

# Overcoming Technology: The Grace of Stuff

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We tend to think of technology as a way of producing this or that. Simple technologies produce obvious results: a match produces fire. More complicated technologies, such as computers, also produce things, though sometimes it is less obvious what they produce. Our messages may get lost in the ether, but that metaphor recognizes that I produced something using my computer, whatever it was that got lost. There are good reasons to understand technology in terms of production.

Martin Heidegger argued however that technology is less a matter of production than it is a matter of revealing: technology reveals something as this or that.<sup>1</sup> Heidegger uses Aristotle's example to make his argument that technology is essentially revealing: the craftsperson producing a silver cup.<sup>2</sup> He or she does that by revealing what is in silver and in this particular social and political context through smelting and pounding and carving and polishing. Through the work of the craftsperson, the cup appears. It is revealed, not only by the craftsperson, but also by the material from which it is made, the shape that changes in the process of the revelation of the thing, and personal and social needs that particular objects fulfill.

But, Heidegger argues, modernism has shown us that technol-

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ogy goes farther than it might have seemed to go anciently. It not only reveals things like the cup, the ends of production. It also reveals the world itself in a particular way, namely as powers in reserve available to be used,<sup>3</sup> powers waiting to be ordered (unlocked, transformed, stored up, distributed, switched about). Technology reveals nature as a storehouse of energies.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning technology reveals things in the world as good for something and ready to be used for that something. The match reveals sulfur and wood as good for lighting fire. The river is a reserve of raw power, a reserve revealed by its dam. The dam's turbines produce electricity that is circulated in a distribution system, another reserve. My computer draws on that system and uses the switching properties of electricity to perform a variety of acts. It too is a reserve, a potentiality to be used in the circulation of powers, each a thing that is good for producing some other thing. Each is a link in a continuing chain of production with no ultimate end but further production.

Not only tools and materials, but also the acts done with those tools and materials, such as the messages sent from my computer, are what they are within an economy of circulating powers of production, such as work management and arranging for conferences. My department and the conferences that I take part in are both products of production and parts of further productions. And that goes on, with each production from a reserve showing itself as a reserve for the next thing to be produced: everything is always good for something—something else. To be is to be in reserve for production.

This understanding of the world as powers in reserve for use in an economy of production isn't the result of some perversity on our part. It isn't a defect in our psyche, something to be changed by a change of attitude or by psychological or social therapy. Understanding the world as a resource to be used to produce other things and acts, things and acts that themselves then become a further resource, is a genuine way in which the world reveals itself.<sup>5</sup> In our lives within the world, we *find* the world that way. We don't impose on the world its being as Heideggerian reserve. It presents itself to us with that character. In fact, it presents itself to us as if being a reserve for resources is its only real state:

nature as storehouse. The world itself brings us to see and use it as essentially a reserve.<sup>6</sup>

That is a fact with which we live. In itself the being of the world as reserve is not a problem. In fact, it is not only not a problem, it is part of what makes human life possible. The problem is that the more we live in the world technologically—with the natural world revealing itself as energies in reserve to be manipulated for production—the less we are able to see that world and the things we encounter in it in any other way. The multiple ways in which things can show themselves (their truth, we could say<sup>7</sup>) are reduced to one: reserve. The truth of technology threatens to cover over any other truth of appearing. If it were finally to do so, then things would cease to be unique things, becoming instead merely entities replaceable for one another in the circulation of production. In a technologized world each thing tends toward being merely good for something else.

In this possible world, the pen with which I love to write, the mug from which (as a convert who loved his coffee) I drink my roasted barley or ginger tea, the flowers in my garden, all these would lose their identity as individual things. They would become merely one more thing essentially like another in being a reserve, however different they might appear to the eye or the hand. They would differ in their materiality and shape, but they would be the same in that the being of each would be that of readiness-for-production: readiness to produce notes, or hold my drink, or decorate my home. And those notes, my drink, and the act of decorating my home would themselves merely be further material in reserve for more production.

The further problem is that if ever the things that appear were to concern us *only* as powers in reserve, then human beings themselves would also appear only as things in reserve.<sup>8</sup> We would join the rest of the world as something to be held in reserve and ordered in chains of cause and effect in order to produce something. Sometimes that something would be material. We might be assembly line workers. Sometimes that something would be social. We might be good citizens of the putatively perfect state. In any case we would cease to be human.

The problem of technology, then, is two-fold: on the one hand, the natural world presents itself technologically; on the

other hand, the more we encounter it that way, the more we *and* the world are in danger of disappearing.

It is not difficult to see the danger of a completely technologized world looming ahead of us. Movie makers have often taken advantage of our ability to envision that danger. But the answer is not an anti-technology. No candidate for government of office or program, whether conservative, moderate, or liberal, can undo this threat. No mythical power wielded by a superhero come to save us will do the job. Nor will we rid ourselves of the danger by donning our *lederhosen* or bib overalls and returning to the primeval forest or to the organic farm.

Indeed, the attempt to undo the danger of technology with an anti-technology (perhaps some as-yet unimagined invention, often some older but now outmoded technology) is not anti-technological at all. It is just one more technological move, governed by the same understanding of the world as ultimately a storehouse of manipulable, interchangeable entities ready to be used to produce another interchangeable entity. In an anti-technology, the choice of tools and powers may be different, but the world still appears as technological.

Heidegger points out, however, that the essence of technology is not, itself, something technological.<sup>9</sup> The happening of technology is not itself a reserve ready for production. That means that the essence of technology—revealing—contains not only the threat I have been describing. It also contains the possibility of saving us from that threat. If we can see, Heidegger argues, that every instance of revealing is revealing “in one way *or* another”<sup>10</sup> rather than just in one way, then we find ourselves already in principle outside of the threat we fear. Even if the revealing of modern technology shows us things as merely standing in reserve, the openness that is necessarily part of any revealing means that they also appear as possibly otherwise. That openness may allow us to see things *not* as merely standing in reserve.<sup>11</sup> Quoting Hölderlin, Heidegger says, “Where danger is / grows the saving power also.”<sup>12</sup>

However, as much as Heidegger wants us to recognize that the resources for denying technology its revelation of everything as resource are part and parcel of the essence of technology, he suggests that there is something even better for avoiding calamity. He

says that the aesthetic offers an even “more primally granted revealing”<sup>13</sup> than the revealing that can occur with the essence of technology. Through art we see not only that things can be other than standing reserve. We see a revelation of appearing itself.<sup>14</sup> The givenness of the world shows itself, not as stuff for something else, but as itself in a world of things and non-productive powers: color as color and as revealing the light of day; granite as hard, smooth, and cool, but also as revealing the power and powerlessness of the wind against it; sound as sonorous as well as overwhelming.<sup>15</sup> As an aesthetic object, the painting shows us color that has no further purpose than its own appearing. The painting is, strictly speaking, good for nothing. It is not what it is merely in virtue of the fact that it is good for producing something else.

To use a word that is lately fashionable in French philosophy, art *interrupts* technology. It allows us to see the openness of the essence of technology and, thus, to see that there is something other than the technological. But surely a religious attitude toward the world is as interruptive of modern technology as are poetry and art. Heidegger insists on the beautiful as the savior of the true. Those of us with religious sensibilities are probably willing to agree with that insistence, but perhaps not on the limitation that Heidegger may implicitly impose. At least not at first.

In religious experience the world appears as ultimately more than resource for production because it comes, ontologically, before all production. We find ourselves in an already existing world, a world given to us by God. As a gift of God the world is irreducible merely to a storehouse of powers. Even when it is a reserve, it is also a gift. Appearing as a gift, the world shows itself as coming from somewhere else. The created world bears the mark of something more than itself. And if it appears with that mark of something more, as it often does when we are enthralled with the beauty of nature, then it cannot at the same time appear as merely a reserve waiting to be used.

The Mormon belief that the world was not created *ex nihilo* means that the world is also more than the gift of God. In some sense things give themselves to us, though what that sense is remains largely unexplored except perhaps by the Pratt brothers. But we can at least say that stuff gives itself as resistant. (The word “stuff” is particularly appropriate as a technical term for Mormon

thought because it doesn't carry the metaphysical, scientific, or common-sense baggage of words like *matter* or *substance*.) No state of what-is is reducible either to our will or God's. No process of production can keep things from returning toward mere stuff. Entropy is unavoidable; contingency cannot be permanently overcome. This aspect of the existence of things, often conflated with materiality, is that which resists any reduction to a reserve. The stuffness of things guarantees that there is no pure economy of production.

However one parses the teaching of eternal stuff theologically, for Mormons things have their own power to appear within the divine gift of God's creative work. That power is prior to any power of the world to reveal the things within it as standing in a reserve waiting to be used. In fact, it is prior to any power of the world to reveal things within it as any particular thing or for any particular end. The power of stuff to appear is power to be good for nothing.

I once referred to Heidegger's so-called paganism with tentative approval.<sup>16</sup> He is accused of paganism because he takes what-is to be of import in itself and not only because it has been given value by God or is given value by us. Stuff has being apart from either our or God's valuing of it. It cannot be reduced to value, whether that value is temporal or eternal. But that means that Heidegger's appeal to the aesthetic can be understood as not only an appeal to fine art, but (more so) as an appeal like ours to the obdurate character of things. (His two ways of overcoming the technological turn out really to be one.) In recognizing the eternally obdurate character of things, Mormons too might be accused of paganism.

Except for the rhetorical difficulties that accusation will get us into, rhetorical difficulties that I don't underestimate, I have no problem with seeing a connection of Mormonism to paganism. After all, as President Hinckley said, "We say to people [presumably including pagans], in effect, you bring with you all the good that you have, and then let us see if we can add to it."<sup>17</sup> To take what-is as having being in itself, apart from any production or valuing, whether by God or human beings, is of course to deny creation *ex nihilo*. But it is not to deny the inestimable gift of God in

bringing the elements together in creation. As Mormons we can have our Christian cake and eat our pagan one too.

Of course, in Abrahamic religions and western philosophy other persons also give themselves to us, and in doing so they in particular can appear as prior to the technological. Philosophers from Plato to Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Marion have thought about this “prior to.” They have often disagreed about its particulars, but few have disagreed that human beings cannot be understood merely technologically. Kant expressed the point by saying that we should always treat other persons as not only means, but also ends.<sup>18</sup> In the terms I have been using, he tells us that human beings are ultimately good for nothing. Others may disagree with Kant’s formulation or his arguments for the point, but they rarely disagree with the thought that imbues it: being human is a good rather than a good-for-something. Human relation itself can open a view of the world as nontechnological. And in its view of human beings, Mormonism could once again be accused of a kind of paganism since human beings do not owe the entirety of their being to God.

The answer to this second charge of paganism is less philosophical or theological than it is scriptural, from scriptures that we share with other non-pagans. For example, in Judaism and Christianity the biblical story of Adam and Eve teaches us the “more than” of humanity without the technical terminology of philosophy. It approaches the charge of paganism from a different direction.

Our creation accounts report God saying of the first couple, “Behold the man is become as one of us” (Gen. 3:22; Moses 4:28). We read this as implying that human beings have the same ultimate ontological status as the Father and the Son. Whatever else is true of us, we are also made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), *eikon* in the Septuagint. We are icons of God. There is some sense in which others ultimately reveal themselves to us as God reveals himself. So mortal persons also come before us and reveal something other than a world of mere resource.

What we see, then, is that in Mormon belief there are at least three ways in which technology can be interrupted: when the world reveals itself as God’s creation, when something reveals itself as uniquely itself, and when I encounter another person as

both other than me and a person. By revealing a God beyond our mortal world and yet in some way the same as us, and by showing us ourselves in a world of other eternal things and eternal persons, Mormonism shows the possibility of these three interruptions.

Perhaps put too simplistically but in more traditional terms, Heidegger's answer to the problem of technology is the beautiful. If we can be saved, it is the beautiful that can save us from a world that threatens to annihilate humanity, whether by nuclear burst, by environmental disaster, by turning us all into things in reserve for use in circulating powers, or by some combination of those possibilities. Traditionally Jews and Christians reply that not only the beautiful can interrupt the truth of technology to reveal a prior, deeper truth. The tradition responds that salvation from the danger of technology comes in the conjunction of the true, the beautiful, and the good—types of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. Both type and antitype are ultimately good for nothing.

Many Mormons will respond sympathetically to that Abrahamic response to Heidegger. My suspicion, however, is that if we take seriously the idea that there is eternal stuff, what-is in itself as well as what-is as valued by a person or Person, and therefore that nothing comes from nothing, then we come to a radical conclusion. If there is that kind of eternal stuff, then the good amounts to the true (the appearing of things themselves) and the beautiful (coherent appearings; at least some of them awe-ful events), taken together. And coherent appearing amounts to a particular kind of appearing.

If stuff is eternal, then neither the beautiful nor the good is a fundamental category. Truth is the appearing of what-is, stuff showing itself. The beautiful is the coherent self-showing of stuff. The good is the valuing of those appearings. This makes neither the beautiful nor the good merely subjective, for there can be natural coherence, like the nautilus shell, and natural valuing, such as life.

In response to the traditional triumvirate of truth, beauty, and goodness, Mormons propose instead that the true is sufficient to interrupt technology, without referring immediately to the beautiful or the good. But that takes us back to something like Heidegger's position: things and persons give themselves, and



that giving makes it possible for the interruption of the drive to order everything as only good for something. Often things and persons give themselves within the order of technology. They appear covered over by technology in Heidegger's broad sense of that term. But sometimes they also give themselves as beautiful, and sometimes they give themselves as good—or in the horror of evil.

*Grace*, the appearance of stuff that is good for nothing but itself, is the word that Heidegger has overlooked but that we must remember. And we remember it not merely by keeping it in mind, but by instantiating the recognition of its appearance in the world through our lives as God's children. On many occasions we do that by living merely technologically. Other times we discover more than the sameness of technology when we are overcome by the beautiful. And sometimes we are brought to our knees outside technology by things or persons giving themselves as overwhelming good or in overpowering evil.

Such lives of grace are seldom the lives of superheroes, political prodigies, or authors of new technological marvels. Instead they are the everyday lives of ordinary people. They are village and ward lives.<sup>19</sup> The lives of God's children are lives in a carpentry shop or on the job site in Sepphoris (Matt. 2:23). They are lives in which we comfort our friends faced with the death of a friend (Jn. 11:1-3, 17-44). In these lives we feast and celebrate marriages, and run out of food for our guests (Jn. 2:1-10). We get exasperated with our family (Jn. 2:4) and with co-workers (Matt. 16:5-11).

Of course there are transcendent moments in religious lives (Matt. 17:1-3), moments in which something outside the daily order of the ordinary reveals itself. But such moments are what they are only within a life that is not filled with them (2 Nephi 2:11). And if there is eternal stuff, then not every moment of transcendence is good. Transcendent evil exists as well as transcendent good.

Without the mundane, any transcendent would be meaningless. But the mundane is not merely counterpoint to the transcendent, the necessary background against which transcendence appears. Joseph Smith's vision of the eternities suggests that life, in this world and the next, is essentially constituted by the mundane, by a physical world of real family, friends, and work, a world in

which the good transcends the mundane, but a world that cannot escape evil. Thoughtful Mormons like Eugene England and Terryl and Fiona Givens take us back to our peculiar scriptures (Moses 7:29) and remind us that even God weeps.<sup>20</sup>

Taken together, the gift of God, the gift of things, and that of other persons—their grace—turns out to be the mundanity of the world as much as or more than it is the joy and surprise of the work of art or the sublime spiritual experience. Heidegger has forgotten both grace and the mundane. But grace and mundanity, in particular the grace *of* mundanity, reveal the world as more than a standing reserve of materials for production. The true and the beautiful, the experience of the good, and even the experience of evil, with and in the mundane, interrupt any possible totalizing world if we can allow them to.

That could easily stand as my conclusion, but at least two questions remain. First: suppose that we make this Heideggerian distinction of stuff before any appearing, on the one hand, and the event of appearing of the world, on the other, and then we locate the possibility of salvation from the possible doom of technology in that difference. Can we see stuff or its possibility of appearing anywhere but in an event of appearing? Presumably not. But if we cannot, then how do we see the *difference* between the potentiality to appear and the appearing? Where do we see the Kantian/Romantic “sublime” and its difference from everything else? The thinker who has done the most to consider this question is probably Jean-Luc Marion, in his discussions of the gift and of what he calls the saturated phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps we can find at least the sketch of an answer there, but that remains to be seen.

The second question, one introduced in Jacques Derrida’s interrogation of Emmanuel Levinas<sup>22</sup> and continuing in David Bentley Hart’s recent interrogation of postmodern thought:<sup>23</sup> can we think that difference without understanding the appearing of a thing or the appearing of a world as a kind of unavoidable primal violence? Is the difference between stuff and its appearance necessarily violent? Most postmodern thought says it is. Are the later Levinas, with Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others right about that? If so, what does that primal violence mean for a Mormon understanding of the world? Is primal violence perhaps the same as primal chaos, for example?

As a Mormon I accept that Joseph Smith's insertion of the mundane into religion reveals the truth of our existence. But we need to think more deeply about that insertion and its implications without taking automatic recourse to the terms of the Abrahamic theological tradition, and we need to be able to answer questions like the one about the possibility of seeing or saying what comes before appearance, as well as that about metaphysical violence, if we are going to theologize that insertion. The stuff(s) of the universe demand(s) our thoughtful response.

### Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Levitt (New York: Garland, 1977), cf. 5-6, 11-13.

2. Heidegger expands on Aristotle's mention of the production of a silver cup when he explains causation: Heidegger, "Question," 6-8; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1013a26.

3. Heidegger's word is *Bestand*.

4. Heidegger, "Question," 14-17.

5. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. Cf. *ibid.*, 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 32; my italics. The German is "das so oder so": Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage Nach der Technik," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), cf. 36.

11. Heidegger, "Question," 32.

12. *Ibid.*, 28.

13. *Ibid.*, 34. For a more fully worked-out thinking of the appearing of the thing in the artwork, see Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 143-212.

14. Heidegger, "Question," 34-35.

15. Cf. Heidegger, "Origin," 168.

16. James E. Faulconer, "Room to Talk: Reason's Need for Faith," *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 19-51.

17. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Words of the Living Prophet," *Liahona*, April 1999, <http://www.lds.org/liahona/1999/04/words-of-the-living-prophet?lang=eng&query=bring+truth> (accessed May 16, 2012).

18. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* G429 / 47.

19. I take it as significant that we call our congregations after the relatively arbitrary political divisions of a city. What could be more ordinary or more informative?

20. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 63–80; Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormons Make Sense of Life* (Salt Lake: Ensign Peak, 2012).

21. For the best overview of Marion's understanding as it relates to other thinkers in the history of contemporary philosophy, see Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

22. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 79–153.

23. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).