Technology and the Wilderness Experience

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As mechanical devices become lighter, sleeker, and cheaper, the issue of technology in wilderness becomes an increasingly more important ethical concern because many high-tech luxuries or devices stand to separate the backcountry traveler from the very goals he or she hopes to actualize by recreating in wilderness. As recreationists, we need to determine which items are essential and which are distracting, separating important "equipment" from needless "devices," and exercising the self-control to carry only what we need. This process can be called "responsible simplicity." It is in the backcountry traveler's best interest to exercise responsible simplicity, to choose only the devices necessary to actualize the *telos*, or goal, of one's wilderness experience. A critique of the appropriateness of technology in the backcountry should entail examining devices in their context and also by their relationship to other technologies brought into the backcountry. From a virtue ethics standpoint, responsible simplicity can promote the integrity of wilderness recreation by providing oversight with regard to what goods are internal to the practice. It can also allow room for "wilderness" in our everyday lives in association with David Strong's notion of "counterbalancing" and Albert Borgmann's notions of "eloquent reality" and "focal practices."

Do you think there is anywhere, in any language, / a word billowing enough / for the pleasure / that fills you, / as the sun / reaches out, / as it warms you / as you stand there, / empty-handed— / or have you too / turned from this world— / or have you too / gone crazy / for power, / for things?

—MARY OLIVER[1]

INTRODUCTION

Never in the past has backpacking become so easy and so comfortable. Gear stores and magazines feature thousands of devices that all seem like essential must-haves for your wilderness adventures: zip-off versatility for your quick drying pants; wind-resistant, breathable, light-weight jackets honed to perfection; high-performance, all-terrain cross-training shoes; adjustable, expedition-

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[1] Mary Oliver, "The Sun," in *New and Selected Poems*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press 1992), pp. 50–51 (emphasis added).

ready packs; and high-density padding, moisture-wicking "Adrenaline" socks.[2] With today's advanced technology, you can bring in your cell phone, MP3 player, floatable GPS unit, satellite phone, laptop computer, two-way radio—and, yes, even a backcountry television. You can modernize your kitchen with nonstick cookpots, over-the-fire toasters, and even a titanium "spork." Well, it's almost like you can have the best of both worlds—you can situate yourself in the backcountry with all the modern conveniences of home.

As mechanical devices become lighter, sleeker, and cheaper, the issue of technology in wilderness will continue to knock on the door of wilderness managers. Researchers draw attention to the current lack of information about how to manage technology about and inside wilderness areas and also how to discern what technology is good and what is bad for wilderness.

> There is a lack of clear direction about how to manage information and communication in or about wilderness. . . . In essence, our crystal ball is becoming increasingly cloudy. Therefore, how should we assess the relative appropriateness of varied technologies in and about wilderness? How can we determine what is good technology and what is bad for wilderness?[3]

No doubt, decisions about appropriate technology will pose future challenges to wilderness managers. For example, if technology makes it easier to travel into the backcountry (e.g., it makes our experiences more comfortable; satellite phones reduce perceived risk; wilderness information is increasingly more available via the internet), will more people go there? Will the average user's skills decrease? Will people get in over their heads? And if so, will they expect to be rescued? A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* reveals that SBC Communications, Inc. has paired up with state parks in Michigan and California to offer internet access in campgrounds.[4] Will wilderness enthusiasts also expect this service? Ultimately, however, the discourse about technology in wilderness will need to move beyond the managerial realm and into the realm of individual backcountry recreationists—our choices and responsibilities are of paramount importance. It will be difficult for managers to define what technology is acceptable for wilderness recreation, and depleted legislative appropriations to wilderness management will make it even harder to enforce these regulations.

But even if all devices were fair game, recreationists should not hitch a ride on the technological bandwagon because many of these high-tech luxuries or devices stand to separate the backcountry traveler from the very goals he or she

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[2] "Explore New Trails, It's Spring," *REI Catalog 2004* (Sumner, Wash.: REI, 2004).

[3] Wayne A. Freimund and William T. Borrie, "Wilderness in the Twenty-First Century: Are There Technical Solutions to our Technical Solutions?" *International Journal of Wilderness* 3 (1998): 22.

[4] David Colker. "Wilderness Connection." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 June 2005, p. F5.

hopes to actualize by recreating in wilderness. In this paper, I do not argue that *no* outdoor equipment is needed to recreate in the backcountry. In fact, certain items are essential for safe and responsible backcountry travel—a warm sleeping bag, good rain gear, layers of thermal long underwear, a backpack that fits, topographical maps, to name a few. Moreover, appropriate equipment is vital to having positive backcountry experiences; without it, we shift our focus to misery and discomfort. The trick is determining which items are essential and which are distracting, separating important "equipment" from needless "devices," and exercising the self-control to carry only what you need. I call this process "responsible simplicity." It is my contention that it is in the backcountry traveler's best interest to exercise responsible simplicity, to choose only the devices necessary to actualize the *telos*, or goal, of one's wilderness experience. I support this assertion by arguing that technology can skew and diminish characteristics unique to the wilderness experience, and these characteristics are necessary for exercising excellence in wilderness recreation. A critique of the appropriateness of technology in the backcountry should entail examining the device in its context and also by its relation to other technologies brought into the backcountry. I look at backcountry travel from a virtue ethics standpoint and explain how responsible simplicity can promote the integrity of wilderness recreation by enhancing the goods internal to the practice.

After observing the imprint that technology can leave on our backcountry experiences, I make the case for allowing room for "wilderness" in our everyday lives. I examine this claim from two vantage points: (1) David Strong's notion of "counterbalancing"—we can use wilderness experiences to counterbalance our technological frontcountry experiences; and (2) Albert Borgmann's notions of "eloquent reality" and "focal practices"—we can use meaningful practices to incorporate the "wild" into our lives.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON WILDERNESS

I carry myself up the first nine mile grunt / Like a question mark, more like Atlas / Than Basho. At Straight Creek / When I take off my pack / I dizzy like a mote, afraid / To stand up to the wind, north wind / Realigning the tailbones of the eastern Front as far south as the Crazies.

—Deborah Slicer[5]

In this paper, I discuss technology and "the wilderness experience," recognizing, of course, that there is no single definition of *wilderness* and certainly

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[5] Deborah Slicer, "Scapegoat Mountain, Montana," in *The White Calf Kicks* (Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press, 2003), p. 44 (emphasis added).

no uniform "wilderness experience." That being said, researchers provide a list of wilderness attributes and recreational benefits commonly noted by backcountry travelers, and I build on these formally recognized observations. I deliberately use wilderness (with a lower-case *w*) to address wild lands both inside and outside the Wilderness Preservation System. By wilderness, I am referring to large areas of wild lands that still have intact most of the components necessary for a natural ecosystem. By and large, these are vast areas of public land, where one would see very little presence of modern human culture. Because wilderness benefits can be derived outside of federally designated wilderness,[6] I use *wilderness, backcountry,* and *wildlands* interchangeably. Although there is variation from one wilderness area to the next, there are fundamental characteristics that wilderness and wilderness recreation can offer.

The wilderness setting offers us a distinctive combination of attributes and opportunities we are often unable to find anywhere else. The characteristics that wilderness and wilderness recreation can offer include challenge and survival, escape, new opportunities, natural awe and beauty, and solitude.[7] These elements of the backcountry setting are salient to attaining outcomes unique to wilderness travel. Faced with the encroachment of technology and technological devices, we run the risk of compromising the wilderness setting and, subsequently, the outcomes or benefits we can gain by recreating in the backcountry. In this section, I examine the characteristics unique to wilderness and postulate how technology might lead to their deprecation.

In the subsequent analysis of wilderness, I employ narrative to establish propositions that the reader might not otherwise hold to be obvious. In a typical philosophical format, we assert and remind the reader of premises that he or she already believes to be true, and these claims are typically acquired through experience. For instance, every other morning I need to water my garden in order for the plants to grow. But when it rains long enough, my garden gets watered sufficiently. Therefore, on very rainy days, I do not have to turn my sprinkler on. Neither do I have to supply a narrative to persuade readers that there is inequality of income and wealth in this country. But when it comes to the wilderness, many readers' minds are like parched gardens. There is a lack of common experiences that can serve as premises.[8] Thus, to make the act of wilderness recreation more intelligible, we must call upon witnesses to narrate and explain their experiences. Alasdair MacIntyre explains that narrative can help us gain a better understanding of what someone does and who that person

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[6] Sarah L. Pohl, William T. Borrie, and Michael E. Patterson, "Women, Wilderness, and Everyday Life: A Documentation of the Connection between Wilderness Recreation and Women's Everyday Lives," *Journal of Leisure Research* 32 (2000): 415–34.

[7] Ibid., p. 422.

[8] Thanks to Albert Borgmann for assistance with this simile.

is by placing his or her action within a context. That is, in order to understand *X*'s action, we must also understand the setting in which *X* acts. Then *X* can serve as both an actor and an author of his or her experience.[9] Consequently, in the following section I draw upon my own experiences, the experiences of others, and wilderness research to explain both the backcountry and our actions within the setting. Narrative plays an important role in our choices and assessment of whether or not we are acting morally. So in order to answer the question "What am I do to?" we must also be able to answer the question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"[10] Our personal identity is the unity of the narrative we live and tell, and we need this unifying conception of a human life to asses our character as moral beings. Through the narratives below I establish that (1) wilderness, because of its context and attributes, presents the backcountry traveler with opportunities he or she is unable to find elsewhere; and (2) our wilderness experiences can be compromised by technological devices. Thus, we need to carefully consider what technologies further wilderness benefits and which diminish the *telos* of backcountry recreation.

Challenge and survival. In the late nineteenth century, William James posed his famous question, "What is the moral equivalent of war?" He said, "What we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible."[11] The excerpt above from Deborah Slicer's "Scapegoat Mountain, Montana" speaks to the author's struggle up a prominent peak in the Rocky Mountains. It is a "grunt"; she hunches over like Atlas, carrying the weight of the world and arrives "dizzy" at the creek. Anyone who has spent time backpacking is aware of the physical and mental challenges it can demand. It requires of us preparation skills, personal responsibility, and physical competence. These may involve the long-term focused absorption of hiking up a 4,000-foot pass or finding materials to build a fire after two continuous days of rain. Such opportunities require endurance, strength, and courage. But these character traits can be compromised by available technology. Perhaps it is important to taste our frailty in the face of a storm or be forced to show humility when we have to turn back. How would we feel if we knew we could make a call for help on our satellite phone? Would our fire feel as warm if we started it with Fire Ribbon or white gas? Probably not. These experiences would be diminished, and our humility would get subverted by our desire to control our surroundings. Moreover, gaining control over our sur-

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[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1984).

[10] Ibid., p. 216.

[11] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 290.

roundings or mastering our environment fails to result in higher levels of satisfaction. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi studied the experience of enjoyment and found that it is not speed or height or distance that makes our experiences enjoyable. It is our ability to enter into a state of "joyful absorption" or "flow."[12] As Bill McKibbon explains, "The joy comes not from excelling against some arbitrary standard, but from excelling against whatever your limits happen to be."[13]

Escape. There is nothing like backpacking deep into the backcountry—sixteen days into a twenty-two day trip in the Beartooth Mountains, your muscles are strong and for the first time all summer you feel like your body is performing as it was meant to function. You have not seen an automobile in over two weeks, and in fact you begin to wonder if you will remember how to start the car when you reach the trailhead. Wilderness offers us simplicity, allowing us to be away from the distractions of society, to escape from societal norms, and to be alleviated from life's everyday demands. There is nothing like backpacking deep into the backcountry. Yet there is also nothing like backpacking deep into the backcountry and finding trash at your campsite or hearing your neighbor's cell phone across the lake. These items diminish our ability to fully escape. "It just doesn't belong," we think to ourselves.

New opportunities. Successful and comfortable travel in the backcountry requires one to learn certain "woods wisdom" skills. As a backcountry traveler, I have learned to execute a bear hang (for food bags); to read topographical maps, set a bearing, find water, and pinpoint our exact location; to wake up early if I want to cross a Montana mountain pass before the afternoon storm comes in; and to tell how many light hours remain in the day by the position of the sun in the sky. Today, some of these skills can be replaced by technology, and indeed certain technologies can relieve us of backcountry hardships. But perhaps relief is not what we need. With excessive technology we bring our frontcountry expectations of instantaneity into the wilderness. We lose the patience and creativity that are demanded from finely-tuned backcountry skills. In exchange for quicker results and easier solutions, our sense of personal accomplishment becomes compromised.

Natural awe and beauty. Words can hardly describe waking up by Shoshone Lake in Yellowstone National Park, early on a fall morning. Fog hovering thinly above the surface of the lake, cold air hitting the water, heating and rising toward a brilliantly red, then orange, then yellow sky—a text book tequila sunrise too perfect to ever forget. The natural beauty found in wilderness is unmatched by any other setting. It invites us to connect with and pay attention to our surrounding. It inspires us and stimulates our senses. When we simplify

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[12] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

[13] Bill McKibben, *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Times Books, 2003), p. 52.

our backcountry experiences by carrying only what we need, we focus less on distractions and more on our surroundings. Subsequently, the more we focus on our gadgets—our backcountry televisions and self-inflating air mattresses—the less we pay attention to other, more meaningful things around us. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James quotes Charles Kingsley's description of the mysticism and self-reflection that wild lands can invoke. Kingsley writes:

> When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes. . . . Have you not felt that your real soul was imperceptible to your mental vision, except in a few hallowed moments?[14]

The world of gadgets and devices detaches us from our environment. "If cars do this to some extent, jets remove us even more. An exercise machine that imitates movements of cross-country skiing detaches one from the trail and trees."[15] The more detached we are from our environment, the less aware we will be of the mystical moments and self-reflection that can emerge from wilderness experiences.

Solitude. For the past eight years, I have worked as a backcountry instructor for a handful of different organizations. These organizations have different missions, but all of them have involved facilitating meaningful experiences and self-reflection for students, often including an overnight solo ranging from one to three days. The solo experience can have a different effect on different people, but students always remark about the personal reflection and mental clarity they achieved from being alone. In our frontcountry lives we almost never have the opportunity to be alone, to avoid being distracted from life's buzzers and bells, to be able to contemplate the things that matter most to us—what does it mean to live a good life, what is my purpose, is there a God? When we think of the antithesis of wilderness, we may conjure up images of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where advances in technology help society control all that might be unique to an individual—his or her profession, emotions, and thoughts. People in Huxley's civilization do not think about anything unpleasant; nor do they ever challenge their lot in life. It should be no surprise that the controllers of this disutopia have socially engineered their citizens to hate solitude,[16] for quite possibly in their time spent alone, members of this civilization might decide they want something different.

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[14] Quoted in James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 303.

[15] David Strong, *Crazy Mountains: Learning from Wilderness to Weigh Technology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 29.

[16] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1932).

TECHNOLOGY

Prima facie it may seem like bringing technological devices into the backcountry is a harmless endeavor. After all, we are still in the woods, eating GORP and sleeping under the stars. Does it really make a difference if we make a call home to a loved one on our satellite phone? Are backcountry televisions inherently evil? Probably not, but in examining the impact of technology on the wilderness experience, we need to examine the device in its *context* and also by its *relation to other technologies* brought into the backcountry. In terms of its context, we need to challenge the very nature of bringing certain technologies into the wilderness. Do they belong there? What is the nature of wilderness? What sorts of outcomes do we hope for when we recreate in the backcountry? If a wilderness is supposed to be an area "in contrast with those areas where [humans] and [their] own works dominate the landscape,"[17] and certain technologies promote an attitude of domination, perhaps we should leave them behind. Additionally, a primary motivation for establishing the Wilderness Preservation System was to "assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States."[18] Wilderness is supposed to offer opportunities apart from mechanization. Consequently, is it not counterproductive to import the very devices that symbolize a mindset from which we are trying to depart?

In terms of its relation to other technologies brought into the backcountry, it is imperative to examine the *pattern* that these devices collectively imprint on our wilderness experiences, rather than seeing them as objects independent of each other. According to Heidegger,[19] technology is more than just an instrument. It is an essence or modern mindset that embodies a desire to dominate and conquer nature. Part of the essence of technology is revealed by our failure to distinguish between what Borgmann calls "things" and "devices." A thing requires our skill, engagement, and practice; a device offers us instantaneous results, but fails to involve our engagement.[20] For example, we can compare using a GPS unit instead of topological maps and a compass to help navigate a route. GPS units are precise, easy to use, and quickly tell us where we need to go. A map and compass can be frustrating, and their use demands a certain level of skill. We need to continuously pay attention to the landscape around us; else we miss a key drainage or landmark to pinpoint our location. But the technology behind a GPS unit is unintelligible to the user. Its machinery is concealed.

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[17] Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88–577).

[18] Ibid.

[19] Martin Heidegger, *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. D. F. Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1977).

[20] Albert Borgmann, "Focal Things and Practices," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. D. M. Kaplan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 115–35.

If we run out of batteries or the device breaks, we are unable to fix it. A GPS unit fails to tell us anything about our environment; it simply solves our problems for us. On the other hand, a compass is a simple tool. We know that the magnet inside it is drawn in the direction of magnetic north, and we can fix it if it breaks. As we are reading a compass and following a map, we have to pay attention to everything around us. We are engaged in the activity. Though the end of a GPS unit and map/compass may be the same (navigating direction), their means are distinct. The complexity of the device directly relates to the diminishing returns to the user. Today, there is an increasing tendency to replace things that require our skill and engagement with technological devices that instantaneously solve our problems. But developing skills and being engaged in our activities is precisely what gives meaning to our backcountry experiences.

GOODS INTERNAL TO A PRACTICE
AND RESPONSIBLE SIMPLICITY

Backcountry travel offers us opportunities to find pleasure in the ends (e.g. getting to camp or climbing a mountain) *and also* in the means to get there. Alasdair MacIntyre explains how some activities have goods internal to that form of practice (i.e., activities that we do for their own sake), and we can use his notion of "goods internal to a practice" to guide our decisions about appropriate technologies for the backcountry. He explains,

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[21]

Activities that offer goods internal to a practice are the strict counterpoint to many technological "pure pleasures" (those unmixed with pain) like watching television or eating fast food, as the former requires our engagement, exertion, and overcoming obstacles. Technological or mechanistic pleasures subvert the practices and conceal the substructure or foundation upon which they depend, and the only things that count with these pleasures are the end materials. Though technological pleasures fail to provide us with the long-lasting fulfillment of goods internal to a practice, still we find that many Americans turn to passive technological pleasures when the work day is over. Borgmann describes the pull to consumptive pleasures that many of us feel.

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[21] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187.

When we come home, we often feel drained and crippled. Diversions and pleasurable consumption appear to be consonant with this sort of disability. They promise to untie the knots and soothe the aches. And so they do at a shallow level of our existence. At any rate, the call for exertion and engagement seems like a cruel and unjust demand.[22]

We have seen a rise in individuals turning to mechanical technology not only for entertainment but also as a means to solve their problems. For example, now more than ever, Americans are willing and eager participants of cosmetic surgery and psychotropic drugs. What becomes lost in mechanistic or techno-logical pleasures is the value in working for what we get. Alternatively, Bill McKibben argues that hard work gives meaning to our lives. "For the most part, the chance to develop skills and to apply them, to see our sweat manifested not only in a paycheck but in a harvest, a house, a book, a classroom full of growing children—that is among the strongest day-in, day-out meanings of our lives."[23] We find merit through discipline and dedicated striving and gain character not only thorough our deeds but also by their product.

In delineating the difference between achieving our goals and just having our goals accomplished, we can turn to Robert Nozick's experience machine.[24] The experience machine is a hypothetical device that could program us with subjec-tive states, allowing us to have an illusion of living a perfectly happy life. Most of us would detest the notion of the experience machine. We believe that what we actually are and do is more important that just what *seems* to be the case.[25] But if we look closely at the impact that technology can have on our wilderness experiences, we realize that Nozick's experience machine is more than just a thought experiment; we may not be as far from the deception as we think. In fact, technological devices may create an *illusion* of accomplishment, or safety, or roughing it. Were my skills diminished by the fact that I could have called 911? Did I really catch that fish, or was it my fish finder? Our wilderness experiences run the risk of becoming more like virtual wilderness when technological devices do the work for us. They separate us from our environ-ment and create a false sense of accomplishment.

Just as there is an excellence involved in baking sourdough bread, there is also an excellence involved in wilderness recreation. Thus, in assessing the value of technological devices in the backcountry we must also be able to pinpoint the standards of excellence involved in, or *telos* we hope to achieve through backcountry travel. We ought to choose the items essential for safe and responsible backcountry travel and give careful consideration to those devices that separate us from the goals we hope to actualize by recreating in wilderness.

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[22] Borgmann, "Focal Things and Practices," p. 126.

[23] McKibben, *Enough*, pp. 93–94.

[24] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

[25] Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," in *Consequentialism and its Critics,* ed. Samuel Scheffler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.109.

It would be impossible to define a responsibly simple checklist, as no two recreationists are alike. Furthermore, the complexity of a device does not necessarily imply that technology is distracting. For example, one user may require a battery-powered wheelchair to access the backcountry, but a seemingly simpler device such as a stereo may be distracting for a different user. Moreover, the same technology such as an oxygen tank may further the goals for one user (with pulmonary disease), but might diminish the experience of another. In distinguishing between essential and diminishing technologies, we need to examine a device's potential impact on our experience, and choose only those technologies which help us pursue the goods internal to the practice of backcountry recreation. Our decisions shape our immediate experiences and also affect our ability to exercise the virtues inherent in the practice of wilderness recreation.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND WILDERNESS RECREATION

Expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character. Joseph Conrad in Lord Jim tells us that it is necessary for a youth to experience events which "reveal the inner worth of the man; the edge of his temper; the fiber of his stuff; the quality of his resistance; the secret truth of his pretences, not only to himself but others."

—KURT HAHN[26]

Virtue ethics is an approach to normative ethics which emphasizes the moral character of the actor.[27] In this sense, we have the capacity to be good moral agents, and through thoughtful action (or practice) we develop virtuous habits, and these habits eventually shape our character. Thus, habit is particularly important in living a good life.[28] I argue here that backcountry recreation can help us develop virtuous habits that promote and eventually shape good moral character. It is important that we have opportunities to develop virtuous character, and in a world that is strongly governed by consumerism, uniformity, and conformity, wilderness recreation can serve as a valuable counterpart to technological culture.[29]

Backcountry travel can result in a number of positive outcomes, including self-sufficiency, change in perspective, connection to others, and mental clarity.[30] Researchers have documented other positive benefits of wilderness recreation including physical health, economic benefits, therapeutic benefits, educational benefits, spiritual benefits, symbolic benefits (just knowing wildlands exist),

[26] Kurt Hahn, "Quotations," http://www.kurthahn.org/quotes.html (emphasis added).
[27] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999), p. 1.
[28] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* trans. Martin Oswald (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
[29] Strong*, Crazy Mountains.*
[30] Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson, "Women, Wilderness, and Everyday Life," p. 423.

and aesthetic/creative benefits.[31] Additionally, each of these outcomes can manifest in a variety of ways in everyday life.[32] In the subsequent section I explain how technological recreation differs from wilderness recreation and how the latter can contribute to developing the virtues. In this discussion, I use the following standard list of virtues associated with virtuous character: charity/benevolence, friendship/sociability, gratitude, generosity, honesty, loyalty, and justice.[33]

VIRTUES AND TECHNOLOGICAL RECREATION

In *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry declared our nation to be in a cultural "crisis of character."[34] Since then, other agrarian ethicists and philosophers have noted that American culture is in desperate need of an alternative to industrialized capitalism and consumerism. Norman Wirzba highlights some of the cultural problems associated with industrialized capitalism including: "communal disintegration, social boredom and anxiety, nickel-and-dime employment, voter disenchantment, a growing gap between the rich and poor, international terrorism and unrest, [and] corporate welfare."[35] One prominent by-product of capitalism and advances in technology is industrialized agriculture. This system has largely contributed to the separation of people and places from their histories[36] and our disconnectedness from the living world.[37] Furthermore, the secularization of people from their traditional communities has led to an increase in anomie.[38]

Like technological culture, technological recreation encourages us to find pleasures through instant gratification. There is a hurried impatience in the air, and we even try to pack more leisure into our leisure. It is not uncommon to witness today's recreationist running on a treadmill, listening to a walkman, and watching television simultaneously. Technological culture requires that

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[31] Bev L. Driver, Roderick F. Nash, and G. Haas, "Wilderness Benefits: A State-of-Knowledge Review," in R. C. Lucas, compiler, *Proceedings—National Wilderness Research Conference: Issues, State-of-Knowledge Future Directions: 1985 July 23–26, Fort Collins, CO. Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-220* (Ogden, Utah: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station, 1987), pp. 294–319.

[32] Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson, "Women, Wilderness, and Everyday Life," p. 423.

[33] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

[34] Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (Berkeley: Sierra Club Books 1977).

[35] Norman Wirzba, "Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters—Even to Urbanites," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. N. Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), p. 3.

[36] Wendell Berry, "The Whole Horse," in *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*, ed. E. T. Freyfogle (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001), pp. 63–79.

[37] Gary P. Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasure and Politics of Local Foods* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

[38] Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality."

we participate in very little physical activity, and when we do, we often tend to rush through it. Lisa Heldke argues that we "hurry through" physical activity because we see it as inferior to the mechanical. She states, ". . . because physical activities involve us directly in the physical . . . and because that involvement is regarded as base, dirty, and inferior, in ordinary life physical processes become things we try to 'hurry through' or from which we try to remove ourselves."[39]

Technological culture and recreation embody a sense of indifference about any world outside our living rooms. Eighty percent of our leisure is spent alone, as passive consumption, and sixty percent of this time is spent watching television.[40] Our work, which used to involve social engagement, is now driven by productivity and specialization. Our leisure has followed a similar suit; it too is directed by specialists and has shifted to passive consumption. MacIntyre explains,

> The realm of work tends to become separated from everything but the service of biological survival and the reproduction of the labor force. . . . *Pleonexia*, a vice in the Aristotelian scheme, is now the driving force of modern productive work. . . . And correspondingly practices have in turn been removed to the margins of social and cultural life. Arts, sciences and games are taken to be *work* only for a minority of specialists; the rest of us may receive incidental benefits in our leisure time only as spectators and consumers. Where the notion of engagement in a practice was once socially central, the notion of aesthetic consumption now is, at least for the majority.[41]

Our communal contact is dissolving; we lack engagement and involvement with others, with activities, and with our surroundings. This disengagement is marked by anonymity, alienation, and detachment. In a sense we are not honest about our passivity. We know going out for a walk is a healthy activity; yet, it seems difficult to pull ourselves off the couch. The substructure of technology is obscured from our view, causing us to believe that water comes from the faucet, that heat comes from the thermostat, and that food comes from the supermarket. Although a far jaunt from the couch, even backcountry recreation can be diminished by certain technologies. Gadgets and unnecessary devices behave suspiciously like some of the technologies we use in the frontcountry: they help us control our surroundings, shift our focus to consumption and materialism, dominate nature, and remove us from bodily engagement.

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[39] Lisa M. Heldke, "Foodmaking as Thoughtful Practice," in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking,* ed. D. W. Curtin and L. M. Heldke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1991), p. 205.

[40] Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992).

[41] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 227–28.

VIRTUES AND WILDERNESS RECREATION

*Let us be first of all kind and then honest, and finally us never forget one another.
Let us, my dear boys, be as brave and generous as Ilyusha, as intelligent, bold, and
generous as Kolya . . . and as shy, intelligent, and sweet as Kartashov! . . . And let's
always go like this, hand in hand, throughout our lives.*

—Dostoevsky[42]

Wilderness recreation invites us to slow down and look around. We become conscious of all things around us and our place within the world. It is anything but passive. The mental clarity that comes from the solitude and simplicity in the backcountry can lead to feeling grateful. Moreover, the simplicity and peace that we find in the backcountry makes us content with what we have. We develop patience. People take utter satisfaction and pride in knowing that everything they need can be stuffed into a pack and carried on their backs. Additionally, wilderness recreation requires our engagement. We feel alive, connected, creative, and inspired to be better people when we return. Wilderness presents obstacles and dilemmas, and these problems challenge us to step up to the task. When we do so successfully, we feel confident about our abilities and good about ourselves. Wilderness recreation can serve as a catalyst to challenge contemporary technological culture. It encourages us to look at the world in a new light and to question the norms around us. Although the backcountry offers prime opportunities for solitude, most of us do not travel in it alone. Whether we like it or not, we become a family with our backcountry companions. We have to work together, we have to communicate with each other, and we find commonality. Good expedition behavior is characterized by generosity and benevolence, by carrying more than your share and pitching in where you can. We learn how to be fair in our groups. We figure out what seems just and what the rules are by which we want to live. Moreover, wilderness in itself, with its evenhandedness of consequences, is just. The backcountry calls us to bring that which is wild into our everyday lives. We are loyal to it.

WILDERNESS AS A COUNTERPART
TO TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE

*The world does not become less "unknown" in proportion to the increase of our
knowledge about it. . . . Our experience of the world involves us in a mystery which
can be intelligible to us only as mystery. The more we experience things in depth,*

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[42] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp. 935–36 (emphasis added).

the more we participate in a mystery intelligible to us only as such. . . . Our true home is wilderness, even the world of every day.

—HENRY BUGBEE[43]

In *Crazy Mountains*, Strong critiques the technological framework that guides our culture. He argues that our current vision of technology is an attempt to control everything around us. We see nature only as a material to use as we wish, and our enrichment now lies in creating and consuming novel commodities. "For all its thrills, frills, and glamour, consumption as a way of life, however, seems to evoke only the more superficial qualities of our humanity and leave[s] people feeling empty."[44] As an alternative to our current vision of technology, Strong promotes an approach to the world that calls for a "consideration of things" or being thoughtful about the way we take things into account. He builds his theory on Borgmann's distinction between "things" and "devices." Borgmann explains,

> A thing . . . is inseparable from its context, namely, its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement. The experience of a thing is always and also a bodily and social engagement with the thing's world. . . . A device . . . disburdens us of all other elements. . . . The machinery [of the device] makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt.[45]

Things—such as canoes, candles, dramatic performances, and mountains—are those that focus our social engagement, require our involvement, tie us together with each other, illuminate the world around us, and interweave means and ends. Devices are products of our technological culture. They block our experiences and create conditions for superficial understandings and shallow contact with the world.[46] Unfortunately, our culture has reached a point where we have ceased to see the difference between things and technological devices. Things have become subverted by technology, and we treat everything as something to be mastered.[47]

Strong, like Borgmann, argues that wilderness or wild things offer a way to encounter the world in an alternative way than through our consumerist approach, where nature is treated as a resource for our use. Wilderness is anchored in wild things untouched by technology. Experiencing wilderness

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[43] David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 81 (emphasis added).

[44] Strong, *Crazy Mountains*, p. 129.

[45] Borgmann, "Focal Things and Practices," p. 115.

[46] Strong, *Crazy Mountains*, p. 85.

[47] Ibid.

calls upon us to develop skills, patience, openness, humility, reverence, and perceptiveness to the things around us. By experiencing the wild, we can experience the world of things, and in this encountering of things we find a counterbalance to devices.[48] Neither Strong nor Borgmann argues that we need to do away with technology altogether, but that we should refrain from substituting devices for things. Our wild experiences make the frontcountry more meaningful because after spending time in the backcountry, we are able to gauge technology, consumption, and the choices we want to make about how to live our lives. This meaning is articulated by Borgmann, who says, "Wilderness on this continent, it now appears, is a focal thing. It provides a center of orientation; when we bring the surrounding technology into it, our relations to technology become clarified and well-defined."[49]

GOING HOME: FOCAL PRACTICES AND
THE WORLD OF ELOQUENT THINGS

This one time upon the earth, / let's not speak any language, / let's stop for one second, / and not move our arms so much / It would be a delicious moment, / without hurry, without locomotives, / all of us would be together/ in a sudden uneasiness.

—Pablo Neruda[50]

While wilderness plays an important role in reforming the culture of technology and making our lives more meaningful, we do not necessarily need to be in the backcountry to re-access this vision. One way to embrace the world of things and meaningful practices may be to recover and cultivate what Borgmann deems "the world of eloquent things." He argues we are immersed in a culture characterized by its consumption, technological distractions, predication, and control, and because of these circumstances we are in danger of losing our sense of reality. "Even if one applauds the attempt to salve unavoidable suffering with money, one should wonder whether the attitude that begets such attempts will not also rob us of real joy."[51] As an alternative, Borgmann calls for a "recovery of the world of eloquent things" and calls this recovery "postmodern realism."[52]

Postmodern realism is an alternative to our "hyperactive" culture or "hyperreality,"

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Borgmann, "Focal Things and Practices," p. 119.
[50] Pablo Neruda, "Keeping Quiet," *Full Woman, Fleshy Apple, Hot Moon: Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial 1997), p. 155 (emphasis added).
[51] Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, p. 12.
[52] Ibid.

which exhibits "the suspension of civility, the rule of the vanguard, and the subordination of civilians."[53] In contrast to hyperreality, postmodern realism promotes "eloquent reality" which is natural and traditional, but only occurs "where hyperreality and its mechanical supports have left openings."[54] We can recover eloquent reality with "focal things or practices" or encounters that center our lives and engage our mind and body. Wilderness is a focal thing; it is free from mechanical supports and "it provides a center of orientation; when we bring the surrounding technology into it, our relations to technology become clarified and well-defined."[55] But we can also recover eloquent reality by focal practices in the frontcountry such as running, the culture of the table, gardening, and music.[56] These experiences provide a healthy alternative to consumerism and technological pleasures. They bring meaning into our lives; they liberate us from the world of technological distractions; they invoke a sense of respect for the things around us; and they promote a more "intelligent and selective attitude toward technology."[57] In a very real sense, focal practices bring that which is natural or "wild" to the forefront of our world.

CONCLUSION

Assessing the ethics of technologies in wilderness is not just a matter of creating a simple checklist or continuum that concretely delineates right technologies from wrong. We need to pay particular care to their impact on the wilderness experience, and note that in many cases the convenience of technology may be overruled by the benefits we can derive from not bringing them along. The benefits from wilderness recreation can contribute to developing virtuous character, and this ultimately affects our ability to live a good life. If we practice responsible simplicity when recreating in the backcountry, our wilderness experiences will serve as a positive counterpart to our technological culture. It is clear that wilderness has much to teach us about technology, and we can continue to access this knowledge by incorporating other meaningful practices in our lives.

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[53] Ibid., p. 14.
[54] Ibid., p. 119
[55] Borgmann, "Focal Things and Practices," p. 119.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., p. 129.