Being as One's Way

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Since I have recently settled into Liverpool it seemed appropriate to begin my response with a quotation from one of Liverpool's best known sons, John Lennon, who famously said (well sang actually, in a song called *Beautiful Boy*), "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." The concern that the planning *for* life distracts our attention *to* life, that we are both living and not living, echoes a primary concern of many of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. Being "on one's way" seems likewise to have become a state of perpetual transition, an existential homelessness,[1] leaving us unable to be present to life as it happens here and now. Making plans to secure the future from the fragility of life has become a feature of technological society (perhaps drawn from its roots in the Christian theological tradition: the *parousia*) and part of our forgetfulness of finitude. It involves the kind of nihilism that Friedrich Nietzsche seeks to avoid with his affirmation of life in the eternal return, where "being on one's way" would not deny life, but would celebrate it through the possibility of its eternal repetition.[2]

If we were faced with an eternity in an airport, we might well design them differently. Is it not likewise with classrooms? Surely the assumption that they are spaces of preparation and transition expresses itself in their architectural forms. So where are the spaces prepared not for transition, but for dwelling, spaces alive to the possibility of the eternal return? Or is this dichotomy between dwelling and transition what Paul Farber and Dini Metro-Roland are hoping to undercut?

In Japan, Shinto Buddhist temples and shrines are ceremonially torn down and rebuilt every twenty years to ensure that the spirit of the deity dwelling in that place has renewed power. Similarly, Tibetan Buddhists construct and destroy elaborate sand Mandala's to ritualize the eternal return. Ritualizing change, then, is quite distinct from ignoring it, insuring against it, or — even as management gurus now like to encourage us — embracing it. Ritualizing change undercuts the dichotomy of John Dewey but only if the rituals are given life through our attention to them. Otherwise we are prone to separate performance from significance, means from ends, and education from life.

Last week the Universities Minister David Willetts called upon UK universities to invest in online courses if they are to take advantage of the "historic opportunity" that the technological age presents. That we can employ technology to deliver content reflects the moral commodification of education. Of course many critics have warned of the danger of an objectified model of knowledge and the commodification of education. And yet public discussion still presumes we can separate the content from delivery. This reflects the fact that we have become accustomed to separating device functionality from interface, facts from values, and means from ends. Technology itself is often regarded as a neutral application of scientific understanding, the means by which we may accomplish the will of the

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human spirit. But the philosophy of technology took its departure by questioning this naïve view of technological neutrality. Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, and Albert Borgmann all question the neat separation of means from ends that has come to characterize technological society. Nevertheless, if education is just a means of acquiring information then, of course, online education (like MOOCS) is likely to be a more efficient means than the traditional classroom.

But it seems that the real problems occur when transitory spaces are reduced to the mere means to achieve a determinate end — arrival at a destination, or progression to the next phase of education or one's chosen career (themselves just steps along a transitive movement toward one's final resting place). From a reductive point of view, the goal of means can be only ends. But the goal of transition is not rest, but progression and renewal. So the spaces of education are not to be conceived reductively as mere means to a place at Oxford University, but spaces that gather context, presence and some indefinable aura (as Walter Benjamin might say). Farber and Metro-Roland indicate that such gatherings cannot be contained within the range of calculative rationality. So where are they to be found? Borgmann's focal practices are presented as forms of activity that resist the march of moral commodification. But is Borgmann's account of focal practices that resist technological enframing not indicative of a kind of romantic or sentimentalized image of meaningful engagement?

It seems that we only notice the loss of engagement that disburdening technological devices bring about when it is too late. We are initially amazed and delighted that, for example, our entire music collection can be carried with us on our mobile phones, but only later might we come to notice that our relation to music has been subtly and irreversibly altered (and I do not just mean for the worse).[3] We cannot simply restore the significance of focal practices (of, for example, playing musical instruments within a community of friendship) when the foundation of their existence, a certain *being-in-the-world*, has become hopelessly enframed by the technological thinking that separates means from ends.[4] In my reading, Borgmann's espoused solution to moral commodification through the restoration of focal things and practices fails to recognize that technological rationality erodes meaning from the inside out. By the time we recognize the consequences of the technological epoch, all we can do is to rail against the means-end logic of performativity (which I think is part of the issue with Farber and Metro-Roland's account). But our resistance is futile because the forms of discourse, rationality, and perception (in a word, our being-in-the-world) have themselves been fundamentally altered. The arrival of what Borgmann calls the "device paradigm"[5] is a *consequence* of technological being, not the cause of it. It is hardly surprising that technological rationality has appeared to be deterministic to some commentators. Any resistance we do mount fails to grasp the metaphysical ground from which such changes emerge. The hegemony of technological discourse and rationality might also account for the fact that "there is much that is amazing, and many who are unhappy." Our uncanny sense of loss remains, like technological anxiety more broadly, at the margins of our social consciousness.

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So it might seem curious that Farber and Metro-Roland regard current spaces of learning as embodying focal practices, from the physical presence of books and desks to the climate created by skilled practitioners. Their account seems more like an affirmation of traditional practice in face of technological change than a call to realize an idealized learning space. But to evoke the classroom as the "commanding presence" of schooling might not resonate with the educational experience of many. I appreciate the sense that something incalculable (and largely invisible) is at risk as we race into the Internet age. I acknowledge that the "here and now" of classroom spaces can be formative in unexpected ways, ways that are not contained by the behavioral objectives model in which outcomes can be set out in advance of each lesson.[6] Farber and Metro-Roland say that "Schools are places set aside to prepare for, renew, and sustain the focal practices of education." But are these places bound to any spatio-temporal context? Do not these focal practices of education boil down to human relations? So can the question be translated? Can human relationships be developed and nourished within the context of the mediations of technical devices? While human relationships are clearly difficult to define, is it not an over-realization, or reduction, to suppose that the books, desks, and whiteboards embody the transcendent context of focal things and practices?

The later Heidegger made much of paths, ways, and tracks as metaphors for doing philosophy. In connection with his meditations on Taoism, Heidegger goes so far as to say that "all is way."[7] To be always on one's way might seem to express a condition of becoming and of change inconsistent with the foremost philosopher of being. But of course Heidegger's account of Being undercuts any presumed dualism of being and becoming, and similarly suggests that to strip ends from means is to misconstrue the structure of being, since concern (or care) is the glue that binds and process as well as product of being's disclosure. Heidegger's well known ambivalence to modern technology might boil down to this: that technology represents the most consistent and radical isolation of means, shorn of any existential significance.

In itself technology need not displace focal practices. But how can we distinguish beneficial innovations from those that erode something fundamental? I do not think we are yet in a position to answer this question. But the fact that Farber and Metro-Roland (along with others) are reflecting on the significance of technological progress is of vital significance.

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1. Martin Heidegger "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. D.F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1993).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §341.

3. In the age of online streaming and cloud storage with a range of ways in which music is made available to us, we should wonder whether the notion of a "music collection" is not rather anachronistic.

4. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

5. Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

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6. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

7. Lin Ma, "Deciphering Heidegger's Connection with the Daodejing," *Asian Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (2006): 149–171.

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