TECHNOLOGY AND THE GOOD LIFE ?

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ERIC HIGGS, ANDREW LIGHT, AND DAVID STRONG

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Borgmann's Philosophy of Technology

David Strong and Eric Higgs

> *The book* [Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life] *that helped me find a voice, however, also opened up a troubling rift between the instruments of thought and what matters in thought, between the discipline of philosophy and the task of philosophy. The latter, I thought, was a matter of helping people become more conscious of the distractions of the culture of technology and more confident of the focal things and practices that can center one's life. I had engaged the arguments of the discipline to advance the task. The clanging and grinding of the disciplinary machinery was music to some colleagues, an ordeal to others, and incomprehensible noise to all non-philosophers. Where, then, is philosophy to be found, in the discipline, or in the task?*
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> —Albert Borgmann, "Finding Philosophy"

In modern life we swim deep in a sea of technology, surrounded by artifacts and patterns of our own making. These artifacts and patterns, like water, are often transparent to us. They are everywhere and nowhere to be seen as we fin our way along chasing after whatever is new, stylizing and restylizing our lives. Yet something feels wrong. Leisure leaves us stressed. Time saving leaves us with no time. Freedom amounts to deciding where to plug into the system. Nature is pushed aside. Even our sense of who we are is transformed in relation to this surrounding sea. So we dart anxiously here and there trying one technological fix after another. It has not occurred to us yet that, like fish in polluted water, what may be wrong lies closest to us. Philosophers of technology along with political and social theorists and others have made insightful attempts to understand the problem or problems of what is in the water. Nevertheless, despite debates within and among these disciplines, scholarly sophistication here remains at an early stage. In addition to this disciplinary challenge, the task of reaching beyond academic specialists to get other people to realize that a significant problem is hidden in their transparent surroundings has scarcely made a dent (Noble 1997).

These two challenges, both the challenge of what Albert Borgmann calls the discipline of philosophy and the task of philosophy, are important. As professional members of the discipline of philosophy, we are concerned with the "instruments of thought." We take theories, distinctions, and arguments, such as those advanced by Borgmann in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (or *TCCL*), as a point of departure for testing, revising, or forwarding alternative theories. From this perspective, we are the ones who find music, or at least hours well spent, in working through the complex turns of thought in Borgmann's book. However, we also share Borgmann's disappointment that genuine achievements in the discipline of philosophy often fail at the *task* of philosophy, that is, to engage the public more broadly in a reflective conversation about matters of great concern to all. We feel this shortcoming poignantly when these philosophies could have something decisive to contribute to a conversation about the quality of our lives by uncovering what is hidden yet harmful in our surroundings and by helping us to understand what can be done about it. From the particular standpoint of Borgmann's theory of the device paradigm, as we will see in detail later, this means "helping people become more conscious of the distractions of the culture of technology and more confident of the focal things and practices that can center one's life." Such philosophies ought to be, but often are not, part of the mix of a widespread public conversation.

A public and philosophical conversation about technology, in particular, is urgent, as Ellul, Heidegger, Mumford, and many others have pointed out. For such a public conversation to develop in a meaningful sense, it must be much more widespread than a debate among a handful of academic specialists. If the philosophical ramifications of technology remain little discussed by the larger society, then no matter how successful philosophers are at articulating and debating these ramifications, they will have failed at the greater task.

An example of a philosophical and technological issue that may open up a public conversation in this fashion—in fact an underlying contention for a number of chapters that follow—is the challenge posed by rethinking, in our contemporary technological context, the general relationship between the useful and the good. According to *TCCL*, technology has produced extraordinarily useful things and successfully taken on the ancient scourges of hunger, disease, and confinement. It did so, however, in following a particular pattern, the device paradigm. In following that pattern, we have been inattentive to the distinction between two kinds of burdens: the odious burdens of hunger, disease, etc. and the ennobling burdens exacted by the demands of community and of human excellence.[1] Rather we seek relief from all burdens whatsoever. Hence we have under the banner of usefulness reduced our devotion to community and excellence. One the one hand, ambulances save lives and so are eminently useful; on the other hand, cars save us bodily exertion and the annoyances of fellow pedestrians or passengers and are thus, at least in part, a threat to the goods of community and our physical health in the form of exercise. Hence, according to this particular philosophy of technology, we need to focus on those specific goods that are both irreplaceably good (viz., focal things and practices) and threatened by the thoughtless employment of technology.[2]

Borgmann and the Task of Philosophy

The twofold task of philosophy is to engage philosophy with issues that matter and to involve the public in a philosophical conversation about these matters. For Borgmann, the task of philosophy is to engage "the things that matter" quite literally. The distinction between "focal things" and "devices" has proven to be valuable to philosophers and laypeople alike: Borgmann's account of the difference between things and devices is easy to grasp intuitively, as we will see shortly. Moreover, it helps people to become aware of the otherwise invisible water we are immersed in, Borgmann believes, by making them conscious of the significance of technological change as it impinges on important centers of their lives. On his view, it helps people to identify and guard these centers against corrosive forms of technology. To see these latter advantages, we need to understand the distinction itself first.

What are these focal things and devices? In general, Borgmann characterizes "focal things," "centering things," or what he sometimes calls "focal reality" as simply different placeholders "for encounters each of us has with things that of themselves have engaged mind and body and centered our lives. Commanding presence, continuity with the world and centering power are the signs of focal things. They are not warrants, however. To present them is never more than to recall them" (Borgmann 1992, 119–

1. Excellence, for Borgmann, arises out of focal practices that require our exertion, attention, patience and so on. For example, backpackers literally burden themselves with packs and walking in order to encounter the wild on its own terms. What he means by excellence can often be summarized in terms of engagement, skill, discipline, fidelity, resolve, celebration, and, as Gordon Brittan will call attention to in this volume, traditional excellence.

2. As we will see, Borgmann argues that we are already assume the device paradigm when we separate means and ends. Special care, then, may need to be taken if we are not to become subverted by the device paradigm when we reconsider what is useful and what is good.

20). Before developing this terminology, it is helpful to think of the device for now (although a more rigorous account will be offered later) as referring to a descriptive characterization of most of the mass-produced artifacts around us as well as our commonly employed procedures. Devices are just the opposite of focal things.[3] Devices are disposable, discontinuous with their larger context, and glamorous in their appeal.

To give content to these characterizations of things and devices, let us take an example that figures prominently in Borgmann's works: running. Among focal things for runners are an ocean road that George Sheehan runs almost daily; a path along Rattlesnake Creek for a runner in Missoula, Montana; the course that the New York City marathon takes for Peter Wood. Like other focal things, these things often lie inconspicuous until runners disclose them, bringing what Borgmann calls their eloquence into relief.

The focal thing's *commanding presence*, in part, is its capacity to make demands on us. It takes getting in shape and staying in shape to be equal to the six miles of ocean road. Nor can one simply push a button and step off the device, disposing of the run, if one does not feel like running that day. Focal things demand patience, endurance, skill, and the resoluteness of regular practice—a *focal practice*. Even a certain character, that of a runner, is developed in order to become a match for the thing. Commanding presence, too, in part, has to do with the thing's attractions. The sights and sounds, the events of the run, the uniqueness of a particular run, or the harmony one feels with the surroundings cannot be instantly replayed at our disposal. These demands and attractions of the focal thing's commanding presence make things engaging for mind and body, serving to unify them. Commanding presence, then, describes (Borgmann excels at descriptions on a general level) the characteristics of focal things that contrast with the *disposability* of the device. Most of these devices are designed to be under our control. A computer software advertisement, picturing a mouse, brags about how much can be done "without lifting a finger." Following the trajectory of disposability, it's hardly surprising to find the recent development of a wireless mouse—it makes control even easier. In the process of lifting all these burdens from us, however, these devices are often disengaging. Most devices require little in terms of skill, patience, effort, or attention.

Unlike exercise in front of a video in the controlled environment of a health club, runners experience a *telling continuity* between their focal thing, say the Rattlesnake Creek path, and the weather overhead, between the

3. It should be noted as well that Borgmann thinks of things and devices as being on a continuum: between the clear examples of things and devices are many degrees of variation.

high, roily waters of the creek, the month of May, the receding snowfields, and the previous winter's snowfall. The office window from which one sees the mountains still capped with snow, the home where one lives, and the conversations one has with other members of the community are of one piece with this focal thing. The hour spent in the club exercising in front of a video, as we will later see with devices generally, is *discontinuous* with this larger context of one's life, community, and place. While the function of a device captures one or a few aspects of the original thing, such as the exercise of muscles, devices sever most other relationships. At the health club, one might be reading a book, riding a stationary bicycle, and listening to music with headphones. Mind, body, and world are all dissociated from one another. In general contrast, then, a focal thing is not an isolated entity; it exists as a material center in a complicated network of human relationships and relationships to its natural and cultural setting.

Focal things gather this complicated web of relations in a way analogous to how a grizzly bear concentrates the web of ecological relationships dispersed throughout an ecosystem large enough to support the species. But mere contact with the thing, the material center, does not guarantee that this web of relations will be brought home to us automatically. A six-mile run along Rattlesnake Creek can be boring or a mere relentless chore. Although mind, body, and world may not be quite as dissociated as in a health club, runners do feel this discord and find themselves to be out of touch at such times. Presumably, runners would not be runners were it not for better days. On the good days, runners come away appreciating these *centering powers* of the thing. They come away invigorated, knowing that "this is where I want to be and what I want to be doing." Through focal things and practices they affirm the place where they live and the direction of their lives. On such days they have had a *centering experience*. These centering powers of focal things contrast with the short-lived but admittedly alluring *glamorous* appeal and thrill of many devices.

These centering powers of a thing can also be thought of as its unifying powers. As we will see better later, devices separate means and ends. With automobiles, for example, we "cash in prior labor for present motion . . . my achievement lies in the past, my enjoyment in the present" (Borgmann 1984, 202). Things, through their centering powers, unify means and ends, achievement and enjoyment, competence and consummation, mind and body, body and world, individual and community, present and tradition, culture and nature. These latter can be seen more clearly by summarizing our account with an example of a focal thing drawn from music. A fine violin, for instance, is brought to life in the hands of a caring and gifted performer, and simultaneously the life of the performer is enriched in

relation to the violin. This relationship between the artifact—the violin—and the performer requires skill, and as such helps to create the character of the performer in relation to the artifact, here, the focal thing. Communal ties can be forged when focal thing, performer, and audience come together in a performance that offers a communal celebration.

As are many of the focal things that are likely to come first to mind, violins are an older technology and somewhat "a thing of the past." Most musicians, whether with violins or mandolins, cannot make a living at their focal practice. Many are forced to give up, choosing a different occupation altogether, often leaving their instruments behind. Devices, such as sound systems in one way and televisions in another, have displaced performance both by individuals and within the community. From a historical perspective, these things of the past and their world are all but gone; devices have come to replace them. On Borgmann's account, the destruction of things and the reconstitution of them into devices continues to this day, perhaps even more rapidly, with newer forms of sophisticated technology, such as information technology. In this rising tide of technological devices, disposability supersedes commanding presence, discontinuity wins over continuity, and glamorous thrills trump centering experiences. The pervasive presence of these devices and these experiences, Borgmann finds, tends to contribute to a life that lacks a center and that is missing a rich social and ecological context. Thus, if Borgmann's theory is right, there exists a profound conflict between the expansion of technological devices and the focal things and practices these devices displace. On that basis, he appeals to readers, for the sake of the quality of their lives, not to let devices completely overrun these things and practices. Such protection of centering things can occur, he argues, only if prescribed steps are taken to make room for them in our individual lives, communities, and culture.

Understandably, Borgmann thinks of the task of philosophy as making these points about things, devices, and the quality of our lives not only for other philosophers and other specialists but also for all his fellow citizens. No contemporary philosopher has drawn more attention to these "things that finally matter" than Borgmann, and for that reason, his philosophy has received widespread attention beyond the disciplines of philosophy of technology and technology studies. If more successful with this conversation about technology and the quality of our lives, it certainly would help to spur and revitalize philosophy generally and the philosophy of technology in particular. Significantly, for our purposes too, these focal things yield a standpoint from which Borgmann's theory as a whole can be evaluated.

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We can get clearer about this task of philosophy and tactics for widening this philosophical conversation with a brief look at the several traditions that Borgmann's philosophy of technology is rooted in. In one classification system Borgmann belongs to the humanities as opposed to engineering tradition in the philosophy of technology. Philosophers in the engineering tradition tend to take a narrow view of the philosophy of technology, thinking of it as a field aimed at examining mostly technical philosophical problems arising out of applied science and engineering and taught most relevantly at technical universities. In the humanities tradition by contrast the task is a broader one of reflecting on the world and technology, and here is where Borgmann's work is clearly situated (see Mitcham 1994). Technology, for him, is not only applied science and engineering; technology is the larger context, the way we "take up with the world." The world within which we exist with modern technology has its own special features and patterns. To bring out these special and decisive features of our age, that is, to evaluate the *significance* of technology is to do, on this view, philosophy of technology.

This reflection on the world accords, too, with Heidegger's influence on Borgmann. No doubt Borgmann, in some sense, is a neo-Heideggerian. Readers of Borgmann will continue to find throughout his work ways in which he is indebted to Heidegger. Born and raised in Freiburg of parents belonging to the Catholic intelligentsia (acquainted with Bernhard Welte, Karl Rahner, and Max Müller) and attending the university as an undergraduate, Borgmann listened to lecture series by Heidegger, and he wrote his dissertation at the University of Munich under Heidegger's student, Max Müller (Borgmann 1993, 157). The device paradigm itself, sometimes called the framework of technology, Borgmann considers a more useful and tightly developed specification of Heidegger's essence of technology: *Gestell* or framework. And just as Borgmann's critique of technology is at its base inspired by Heidegger, so too is Borgmann's proposed reform of technology, which entails, in part, recognizing this framework of technology. Another part of Heidegger's reform proposal entails a puzzling element in Heidegger's thought. The question of being is Heidegger's principal concern, yet in his later writings he begins to emphasize (following Rilke, Hölderlin, and other German poets) particular "things." Borgmann has highlighted and thoroughly developed this underarticulated side of Heidegger's thought, in which even sophisticated scholars of Heidegger sometimes interpret things to be almost any material object, for example a modern highway overpass (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1997). Borgmann's philosophy has also moved the locus of Heidegger's discussion of things more toward the special things of our lives, things of great importance to our well-being. As we will see,

this last move comes from an American tradition of things rather than the European one.

This debt does not mean that Heidegger's influence on Borgmann is obvious for there is an enormous difference between Heidegger's difficult and idiosyncratic language and Borgmann's more developed, ordinary, clear, and precise language. Thinking of Borgmann as a Heideggerian may therefore do him a disservice. As he says in an autobiographical piece, "Heidegger had shown me the problem that needed attention. Rawls [with *A Theory of Justice*] set the standard for solving it" (Borgmann 1993, 158). The quest for a clear and more ordinary language, one accessible not only to specialists but to any literate reader, springs from Borgmann's aspiration to kindle a public conversation about technology's threat to the significant things in our lives. In *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (which we will call "*CPD*" in this chapter), as Borgmann assumes the role increasingly of a public intellectual, he strives for an even wider audience by writing in a more straightforward, less technical style for a trade book audience.

Borgmann, especially with his work on focal things and practices, is every inch an American philosopher in a tradition he characterizes as concerned with "the reflective care of the good life." This tradition bears philosophical roots in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville and is carried forward in the work of Borgmann's former colleague at the University of Montana, Henry Bugbee, author of *The Inward Morning*, a Thoreau-inspired title. It is also a tradition of practitioners and writers (at times inspired by Native American traditions) who title their books, stories, poems, and essays after ponds, whales, bears, creeks, rivers, ridges, capes, islands, refuges, turtles, willows, delicate arches, farms, horses, landscapes, city squares, parks, streets and neighborhoods, villages and towns, and even suppers and motorcycles—what Borgmann calls focal things. Alternatively, these writers speak of activities, such as walking, running, woodworking, sailing, throwing pots, weaving, cooking, or "love medicine" and ceremonies—these are Borgmann's focal practices. It is out of this tradition, for example, that Aldo Leopold can begin his *Sand County Almanac* with an appeal to things and his connection to them without feeling the need to explain to his readers what he means by them. "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot" (Leopold 1968, vii). It is really this tradition that Borgmann has increasingly aligned himself with since coming to America in the 1960s.

The Device Paradigm

To meet the task of philosophy in *TCCL*, Borgmann developed his philosophy of technology as the theory of the device paradigm. This theory remains basic although mostly implicit, for *CPD* and his recent *Holding On to Reality* as well. Beginning with the observation that contemporary life in technologically advanced countries exhibits a repeated pattern, Borgmann tries to provide a language of reflection, a theory, within which we can comprehend this exhibited pattern and its consequences. Ultimately, since the theory of the device paradigm yields a cautionary tale of disappointing and debilitating consequences of technology, it claims to show how to challenge and reform technology in a way that goes to the root of the problem of its affect on our well-being. Here we will present an overview of the device paradigm.

The device paradigm helps us to understand why people expect so much from technology. Certainly part of the story involves the benefits wrought by modern science and technology. After all, it was not people's prayers and rituals that brought the threat of smallpox to an end; it was modern medicine. People believe that technology has removed and can remove much, if not all, of the misery and toil that have plagued the human condition. Technology can reduce or eliminate darkness, cold, heat, hunger, confinement, and so on by bringing these harsh conditions of nature under control. Freedom from these conditions thus entails the conquest of nature.

Borgmann advances beyond this common understanding of "the promise of technology" by connecting this liberating aim of the promise with another, less well articulated, aim: enriching life. He argues we have come to embrace a vision of the good life that is inextricably bound to the technologies that shape our everyday lives. Technology in the common understanding promises not only to disburden us of our everyday hardships but also and more importantly to make us happy. It is with this twofold aim, liberation and prosperity, that the domination of nature, culture, time, and place was first undertaken and, often in a more subtle fashion, is continuing to be carried out (Borgmann 1984, 35–48).

In important respects Borgmann reflectively agrees with this promising aspect of technology. On his view technology can be used appropriately in a liberating role, in the service of centering things. In that supporting role, it can help to provide the time, space, and security necessary to pursue focal practices such as sewing, running, hiking, cooking, musicianship.

The flaw in the promise of technology shows up mostly, though not exclusively, in its enrichment role. The conventional view is that technology frees us for other, more enlivening pursuits; Borgmann argues, however, that we typically are not freed up for other centering things but only more

passive consumption. Technology frees us up for more technology. Our received understanding of the good life, in popular terms measured by our standard of living, is nothing but a vision of this technologically "enriched" life. But why is it such a mistake to believe that technology can fulfill our lives? Borgmann finds that the fundamental problem lies in the details. Technology promises to liberate and enrich us through devices. A close and careful examination of devices, however, shows that when devices fill our lives, we are reduced to disengaged consumers of the commodities these devices provide. So the basic question is really: What is distinctive about the device that can be deceptively alluring?

The device paradigm shows that from roughly the Industrial Revolution on there has been a transformation of our material world from one pervaded by "things" to one dominated by devices. The best-known of Borgmann's illustrations is the shift from hearths and wood-burning stoves (things) to the central heating system (a device). A thing, in Borgmann's sense,

> 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. . . . Thus a stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a *focus*, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center. Its coldness marked the morning, and the spreading of its warmth marked the beginning of the day. It assigned to various family members tasks that defined their place in the household. . . . It provided the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together with the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity to daily tasks. . . . Physical engagement is not simply physical contact but the experience of the world through the manifold sensibility of the body. That sensibility is sharpened and strengthened in skill. Skill is intensive and refined world engagement. (Borgmann 1984, 42)

The engagement with the world of things, as found in the case of the wheelwright, the blacksmith, or the musician molds the character of a person and helps to provide one with a fuller sense of self. Thus, for Borgmann, the earlier world of things defined a strong framework in which a person's particular practices defined one's character. The variety of practices created diverse communal relationships.

What has replaced the thing is the device. The device provides what Borgmann calls a *commodity*, one aspect of the original thing (for example, in the case of the wood-burning stove, warmth alone), and disburdens people of all the elements making up the world, or context, and engaging character of the thing. This world of the thing, that is, its ties to nature, culture, the household setting, a network of social relations, mental and bodily engagement, is taken over by the *machinery* (the central heating plant itself) of the device. All of these multifarious relationships are eliminated in the process.

> The machinery makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt. In the progress of technology, the machinery of the device has therefore a tendency to become concealed or to shrink. Of all the physical properties of a device, those alone are crucial and prominent which constitute the commodity that the device procures. (Borgmann 1984, 42)

Devices, therefore, hide the complicated mechanisms by which the commodity is produced, and consequently result in a sharp division between the foreground (commodity) and background (machinery). Owing to this submerged character and to its variability (from coal to gas to oil to electricity in the central heating unit), the machinery becomes necessarily unfamiliar. It is very important, however, not to think of the device as only machinery. The device makes available a particular commodity—warmth. This commodity is that for which the device is intended. Just the opposite of the machinery, the commodity fills the foreground (warmth becomes ubiquitous in the house), remains relatively fixed as the means change (from coal to electricity) and becomes increasingly familiar. It follows that there exists a wide division between what a device provides in the foreground, the commodity, and how it provides its commodity in the background, the machinery. Hence, and this is Borgmann's central insight, devices *split* means and ends into *mere means* and *mere ends*.

Things, in contrast, richly interweave means and ends, so that practices are experienced as good in their own right and useful too. In the Zen tradition, for instance, one can become enlightened through giving oneself to simple tasks, like chopping wood. Of course, we can be proud of the skills we learn, or enjoy the character we develop as we acquire the sets of skill and virtues necessary to engage in furniture making, cooking, or working with a string of packhorses. Or one can enjoy the social good of all working together in the household to get things done. However, the world of the thing and the engagement it calls for are felt at times as a burden or hassle. The device frees people of all these problems.

Concerning this disburdenment, Borgmann sees in the postmodern era

a trajectory to the device paradigm (in addition to the change from a thing to a device) with the further refinement of devices. The more refined a device the more it lifts these burdens from us. For that reason, refined devices disengage us even further, eliciting private passive consumption. "To consume is to use up an isolated entity without preparation, resonance, or consequence" (Borgmann 1984, 53). As consumers, we become disengaged from things and each other—our social life becomes mediated through a commodity culture.

This thing-to-device illustration in the case of the wood-burning stove is representative of the larger cultural pattern. Extensively yet unobtrusively, this technological approach to the world, Borgmann argues, pervades and informs what people think, say, and do. Organizations, institutions, the ways nature and culture are arranged and made accessible all become modeled on the device. "Technology is the rule today in constituting the inconspicuous pattern by which we normally orient ourselves" (Borgmann 1984, 105). It becomes extremely important then to consider not just the appropriateness of this or that device in a specific context, but to consider people's typical use of them and the overall consequences of the use of devices by most people in the developed world. This then is the device paradigm: Borgmann's term for the transformation from things to devices and the technological universe created by that transformation.

Now it is easy to see how we can begin to move from this description of the device to a diagnosis of the problem:[4] By destroying most or all the relationships we once had in the world of things, devices completely change our lives. Borgmann does not argue that we should all return to wood-burning stoves or the like, rather he challenges the limitless and unreflective employment of devices. If we are spellbound by the promise of technological enrichment—of a world that happily demands less and less of us in terms of skill, effort, patience, or any kind of risk—the logic of the device results in a disburdened and disengaged way of life. Television, for example, claims over fifty percent of our free time. In the force of its attraction, it exemplifies the perfect fulfillment of the promise of technology: a quick, easy, safe, ubiquitously available window on the world. So seen it is exactly what people have hoped for from technological enrichment and exactly the kind of enrichment—amusement—that devices can capture. It is ironic, then, that people do not take much pride in television—as the label couch potato indicates—and are often left dissatisfied spending so much time in front it. In general, Borgmann argues, the promise of technology

4. Borgmann argues that description, diagnosis, and prescription cannot be separated from each other ultimately. See Borgmann 1984, 68–78; Strong, chapter 17 in this volume, 317, 320–29.

pursued in this unreflective and limitless way turns ironic in the same way: technological enrichment, the life of consumption, leads to disburdenment, disengagement, diversion, distraction, and loneliness. Similarly, virtual reality turns out to be disposable, discontinuous, and merely glamorous and ephemeral in appeal. The computer will yield similar ironic results *if* pursued in this unreflective fashion.

> It has already begun to transform the social fabric, our commerce with reality, and the sense we have of our place in the world. At length it will lead to a disconnected, disembodied, and disoriented sort of life. The human substance will be diminished through a simultaneous diffusion and individuation of the person. Hyperintelligence allows us to diffuse our attention and action over ever more voluminous spaces. At the same time, we are shrinking to a source of instructions and finally to a point of arbitrary desires. (Borgmann 1992, 108)

These and other such unexpected consequences of device procurement are what Borgmann calls the "irony of technology." The good life that devices obtain disappoints our deeper aspirations. The promise of technology, pursued limitlessly, is simultaneously alluring and disengaging.

If Borgmann's task is to help us develop a language of reflection within which we can come to grips with technology, only half of that task is completed by understanding the promise and irony of technology and the roles devices and consumption play in this ironic turn. Borgmann himself notes that if his cautionary tale about technology were the limit of his prescription it would be tantamount to advising us to turn off the television without providing a genuine alternative to it. If we send the gopher down one hole, chances are it will show up at another. To get to the bottom of the matter—to actually put into practice a response to the device paradigm—we must become respectful, or "mindful," of things. That is, we must refocus our lives by turning to *focal* things and practices. The prescription follows from the diagnosis.

Things of the past were both focal (e.g., the wagon itself) and more peripheral (e.g., the chisel that the wheelwright used to build the wagon). Borgmann looks to the more central kinds of things for a foothold to get the reform of technology underway, but with two qualifications. Unlike the things that center an entire culture in the past, such as temples and cathedrals, for us these focal things are central for individuals, families, and communities but not entire cultures. Second, although many focal things today are remnants of yesterday's world of things, such as classical musical instruments, these focal things have changed in form, and, importantly,

many other focal things are of more recent origin. A favorite walk, canyon, stream, slope, one's garden, or a part of the musical or theater scene of a town or city can be (or become) focal things for individuals and communities.

A thing is focal if it is what we give our time to and what we build our lives around. Like the fireplace, focal things richly interweave means and ends, point to the larger context of their setting in nature, the community, and culture, call for attention, effort, skill, and fidelity to regular practice, and invigorate individual and community life. Genuinely focal things stand over us as a commanding presence. Under the rule of the device paradigm, commodities provided by devices and consumption are what most of us spend our time on and build our lives around. Unlike focal things, our interest in any particular commodity is short-lived; the thrills of consumption are necessarily disconnected from each other, and the result is fragmentation. Commodities also are discontinuous with their larger natural, communal, and cultural settings (often blinding us to social injustice and ecological damage). They are disposable, demanding little of us. We merely turn them on and off. In sum, whereas focal things unify and gather, devices divide and scatter.

Focal things guide reform but they also require commitment. To reorient ourselves we must engage regularly in "focal practices." The "culture of the table" can be a focal practice.

> In the preparation of a meal we have enjoyed the simple tasks of washing leaves and cutting bread; we have felt the force and generosity of being served a good wine and homemade bread. Such experiences have been particularly vivid when we come upon them after much sitting and watching indoors, after a surfeit of readily available snacks and drinks. To encounter a few simple things was liberating and invigorating. (Borgmann 1984, 200)

Engagement with focal things and practices alerts us to the forces opposing them and the flawed use of devices—the irony of technology. We destroy the engagement we enjoyed with them when we try to enrich our lives through consumption. Thus, the culture of the table can be and for many of us mostly has been displaced and destroyed by fast food. We see this problem when wilderness and the natural world are destroyed as their resources are needed for increasing levels of consumption, or as nature becomes packaged in a subdivision. Walking and biking attractive city streets and parks has been displaced by automobiles, freeways, shopping at indoor malls, and private forms of entertainment. Participation in sports is displaced by spectator sports. Childhood hours spent among things outdoors are now spent in front of the television, video games, and the Internet. Temporally, spatially, socially, and bodily, centering things have been crowded out of contemporary life. We can counter these forces, Borgmann insists, but only by guarding a focal thing with a regular practice. We can "clear a central space amid the clutter and distraction" even through small steps like committing ourselves to meals with beginnings, middles, and ends, breaking through the "superficiality of convenience food" (Borgmann 1984, 204). Engaging in such focal practices, therefore, requires "resoluteness," "either an explicit resolution where one vows regularly to engage in a focal activity from this day on or in a more implicit resolve that is nurtured by a focal thing in favorable circumstances and matures into a settled custom" (Borgmann 1984, 210).

Finally, Borgmann sees that we need "deictic discourse," languages of reflection (which often turn out to be from literature) that remind us of the greater importance of these centering things and practices and help to provide the resolve to engage in them. Only then can we begin to make wise basic choices that roll back the universalization of devices. "In a finite world, devotion to one thing will curb indulgence in another" (Borgmann 1992, 116). Since consumption and devices have displaced things, the key to reform is now to displace them, not completely, but in a way that knits an unprecedented relationship between things and devices. Borgmann, as we will see, looks forward to their harmonious coexistence.

The basic issue then is something like this: Through recollection, actual practice, and the disclosures of literature and public conversation, we become conscious of the importance of focal things; from understanding the device paradigm, we become conscious of technology's threat to these same things. Having located this pivot and having been motivated to rescue things, the next step is to work out what it will take to make room for and encourage engagement with these things within a setting of technology. What will it take to overcome the conflict between focal things and technology? How, for instance, can we expect ourselves, our families, or others to live anything but the life of consumption if factors in towns, cities, and the economy virtually force such a life upon us? Overcoming this tension serves as the directive from which the theory becomes wide-ranging in prescriptions for reform. Borgmann's general answer to these questions draws in two ways. First, focal things and practices need to be expanded and complemented by public things and communal practices. Second, we need to recognize how the economy presently is in service of consumption and needs to be reoriented.

Just as individuals are faced with choices between clearing a space for focal things, so too are communities faced with letting their downtowns and other traditional centers die while developing a shopping district closer

to freeway exits. Borgmann believes that communities need to become conscious of the fundamental material communal choices they face, so that rather than feeling forced to consume, members of a community feel encouraged to live lives consistent with focal practices. Fundamental material choices of this nature reinforce passive, private consumption when public places and public goods in general become increasingly instrumental in character, replacing places of celebration and encountering others in their bodily presence. This happens when downtowns are abandoned or even when trees are cut down for developments, leaving a town less attractive for walking and less livable. Reform then has to do with protecting, maintaining, and enhancing communal centers, public focal things, that many times already exist in a community in some fashion. We learn better from what we are already doing right. So communities near wilderness need to protect wilderness, while a community near the prairies may want not only to protect but restore some of the prairie. One community may put its efforts toward preserving and enhancing a different musical tradition than another community. From this standpoint, Borgmann prescribes, among a host of other things, protection of open spaces, concert halls, more preservation of historical treasures, more farmer's markets, enhancing street life, allowing nature more of a say in our built environments, more walking trails between towns and their outskirts, and more paths for running and biking. Some of these public things will favor engagement in the daily life of the community while others will favor its festive life. Given the interest of a particular town, creation of a ballpark can be centering for a community. "A thoughtful and graceful ballpark tunes people to the same harmonies" (Borgmann 1992, 135). From such shared experience, public conversation can continue to grow and address further reforms.

Both *TCCL* and *CPD* call for deep reforms of the economy. In *TCCL*, Borgmann thinks of the present economy as the machinery component of the device, like the central heating plant itself. What this device—the economy—provides is the goods of consumption: the latest, the widest assortment and the most commodities. Since this commodious good life is taken for granted, it never really comes up for examination; rather most of our discussion, whether in politics or the news media, focuses on the economy alone and how well it is performing in providing these commodities. In *CPD*, Borgmann finds this same kind of focus and hidden assumption.

> To rein in consumption has been a standard ingredient of the medication prescribed by mainstream economists. But the implication invariably has been that the curtailment of consumption now is justified solely for the sake of greater consumption in the future. The present criticism of commodity consumption thus turns out to be an unreserved affirmation of commodity consumption as such and hence of commodious individualism. (Borgmann 1992, 80)

Generally, Borgmann sees that the economy is now in the service of affluence, his name for the goal of producing more, more varied, and more refined commodities. His reform tactic prescribes dislodging the economy from this service to consumption and reorienting it toward serving things and the kind of life of engagement they sponsor. The economy ought to serve "wealth" at the expense of affluence. In contrast to affluence and to poverty (where one lacks the wherewithal in terms of time, means, health care, to pursue focal practices in a secure manner), wealth is the setting within which focal things, both private and public, can flourish. It consists of the leisure, space, books, instruction, equipment, physical health, and economic security necessary to become equal to a "thing that has beckoned to us from afar" (Borgmann 1984, 223).

How wealth can be advanced politically and economically is too complex to go into in detail. Suffice it to say that Borgmann believes there is a kind "half-knowing and half-hearted going along" with present technological development. This conflicted attitude in people provides an opening for change. As we grow conscious of what our basic choices are through improved public conversations and through actual contact with focal and public things—when for instance events like communal celebrations are secured by community—we will begin to see better what other steps need to be taken. Through these kinds of steps, we may eventually come to a collective affirmation to enhance the quality of lives rather than increasing our standard of living. Accordingly, if such affirmation occurs, in *TCCL* Borgmann prescribes a two-sector economic system: one sector that is local and labor intensive; another sector, subordinate to the first, that is more automated and centralized for mass producing devices and other products and services necessary not for affluence but for wealth. With the second sector, Borgmann has in mind infrastructure, certain kinds of goods and services, and research and development. With the first sector, he has in mind industries having to do with food, furniture, clothing, health care, education, and instruction in music, the arts, and sports. He argues that the local sector should be favored through tax and credit measures to the point where its goods and services can prevail in the market.

In other words, we need a new maturity, a maturity where we are no longer spellbound by technology. Freed from the threat of their universalization, devices in this setting will no longer be in service to consumption

but will instead serve centering things and the life of engagement they sponsor.

Borgmann returns to this notion of maturity in *CPD*. There he connects his critique to postmodernism, casting modernity as undergirded by the project of dominating nature through technology. What is distinctive about postmodernism is its acceptance of consumerism. So while many postmodern critiques of the modern project are correct and effective at certain levels, none goes to the root of the matter, critiquing technology as a way of life in pursuit of technological prosperity. Borgmann formulates an alternative postmodernism designed, again, to outgrow technology as a way of life and to center individual, family, and communal life around eloquent and "focal reality," a new name for focal things. He argues that not just as individuals but more so as a culture the choice of whether or not to embrace focal reality is the most important one we face as we cross the "postmodern divide."

Apart from this core theory of technology, Borgmann plants a rich garden of concepts in order to advance the general task of philosophy. He argues, for instance, for a three-way classification of knowledge. Scientific knowledge—*apodeictic* knowledge—gains power through precision and reduction, and has largely devalued and displaced testimonial forms of knowledge over the last two centuries. Art, music, writing, and other forms of *deictic* or testimonial knowledge move people to act and to understand what it is that gives context and focus to one's experiences. Deictic knowledge articulates a thing or event in its uniqueness. Apodeictic and deictic knowledge, alone or in combination, are insufficient, however, to comprehend the technological world; scientific knowledge by itself fails to select significant strands of social reality, and deictic knowledge grants the significance of particular things as individuals but is less adequate for reflecting upon repeated ontological and normative patterns found in social reality. Borgmann proposes a third explanatory possibility: *paradeictic* knowledge. It is more concrete and specific than apodeictic knowledge, and more abstract than deictic knowledge: "A pattern, then, is an array of crucial features, abstract and simple enough to serve as a handy device, concrete and detailed enough to pick out a certain kind of object effectively" (Borgmann 1984, 73). The device paradigm as the primary pattern of contemporary life is a paradeictic explanation. The theory of the device paradigm is a paradeictic explanation that reveals the technological character of the underlying repeated pattern of contemporary life.

In sum, Borgmann has accomplished the kind of philosophy of technology that we believe is worth doing. While it is ultimately concerned with the task of philosophy, with doing public philosophy about things

that matter, its public character is continuous with disciplinary rigor and depth. Without the substance of the former, it would not be worth the effort and care to study and critique it. Without the disciplinary rigor, philosophers may facilely dismiss it before seeing how new, comprehensive, and profound is this philosophy of technology.

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