



Christian Ethics in a Technological Age

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by **Brian Brock**

reviewed by **Richard Higginson**

This book is what it says it is rather than what we might over-hastily assume it is going to be. Aberdeen University lecturer Brian Brock deliberately refrains from a systematic appraisal of technological issues from a Christian perspective. He provides interpretation of a technological culture rather than making normative moral pronouncements, offering a deeply thoughtful and subtly nuanced analysis but one that is overall highly suspicious of technology.

Brock takes issue with contemporary technology assessment which is done overwhelmingly in terms of costs-benefits analysis. This balancing of ethical outcomes in terms of good and bad consequences is symptomatic of technology itself which perceives 'all things in terms of objectifiability, material efficiency, and manipulability' (p.26). But he gives sympathetic attention to certain voices, not necessarily Christian, who have 'indicated the lived difficulties arising within the modern Western technological way of life' (p.25). These are Heidegger (who shows how our age 'objectifies' the natural world simply as a 'standing reserve' or resource), Grant (technology turns from being used to alleviate human suffering to controlling society) and Foucault (first prisoners and then workers are treated as standardised biological machines).

Believing that these accounts are helpful but need penetrating by insights from Christian theology, Brock emphasises the importance of listening and responding to God in Christian ethics. He locates modern technology within the dynamics of sin as self-assertion against God and good works as service. Drawing on Augustine and Barth, he says 'Technology is sin when it becomes a way of life expressing a quest for power and self-aggrandisement' (p.207). Christians must constantly ask: how does this technology embody love for others? He agrees with Wannenwetsch that Christians are deeply embedded in society and cannot construct an alternative new society, but they

can *subvert* current practises by 'bending or breaking conventions in the desire to better serve the neighbour before God' (p.382). Brock finds inspiration in the Sabbath which calls human beings to celebrate God's work with him, and attend to ways in which work can be more communally attuned, reflective and playful.

Although much of Brock's argument is rather abstract, he does include fascinating reflections on some specific technological issues, notably blogging, poultry breeding, and the testing of genetic material such as human ova.

I recommend this book as a dense read which repays perseverance. Brock provides some timely warnings about technology but overall my view is more positive than his. I would give more emphasis to three aspects that he only mentions tangentially. The command to 'subdue the earth' (Gen.1:28), though prone to abuse, does provide a God-given mandate for technological development. St Paul's assurance that 'all things are yours' (1 Cor 3:21-22) should encourage a greater Christian confidence about appropriating worldly realities like technology. Moreover, while Brock presents Christians as being sucked into technological ways of thought and behaviour, he underplays the extent to which (in particular) Protestant Christians led the way in the study of science that gave rise to technological application. This flowed from seeing God's world as fair scope for investigation, unhindered by fear of censorship from an oppressive Church, which was more the case in Catholic countries.

Brock makes appreciative comments about the benefits of medical developments like penicillin, and he affirms that the Gospel 'reveals as good news human ingenuity and the richness of creation's given material order, insisting that the two *can* come together in the creation of good and beneficial techniques and mechanical artefacts' (p.381). Indeed they can – but I wonder if that is the primary message which readers will take away from this book? ■

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