

CS Lewis Lecture 2007

Money, Sex and New Technology

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These are Ireland's present cultural obsessions - the making and spending of money, a more liberated expression of our sexuality, and the discovery and deployment of new technology. It is Ireland's version of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

When it comes to these entities, the assumption is that they are in themselves neutral and that it is only in their use and abuse that ethical and social issues arise. Money is then simply a means of bartering, which can meet our personal and social needs; or its accumulation can become part of an insatiable craving for personal fulfilment. Similarly, our sexuality can be a loving expression of who we are as men and women or a means of achieving power and selfish pleasure. New technology might be seen as the means of reducing repetitive tedium in the workplace or as a primary contributor to the pollution of the atmosphere.

Any examination of these phenomena is difficult because of the prevailing paradigms of this time. Success, status and the enjoyment of life are individually and corporately assessed by economic factors. The mantra that how we behave as consenting adults in private should be without judgment is normative for sexual expression. And that new technology has not only brought about an economic renaissance in Ireland but has helped us to communicate more efficiently and enjoyably than before is a given. We will call all of this, in old-fashioned theological terms, "the world." Each of us too has vested interests and agendas, which are an expression of what Malcolm Muggeridge described as "the dark little dungeon of our own ego." We start with what GK Chesterton called the only theological conviction that is empirically verifiable, our fallen selfish nature. This affects not only our choices, but our priorities and our perspective. We will call this "the flesh." And then there is the presence of evil. In CS Lewis' Narnia, it is always winter and never Christmas because of the presence and power of the wicked witch. Evil is therefore portrayed as more than simply the result of individual choices. Similarly, today in naked nationalism or tribal conflict, in the "clash of civilisations" or "the dictatorship of the proletariat," in the pursuit of "blood diamonds" or "black gold", we see a diabolical presence at work. We will call this "the devil." The world, the flesh and the devil make a critical examination of money, sex and new technology difficult for us.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition there have been three approaches to money. The negative sees money as a threat and possessions as a curse. The positive sees wealth as a reward and possessions as a right. The neutral stance sees money as a gift and possessions as a privilege. They have been found in all the Christian traditions, but the negative is most prominent in Roman Catholicism, the positive in Pentecostalism and the neutral in Protestantism. Let me suggest that because of the radical teachings of Jesus and our experiences through the Celtic tiger, we need to revisit this subject. Our conclusions might make us a little more wary of money and things.

The bluntness of Jesus when it comes to matters financial is not a little unsettling. He pronounces woe (which is a curse) on the rich and blessing on the poor. He explains that the wealthy can only enter his kingdom with great difficulty, like a camel getting through the eye of a needle. He tells a parable of a man who mismanages his employer's funds. When found out, he "cooks the books" for his employer's creditors so that they will have to pay less than they actually owe. The employer finds out and commends the swindler for his shrewdness. When Jesus comments on the story, it is to illustrate that wealth is unrighteous because it is powerful enough to sway people to do what is unrighteous. Is money neutral? He speaks of it as a power. It can take the place of God. It can develop a divine status. "No servant can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *Sickness unto Death*, describes idolatry as "building your identity on anything except God." No wonder Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all he has and to give it to the poor.

Consider the effects of wealth and possessions upon this nation.

The western economy is anchored in perpetual unhappiness. In order for us to buy more and to keep the economy moving, we need to be persuaded that we cannot be happy until we purchase something more: a new dress, a new car, a new kitchen, a new holiday. Even though it is a truism that money cannot buy one happiness, there is the seductive belief that money, pleasure, things and happiness are inseparably related. The unholy alliance of the world (the assumptions of our society) the flesh (our own bias to idolatry) and the devil (with his institutionalised structures, which Walter Wink identifies with the principalities and powers) keep us imprisoned within this mindset. We have been convinced that leisure, lifestyle and consumption will inaugurate the New Jerusalem. Advertisers now woo us by offering not merely security and status but increasingly aspirations, dreams and fantasies (for example, car advertisements). This is another religion.

What are the practical consequences?

This is a source of debate. I find it fascinating that in "The Best of Times? The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland," published by the Economic and Social Research Institute, in what is an upbeat analysis of the consequences of our economic renaissance, the social gains are in terms of social mobility through the provision of employment and in the number of people marrying and having children at a higher rate than 15 years ago. While the *Irish Independent* of the 15th of this month, in an editorial commenting on the Iona Institute's report on the rapid change in family life, particularly in Urban Ireland, says, "Irish society is changing even more rapidly than we thought. For many people, the change is not for the better."

The pressure to make it financially means that many parents have become virtual workaholics. For this god, people are sacrificing their children, their health and even their own lives. Think of the pressure on families as mums and dads weave their way through gridlock Dublin traffic to get their offspring to crèches and schools before beginning a day of work in order to pay off their own debts and satisfy the companies' aspirations for "the bottom line." What are we doing to ourselves? Why, according to a report by the Royal College of Surgeons, "a terminally ill patient has a better quality

of life than many in managerial positions.” All this has contributed to our individualism, social alienation and lack of civic involvement. No wonder An Taoiseach invited Robert Putnam, the author of *Bowling Alone*, to address the Fianna Fail parliamentary party. Or, why has this god caused hardworking, gifted and idealistic politicians to become greedy, corrupt and shameful leaders? And is it not ironic that in the year in which we remember William Wilberforce’s resistance to the economic arguments to keep slavery, we argue the pros and cons of immigration on the basis of the financial benefits to our GNP? Should it not cause us some alarm that the educational curriculum at secondary and tertiary level, rather than being concerned with knowledge and wisdom in science and the humanities, is increasingly governed by our economic needs for the future? Time and time again, research has shown that any happiness produced by an increased standard of living is more than offset by a drop in the quality of relationships. In Britain, I noticed that even though incomes have tripled since the 1950’s, the number of people who have described themselves as “very happy” has dropped dramatically from 57% to 36%. According to this *New Scientist* survey, the happiest people are found in Mexico and Nigeria.

In 1943, Eamon De Valera made this speech on the radio on St. Patrick’s Day. It has often been quoted with derision as a premodern vision for Ireland. Today, with the purgatory that is the life of many, it sounds like heaven:

“The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.”

No one is pleading for a return to days of poverty when our primary export was people. Nevertheless, we need to critique the social implications of such rapid wealth creation and consumerism. JK Galbraith’s “theory of social balance” for a combined concern with publicly provided services and privately produced goods would be a starting point. His oft-quoted cultural comments on Britain’s post-war affluent society are apt for our time:

“The family which takes its mauve and cerise, air-conditioned power-steered and power-braked car out for a tour passes through cities that are badly paved, made hideous by litter, blighted buildings, billboards, and posts for wires that should long since have been put underground. They pass on into a countryside that has been rendered largely invisible by commercial art...they picnic on exquisitely packaged food from a portable icebox by a polluted stream...”

I say that this theory of social balance is a starting point because I am talking about more than equilibrium. If happiness is found through giving, peace through relationships and contentment in wonder, then the deceptive power of money and its potential sacred status needs to be addressed both individually and corporately.

French sociologist Jacques Ellul put it like this: “There is one act par excellence which profanes money by going directly against the law of money, an act for which money is not made. This act is giving.”

There have been moments in this state when we have practised this, and we loved it. I am thinking of the year of the Special Olympics. Villages, towns and communities worked together so that we were not focusing on our own needs but on the needs of others. Sure, we raised money, but not for our pleasure - for the pleasure of the Olympiads. The happiness it evoked among us all caused the country to glow.

What I am asking for is a new mindset with regard to wealth. We have personal and social needs that must be met in our households and in local and national government. For these we need financial resources. The provision of food and protection against the elements, an infrastructure to enable business and society to function, the education of our children and the care of us all in terms of our health and social needs – all this costs money for which we must budget. Is what is left simply for the accumulation of more wealth or to be used in the endless pursuit of happiness through the purchase of commodities? Instead, a society which honours its citizens and celebrates their humanity will give leadership for the encouragement of giving.

Three areas in particular should be our focus. The first is the creation of what is beautiful. Writers, artists, musicians, film makers, architects, painters and all who enable us to experience mystery and cause us to hear “the rumour of angels” need to be a priority not because they are economically beneficial but because in creativity they are giving wonder and causing us to taste life. When I am driving home from a tedious and long meeting in Belfast, when I come to that magnificent bridge across the Boyne each time my heart rises in me and I thank God for the designers and the commitment of those in local and national government to fund it. The arts should not be peripheral but central to our nation. The second is the pursuit of justice. Here I am not thinking only of an independent judiciary but also the embracing of the moral imperative to seek the right for the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society (the equivalent of what the Old Testament prophets highlighted as “the widows and orphans”). Those who give nationally and internationally in the pursuit of just causes need to be resourced and rewarded. This would mean not only an increase in support for development out of our national budget and so “make poverty history,” but tax incentives to industry and individuals to make giving a part of our lives. Brian Feeney, the billionaire who gave away his fortune, ought to be an inspiration to us. The third is the encouragement of relationships through which our citizens learn to give and to receive. Individualism and lack of social and civic engagement is a direct correlate to our economic advance. Work practices that are inherently antisocial and make relationships in the family and society so difficult need to be challenged. Dr Margaret Fine-Davis of TCD found in a survey “that there are more negative perceptions towards people who participate in family-friendly programmes.” Both men and women who work part-time or job-share are seen as less serious about their careers. According to the Industrial Relations centre, “Other surveys have found that a significant percentage of Irish employees would prefer a lower salary if it meant a shorter week.” In the past we argued for shorter working weeks, days of rest, and safe, affirming working environments, so we need to create structures in which our citizens will have time to give of themselves, to enjoy the craic and to support the community. Increased resources from our taxes should be made available for clubs, societies,

youth organisations and faith-based social agencies so that giving becomes a way of life.

Here I am, not arguing that government legislation could establish the kingdom of God, but that these values that reflect the kingdom would be liberating and beneficial to us all.

If money is not neutral, what of our sexuality? In the US, the stance of the Episcopal Church, with its ordination of a practising homosexual as a bishop, has created enormous tensions within the Anglican communion. It is based on the rationale of sexual neutrality. At the 1994 Episcopal convention in the US, more than 50 bishops signed what they called “A Statement of Koinonia (Collegiality),” which asserted that “both homosexuality and heterosexuality are morally neutral, that both can be lived out with beauty, honour, holiness and integrity.”

In Ireland today there appear to be three approaches to expressions of our sexuality. The first we will call premodern. It is found among the majority and mirrors the traditional Catholic and Protestant emphasis on the priority of family. Our immigrants by and large are eager cobelligerents in this view. Any behaviour that challenges the traditional nuclear or extended family is perceived as deviant and is morally condemned. The second approach is modern and seems to be prevalent among those whom David McWilliams calls the HiCos (the blending of a Hibernian and Cosmopolitan mindset). It is based on a mixture of tolerance and rational analysis. The combination of genetic inheritance with our unique social conditioning means that who we are is inborn and will determine our identity and sexual choices. The third stance is unquestionably a minority opinion but increasingly present among the gay community. It is postmodern and finds the idea of being a predetermined entity insulting. Here the emphasis is more on the notion of freely choosing to be who we are and how we behave as not just a personal but a social construct.

How are those who stand in the tradition of CS Lewis and orthodox or “Mere Christianity” to respond to this sexual malaise? The choices in terms of our sexuality are wide. It is not simply between straight and gay (if only it were that straightforward). Let me list some of them:

- Patriarchal monogamy or matriarchal monogamy over and against patriarchal or matriarchal polygamy. This is a debate presently taking place across the pond, not just in Utah but in Canada, as part of a redefinition of marriage.
- Egalitarian or hierarchical monogamy expressed in a heterosexual or homosexual radical commitment (in either some sort of marriage or civil partnership).
- Multiple polyamorous relationships. Here is a dictionary definition: “the desire, practice, or acceptance of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at a time with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved.”
- There is straight, gay, bisexual and transsexual promiscuity. And what of incest, paedophilia, rape? – the list seems endless. Are all these equally acceptable? We have traditionally said “no” to a number of these, but who is to decide? Is there anything sexually normative for our society? Is sex neutral?

There would appear to be three options for us. The first is the recognition that we are still in some sense part of Christendom, and since the constitution and legislation in place are a reflection of such ethical convictions, then we should apply them with fine tuning for our time. It is like saying that this is a predominantly Christian country and what is normative is based on “the law of God.” If this nation were Hindu or Muslim or Jewish, we would expect the same in terms of the application of their “laws.” However, does Christendom still exist? Are we not part of a secular Europe? Is this not a Republic free to formulate its own values? The difference between a “law” and a “value” is that a law is given from without and a value is created from within. The difficulty with this position is that unless we embrace social moral anarchy, we will easily replace what is perceived as the tyranny of “God” or “the church” with the tyranny of majority opinion or, worse, an elite group of ethicists given the responsibility to formulate the state’s values in terms of sexual behaviour. The third option is what traditional Catholic social morality has argued for and is implicit in the writings of CS Lewis, and that is an appeal to “natural law.” Peter Kreeft, who is Professor of Philosophy at Boston College and a disciple of Lewis, expresses it like this:

“Opinions about values are not wholly relative to cultures. No culture thinks courage is bad and cowardice good, honesty bad and dishonesty good, theft and adultery and murder good. Every society has some version of the Ten Commandments. If a sociologist tells you otherwise, ask him which society has had this totally different set of values. It is true that different societies apply these basic values differently. For instance, in some societies suicide is thought to be courageous; in others it is thought to be cowardly. But no society prefers cowardice to courage. Some societies let a man have four wives, others only one, but no society says a man may simply take any woman he wants.”

Certainly the Court of Human Rights presupposes some sort of natural law, as did famous cases like the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals on charges of “crimes against humanity.” Similarly, the international law enforcement agencies working in tandem against what is perceived to be sexually deviant behaviour such as paedophilia would seem to mirror a universal ethical conviction. Interestingly, French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre, as a moral relativist, argued that we had no right to judge anyone including the Nazis since all values were relative to different cultures. Today, such relativism, combined with freedom of personal choice and the “this is natural to me” argument, makes a rationale on the basis of natural law for sexual morality less appealing.

Instead, let me present the Christian paradigm in terms of human sexuality and to begin to tease out the social benefits over and against the alternatives. By arguing for a paradigm which is not “flavour of the month,” we stand in the tradition of Galileo and Copernicus. Their paradigm was an unproven minority opinion, but increasingly, experience confirmed their theses, and their experience was ratified by their theses. If there is validity in this paradigm, it too will become self-evident.

There are three windows through which a Christian understanding of human sexuality is perceived. The first is like a large bay window and the other two are smaller and can be opened to allow what is on the outside to come inside. Let me explain. The big window is that sexuality and spirituality are inseparable. Look at Genesis 1:27: “So

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” From a Judeo-Christian point of view, “the *imago dei*” is not expressed individually but in relationships through our masculinity and femininity. As men and women together, whether we are celibate or married, we desire to be known by another and to know another, to love and to be loved. This is both vertical and horizontal, i.e. in our knowledge of God and of each other. This is perceived to be basic to our humanity. Physical sexual union is simply an expression in the form of what is essential to all our authentic relationships. This is meant to throw light on every aspect of our sexuality and how we make choices. The second smaller window is that we are all sexually broken as part of this fallen world. This is seen in the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve in their disobedience, hiding from God for fear of being known and of being conscious of their nakedness and so looking at each other as objects to have rather than as subjects to know. They are threatened by this and conceal their genitalia. When it comes to how they relate, Eve is told that she will seek for her husband to know him but instead he will seek to control her. So inevitably, sexuality is an area where we have all got it wrong – relationally, emotionally, biologically and spiritually. This is what we mean by our sexual brokenness. Our choices therefore have been at best confused and at worst perverse. The other smaller window is the belief of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The liberation that comes from being part of the new mankind is to be set free to know and to be known so that we can increasingly express our sexuality as it ought to be. We are not what we should be but we are not what we once were. This is something that is entirely of God’s grace.

These windows affect not only the judgments we make but how we judge others. The smaller windows are open so that we might be compassionate to those who, like ourselves, are sexually broken, and second, that we might listen empathetically to those who hold different views from our own. If God has not treated us on the basis of what we deserve, why should we take a stance that is different. This not to suggest that we should change the rules in the middle of the game, but as those who have consistently tried to move the goalposts, we should be gracious to those who do not share our convictions. This is why Leslie Newbigin, the outstanding missiologist, reckoned that Christians ought to be the most tolerant people on Earth because they know what it means to have received grace.

On this basis let me try to set out what is the traditional Christian paradigm for sexuality.

As those who bear the divine image, we inherently express who we are as sexual beings in all our relationships. It is not good for us to be alone. We all have a longing for completeness. In the Genesis creation account, Adam has all the animals parade before him, but something is missing. When Eve is created out of him, there is a poetic sigh of relief: “At last, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” Here, he is saying, is someone like me but different. The implication is that men and women together are to express their God-likeness in mutuality, in serving each other. They are to explore and confront, to encourage and criticise, and so know another and be known by another. This is apt whether we are single or married, gay or straight, celibate or sexually active. The masculine and feminine are both needed to bring us to wholeness and personal resolution. Our sexuality is not limited, therefore, to the fulfilment of our biological longings or the need for orgasmic relief or pleasure or the

desire for procreation. There is at its base a solid social dimension to who we are as sexual beings.

However, it is in this context that the Genesis narrative adds immediately, “Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” It is this we call marriage. In becoming one flesh, it entails an exclusive sexual bonding that is only appropriate through such a radical covenant commitment. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is used consistently in the Old and New Testaments as a metaphor of the exclusive, inviolate bond that is to exist between God and his people. It is here we see so clearly the interweaving of our spirituality and sexuality. The sex act is seen to be sacred. It is in this virtual sacramental communion we become Godlike, as men and women, and have the potential of creating life. Let me quote from Stanley Grenz:

“Because of the meanings the sex act is intended to carry, the marital bond provides the sole proper context for sexual intercourse. The Old Testament law codifies this view (e.g. Exodus 20:14) and Jesus and the New Testament Apostles reaffirmed it (e.g. Matthew 19:3-9; 1 Corinthians 6:9). As a result, the traditional Christian sex ethic rightly advocates chastity in the form of abstinence in singleness and fidelity in marriage.”

This has been the foundation stone of our understanding of family, community and nation. It has determined what we have considered to be “right” or “wrong,” “natural” or “unnatural.” It is the basis of our sex ethic. Because of it, we see the sex trade and pornography as abhorrent in that they demean our humanity in treating people as things for pleasure. We legislate against paedophilia and rape because of their repugnant sexual abuse of children and adults. Notwithstanding, we must recognise that all the consequences of holding this traditional view have not been positive. Some have allied it to a patriarchal understanding of marriage that has led to the diminishing of the role and status of women. Similarly, we have not shown love or understanding to those who have embraced an alternative sexual lifestyle, which the gay community has rightly highlighted as “homophobia.”

Insofar as the traditional view has almost universal appeal across religious and ethnic boundaries and (in spite of the virtual hypocrisy we feel in advocating what we have failed to live up to), because it has produced a stable building block for our society, those who advocate a more libertarian expression of sexual behaviour need to demonstrate the social implications of what it will mean for our nation.

Already we are aware of the consequences of a more libertarian attitude to how we act sexually. It is now an exception for a non-churchgoing heterosexual couple who is seeking to be married not to have been living together beforehand. It is a matter of statistics that such couples have a 50% greater chance of divorce after five years and a 60% chance after ten years than those who get married first. Futurologist Patrick Dixon, in his book *The Cost of Free Love*, highlights the economic and social costs to the UK of a change in social attitudes to sex from the 1960s.

“Free sex and broken relationships are costing us a fortune - up to £9 billion a year. For that you could pay for a quarter of the health service or 5,000 primary schools. Here are some examples. Over 580,000 people a year need treatment for gonorrhoea,

herpes, Chlamydia, warts, HIV and other sex infections, costing £270 million, mostly for AIDS. Cervical cancer tests and care cost £113 million, largely caused by a sex virus. Legal aid for divorce costs £180 million. Every year 170,000 divorcees need new homes - a quick way to poverty. Each divorce may cost £20,000 over five years. That's £3.5 billion. Then there are 66,000 children in care at up to £30,000 each - total £1 billion. If half are there because of family breakup then the bill is £500 million. Then there's another £22 million for extra social work time, £16 million extra for health visitors, £1 million on family therapists, £4.2 million on child psychiatrists (10% only), and £9 million for children with learning difficulties because of home problems. Marriage guidance costs £15 million a year. Then there is soaring youth crime, almost half of all offences committed. If just one youth crime in five is linked to family breakup then the bill is £1.4 billion a year. I know the situation is far worse than any figures can ever show because the biggest costs of all can't be measured in cash terms. Look for example at the pain of broken relationships and a generation of emotionally damaged children.”

This pattern is being repeated in Ireland.

For those who hold that sexuality is not neutral and that there are norms in sexual behaviour, we are faced with enormous challenges in how to advocate our convictions in a post-Christian society when our paradigm seems a threat to a pluralist and secular mindset. Think of the reactions in Europe to the appointment of Rocco Buttiglione as a commissioner because, as a devout Catholic, he expressed his personal views on human sexuality.

Let me in this context make a twofold suggestion. First, we need to model our convictions. We should seek to develop Christian communities that are characterised by a welcoming spirit. If we believe that we are all sexual failures and that we have been accepted by God without any reference to our own status or efforts, then we ought to be equally generous in our attitudes and stance when relating to people whose convictions and lifestyle are different. Whatever their sexual choices, everyone ought to feel loved unconditionally and genuinely befriended. Whether or not they hold to our faith views or moral convictions, they ought to feel a sense of belonging. It is only in such a welcoming spirit that folk can hear what we are trying to say. This is what made the ministry of Jesus so radical. His reputation was that he was constantly associating with those who were morally and religiously unclean. Whether it was protecting the woman found sleeping with a married man who was about to be stoned to death or commending a prostitute for her devotion as she undid her hair to dry the feet she had made wet with her tears, he took the risk to make credible his love for all. This was his lifestyle while remaining clear and unequivocal in his commitment to what he considered to be sexually normative as is seen on his teaching on divorce and adultery. Similarly, the dynamics of community life need to adjust to the realities of what is. There will be teenagers and widows, unmarried mothers and childless couples, the singles and the separated. There will be stable and unstable marriages with children. It is a microcosm of society. Those who hold to a traditional view of sexuality need to model how we practically support each other within the larger family so that whatever our status we do not feel demeaned or inferior. In this we are tangibly expressing, through what the apostle Paul calls “the new mankind,” how society can be. In this we model our convictions. Second, we need to encourage legislation in the Dail that encourages marriage and family life but also recognises

that in a pluralist society, for those who do not hold our views, we need to support that which is less than the ideal. Here I am thinking of civil partnership. Whatever one's sexual orientation, if we choose not to be celibate, it is better to be in a committed and faithful relationship than to be promiscuous. The legal and social constraints of people entering into such agreements would encourage this stability as well as providing financial security. This is less than the ideal. It is not marriage. But often we have had to legislate for what is necessary in a fallen world. If Moses had to legislate for divorce in a theocracy it ought not to surprise us, therefore, that we find it necessary in a non-Christian context to support legislation that falls short of what we consider normative.

And what of our obsession with new technology?

The benefits to our nation seem limitless. Food and warmth, health, and knowledge are now more easily available. Technology too has brought us enrichment through unbounded prosperity in terms of goods and services. It is not surprising, therefore, that the entire spectrum of political and social life has embraced with enthusiasm this technological era. Church men and politicians alike happily drink at this fountain of redemption. The reservations that have been expressed are usually concerning either social exclusion, which means that because of poverty or lack of education sections of the community are not able to fully participate, or questions are raised about the ethics of the production of GM foods or embryonic stem-cell research or the mysterious world of nanotechnology. But, in a more CS Lewis-esque approach, I want to ask more foundational questions about new technology. Specifically, as with money and sex, my query is, is new technology neutral?

Ellen Ullman is a computer software engineer. In her book *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and Its Discontents*, she says that she would prefer to argue

“that computers are neutral, a tool like any other, a hammer that can build a house or smash a skull. But there is something in the system itself, in the formal logic of programs and data, that recreates the world in its own image...it forms an irresistible horizontal country that obliterates the long, slow, old cultures of place and custom, law and social life.”

This is a world just crying out for satirical analysis. If Dara O'Briain has not done a set on this, he needs to. Marva Dawn, a Lutheran theologian, tells us that she saw a cartoon of two persons on each side of a computer desk. In panel after panel, the one facing the computer console tells his companion how he uses it to telecommute to work, to get whatever information he needs from the Internet, to find entertainment, to email his friends, and even to shop online. During the entire conversation, he is tapping on his computer keys. After remaining silent for all the other panels, the companion finally asks his friend what he's looking for. He responds, “A life.”

At a personal level, I can reflect the experience of many. I am simply overwhelmed. Hardly a week goes by that there is not a hiccup with the system in the office and I am frustrated. And what of the info-glut, as it's called, that comes through the TV and the Web, so much information for which I have not asked, which leaves me in a state of intellectual paralysis because I do not know what to do with it? Now, because I can do so much at greater speed (except of course travel the seven miles from Lucan

to the centre of Dublin), I find myself even more hyperactive and participating in what the early fathers called “the sin of business.” Or what of my experience at a large church in the US, where the leaders met to prepare for the week’s ministry, standing up, in order to save time, all clutching their palm-held computers to do the business? As a pastor, I meet with folk at the cutting edge of the industry who are stressed beyond measure either because of fear that they are not keeping up-to-date with the new developments or are taking yet another course in the necessary techniques to keep a step ahead of their colleagues. I watched with amusement and relief as Patrick Dixon, giving a lecture to the top managers in the IT industry in South Africa, asked how many of them had gizmos on their palm-held computers or mobile phones that they had never used or did not understand how to use. As far as I could see, almost every single person in the room raised their hand. And what of the lack of civility with the ubiquitous use of mobile phones? Are these experiences, which are common to us all, merely the abuse of what are inherent benefits, or are they symptoms of something more problematic?

Instead of an unthinking acceptance of new technology, this aspect of our lives requires careful and detailed examination. This is beyond the possibilities of this paper. I can only make some tentative suggestions as to where we might find help. Two men in particular stand out. The first is the French sociologist from Bordeaux who died in 1994, Jacques Ellul. He is unquestionably pessimistic about the technological milieu. For Ellul, the “sacred” is both the object of hope and fear, fascination and dread. Humans once saw this as nature. It was replaced in the West by Christianity; then at the Reformation, the church was desacralized by the Bible, then reason and science replaced the Bible and now it is “the technological society we hold as sacred,” says Ellul. He defined technique as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency...in every field of human activity.” This he saw in practice as a total phenomena for civilization, “the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed upon all human activity.” Whatever our personal desires, we are trapped within this environment. He sees the drive for efficiency as a necessity that determines everything from the division of labour to the setting of production standards. He believed we are being put at risk by our technology and its hazardous consequences. In particular, he sees that our values are being determined by technology rather than our humanity controlling them. Examples he gives are in the field of education, where people question the significance of learning ancient languages and history because they do not appear to advance a financially efficient and technical state. Instead, they are encouraged to handle and imbibe information that in itself cannot affect wisdom or maturity. Or in the media, where he sees technology exerting control over human destiny. He writes: “It is the emergence of mass media which makes possible the use of propaganda techniques on a societal scale. The orchestration of press, radio and television to create a continuous, lasting and total environment renders the influence of propaganda virtually unnoticed precisely because it creates a constant environment. Mass media provides the essential link between the individual and the demands of the technological society.” Is Ellul right – does the new technology fetter us rather than free us?

The second commentator is Albert Borgmann, a Professor of Philosophy in Montana in the USA. Like Ellul, who sees the problem more in the technique rather than in a machine or thing itself, Borgmann’s concerns are not with technology per se but with

what he calls “the device paradigm.” It is this that results in us feeling more burdened than ever. We can only touch here on what is to Borgmann a profound and at times complex analysis. He distinguishes between things and devices. Things always have a context. Tasks and skills are related to it. His example is a fireplace. We become bodily and socially engaged with it. We prepare wood. We light the fire. It is a social focal point of the home. The whole family is involved. But more, our whole body is involved through the senses – hearing, smelling, touching, thinking. Now, for most of us, a device has taken over the fireplace –the central heating system. By removing the burdens of having to build the fire and keep it stocked, this device “makes no demands on our skill, strength or attention...” We require no skill for a good device. Our only focus is what it produces – warmth/heat. One can see immediately the social consequences of a society controlled by “the device paradigm.” This is his concern. There is obviously a change in how families relate and share things together. How we function in terms of those who come to repair the devices is now based on contracts and money rather than trust and fidelity in work. Factories are developed to produce the devices and must be sold, so a need has to be engendered. Disposable devices become commonplace in that it is cheaper to replace than repair. It would be fascinating to hold a workshop and allow us to share the repercussions of this device paradigm for Irish life. My earlier frustrations begin to make sense to me. Marva Dawn has highlighted the practical effects. Relational work is diminishing. The info-quagmire is not relevant to what we need. News through the media is simply the dissemination of information rather than communication. The fact that work is device-orientated rather than relationally and creatively motivated means that work and labour are despised and seen only as a process. Our only relief is “entertainment” – “commodities,” says Borgmann, “that we ingest, that we eat, see or hear.” Television is our escape, so it needs to become increasingly titillating to attract. Our history and documentary channels need their specials that simply terrify or amuse us. After 9:00, our sexual taboos need to be violated. But more than that, he sees it as debilitating in itself because it tends “to prevent an idyllic childhood and a vigorous adolescence, to suffocate conversation, reduce common meals, supersede reading, to crowd out games, walks and social occasions...” It would be easy, on this basis, to romanticise about an era before technology and the emergence of the device paradigm. This has never existed. The challenge for us is to how to embrace those things that relieve our burdens while refusing to participate in the paradigm of the technological milieu. Borgmann proposes not the dismantling of the technological world but what he calls the recognition and restraint of the paradigm, namely that we use devices on the basis of our focal concerns and basic values rather than allowing technology to create them for us. Simply put, our motto must be that “people matter more than devices.” Having agreed on our priorities as people, technology needs to be placed in the background as tools. At a personal level, this will require radical decisions by many of us. From supporting local craftsmen and bakers to using texting and emails sparingly to inform so that we might have time to relationally communicate. Corporately, it is a much greater challenge. The principalities and powers are stacked against it. Perhaps at present what is required is a committed counter-cultural force, which Jesus called the kingdom of God, whose light will function as a city set on a hill.

“The price of freedom is eternal vigilance” is the old cliché. Each generation needs to assess those elements in society that are a potential threat to the dignity and splendour of our humanity. Those responsible for this lecture stand in a noble tradition. William Wilberforce fought politically throughout his life for the abolishment of slavery.

Elizabeth Fry agitated for prison reform. Kier Hardie resisted the abuse of the working class and founded the Trade Union movement and eventually the Labour party in Britain. And Dr. Thomas John Barnardo was determined to adequately provide for homeless and orphaned children. It was their faith that was their primary incentive. We stand on their shoulders with the responsibility in our time to pursue the liberation of the human spirit.

If neither money, sex or new technology is neutral, then it is right for us to discover the truth about them, so in the words of the apostle Paul: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” One of my heroes is Miroslav Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic. As a dissident under Communist rule, Havel with his colleagues had to establish a parallel cultural movement of truth in the context of institutional lies. According to Mary Jo Leddy, a social commentator,

“They had underground study groups. They studied Plato. They had drama. They had music groups. They wrote novels and poetry, and published them underground...it was not a counter-culture because, Havel said, ‘it was impossible for us to live totally outside the system. They created within it zones and spaces, where they could become who you really are...Over time, the truth became stronger and stronger until people began to say to the system, we don’t believe you anymore. And the system fell.”

In a comparable fashion, we too cannot function outside the system, but the challenge for us with regard to money, sex and new technology is to create zones and spaces in which we can pursue truth and live the truth, and the truth will set us free.

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