ENDANGERED EXPERIENCES:
SKIPPING NEWFANGLED TECHNOLOGIES AND STICKING TO REAL LIFE

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There is a generalized sense in our culture that […] something may have been lost. […] [P]eople react very differently to this; some endorse this idea of loss, and seek to define what it is. Others want to downplay it, and paint it as an optional reaction, something we are in for only as long as we allow ourselves to wallow in nostalgia. Still others again, while standing as firmly on the side of disenchantment as the critics of nostalgia, nevertheless accept that this sense of loss is inevitable; it is the price we pay for modernity and rationality, but we must courageously accept this bargain, and lucidly opt for what we have inevitably become. […] But wherever people stand on this issue, everyone understands, or feels they understand what is being talked about here.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007, p. 307)

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Preface

Some people write books to save the world. I wrote this book as an insurance policy for my future. You see, I have drawn a line and decided that there are some coming technologies I simply will not use. For instance, right now, I am deemed normal for holding a Smartphone in my hand and not on the bridge of my nose. In a few years from now, when VR becomes a thing, I will be deemed abnormal for (not) doing the same thing. When that time comes and I am called crusty, old, and crazy, I want to have this book at my disposal—to prove that I am crusty, old, but not crazy.

There are *reasons* why I refuse some technologies. This book is my best attempt to explain those reasons. I won't aim to convince anyone of anything. Still, I suspect that others may also appreciate having this book on stand-by the next time they are called names for skipping newfangled technologies.

Agree or disagree with where I draw the line, at least I have a line. Looking around, the dominant attitude is to adopt whatever technologies come one's way, without any prior thought. Folks (in the West) seem to have gone from "God is dead therefore everything is permitted" to "Everything is permitted therefore anything we do will work out fine." This isn't the place to discuss the whole God thing. But, I doubt that an unconstrained free-for-all will turn out well. Lines in the sand, one eventually realizes, aren't necessarily a bad thing.

Such a realization usually comes only after bad consequences have happened, so it would be nice if, simply by reading a book, one could skip that phase. Alas, just as no author can save the world, I doubt that I can spare my children from the costs of their learning curve. Yet, as a parent and philosopher, I have to try. After all, my kids will probably be the first to regard me as crusty, old, and crazy.

I view this book as an insurance policy for my future, but I am aware that, like those working in insurance, I have unwittingly devised a way to win no matter what. If the future turns out fine and technologies fail to match my negative forecasts, then I can claim partial credit for averting disaster. If the future turns out bleak, then I can claim the moral high ground and say I told you so. This is clearly disingenuous. I nevertheless hope that, amid the various things I say, some actually contain wisdom.

I teach philosophy of technology now, but I can't quite pinpoint when I first began to think more critically about the subject. Maybe it goes back to 1998, when a freak event caused me to travel back in time. I wasn't alone: thousands of people were also involved. At the time, I lived in the epicenter of what became known as The Great North American Ice Storm. Freezing rain poured so relentlessly in the region south of Montreal that, by the time nature was done coating layer after layer, each blade of grass had a baseball bat of ice attached to it. You can imagine what that did to electrical wires. So, for weeks, a power outage left a large portion of the population in pitch black darkness.

I was fortunate enough to have a friend whose father was a hunter and handyman, so I spent the crisis in an oil-heated home eating game meat, canned goods, and sipping tea by candlelight. Everyone muddled through in whatever manner they could. Not everyone

was as fortunate as me. According to some estimates, the ice storm claimed as many as 35 lives, injured 945, and resulted in the temporary displacement of 600,000 people. No one wishes for hardship on anyone. Still, I distinctly recall feeling disappointed when, after weeks of quiet, power returned.

I liken the event to time travel, because it was like sampling an era that we knew once existed but had never experienced. When it all ended, many of us went into denial about what happened and resumed our lives, unaffected. However, some of us could not shake the disturbing thought that our quality of life had been tangibly better.

Gestalt theory teaches us that, to see anything, we have to see it against the backdrop of something else. This contrast lets attention discern an object, but given that our cognitive resources would not handle a regress, we must let the backdrop's boundaries fade into the unknown. Thus, like our darting eyes, our minds are constantly focusing on surprises while letting invariants recede into inattention. This explains why technology feels novel at first but quickly becomes a new normal that we don't even notice. Like the transmission towers that got crushed, the ice storm shook this pattern of habituation.

This was before Smartphones, mind you. Even so, the blackout showed us how little time we previously spent with each other. With nowhere else to go, conversations stretched and social bonds tightened. I was an undergraduate student at the time. Now, two PhDs and five kids later, I want to use my philosophical training to explore—without any disaster—what else I might be missing out on.

To see the value of such a project, once must have had a private ice storm moment. Coming to the book with a personal motivation matters, because I will not devote any space to establishing that technologies can sometimes, on balance, be more bad than good. I am instead concerned with the fact that, even when we realize this, we can have a hard time skipping technologies we know to be harmful. For obvious evolutionary reasons, conformity with social trends exerts a powerful influence on us. Hence, something needs to tug equally hard or harder in the opposite direction. Hopefully, this book can do that.

If, like me, you are worried about the many valuable experiences already rendered obsolete by Smartphones and social media and now look with concern at Meta's VR or Tesla's bots, *Endangered Experiences* can give you the confidence to skip those coming bandwagons. Life is all about trade-offs, so we should all develop a reflex of asking, not just "What does this device add to my life?", but also "What does this device remove from my life?" I am less concerned with the outcome of such a reflection than with ensuring that both sides are considered.

There is a clear demand right now for books addressing the drawbacks of technology. Sociologists (Turkle 2015), psychologists (Twenge 2017), computer scientists (Newport 2019), and scholars from business schools (Zuboff 2019) have all written popular books addressing the drawbacks of technology. Yet, for some reason, we find comparatively few academic offerings by philosophers articulating such a critical message. This is odd. What sort of emptiness or void is technology generating, exactly? If it is *existential*, then

we are solidly on philosophical turf. As for the question "what should I do?"—that is the core concern of philosophy's branch of ethics.

Endangered Experiences won't try to reach die hard technophiles convinced that every problem can be solved by cleverer algorithms, nor will it offer any large-scale legislative fixes to today's problems. The book may, however, nudge fence sitters who share my feeling that something is wrong but can't quite articulate this feeling of wrongness. Sometimes, great change can come simply from naming a pervasive phenomenon. So, if you want to glimpse the best-case scenario that privately motivates me as an author, my hope is that the expression "endangered experiences" will crystallize many people's inchoate worries and go viral.

Although I bear sole responsibility for the views and mistakes in this book, I want to thank Liam Dempsey, Wayne Fenske, Brian Garrett, Mark Glouberman, William Irwin, Henry Jackman, Puqun Li, Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, and Sandra Woien. I am grateful for the vibrant students of my PHIL 1201 course, where many of these ideas originated. I also want to thank all the readers who followed the book's development via my monthly philosophy of technology newsletter.

Introduction

Everyone is acquainted with endangered experiences. You have no doubt conversed with a friend roughly your own age and said: "Do you remember when we _____?"—filling that blank with some previously widespread experience now rendered rare or absent by technological change. In some cases, the bygone experience is mentioned out of nostalgia. In other cases, the joint reminiscence signals good riddance. Yet, what makes a philosophical study of endangered experiences so frustrating—and urgent—is the fact that we tend to notice their absence only once they have become extinct experiences. Chances are that, if we bring up a particular experience in conversation, it is because that experience is gone, in some cases forever.

These disappearances can be deplored, but luckily their cause is not at all mysterious. Physics defines a machine as something that transmits or modifies force in order to do work. Machines, however, are artifacts, so they don't just do work; they do work *for us*. Since no biological organism needlessly doubles on work, any skill a machine performs is a skill we no longer have to cultivate. Often, letting go of a skill lets us move on to bigger and better things. Sometimes, though, we get deprived of a worthwhile experience.

Most of us care when a species or language vanishes, even when we have no connection whatsoever to the species or language in question. What usually threatens living species and languages is technological encroachment. Yet, despite this common

cause, protection efforts by biologists and linguists are not conducted in the name of anti-technology, but rather in the name of diversity or intrinsic value. We don't build highways over wetlands or children's parks, because we regard the value of those sites as greater than whatever efficiency might be obtained by their obliteration. I see no reason why efforts to identify and protect worthwhile endangered experiences should be viewed any differently.

The "extended mind" actually atrophies it

Many academic books in the humanities and social sciences look at how the algorithms used by big tech companies facilitate surveillance and increase polarization, but the problems that concern me go deeper than economics or politics. As a philosopher, I am interested in the fact that technologies invariably bring with them a diminution of our moral, social, and cognitive habits. This is because, when we rely on a technology, we offload habits that evolution and cultural adaptation have spent centuries programming us with. Habits that go unused usually atrophy within a lifetime and often vanish across a few generations. The "extended mind" (Clark and Chalmers 1998) actually atrophies it. Hence, in some cases, reliance on technology risks deleting hard-earned files that cannot be recovered.

I surmise that people will notice this atrophy *en masse* when the first generation raised on self-driving cars loses the ability to drive. A similar thing happened when we (mostly) surrendered the ability to drive a stick shift. However, we did not surrender our agency (choice of destination, path, style of driving) to a computer. Technological

encroachment's human atrophy is more prevalent than people realize. To continue with an automotive example, we build speed bumps to slow down cars, but bypassing the drivers' cultivation of good judgment is not so great for people who live on streets without bumps. More powerful technologies reshape our lives in more profound ways. Arguably, once we are able to warn of our lateness by text message, we are less liable of cultivating punctuality. Likewise, a person's ability to engage in deep work for sustained periods of time shrinks when that person continuously transitions from one attention grabbing content to the next. Surrender your ability to shift the gears of your mind, and you are in big trouble.

Philosophers have done excellent work on the "deskilling" (Vallor 2015) that results from technological use, but I want to focus on the fact that losses in skills imply losses in what we can experience. For example, my working-class Quebecois grand-parents and their neighbors could gather to play the spoons, the fiddle, and recall a whole repertoire of sing along songs. These skills do not seem like much in isolation, so no one made a fuss as they quietly atrophied and eventually vanished. However, given that I cannot do any of these things, I can no longer experience the close-knit sense of community that my ancestors did. I am instead left watching archived videos of *Soirée Canadienne* on YouTube, somewhat envious of an experiential possibility that seems rewarding but that I can no longer recapture. Backgrounds and personal histories naturally vary, but I suspect that everyone has a similar story to tell. Nostalgia is of course an emotional response. However, as we learn more about the rationality of emotions (de Sousa 1987), it may prove to be a justifiable response.

As more and more traditional experiences become extinct, a growing number of people are sensing that passivity in the face of technological encroachment is not making our world or our lives any better. The success of science-fiction films and novels attests to this sentiment. Indeed, "[t]he revival of interest in Isaac Asimov's theories of robotics […], by which humankind attempts to formulate laws to prevent such a takeover, is only one symptom among many of this persistent cultural anxiety" (Jones 2006, p. 3). Novelists and filmmakers are often better at diagnosing the ills of their era than scholars and academics. The downside of fiction as a medium, however, is that it conveniently lets one disavow everything. Sci-fi thus acts as a kind of "moral outrage porn" that is "engaged with primarily for the sake of the resulting gratification, freed from the usual costs and consequences" (Nguyen and Williams 2020, p. 148) that real personal change(s) would entail.

This book is premised on the idea that our best deliberations should be taking place in the agora of nonfiction, not in the wild west of fiction. Why should we stay silent when technologies make valuable experiences, skills, habits, and social patterns obsolete? We have private conversations about what we have lost. But, in a kind of grief denial, we continue our lives and our work unaltered by the realization. Certainly, in academic philosophy, few dare to sound the alarm bells, perhaps for fear of being labeled alarmist. The goal of *Endangered Experiences* will be to alter this conversation so that, when we worry that a new technology might erase an age-old practice, we don't feel as silly or radical.

What to do (or not do) before one-way doors

The conversation needs to be altered, because we are not having much of a conversation. Right now, creation of a technology essentially means adoption of that technology. Clearly, some who profit from clear-cutting established human habits have a vested interest in protecting this creation=adoption equation. I would like to wedge a moment of pause between the two events, so as to reflect on whether a given technology will indeed leave one better off. I have no beef with technology per se, but I do have a beef with dogmatism. Just as cars replaced horse-drawn carriages, DVDs replaced VHS cassettes, online streaming is now replacing DVDs, and so on. It is obvious that this happens. It is *not* obvious that such replacements always result in improvements. We took everything for granted back then, but the internet prior to Smartphones may have struck a better, less toxic, balance. Hence, before adopting a given technology, we ought to compare the options and weigh the trade-offs—especially when we risk a loss that can never be recovered.

Skipping on a technology comes at a cost, so there are no solutions, only trade-offs. One of the puzzles is how to preemptively compare pros and cons without being able to predict the effects of a technology. We are thus dealing with decisions under uncertainty. Why, then, do we witness such bold confidence across the board? Maybe I am missing something, but when it comes to technology, I don't see much uncertainty. *Endangered Experiences*' goal is to reinstate some balance in the deliberations—if nothing else by making sure that we are actually deliberating.

If human behavior was completely pliable, the possibility of experiential loss would not cause any concern. It would constitute a loss, but not an irretrievable loss. However, easy access to certain technologies can leave one unable to rebuild what has been extinguished—and thus less equipped to deal fruitfully with the world and flourish. To be sure, one can face this risk of loss with a carefree attitude and cross one-way doors in a cavalier manner. But, once the door behind slams shut and the valuable experience has been lost, there is no room to act on regret. Rational consideration thus needs to be frontloaded, since afterward there is no avenue for action. I recall visiting an archeological conservation center where part of a wooden shipwreck was kept in an aquarium, filled with the original lake water. The chief researcher explained that they were unsure how to remove the wood from its anaerobic environment without further damaging it. So, drawing on their expertise, they did nothing. I find wisdom in this approach.

In most domains, we approach one-way doors with great caution. Finland, for example, expends great sums to safely bury its spent nuclear fuel into the bedrock, because it grasps that any exposure of the natural environment to those radioactive materials would cause irreversible damage. In the world of social relationships (dates, interviews, etc.), a popular saying warns that you'll never get a second chance to make a first impression. The logic involved generalizes: we think more carefully about getting a tattoo than we do about getting a haircut. Likewise, most cultures value virginity in part because the loss which accompanies the gain is irreversible.

Such practices lie in the middle of our cultures like giant sequoia trees so ancient that we cannot date them. In fact, we are so used to admonitions of caution that we don't even take them seriously anymore. So, when it comes to technology, we take whatever Silicon Valley throws our way and massively incorporate it into our lives, often overnight. "Already, many people have learned to defer to algorithms in choosing which film to watch, which meal to cook, which news to follow, even which person to date. (Why think when you can click?)" (Carr 2018, p. xii). As a result of this technological encroachment, many worthwhile human experiences—some of them as old as humanity itself—are vanishing at an alarming rate.

You do you

Taking the analogy between endangered experiences and endangered species too literally risks making it look as if we need some central authority or board of experts to measure which experiences are being lost and at what rate. But, unlike biologists tagging and tracking animals, the individual experiencer alone is in a position to tell whether their quality of life is getting better or worse. I would not want my discussion of endangered experiences to grease a slippery slope to more bureaucrats managing peoples' lives from afar. Wisdom (about technology or any other area) is responsive to reasons, not nudges, so "wisdom management" (Jakubik and Müürsepp 2022) would be a contradiction in terms.

How can one distinguish garden-variety social change from alterations that corrode what is essential to one's being? At the risk of alienating those looking for policy

recommendations, this is a matter for each person to decide (policies that prevent interference with such personal decisions might be legitimate). Judicious technological choices do not require empirical methods like surveys, but rather the most exacting tool of all: honest self-appraisal. In such an inquiry, "right" and "wrong" answers map onto *honest* and *dishonest* ones. In the end, only you can tell whether your life is getting better or worse as a result of a given technology. Going with the crowd is the perfect excuse for not listening to one's conscience. Even so, you didn't consult whether the majority approved of your choice of mate or sexual orientation, so you needn't consult the majority to decide whether an experience is more valuable than some gizmo.

This call for case-by-case authenticity might be seen as a cop-out, but I view it as more demanding than emulating some pre-made lifeplan. Authenticity cannot be reduced to a formula. This is where greater (inner and outer) attentiveness comes in: you must catch your thoughts in the act—especially the inconvenient thoughts you would rather not have. A life is comprised of innumerable experiences, so if you find yourself thinking that some x might disappear, then that x is already endangered. Paying honest attention, do you house a little voice pining for the time before, say, Smartphones? We tend to disparage backward-looking perspectives—this is one of the dogmas I aim to combat. However, it is entirely possible that "the good old days" were in fact good days.

Some humans will always be tinkerers, devising new stuff. I am grateful for that, because I value options. However, one *homo sapiens*' invention places no moral demand on another *homo sapiens*' adoption. We are not required to verbally justify why we purchase a good or service, so we shouldn't have to justify why we don't purchase a good

or service. Think, preferably well and beforehand. But, once you have reached a decision, a simple "no thank you" should suffice—with no frowns or weird stares. This, at any rate, is how I unpack the idea that we are each free to choose (Friedman and Friedman [1979] 1990).

Because honest and dishonest answers are indexed to an individual's actual life, there is no reason to expect that everyone will agree on which technologies they adopt or reject. The philosopher's goal should not be to make others march in step with their preferred social vision. Instead, philosophers more concerned with wisdom than reputation should inspire/equip individuals to heed their conscience, especially when that conscience recommends choices at odds with greater trends. In that regard, I side with self-improvers like Henry David Thoreau and distance myself from central-planners like Plato. Plato wanted to lead. Thoreau just wanted to live—and perhaps lead by example.

A timely topic

Far from being timeless, this philosophical topic is time-sensitive. Whereas philosophers used to ponder dilemmas in a merely speculative manner, programmers building self-guided cars need to be told what specific instructions to feed into a car in the event that it spins out of control and must hit, say, either a young or old person. The United States military is funding research to develop robot soldiers capable of making their own decisions, but robotics makes our usual reliance on blame and praise irrelevant, since we clearly cannot punish or reward a machine for its actions. Technology also raises questions about what it means to be human. The familiar Bluetooth devices nested in our

ears are only one surgical intervention away from being parts of our brains, thereby opening up unprecedented control over perception, the possibility of establishing a hive-mind, and so on. Meanwhile, leaked internal memos show Google's long-term ambition not just to record, but to eventually control, human behavior and thus world history.

Much of this utopianism is misplaced. While we may predict what an AI will do, we have no way to predict what an AI programmed by an AI will do. One could argue that we do not even fully know what our current tech does, so the situation may be even worse. When the AI software AlphaGo defeated world champion Go player Lee Sedol in 2016, the team of engineers at Google DeepMind had no way of knowing how AlphaGo reached its decisions and were thus unable to tell a blunder from a clever gambit. Robots will be in a position to design and 3D-print better versions of themselves, with or without our knowledge or consent. So, if there is any truth to the idea that "[o]ur species' pace of change now outstrips our ability to adapt" (Heying and Weinstein 2021, p. xv), uncontrollable and irreversible increases in technology may pose a threat to our very existence as a species.

I used to jokingly reassure my students that, while people increasingly depend on uniwheels and hoverboards to get around, at least humans will never forget how to walk. Now I am not so sure.

No one thought that it would be common for people on a date to not talk to each other but to instead "text" people who are absent. When, for better or for worse, reliance on a technology extinguishes an unbroken strand of worthwhile habits, it can be hard and sometimes impossible to recapture what was lost. The ramifications of this are not always

as drastic as forgetting how to walk. But, as a rule, the greater the technological encroachment(s), the more endangered the experience(s). For example, we learn mainly by imitating, so a workforce exposed only to online meetings would lack the etiquette and soft skills to properly conduct efficient in-person meetings. Recovery attempts can sometimes be undertaken. But, just as linguists would insist that re-learned Manchu will never compare to native-speaking Manchu, an influencer like Laci Fay who lives every day as if it was 1958 cannot alter the fact that no one else around her shares her lifestyle. In fact, like a renaissance fair that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, trying to revive a departed way of life makes the absence more salient—I doubt moms of the 1950s did their weekly groceries looking like pin-ups. Life happens in a context woven with shared habits, so individuals do not have free reign on the experiences they undergo. Even if my partner and I wanted to host a Quebecois-style get-together of the sort that my grand-parents experienced, we wouldn't be able to. Following YouTube tutorials on podorythmie (seated foot tapping) cannot bring the experience back to life, since it really does take a village.

In my experience, when one publicly suggests that one wants to cut back on *one* technology *a bit*, what others hear is that one wants to cut back on *all* technology *altogether*. This hyperbolic characterization may be unfair, but it expresses a justified concern. What makes the Amish lifestyle a usual target of ridicule is not its particular content, but rather its aspiration to live apart from everything else that is happening. Such an aspiration is neither feasible nor wise. Importantly though, conformity with one's epoch offers no guarantee that one's society is heading toward a better future. We may

not share Fay's or the Amish's preferred yardstick years, but we should all think more carefully before replacing a proven way of life with an unproven one. My book will thus argue that, when we suspect that a technology may have harmful yet irreversible effects, then the wisest course of action can often be to forgo or severely limit our use of that technology—until, at least, we achieve a clearer grasp of the trade-offs. I will often use the expression "technology" as shorthand in the book, but decisions can and should be device-specific. Similarly, it is not because one person comes to a particular conclusion that everyone else must as well. Seeking such uniformity is a recipe for strife.

Calculating the trade-offs of new technologies requires, not just time, but also a genuine possibility of saying "no" to trends. Part of what happens when we give ourselves this right to say "no" is that we become free to say "yes" to the ordinary world. That world may not grab our attention like a pop up. But, when we put aside our distractions and pay attention, we find that it is a source of meaning and value that no simulation could replace. The ordinary world is *irreplaceable*, in both the descriptive and normative senses of that word. Tragically, we fail to appreciate this, because "[n]othing is more difficult than to have a sense for precisely *what we see*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 67). Owing to habituation, what is closest to us is hardest to notice. So, just as biologists and linguists are tasked with tracking categories on the verge of disappearing, phenomenologists should be tasked with evincing valuable human experiences on the verge of disappearing.

The problem—and our response—are not just a matter of logic

It is easy to understand why we fail to assert ourselves as experiences become endangered and eventually go extinct. Devices like Smartphones exceed our common comprehension by such a large margin that they seem "representatives of a higher class of being" (Anders 2016, p. 30). Walking into an Apple store, you would never guess that something so small required such high ceilings. Like farting in a quiet church, it just seems inappropriate to critique something so wondrous. Awe is the intended response—and we consumers respond according to script. No wonder the magnates who built today's devices often act with god-like hubris.

Of course, the adult in us knows that the blemish-free face which stares back at us on a Smartphone is the non-supernatural product of face recognition software, filters, and the like. Even so, the young adult in us cannot help but feel like this familiar-yet-alien face is a better version of ourselves that we somehow fall short of. Smartphone screens thus act like the Mirror of Erised from the *Harry Potter* series, showing "the most desperate desire of a person's heart, a vision that has been known to drive men mad." Tellingly, "Erised" is "desire" spelled backward. Empirical studies are slowly confirming the harm that social media does to one's self-image. But, coming off a book on the ideas of Jordan Peterson (Champagne 2020), I am tempted to think that our best story-tellers understood such things sooner (and better?) than many academics.

Even if many of today's technologies are without precedent, humans have always known to be cautious. The ancient story of Prometheus reminds us that fire allows for much good, but it also allows us to forge weapons of war. When the Greeks looked at a

technology, they saw pros and cons, not just pros. In fact, surveying world myths and religions, one would be hard pressed to find a single story advising people to engage in excess and push forward into the unknown, with no concern for what might await. Yet, right now, this is essentially how we approach unprecedented technologies. I detect no wisdom in this.

The Yakut epic *Olonkho* tells of a "broad shouldered" but "fatuous and boasting" character who frees "a terrible devil." Once that devil was released, the *Olonkho* warns, it "was too late to catch him." Like many ancient stories, *Olonkho* was meant to be sung. Superficially, one might think that this is because this story pre-dates the advent of writing. It does. However, another explanation for the singing is that these were tales meant to be remembered—and presumably acted upon. This is not what we do. In fact, that poem comes from the same region of Siberia where mammoths are currently being pulled from the receding ice caps, in the hopes of bringing that species back to life (for reasons no one seems to know).

One of my methodological assumptions in *Endangered Experiences* is that the opinions of our present generation should be weighed against the combined opinions of past generations. Aptly enough, *Olonkho* was deemed by UNESCO to be part of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." Purely logical argumentation still has a place, so no tradition should be accepted dogmatically. But, if you look at a full timeline and squint, you will see which opinion prevails. It would be irrational for a fallible thinker to be unmoved by this fact.

Analytic philosophers are, as a rule, suspicious of drawing lessons from history. Yet, when Finland's government researched ways to warn humans about radioactive storage facilities 100,000 years from now, one of the proposals was to convey that message of warning by myths and stories. Narratives are deemed by experts to be the most resilient mode of communication, so it takes only a slight induction to conclude that the lessons learned by our predecessors might reach us via similar channels.

A message of caution may be as old as humanity itself, but precisely for that reason, it needs to be refreshed by each generation. This is an especially urgent task today, given that technologies like VR, Smartphones, and social media are designed to mask their addictive properties. The threats we face do not feel like threats. Yet, as anyone who has experienced a hangover will attest, activities which appear beneficial can often prove harmful. An inquiry into what actually serves one's interests must therefore be supplemented by reason. Such a rational inquiry, however, is not instantaneous, so it needs a minimum deliberative and temporal space in which to operate.

Moreover, the problem that we confront—and our response—are not entirely rational, so rational appeals on their own are bound to fall short. As children, we responded to stories long before we learned to respond to arguments. This power of narratives never leaves us. So, if we can insert a moment of pause between the creation of a technology and the adoption of that technology, we can give reason, attention, and tradition a chance to render their verdict.

Spooky –isms

The stance that I have been outlining is not Luddism. Reading the original writings of the Luddites, one is struck by how clearly they knew what they were on the verge of losing. As befits this episode of the Industrial Revolution, the problem was in-your-face and the push-back was in-your-face too. By contrast, the technologies of today's Information Revolution manipulate awareness and attention to control the range of worldviews that one is able to form. The Luddites hated the machines that they worked on, but we love ours and even bring them to our bedside. Tellingly, popular lore says that vampires cannot enter one's home without being invited in. Comfortably numbed by the periodic doses of dopamine produced by our buzzing notifications (Lembke 2021), we fail to see what we are on the verge of losing. We thus sleepwalk toward a future that we may come to regret.

What should one do about this? The philosopher of technology Mark Coeckelbergh expresses a common view when he says that "[d]igital detox is no longer a viable option and advice based on ancient wisdom sounds like yet more self-help memes" (2022, book jacket). I think that this gets things all wrong. For starters, to give up on any kind of detox is to endorse a form of defeatism that is just as radical as anything a Luddite might advocate. Inaction does not even follow as a practical conclusion. As Edmund Burke wrote, "Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

Secondly, although the unprecedented nature of today's technological challenges seems to make tradition irrelevant, one could also argue that the unprecedented nature of

today's technological challenges stems precisely from the fact that our generation has rejected tradition as irrelevant. Yet, memes work wonders—especially those that have a millennia-old pedigree. Now, to say that the past is preferable to the present or that the present is preferable to the future is automatically to make a conservative claim. An anti-conservative bias will render one unable to effectively defend such a stance, so I see this as a golden opportunity to say something that few in academia dare say.

Political labels cloud even the best minds, but the starting assumptions that will inform *Endangered Experiences* come from epistemology, not politics:

- First, *with every technology come losses and gains*. It is hard to see how anyone acquainted with the history of technology could deny this.

- Second, *we tend to appreciate what we had only once we have lost/destroyed it*. This is a tragic aspect of the human condition that we can mitigate but never escape, since it stems from the fallibility of our forecasts.

- Third, given that some losses are irretrievable, *it is better to assess those losses and gains rationally than to adopt technologies uncritically*. Rationality is our most reliable guide for determining how to act, but rationality needs time (since it is a "system 2" task in Daniel Kahneman's sense).

I submit that, if one accepts these three assumptions, caution follows as a matter of course. Right now, however, few champion such a stance. Instead, as we zoom down humanity's timeline, every technology viewed in the windshield is deemed desirable, while every technology viewed in the rear-view mirror is deemed undesirable. This is a

fallacy in the strictest technical sense called "argument from novelty" (*argumentum ad novitatem*). The probability that the future is always better than the present is nearly zero. So, when it comes to endangered experiences, conservation efforts are philosophically warranted.

A fresh look

Ostensibly, everyone writing on the subject wants to avoid being called an "alarmist," so we should probably take a moment to demystify that label. Is the position that the alarm bells should *never* be rung, or that they should be rung *only on justifiable occasions*? If one endorses the former view, then one is arguably endorsing a stance just as radical as Luddism. If one endorses the latter view, then the burden is on one to specify what would count as justified alarmism. The current debates usually focus on the "existential threat," but this invites caricatures, attracts crackpots, and desensitizes regular people. *Endangered Experiences* argues that the extinction of worthwhile human experiences, while admittedly less grandiose than species-level extinction, suffices to justify pausing and reflecting critically about one's technological adoption. Invoking the precautionary principle only in extreme situations renders that principle powerless.

Are all past experiences worth preserving? Probably not. But, the moral of *Endangered Experiences* is that figuring this out is a matter to be determined, not assumed. When it comes to avoiding technological regret, we may not have an "undo" button, but we certainly have a "don't do" button.

What is needed, then, is a rational approach to technological consumption, an enhanced ability to attend to the mundane riches that surround us, and a renewed respect for the wisdom of tradition. These approaches are meant to cover tensed time: I will look at abstract justifications that presumably hold in any time, ways to better focus on what is happening in the present, and past lessons that different peoples have conveyed in narratives. If clicking with one or more of these approaches can make a refusal of technology seem more sensible, then this can reshape the debates and possibly the future.

This is of course a compressed statement, so my goal will be to "unzip" it into more developed chapters. Here is a play-by-play summary of what I intend to say in those:

Our attention is in limited supply, so tilting one's head down to browse a Smartphone requires one to avert one's gaze from whatever else may be happening in one's surrounding environment. The first chapter will portray this redirection of attention as tragic, insofar as one may be missing out on valuable experiences that are irretrievable. Phenomenology is the (secular) art of being maximally attentive, so this chapter will introduce basic phenomenological techniques as potent tools to combat the tactics of attention-engineers. I will look at the founding ideas of Charles S. Peirce and Edmund Husserl and apply those ideas to issues that these thinkers could never have foreseen. *The first chapter's main idea will be that cultivating an ability to focus can boost one's appreciation of mundane experiences and thereby make those experiences less liable of endangerment by technological encroachment.*

Smartphones usurp some part of our experiential world, but virtual reality is an even more invasive species of technology, since it claims human experience in its entirety.

Deplorably, the few philosophers (like David Chalmers) who have paid attention to the coming rise of "Meta" have essentially cheered it on. It is a common (and rarely defended) belief among philosophers of mind that nothing prevents a computer from simulating everything that a subject experiences. However, the second chapter will argue that leveraging first-person indistinguishability to establish reality is a category mistake akin to saying that holographic tigers and Bengal tigers are species of the same genus. Tech companies and philosophers can pretend that virtual reality is the genuine article. *The second chapter's main idea will be that, since marketing is not metaphysics, a premise about subjects being fooled cannot support conclusions about what is really real.*

VR enthusiasts are concerned almost exclusively with simulating perceptual inputs and motor outputs, but the third chapter will argue that our assimilation of real food is not reducible to the perception-action loop. In tech circles, it is common to contrast the cyberspace generated by simulations with the "meatspace" that constitutes reality. The pandemic's lockdowns have indeed forced many of us to get acquainted with and accustomed to such online meetings, for both work and family. We take shared meals for granted because we take them so often. But, if recent events were a taste of things to come, then in-person gatherings may become endangered experiences. However, I want to suggest that commensality—eating together—is a valuable activity that cannot and should not be reproduced by technology. *The third chapter's main idea will be that, far from being an afterthought or periodic nuisance, ingesting food together is a celebratory act that metaphysically connects us both to the world and to other people.*

Although living bodies are not machines, it is a fact that we can build machines. Physics defines a machine as something that transmits or modifies force in order to do work. This definition is incomplete: machines are artifacts, so they don't just do work; they do work *for us*. No organism doubles needlessly on work, so any skill that a machine can perform is a skill that an organism no longer has to cultivate. Often, letting go of a skill lets us move on to better things. Sometimes though, when we let a machine do what we used to do, we get deprived of a worthwhile experience. This, at any rate, is what the fourth chapter will argue. Some researchers have shown how, when we try to game the algorithms that regulate our social standing, we end up doing things we would not have done otherwise. I believe that, when we work for our tools instead of our tools working for us, we employ our tool-making propensity in a way that is supremely maladaptive. *The fourth chapter's main idea will be that the mad haste will not stop until one reinstates individual flourishing, not means-to-end efficiency, as the proper compass of one's technological consumption.*

Because the increased attentiveness to one's surroundings and body discussed throughout this book can in principle be achieved by anyone at any time, we have reason to suspect that prior humans arrived at similar insights about the hidden splendor of everyday life. The final chapter will therefore explore different ways in which past humans have advised caution and moderation in myths and legend. We humans get to know metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical insights by interpreting such stories and texts. This is an openly circular hermeneutic activity, since we only foreground the stories that are familiar or that say what we were looking for. But, if the insights we

obtain from interpretation have practical benefits, this is sufficient to justify the exercise. *The fifth chapter's main idea will be that ancient narrative calls for caution contain great wisdom and can trigger powerful drives that rational appeals leave untouched.*

There is obviously much more to say about this intricate web of topics and issues. But, my goal is to start and/or continue a conversation, not end it…