

Albert Borgmann

Contingency and Grace

Albert Borgmann reflects on how modern industrial technology and especially contemporary electronic technology shapes our sense of self, community, world and even God. He argues that the more complex and powerful the technology by which we relate to the world and to others, the more we tend to see these in terms of our own interests and purposes, and the less they are able to be present before us on their own terms in a way that commands our attention (what he refers to as a being's "commanding presence") However for Borgmann reverence for a being's commanding presence is at the heart of religion. In this piece Borgmann laments the debilitating effect modern technology has had on religious thought and practice and how religion might respond to the threat it poses. Albert Borgmann teaches philosophy of technology and religion at the University of Montana in Missoula.

Many of us share the intuition that contemporary life is uniquely inhospitable to Christianity. What makes this unreceptive atmosphere unique is its general lack of apparent opposition. Our culture seems indifferent to the real message of Christianity and at the same time is eroding the ground that Christianity needs to prosper. There are head-on attempts at bringing Christian doctrine to bear on the life of our society, such as branding our culture as materialist, trying to promote prayer in school through legislation, and seeking to outlaw abortion. But for all their directness, these attempts appear to have little purchase on the deeply underlying problem. Something less direct and more reflective is called for.

A first step in this direction is to recognize that the indifference of contemporary culture to Christianity is, theologically speaking, a problem of grace, of God's presence in our world. A second step is to raise the philosophical question (or the question of fundamental theology, natural theology, or apologetics) regarding receptivity to grace in our society. Grace is always undeserved and often unforethinkable, and a culture of transparency and control systematically reduces, if it does not occlude, the precinct of grace. A technical term for what lies beyond prediction and control is contingency. What we need to recover then as a condition of receiving grace is the realm of significant contingency.

The kind of approach to reality that aims at transparency and control is but another definition of modern technology. Thus our task comes to securing in a reasonable and principled way a realm of substantial contingency in the culture of technology. But if we want to be equal to the full force of our task—examining and readying the conditions for the reception of grace—we must consider it not only in the relatively local setting of technological culture but also in the global conditions of evolution and cosmology.

If that looks like an impossibly big and ambitious task, we can take uneasy comfort from the fact that physicists, biologists, and philosophers (I will consider at least one in each category) have focused the problem sharply and concluded: "No contingency, therefore no divinity" If technology is inhospitable to Christianity in being indifferent to it, scientists reject religion and theology by dismissing them. Here too the head-on approach by way of inviting theologians and scientists to a dialogue has had limited success. Focusing on contingency provides a more reflective strategy and reveals at least some common ground. In any event, we have to make sure, within reasonable limits, that the contingency we aim to wrest from technology is not shown to be illusory by cosmology and biology.

What really has to bother us right at the start is the fact that the majority of scientists are not religious. To be precise, 60 percent of scientists generally are atheists or agnostics. If that worries us, the fact that the more prominent a scientist is the less likely he or she is to be religious should concern us even more. Of the elite that is gathered in the National Academy of Sciences, 90 percent are atheist or agnostic. The least religious among NAS scientists are the biologists. Only 5 percent of them believe in God and an afterlife.

In an effort to narrow the gap between religion and science, physicists have been invited to discuss their disagreements with religion and theology, but their dismissal of both is so profound that nothing fruitful seems to be left to disagree about. "You clearly can be a scientist and have religious beliefs," said British chemist Peter Atkins. He continued: "But I don't think you can be a real scientist in the deepest sense of the word, because they are such alien categories of knowledge." American physicist Steven Weinberg has put it more pointedly yet:

I am all in favor of a dialogue between science and religion,
but not a constructive dialogue. One of the great

achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment!

The depth of disagreement has led British philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse (who, ever so cautiously, professes theism) to think of the disagreement as located in an area where “argument breaks down” at least in the sense that intelligent and even philosophically very sophisticated people exist on both sides of the debate, fully conversant with each others' arguments and completely unshaken by them. All the Christians and atheists I know think that the people on the other side are just plain wrong, but that there is no “sort of discussion or exploration which might, given the particular subject matter' lead either side out of error.”

Hursthouse's resignation is no less worrisome than the scientists' contempt. It implies that rational inquiry and religious doctrine cannot consist with one another.

To reach an area of more articulate disagreement we can turn to the problem of contingency, and to get a firmer grip on contingency we must remember that reality is a texture of laws and conditions. The laws tell us what in general is possible. The actual conditions embody the laws in a particular situation. Take the weather. The laws of physics tell us that precipitation will fall down rather than up, that it turns into ice crystals below 32° Fahrenheit, that cold air is denser or heavier than warm air, and so on. But for meteorologists to predict the weather they need to know, ideally, all the conditions that prevail today and, ideally, everywhere; and the laws plus the conditions in the ideal case would permit an accurate prediction of how the weather will turn out tomorrow, next week, and for the next several months. To illuminate an object or event by finding out how it is governed by scientific laws constitutes the model of explanation in the modern era, and controlling a phenomenon by varying some of its lawfully governed conditions is the wellspring of technological power.

Contingency is found both in laws and in conditions. As to laws, contingency pertains to their origin and to their parameters, that is, to those constants that restrict an overly general law to the way our world actually is. Regarding conditions, it is their ultimate origin and their present meaning that are contingent. In the advancement of modern science, the discovery of a law is a gain in the transparency of the world, especially when a

law or lawful explanation illuminates the previously brute givenness of conditions. The work of Newton illustrates both of these points.

Alexander Pope captured the illuminating force of Newtonian theory in the couplet,

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.
God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

Well, not quite all. Newton himself thought that certain cosmic conditions were simply unexplainable. He held "that the motions which planets now have could not spring from any natural cause alone, but were impressed by an intelligent Agent." In Newton's inference we can see a first explicit tie between contingency and divinity. Where explanation ends, God begins to appear. Conversely, where contingency is reduced or eliminated, theophany dissolves.

Today's cosmology has an explanation for the orbits of the planets. When cosmic matter coagulates in a star, a rotating disc of stuff under certain conditions forms around the star, and in time the disc breaks up and concentrates into the clumps we call planets. It follows that planets will revolve in the same plane and direction around a star. Thus contingency yields to explanation.

Laws, moreover, not only reduce contingency and theophany, rather their necessity and universality seem to lend them unquestionable and self-sufficient force and appear to obviate the question of their origin. Henry Adams, a hypersensitive observer of the rise of contemporary culture, felt the sovereignty of lawful explanation when he was confronted with Darwinian evolution:

Natural Selection led back to Natural Evolution and at last to Natural Uniformity. This was a vast stride. Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased every one—except curates and bishops; it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-Law deity.

Newton, of course, thought that contingency gave God a place within lawfulness. But when lawfulness more and more explains and eliminates divine intervention,

physicists eventually, as Laplace memorably put it to Napoleon, “have no need of that hypothesis.”

The contingency of conditions and their theological implications have had a recent revival, however. John Leslie has been its most impressive champion. He has pointed out that, while some contingencies have been explained away, others have resisted, such as the force of gravity, which in principle can assume indefinitely many different values without invalidating the general consistency of the law of which it is a part. But not only is the force of gravity an unexplainable given, it also needs to have a value that is precise to one part in 10 to the one hundredth power– an unimaginably fine tuning– for a universe with intelligent life to be possible, one that neither expands nor contracts "furiously" and leaves time for evolution.

This along with many other fine tunings in astrophysics, impressively laid out by Leslie, has resurrected the argument from design, and it is one of the creditable head– on replies to scientific atheism. As we should expect, however, atheists are not out of rejoinders. There are principally two. One is to point out that astrophysics is very much in flux and that the hoped for final theory will be free of all contingent quantities. The other is to posit a “multi-verse” of infinitely many different universes one of which has to exhibit the values that the evolution of intelligent life requires, and that universe happens to be ours.

In reply, a theist can appeal to the ultimate contingency that surfaces in the questions, "Why is there a multiverse? Why is there something rather than nothing?" Instead of the many contingencies that have impressed Leslie, there is the one great contingency of the existence of reality that is explained by the existence of a Creator God. Yet again there is an atheist reply. Weinberg puts it this way:

If that's true, what explains that? Why is there such a God? It isn't the end of the chain of whys, it is just another step, and you have to take the step beyond that.

Richard Dawkins, a biologist, has it less diplomatically (and at a lower level of contingency though the force of his argument bears on any level):

This is a transparently feeble argument, indeed it is obviously self-defeating To explain the origin of the DNA/protein

machine by invoking a supernatural Designer is to explain precisely nothing, for it leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer. You have to say something like "God was always there," and if you allow yourself that kind of lazy way out, you might as well just say "DNA was always there," or "Life was always there," and be done with it.

Daniel Dennett, the philosopher, finally, makes the point with characteristic wit and irreverence:

If God created all these wonderful things, who created God? Super-god? And who created Supergod? Super-duper-god? Or did God create himself? Was it hard work? Did it take time? Don't ask!

The origin and the existence of the world and its lawful structure turn out to be contingent since they have no explanation. But it seems to be a pale and silent contingency, and a scientist may reasonably argue that, once the best current explanation of the universe has been given, we may well press for a still better explanation but cannot plausibly demand an explanation of the explanation. The chain of explanations has to end somewhere. Do Christians have an answer to that?

A creditable reply can be found when we turn from the contingency of laws to that of conditions. They are by definition simply given, and no explanation whatever is available. In some cases the contingency of today's conditions can be explained through recourse to yesterday's. But at some point the causal chains seem to trail off in complexity or happenstance.

Recent discoveries have very much heightened the contingency of conditions, for they have shown that in certain kinds of physical settings arbitrarily small differences in the initial conditions lead, within certain limits, to vastly different results. This is not at all what we, heirs to Newton, have learned to expect. A small difference in the angle of a cannon will make the cannonball land in a slightly different place. But the disturbance of the air movement contributed by the notorious butterfly in Brazil can make the difference between sunshine and a hurricane in Florida's subsequent weather. The problem, however, is not just small differences but arbitrarily small

differences-differences however small. Thus the initial state of these remarkable systems will forever elude determination since our instruments and methods of measurement have a floor of precision, and the crucial factors will always lie below the floor. The systems in question are fully determined by the laws of physics, but their initial conditions cannot be ascertained. These systems are deterministic and unpredictable. They are instances of deterministic chaos so called. The well-known example of such a system's behavior is of course the weather. Here is contingency, sometimes with a vengeance.

The opponent of contingency might reply that this is not contingency in principle but a merely practical problem. The atmosphere and the weather are in principle explainable. It is the practical limits of measurement that keep us from explaining and predicting the weather with precision and over the long term. To this Stephen H. Kellert replies: "Chaos theory . . . challenges the very distinction between theoretical and practical impossibility."

Here we come to the second explicit tie between contingency and divinity. John Polkinghorne finds in this indeterminacy the opening for divine intervention. Though I broadly agree with Polkinghorne, his proposal too may be taken as patently unacceptable to the atheist. As if to strike a pre-emptive blow against Polkinghorne's position, Kellert, a philosopher of science pretty much in the classical tradition, has said: "But any expectation that chaos theory will re-enchant the world will be met with disappointment."

Dawkins has tried to provide a general argument why the disenchantment of the world and the deflation of contingency are unavoidable. His argument rests on a certain interpretation of Darwin's theory. Contingency looms large in evolution, and how a proponent of it sees contingency has a bearing on his or her attitude toward religion or theology. A third, somewhat less explicit, tie between divinity and contingency comes to the surface here. To appreciate it, we need to supply some background.

For Stephen J. Gould contingency is a source of wonder, and accordingly, we may infer, he respects religion and has proposed that we encapsulate this central principle of respectful noninterference accompanied by intense dialog between the two distinct subjects-by enunciating the Principle of Noma, or "Non-Overlapping Magisteria."

Dennett, to the contrary, is bent on ultimately emptying contingency of any meaning whatever, and not surprisingly, we may again conclude, he subscribes to Ronald de Sousa's quip that philosophical theology is "intellectual tennis without a net."

For Dawkins the beginning of evolutionary biology is awe at the intricacy of life. He admires William Paley who in 1802 likened this intricacy to that of a watch and drove "his point home with beautiful and reverent descriptions of the dissected machinery of life. . . ," Dawkins says, and for his part he stresses that "one thing I shall not do is belittle the wonder of the living "watches" that so inspired Paley. On the contrary, I shall try to illustrate my feeling that here Paley could have gone even further. When it comes to feeling awe over living "watches" I yield to nobody."

Yet for Dawkins such awe is tentative and finally mistaken. He tells us that "one of my aims in the book is to convey something of the sheer wonder of biological complexity to those whose eyes have not been opened to it. But having built up the mystery, my other main aim is to remove it again by explaining the solution."

But, as I want to show later, this violation of the conservation of reverence involves an illicit switch from one kind of response to another.

There are many kinds of contingent things and events. They range from the trivial and negligible to those that have a commanding presence. Remarkably, Weinberg, Dennett, and Dawkins all pay tribute to the latter kind. For Weinberg, the classic beauty of certain physical theories is nothing less than "compelling." Even more so is the "messy" beauty of art. "I love grand opera," he has said. "I can't hear *La Boheme* without dissolving."

Dennett in the very first section of his great book on Darwin's Dangerous Idea raises the question, "Is Nothing Sacred?" and promises to show "how what really matters to us- and ought to matter to us- shines through, transformed but enhanced by its passage through the Darwinian Revolution." And toward the end of the book he emphatically repeats the question and the answer: "Is something sacred? Yes, I say with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred."

Dawkins is most emphatic on this point though he takes it back in the end. Weinberg and Dennett evidently want to sustain the commanding presence of scientific theory, of art, and of nature though both labor under a tension if not inconsistency. For Weinberg the beauty of theory and art is embedded in a chillingly impersonal and pointless universe. In Dennett's universe, contingency is ultimately random. The reality,

though not the origin and shape, of meaning has always been an open question in Dennett's work.

At any rate, in the commanding presence that contingency can have lies something like an answer, or at least a reasonable outline of an answer, to the question of the origin and existence of the world. Weinberg's reactions to the beauty of nature and art are most telling in this regard. He has this to say about the beauty of nature:

I have to admit that sometimes nature seems more beautiful than strictly necessary. Outside the window of my home office there is a hackberry tree, visited frequently by a convocation of politic birds: blue jays, yellow-throated vireos, and loveliest of all, an occasional red cardinal. Although I understand pretty well how brightly colored feathers evolved out of a competition for mates, it is almost irresistible to imagine that all this beauty was somehow laid on for our benefit.

As far as the beauty of art is concerned, Weinberg is reported to be "deeply touched by music and poetry in ways he admits reason can never justify or explain."

Evidently reality can address us in different ways— in its causal references or in its commanding presence. Accordingly reality can provoke curiosity, research, and analysis or appreciation, admiration, and reverence. These two modes of being (and our replies to them) are consistent with one another, and they coincide with the warp and weft of reality— laws and conditions. Reality described as a web of laws and conditions is seen from everywhere and nowhere. Reality seen as presence within a net of reference is acknowledged here and now. Everything has presence and reference if not always in equal measure. But the two kinds of existence should not be mistaken for one another, as they are by Dawkins, nor should our kinds of responses be confused with each other, the way Dawkins confuses them. The coloration of feathers elicits curiosity in the ornithologist and admiration in the birder. Curiosity is restless and endless. Reverence finds peace and affirmation in its object. Analogously the Creator God is offered by theists not as an object of curiosity and a causal factor— creation is *donation* not *causation*— but rather is called upon as the Commanding Presence simply, properly met with the response Weinberg, Dawkins (at least initially), and Dennett extend to nature and art.

These two modes of being— reverence and presence— and the appropriate responses— curiosity and reverence— furnish the outlines for what has happened in the culture at large since the beginning of modern technology and for what needs to be done now. Reverence and presence have modes of contingency that they share respectively with laws and conditions. Accordingly it is the contingency of presence that is the more impressive and disclosive one. As it turns out, though this contingency is undeniable, it is not irreducible. In fact we can read modern history as the restless and endless assault on contingency, a process that at length has occluded the presence of things and haunted the peace of humans. Accordingly our task comes to restoring the eloquent contingency of nature and culture and recovering the spirit of reverence.

The point of all this is finally not cultural but theological and religious though the cultural concern is creditable enough and constitutes common ground with many atheists. A helpful focus of the shared terrain is the notion of grace, in both its secular and religious varieties. To begin with secular grace, Weinberg softens and warms his hard and chilling account of the universe by concluding his first popular (I would say "philosophical") book with the sentence: "The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy." John Rawls concludes his magnificent Theory of Justice by considering the whole-hearted acceptance of the principles of justice. "Purity of heart," he says, "if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view. " A graceful life corresponds to the region of contingency that is the common concern of Christians and thoughtful atheists.

Christians, to be sure, are less than confident that they can secure all by themselves any measure of grace, but are much more confident that grace can become fully realized and does so as the gift of God, lifting us above tragedy and healing our frailty. But that confidence needs to be examined and reaffirmed in light of the erosion of its ground through modern technology. Divine grace, of course, has not become questionable across the board, else its predicament would have escaped no one. Hence we need to distinguish between kinds of grace.

Sacramental grace, the blessing Christians receive in communal worship, is not in question though it is in danger of diminishment through the technological attack on commanding presence. *Actual grace*— a gesture of forgiveness, the stillness of nature, the consolations of music descends where it will though it is frequently confused with its counterfeit version— grace as a ticket to success. Karl Rahner throughout his life pleaded

for a still wider and deeper understanding of the presence of God's benevolence and beneficence. Grace, he urged, is fundamentally not God's episodic intervention in history and the occasional elevation of the human soul, but the omnipresent goodness of salvation that every human being is capable of realizing. He calls this *existential grace* a "supernatural *a priori*." I will call it *universal grace*. To Rahner's argument I will add an underlining of the fact that universal grace has in each epoch of history a characteristic habit or appearance and, particularly in the information age, a kind of disappearance and concealment as well. That disappearance is most advanced in the affluent industrial countries. I will call historically qualified universal grace *habitual grace*.

Habitual grace provides the habitat for actual grace, but only in a general sort of way since grace can break into a person's life no matter the cultural ecology of a particular time. Still, the shape of historical contingency bears on what actually happens in life. Consider the actually twofold grace of traditional misery. If in the days before vaccination your children contracted smallpox and three of the six died, the survival of three was a joyful gift of grace, gratefully received, while the death of the other three brought consoling grace, much more difficult to realize, of course. At least in some cases, the moment of crisis between life and death was one of what John Polkinghorne has called the "particular critical points at which divine influence was exercised in particular ways," and at the same time one of those, as Polkinghorne has it, that "would be scientifically indiscernible, veiled within the cloudy nature of the event in question."

It might have been a case of the deterministic chaos Kellert has discussed. But evidently we can preempt and overpower the elusive conditions of an infection through vaccination just as, more obviously, we can tame the chaotic water flow of a mountain stream through a pipeline and as we can fix the course of a plane through the chaotic medium of the atmosphere. Very often we can enforce what Kellert has called "clock work hegemony." Thus we eliminate in fact the "critical points at which divine influence was exercised." Should we restore those occasions of actual grace?

For theoretical reasons, no doubt, rather than religious ones, a French anthropologist, as Martha Nussbaum reports, has expressed "regret that the introduction of smallpox vaccination to India by the British eradicated the cult of Sittala Devi, the goddess to whom one used to pray in order to avert smallpox." To which Nussbaum sensibly replied "that it is surely better to be healthy rather than ill, to live rather than to die."

There is no question for us mainstream Christians that the contingencies of childhood disease and death, of starvation following bad harvests, of freezing in winter

for lack of fuel, proper shelter, or clothing, of confinement due to lack of transportation, and of ignorance because of a dearth of information, that all these contingencies are gone for better rather than worse. And this evident moral fact greatly complicates the task of recovering a region of contingency and habitual grace.

Approaching the problem more generally and historically we find that the first phase of the technological assault on contingency began with the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and lasted roughly through the nineteenth. It mounted a successful attack on the basic conditions and needs of life— space, time, food, shelter, public health, education, and information. An emblem of this development is the steam engine. It freed the availability of power from the vagaries of wind and water and, for the first time since the taming of the horse, extended the reach and speed of transportation through the locomotive.

The building of the railroads is the most incisive instance of early technological progress. It also shows that in the first phase of modern technology the contingencies of miseries and blessings changed but did not disappear. People were injured and died through falls from scaffoldings, explosions of boilers, collapses of mine shafts, and similarly brutal causes. To us, the indifference to human health and safety in the initial conquest of nature looks appalling. Still, the general balance of the technological enterprise moved toward the exclusion of accidents and calamities. That trend is well illustrated by Josiah Royce's reaction to the first continental railroad. Speaking of the newly accessible California, he said: "The region that to-day is so swiftly and easily entered was of old the goal of an overland tour that might easily last six months from the Missouri River, and that was attended with many often recorded dangers."

The technological liberation from toil and misery was then and is still being regarded as freeing a space and the time for human flourishing. What has most always been overlooked is the fact that technology has not only made room for pleasure but has also invaded and occupied the liberated space and has impressed its particular shape on our typical enjoyments. To be sure, the advancement of technology did not move from the conquest of necessities and calamities to the procurement of pleasures and luxuries by crossing a clear dividing line. The region of needs and the region of wants overlapped and dovetailed in many ways. Still the major thrust of the second phase of technology occurred in the middle and the second half of the twentieth century.

Technology by itself, of course, did nothing. It merely constituted a pattern that people in the industrial countries have devised, developed, and applied everywhere. The

pattern exhibits the familiar conjunction of mechanization and commodification. Mechanization is the invention of some machinery that takes over the toils and burdens of providing some good, and the good, freed from its natural encumbrances, social burdens, and cultural ties, becomes available as a commodity for purchase and consumption. Thus the machinery of the phonograph assumed the onus of providing music, and music became available in the shape of records that could be bought and played wherever and whenever. Thus a technological device exhibits paradigmatically the tight and distinctive connection of machinery and commodity. The canonical response to commodities, finally, is consumption. Thus the joint effects of mechanization, commodification, and consumption transformed traditional cultures from the ground up.

The effect of this campaign was to constrict actual grace in its personal and real variants. Coaxing children to learn an instrument and prevailing on musicians to convene for domestic celebrations requires grace on our part. But making music transforms us into recipients as well as bearers of grace as when a fine trio provokes delight and gratitude. Analogously, strolling through town on a summer's evening makes for pleasure and thankfulness at the sight of handsome buildings and gracious parks. All this has been greatly reduced and often eliminated through the devices of radio, stereo, and television.

In the last quarter-century, information technology has perfected and begun to complete tendencies that have been long in developing. The drift away from public and civic involvement began after the Second World War and has since gained momentum as Robert Putnam has vividly and exhaustively shown." What has spurred this development is its attractive force. The shape it takes looks much like the cell E. M. Forster has described in *The Machine Stops*- a secluded place of great comfort and limitless media." All the world is at one's call and beckon, and hence to venture out into the world begins to feel like a waste and a pain.

The perfection of the domestic cocoon is proceeding through the proliferation and improvement of information devices-extended telephone service, digital television with large screens, personal computers and the entirety of cyberspace they open up. Information technology, moreover, is insinuating itself into the very structure of our homes to disburden us from having to worry about our lights, our warmth, our safety, our food supplies, and more.

What is even more remarkable and goes beyond or against Forster's dystopian vision is the extension of domestic comfort and control to the globe entire. Not so long ago you needed a map and careful observation, and preferably a quick and alert companion, to find an unfamiliar address, and many times you still had to stop at a gas station to seek help. Now with a technological guide supported by the global positioning system, a gentle voice tells you what exactly is coming and precisely where to turn. There are GPS devices that will similarly guide you through trackless wilderness.

As a result, the commanding presence of things is yielding to a semblance of transparent omniscience and omnipresence. Things no longer occupy a place and take their time. To see what is going on in the city of my youth, I no longer have to cross a continent and an ocean to find it in its place, rather Web sites and Web cameras show and tell me at an instant what I want to see and know. The etherealized presence of Freiburg is further attenuated by the co-presence in cyberspace of hundreds of other cities and sites and by the possibility of penetrating the visual surface of towns and countries to lay bare their geology, hydrography, ecology, population patterns, economic structure, transportation networks, and more. The ultimate dissolution of real presence is achieved in virtual realities where pervasive intelligibility implodes into total control by designers if not also by players.

To the dissolution of commanding reality corresponds on the human side a peculiar restlessness. Since every item of cyber-presence can be x-rayed, zoomed into, overlaid, and abandoned for another more promising site, human desire is at every point at once satiated, disappointed, and aroused to be once more gorged, left hungry, and spurred on. This restlessness takes characteristically distinct forms in the mental and emotional economy of the elites and of the middle class, with many kinds of hybrids in between. The well trained and driven go from task to task in endless pursuit of fame and fortune while the less skilled and less ambitious surf the sea of television and cyberspace and, in the case of the more prosperous middle class, hop from one tourist attraction to another with no coherence or history to connect one Web site or sunny beach with another.

This world without time, place, and grace is attractive or at least seductive in its own ways and, more important, has shown great staying power. Hence we, who deplore it, cannot sit back to await its collapse and to be called on for help. We must meet its seductiveness with the good news of Christ and its durability with conviction. One way of getting our bearing for this enterprise is to return to the root of the technological

promise— the eradication of trouble from the human condition. Trouble is often the twin of grace, and if one cannot prosper, neither can the other. Roger Scruton has pilloried the moral debacle that follows the suppression of trouble:

If we believe that the state is there to cushion us from misfortune, to compensate every loss and make up for every suffering, then we automatically relinquish control over our lives, while drastically narrowing the sphere of human action. Regulations of a mind-numbing complexity now govern activities, consumer products, and employment, with the aim of ensuring that the citizen can amble through a risk-free world, picking his pleasures from shelves loaded with packaged and sanitized products, waddling onwards in a state of moral obesity."

It may be a sign of the gravity of our condition that a conservative British philosopher like Scruton and the politically hyper-correct French anthropologist pilloried by Nussbaum are driven to gesture at the same desperate remedy— maintaining trouble and misery.

The first step toward a morally acceptable and theologically sensible recovery of contingency is to distinguish between trouble we reject in principle but accept in practice and trouble we accept in practice and in principle. When cancer strikes or a car crashes, we should resist the uncomprehending anger that rises from the culture of transparency and control and instead pray for the grace that allows us to accept what has come our way. I realize that we brush up against the problem of evil and the theodicy here. The sole point I want to stress is that these problems are hard or impossible to solve from a third person declarative point of view but are not so from a first person performative standpoint. If I find consoling grace, the evil before me, my evil, no longer cries out for explanation or revenge. Such acceptance, however, is quite compatible with pressing for cancer research and greater highway safety.

When it comes to the trouble of cooking a meal and gathering my loved ones around the table, we accept it not only in practice but also in principle because eating, shorn of its real preparation and personal involvements, has lost its sacramental horizon. Similarly, the trouble of getting up early, driving to the trail head, and, most important, the pain and panting of a steep ascent are the irreplaceable ways the imposing elevation of a mountain is realized. And trouble of that sort, finally, is required to make attendance at a local concert the rich and rewarding event it often is.

Often, but not always. Common meals can be bitter, hikes in the mountains calamitous, and concerts embarrassing. It lies in the nature of grace that we do not

command it but certainly can and often do turn it away. There is no guarantee of real grace in city and country nor in common meals and actual concerts. But there is a definite occlusion of such grace in the cocoon of self-indulgence.

In concert with all people of goodwill we must work to institute the habitual grace that allows real and personal grace more often to be realized today. This "we must" is the response to an enormous enlargement of Peter's commission (Matt. 16:19). The kingdom whose keys are entrusted to us now includes all there is in terrestrial heaven and earth, and it is up to us whether we reduce it all to resources and utilities or can muster the reverence that is required to help it retain or regain its characteristic face and its own voice. The habitat of real grace is the place where reverence and personal grace can be realized. Thus there is a conjunction of real and personal grace. The fate of real grace today lies in the hands of humans while humans can lead deeply graceful lives only in a graceful world.

There seems to be a circle of actual and habitual grace, one grace presupposing the other— a phenomenon reminiscent of the ancient question whether grace is required to receive grace. If that circle threatens us with helplessness, there is another that can trap us in ill-conceived power. We are drawn into that circle when we decide to confront trouble unconditionally and then get caught in the desolation of thoughtlessness. There is a theoretical and a practical side to this predicament. The theoretical side is the burden of theology when in dealing with the problem of technology we turn to technological standards of success. The practical side is our complicity with the technological strategy of demanding results regardless of circumstances. Both sides and circles break open, however, when we let go of regardless power and recognize that genuine power, careful power, is something we receive rather than produce.