The Technology of Happiness

EDWARD MOAD

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INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Omar Edward Moad is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Humanities, Qatar University. He has published numerous articles on Islamic philosophy and comparative moral epistemology, as well as a textbook, Logic and Critical Thinking: An Introduction for Muslim Students (2017: Kazi Publications).

"When there is a general change of conditions," Ibn Khaldun writes, "it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew."[1] Diligent study of history had given him a unique awareness of something all Muslims believe, though few perhaps truly grasp: Allah alone is Eternal, while everything else is perishing. The best we can hope to pin down is a relative view of the Sunnah of Allah as manifest in the pattern of created events. Thus, Ibn Khaldun concluded that history, if it is to aspire to real knowledge, must be a branch of philosophy; that is, we must hypothesize unchanging algorithms governing the flow of events, underwriting the order evident therein. Only to the extent that we understand these laws of human culture can we hope to verify reports, explain the past, or anticipate future events. Alas, since we can only arrive at such laws by inference from the pattern of events, our understanding of them is always limited by the scope and reliability of the historical evidence itself. Ibn Khaldun's evidence was limited to historical reports from a specific period in a specific geographic area. Consequently, as the statement makes clear, he understood that eventually his understanding of human society as a cycle of nomadic and settled life would no longer apply.

In our current conditions, it is simply inexcusable not to be at least as aware as Ibn Khaldun of the difference between the eternal and temporal. Only the amnesia that these conditions induce could explain it. Simply bemoaning this rate of change as another modern ailment is essentially complaining that nothing other than God is eternal. For the rate of change is relative. The task, as always, is to distinguish the eternal from the temporal with clarity. For if the proper relation of humans to God is always a possibility—that is to say, if Shariah is applicable to all historical conditions—then there must be something about the part of creation implicated in such a relation (namely, the human being), that will not change. Yet in our time, technology has 'advanced' at a rate that has led us to imagine the eclipse of human nature itself, a historical condition known as the 'transhuman.' Now what?

In Part I of what follows, we describe the prospect of transhumanism and the current state of moral deliberation on technology to which it draws attention. Then we will

[1] Ibn Khaldun. *Al-Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005).

suggest an alternative paradigm. In Part II, with some help from Aristotle, we conceptualize technology itself in a more principled way. In Part III, we review some insights from Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Alchemy of Happiness* on the true nature of the world, applying our concept of technology, to find a more stable vantage from which to independently evaluate the moral implications of technological changes.

Part I

Transhumanists come in a variety of flavors but share the common belief that advances in technology will soon enable them to take control over (what they believe to be) the process of evolution, and in fact transcend humanity by either engineering or becoming an altogether distinct, superior species—the next stage in the so-called evolutionary process.[2] They advocate realizing this vision by a combination of diverse means, including not only genetic engineering, but also cybernetics, leading some to imagine future human bodies as robotic as they are biological, blurring the line between machine and living organism.

Some have already had themselves placed in cryogenic deep-freeze to be revived at some future time when, they hope, technology will allow them to escape physical deterioration and even death. Others prefer mind-uploading, an imagined process whereby information—believed by the mind-uploaders to constitute the mind—would be transferred to an alternative medium engineered for superiority over the relatively fragile and limited organic brain, completely transforming man into machine.

The 'singularitarians,' for their part, predict and advocate the development of an artificial intelligence that will outstrip the human cognitive capacity, and whose consequently superior wisdom would be rightfully obeyed in the interest of the optimal social organization of our own inferior and self-destructive species. The 'Singularity,' as they call it, would be manufactured by first developing a computer program that simulates human-level thinking processes, but with a built-in

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transhumanism

self-improvement mechanism that will trigger a perpetual increase in its own computational powers.[3]

At the other end of the spectrum on the relation between humans and technology are the anarcho-primitivists, whose opposition to technology is as absolute as is the transhumanist faith therein. Anarcho-primitivists trace every form of social injustice, unjust social stratification, coercion, and alienation to, not just modern technology, but technology per se. Specifically, their view is that social injustice emerged as a result of ancient humanity's shift from the hunter-gatherer to the agricultural mode of subsistence. Their vision of life before this shift is that of a simple, pure, egalitarian tribal existence, to which they promote a process of return they call 'rewilding.'[4]

Neither side can be faulted for shortcomings in imagining the possibilities of technology on the one hand, or in seeing the many links between technology and existing problems, on the other. Yet, even though these represent the extremes of contemporary western philosophy of technology, the fact that they can oscillate so wildly, and be taken seriously by so many is an indication of the inability of contemporary western intellectuals to find a balance. In fact, these extremities follow quite naturally from premises that modernists typically view as unquestionable; that is, secular humanism combined with evolutionary biology.

While humanism holds the good to be what is good for the human being, secularism prohibits the humanist from justifying himself philosophically by reference to religious or metaphysical conceptions of human nature. Evolutionary biology, then, offers the only explanatory option. The human being is the rightful focus of moral consideration because she represents the apex of the evolutionary process, not because of any special creation or divine purpose for her existence. Yet if evolutionary theory is correct, this is a contingent state of affairs, and in all likelihood, a new species will emerge to dethrone the human being as the crown of evolution. In that case, members of this new species will be the rightful focus of

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technological_singularity
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rewilding_(anarchism)

moral consideration in relation to whom we would be like chimpanzees are to us. So what are we to say to the possibility of some such new species using us as guinea pigs, or even lunch packs? We may not like it, but would we be philosophically justified in considering it morally objectionable?

This may sound silly or fantastic, but there is no excuse for a secular humanist not to take such questions seriously. There is nothing in his worldview that justifies him in assigning any special moral status to the human being, that is not simply contingent on evolutionary history. He also has no basis for dismissing out of hand the possibility of a superior species, the mere possibility of which is adequate for undermining the foundation of humanism as a moral framework. If natural selection endows moral as well as biological superiority, then transhumanism follows: it may not only be morally fitting for me to contribute to a transhuman lunch pack, but there may even be a moral imperative for me to hasten the emergence of the very transhuman to whose lunch pack I might fittingly contribute.

Perhaps this explains some of the recent condemnation of anthropocentrism in the west, and the call for moral consideration to extend beyond the human to all forms of life. Why should being at the top of the evolutionary ladder give you a special moral status, whether you are human or transhuman? I imagine something like this would be favorable to the anarcho-primitivists, opposed as they are to stratification. Why should a hierarchy rooted in biology be an exception? Yet this extension of moral consideration beyond the human could have the consequence of rendering nature and life itself essentially bad, locked as it is in its circle of digestion. Or if it is not morally bad that some organisms eat others, that humans eat others, or that others eat humans, then why should it be morally bad for humans to eat humans? Life itself must then be essentially bad—or cannibalism must be okay. Yet if cannibalism is okay, then what is wrong with being eaten by a transhuman? Furthermore, does cannibalism not entail some degree of social stratification?

When the average person faces such extreme consequences of their own worldview, a common reaction is to laugh it off, ridicule the ‘prima facie’ absurdity, and profess one’s adherence to a more moderate, reasonable position. However, this does

nothing to make the moderate position any more compatible with the basic premises of the worldview, nor does it make the extreme conclusions any less consequential. The tension between the conclusion you want and the premises you have remains and eventually even politicians and similarly intelligent people cannot avoid its ramifications. One generation will internalize the fruit sown in the notions of previous generations even if the latter refused to taste it.

How did it come to this? At least part of the process, aside from that just discussed, lies, I believe, in modernity's general abandonment of substantive conceptions of the good in favor of procedural approaches for determining 'right' action. This is related to the foregone discussion inasmuch as, in imposing secularism onto its humanism, modernity effectively salted most of the soil in which any determinate conception of human well-being might have grown. Consequently, the good is not an objectively conceivable thing by reference to which moral evaluation can proceed. It simply comes down to one's preference, there being no real standard by which to judge one preference over another. Ethics, then, becomes a question of procedure, either of negotiating the service of competing preferences, or a purely formal exercise, ostensibly independent of preference or consequences.

None of this offers anything in the way of a determinate concrete conception of the good. The effect of all this has been a deep cultural aversion to such discussions, a sense that no objective investigation into such questions is possible. It has produced an ethical discourse dominated exclusively by talk of rights, autonomy, equality, and other notions involved basically in the determination and assertion of one's role in an inter-subjective procedure of moral decision-making. This discourse excludes any substantive evaluations connected to any real conception of the good that is not just something like 'whatever would be the result of such and such sort of procedure.' As we see, this prevents any principled distinction between the appropriate and inappropriate use of technology.

Part II

Any discussion of such a distinction must begin with a clear view of what technology is. A Wikipedia entry on technology defines it as 'knowledge of how to combine resources to produce desired products, to solve problems, fulfill needs, or satisfy wants; it includes technical methods, skills, processes, techniques, tools, and raw materials.'[5] But perhaps accepting this Wikipedia definition is tantamount to letting technology define itself. It may be wiser to refer back to Aristotle, who carefully distinguished technology (*techne*) from both science (*episteme*) and prudence (*phronesis*).

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is primarily concerned with understanding prudence, which he defines as, "a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being."[6] Whereas science, for Aristotle, is concerned with that which is necessarily as it is, and so cannot be otherwise, prudence differs in that the object of its concern—action—is contingent on the very decision process which prudence seeks to inform. We want to know how to do what is good for human beings precisely because it is possible for us to do otherwise. Technology, on the other hand, is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with production. Action and production are both contingent, but for Aristotle, action can be an end in itself—indeed the human good is a certain kind of action. Production differs from action in that, in every case, 'production has its end beyond itself.' While there are many activities we undertake simply for their own sake, we produce things only for the sake of facilitating action. Generalizing, we may say that we build things in order to live well. Living well is an action and an end in itself. This allows us to form the idea of prudence in the use of technology, and to understand that such prudence is something entirely distinct from technology per se. Such prudence is, of course, not possible without reference to scientific knowledge (in the Aristotelian sense) of what is good or bad for the human; that is, a science of human nature. Moreover, we can see that it would be circular to simply identify technology as the human good. Since technology, by definition, always has its end beyond itself, the human good is something beyond

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology

[6] Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, translated by W.D. Ross in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Jonathon Barnes, ed. (Princeton University Press, 1984).

technology. What sense, then, can be made of the much-vaunted use of 'modern technology for the good of humanity' for a humanity that is incapable of admitting any determinate good?

Part III

In the prolegomena of the *Alchemy of Happiness*, al-Ghazali introduces a science of the self, of God, of this world, and of the Hereafter. In the section on the gnosis of this world, he writes:

> *The body needs three things in this world: food, clothing, and shelter. Food is for nourishment, clothing and shelter are for cold and heat, to prevent them from killing him. A person's needs for his body are no more than these; indeed these are the foundations of the world.*[7]

One might expect a science of the world, understood as a large material object, or the set of all material objects, to identify its 'foundations' as something like subatomic particles, the laws of physics, or even the atoms and accidents of Asharite *kalam*. How, then does Ghazali conceive of the world, such that these bodily needs—food, clothing, and shelter—are to be understood as its foundations? "The world and the Hereafter comprise two states," Ghazali writes, "that which is prior to death and nearer to you and which is called the world; and that which is after death, called the Hereafter."[8] Here, the world is spoken of as a *state* rather than a thing or collection of things—a state that the human being is in prior to death, and which is *nearer* in relation to that state which is posterior to death. But, being a state rather than a thing, and thus presumably not located in space the way a thing or a place would be, in what sense is the world *nearer*? Clearly, the world is nearer in a temporal order; at least, we experience being in the world now, and the Hereafter as *after*. But there is another, possibly more important, sense of 'nearness' at work here. "The purpose of the world," Ghazali writes, "is the provisioning for the Hereafter."[9] This suggests that the world is to be understood as nearer in a

[7] al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad Tusi. *Alchemy of Happiness*, Jay R. Cook (trns.) (Chicago, 2005), 60.
[8] al-Ghazali, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 59.
[9] Ibid.

teleological order; that is, in the way that means are nearer to one than the ends for which they are used.

> *The key to the knowledge of Divine Beauty is knowledge of the wonders of Divine handiwork. And the (five) human sensory organs are the first key to the Divine handiwork. These senses would not have been possible save in this body compounded of water and earth.*[10]

Here, the senses are spoken of as a key. The function of a key is to provide selective access. Thus, it has an end beyond itself. It is technological in the Aristotelian sense. The function of the senses is to provide selective access to knowledge of the wonders of Divine handiwork. This knowledge is also spoken of as a key, the function of which is to provide access to knowledge of Divine Beauty. Knowledge of Divine Beauty constitutes human happiness. It is the good in itself. The senses, then, can be understood as technological apparatus, dependent on the body, the purpose of which is to enable the human being "to gather his provisions and obtain the gnosis of God Most High with the key of the knowledge of his own self and the knowledge of all horizons perceptible to the senses."[11]

To try to capture the full import of this technological conception of the senses, let us consider Ghazali's metaphor. As we said before, a key has a function. But there is more to it than that; namely that, divorced from its function, it is not a key. That is to say, a key is not primarily an object possessed of such and such physical properties (specific subatomic structure, shape, mass, etc.), which just happens to have this particular function, 'on the side' so to speak. The very existence of a key lies in its being for the purpose of providing access, aside from which there is simply *no key*. For it to exist *is* for it to play a role, as a means, in an order of means and ends. This is the existential basis of anything technological.

The role of being a means itself is, at bottom, a kind of potential relation between, on the one hand, the ends for which it is the means, and on the other hand, a kind of being which has ends and means, without whom, no order of means and ends is

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

possible. For to say that the purpose of a key is to provide access does not mean that the key exists independently and has its purpose the way a substance has its accident. The purpose is not accidental to the key, but existential. A key *is* nothing else than a *being there for providing access*. There is no key without provision of access, and there is no provision of access without: 1) one who *can* have access, for whom access is not already provided, and who can make use of the means for gaining access, and 2) something that is made accessible to that person. In understanding the senses as technology, then, in the way Ghazali has it, we understand the senses to be nothing over and above a potential relation between the human being and knowledge of Divine handiwork. Since this latter is itself a key to knowledge of Divine Beauty, the senses can, in the final analysis, be understood as part of a complex potential relation between the human being and God.

"As long as a person possesses these senses," writes Ghazali, "and they spy out things for him, he is said to be 'in the world.'"[12] As we saw before, the world is a *state* that a person is *in*. Now it is clear that the real nature of that state is possession of the senses. The senses, we saw, are technology in the Aristotelian sense; that is, they have their end beyond themselves, which is to gain access to knowledge of Divine Beauty and thus, ultimate human happiness. Upon reflection, we have discovered that technology is really nothing over and above a potential relation between a human being and his or her end. The senses, then, are a potential relation between the human being and knowledge of Divine Beauty. The world, then, is nothing but a state that a person is in, of standing in a potential knowing (thus also loving) relation with God.

This line of thought, however, beckons toward a discussion of the nature of the world that runs too deep for our present purposes. For these, it is sufficient to arrive at the understanding that the sense in which food, shelter, and clothing are the foundations of the world is that they are necessary means of maintaining that state. We must, of course, add to this the proviso that, by necessary, here we mean necessary in a relative sense, for us, and in virtue of the pattern established by Divine Will, and not necessary in an absolute sense.

[12] Ibid.

While this technological apparatus, possession of which constitutes the world, is entirely a product of God, parts of it are also (in a relative, metaphorical sense, of course) a product of the human being. Yet, Ghazali's description of even that part related to human effort is structurally analogous to an item of creation with which the human has no part; that is, a tree, with roots, branches, and branches of branches. The roots, again, are the basic bodily needs: food, clothing, and shelter. As for the manner in which these foundations of the world give rise to its branches, Ghazali's observation is as simple as it is insightful.

Meeting these three needs, he writes, requires the crafts of farming, weaving, and construction. Weaving requires the spinner and tailor. Spinning and tailoring involve tools of wood, iron, leather, and other materials, requiring the craft of blacksmithing, carpentry, and cobblery. These crafts, in their turn require further specialists, all of whom must work together, giving rise to transactions and, hence, the potential for disputes. This circumstance calls for the arts of politics and rule, adjudication and government, and also religious jurisprudence, "by which the law of mediation among the people may be known."[13] Ghazali writes:

> *In this manner, the vocations of the world multiplied and became interrelated. The people lost themselves among them and did not know that the root of all these was no more than three things: food, clothing, and shelter. All of this became necessary for (satisfying) these three needs, and these three are necessary for the body, and the body is necessary for the heart, to serve as its vehicle. The heart is necessary for God. But they forget themselves and they forget God, like the pilgrim who forgets himself, the Kabah, and (the object of) his journey and spends all his time taking care of his camel!*[14]

Another image one might strike is that of gardeners getting lost in the branches of technology, and losing sight of its roots—the basic bodily needs—and its proper fruit: knowledge of the Divine. Prudence in the use of technology can then be likened to the pruning and nourishing of a tree, in accordance with its proper

[13] al-Ghazali, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 61-62.
[14] al-Ghazali, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 62.

function, such that every branch should be proportional and connected with the root in such a way as to facilitate its bearing fruit. Keeping the root and the fruit in mind, one may be able to distinguish the dead and useless branches from the healthy, so that the former would not be allowed to overcrowd and choke the latter. These dead branches might be imagined as so much dead lumber nailed to the living tree. Or they may be likened to a nasty web of thorny, parasitic vines with no root, fruit, or order, and no end beyond itself other than its own perpetuation, which simply feeds off a healthy tree until it kills it own host, and ultimately, itself.

A basis for a principled distinction between appropriate and inappropriate uses of technology might then turn on asking: does the technology in question facilitate attaining knowledge of the Divine handiwork, the self, and ultimately, of God? Keeping this question in mind can help us maintain our center as we adapt to circumstances of rapid technological acceleration or proliferation (understanding that not all such proliferation constitutes 'advancement'). An immediate implication of this is that we need not, and should not, operate under the presumption that we need to 'catch up with the West,' if this means to simply propagate for ourselves an equally extensive tangle of useless gadgets. Of course, much turns on the use we make of the gadgets we find ourselves surrounded with, and the extent to which we allow them to make use of us. For instance, time is the major commodity we have with which to pursue our proper aim. Thus, we should evaluate whether our 'time-saving' devices are really saving or consuming time, and how we are led to use the time that is ostensibly saved.

Returning to the topic with which we began, we may venture to say that, in what we might call Ghazali's philosophy of technology, there is, interestingly enough, something corresponding to the transhumanist, as well as the anarcho-primitivist perspective. Many, if not all, of the Prophets in history lived, at one time or another, in material conditions as simple and primitive as that of the hunter-gatherer idealized by the anarcho-primitivists. Even so, they were content with the satisfaction of only the most basic bodily necessities. Simultaneously, they attained a state that, in relation to the transhumanists' comparably impoverished biological conception of humanity, we can fairly describe as transcending the very species. Of course, in

relation to the Islamic conception of human nature, the Prophets simply embodied the utmost perfection of what the human being is and is meant to be.

The difference is that this conception of human nature locates the human potential in a determinate conception of human happiness in which technology finds its proper end and in relation to which wisdom with regard to its application is possible. From this vantage point, it is possible to deliberate over the application of technology in a manner more sophisticated than the crude dilemma of being simply 'for' or 'against' technology, the respective horns of which transhumanists and anarcho-primitivists represent, and which indeed, modernity seems to impose on itself. Nor is it a simple quantitative question of 'how much' technology is good. Rather, we are empowered to consider the question qualitatively in terms of what kind and to what end.