

Reflecting on the Place of Technology in our Relationship with Nature

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Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience. (Francis 2015, 75)

I recently took a week-long camping trip with my family to the mountains of northern Idaho in the U.S. While I expected the service for my mobile phone to be intermittent, I was surprised to learn that I could obtain no signal whatsoever. For the first time in several years, I could not use my mobile phone at all for accessing the internet or text messages, let alone to place a call. On the one hand, this brought me the minor anxiety of realizing I could not use it in the case of an emergency. Given that I had no use for the phone itself, I removed it from its usual place in my pocket and placed it in my bag in our tent. In doing so, when I found myself experiencing something meaningful in the natural environment (a sunset over the lake, unique rock formations), I was not able to use the camera on my phone to document the moment. Doing so would have forced me to sever my connection to nature and the experience I was having, locate my phone, and then take the picture.

As such, I could not document my experiences; I have very few, if any, pictures of either nature itself or myself within it. On the one hand, I rue this as I have very few pictures of my children enjoying the trip which I can later show them. And yet, the removal of technology as a medium through which I experienced nature brought about a deeper sense of connection in that moment. The totality of the experience was (and is) the experience itself, rather than what I could do to document the experience.

Over the last number of years, as digital technologies and social media have become pervasive in many peoples' lives, it has become rather common that one cultivates a certain "virtual" persona. I don't mean this in a necessarily malicious or duplicitous way (although such can be the case). Rather, we seek to post to social media images and information that represents ourselves in a certain, presumably positive, way to others. Oftentimes the language of "presence" is utilized: One has to be aware of their online "presence" and to carefully craft what image is presented to the world through the virtual medium. I offer an analogy to how one appears in an application for employment: Both are activities in which we have a chance to "construct" ourselves and be intentional about what we present to others. In this sense, one's online presence, insofar as it is constituted in the virtual and the digital, is an extension of our in-person self. It is, in other words, a newer example of a public image.

The availability of digital technologies and tools has allowed us to appropriate a variety of things (both objects and other persons) to develop and enhance the online persona that we cultivate. A formal paper application for employment comprises (or comprised) a resume, listing one's abilities, experience, and qualifications; these were all in service of showing others what one can do. On the other hand, a digital persona is meant to reflect not what one has done or can do, but rather who one *is*. Social media profiles allow us to connect with a variety of persons with whom we might otherwise not interact in person, and these interactions happen solely in a virtual environment. Thus, the experience others have of us comes fully and completely through these digitized artifacts of ourselves and our experiences. As opposed to trying to use this digitized instance of ourselves to convince others to consider us for employment, for instance, we are engaging with others

at a much broader level. What we construct and put on display in the virtual space is in a sense ontologized. It is, from a digital perspective, who we *are*.

On one level, there is a unique interplay between ourselves on a metaphysical level and the metaphysical or ontological status of our digital self. Yet my interests here are not in how we comprise or comport ourselves as digital selves, but rather the relationship we have to specific others in this act of digital creation. Constructing our digital self and displaying it to the world requires certain backdrops. We must be seen as a person within a certain place (or places). To represent our movement through the world, we must document our movement through our environment. It is, in a sense, an activity in the composition of place yet one that does not happen intentionally in one moment, but rather unfolds over time. Our digital self has to be documented having experiences to provide context to who we (in the digital realm) are and what we value. Thinking back to my recent trip, while I know *I* was there, I cannot corroborate that same experience for my digital self, since I have little in the way of digital documentation of it.

In his papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis (2015) notes the intimate relationship that exists between the environment and our sense of ourselves:

Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives. These settings influence the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighborhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity. (103)

While Francis is speaking in one sense of social or economic development at a macro level, I want to examine our development as individual human beings at the micro level. Furthermore, here he speaks broadly of environment as our ecosystem; as we will see below, he focuses his argument more carefully on “creation” or “nature.”

Digital technologies have provided an avenue by which persons influence and construct their identity through the careful cultivation of both their physical and digital environments. In this digital space, I use cultivation in a double sense: First, it is the act of curating all elements of how we portray ourselves, through what medium, and under what circumstances. Secondly, and more importantly for my argument here, we also cultivate ourselves *within* certain environments. Just as a stage production requires scenery and landscapes as a background to elicit certain imaginative and immersive experiences for the audience, we also seek to provide our digital audience with a full experience of ourselves within our world.

To facilitate this, we appropriate and deploy social media accounts of ourselves experiencing nature: within it, experiencing it, surrounded by it, and so on. Whereas an employment application can be satisfied with a written documentation of experiences (courses taken, previous titles held), the audience who interacts with our digital self cannot be sated by a mere statement that we interacted with nature in some vague way. Rather, there must be adequate documentation. We must provide a picture of a beautiful sunset as our Facebook background, a Snapchat of ourselves boating on a lake, or a video of us taking in a quiet encounter with a moose. These artifacts of our interactions with nature are what are necessary to cultivate a digital self that is appropriately interacting with the world around it.

This in and of itself may not be problematic. As Francis notes in the above quote, situating ourselves with respect to our environment and what is all around us in nature is a fundamental act as human beings. Now that technology has developed to the degree that it has, we can quickly and easily document these interactions. We can use technology such as

smart phones to document our place and our environment through the creation of an artifact of that encounter. This process of creating artifacts of our experiences is not inherently problematic, and they can be valuable to us for good reason. Being able to gaze at a picture that we took on an important trip or to glance at a rock we picked up during a walk along the shore is not necessarily a bad thing (and in fact it can be quite positive in jogging our memory of such emotional experiences).

The problems, however, arise insofar as the promulgation of digital technologies encourages a technological and (to borrow a phrase from Francis) “technocratic” mindset in terms of our relationship to nature. As opposed to seeking out and immersing ourselves in our interactions with nature, we now often mediate our experience with a screen in order to obtain appropriate documentation for the sake of our digital selves and their audience. As I will argue below, this both operates from and serves to further reify a consumptive view of nature as raw material for us to use in generating our chosen digital selves. Furthermore, we are thus not fully present in this interaction at all, as our primary concern is the future audience of our digital self. Utilizing this paradigm, we fall prey to the perversion of our appropriate relationship to nature, which Francis characterizes as a movement from an appropriate sense of “dominion” into an attempt to “dominate” nature.

I will argue that my own experiences should serve us as both caution and a point of reflection on the role that technology should play in our interactions with nature.

Incorporating technology in ways that mediate our relationship to both our digital selves and nature is not in and of itself problematic; rather, it is the level to which we allow technology to shape and drive these interactions that should give us pause. The manifestations of what Francis calls a “technocratic paradigm” cause moral problems in

two key ways: First, we are moved to treat nature not as an entity in and of itself, but instead merely as raw material that we can appropriate for the construction and maintenance of our digital selves. Secondly, by encountering the other that is nature primarily through the filter of technology, we lack the robust interaction with nature that is necessary to motivate us to act to “care for our common home.”

Francis and Our Appropriate Relationship to Nature

Prior to detailing the problems caused by technology, I will first unpack Francis’ considered view on our relationship to nature. In *Laudato Si’*, he argues that we have fundamentally misconstrued our relationship to nature, and that we must reflect upon and reconsider the content of this relationship. In line with Catholic teaching, Francis grounds the account of our relationship to nature in the Biblical story of creation in Genesis:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28)

Reflecting upon this, Francis highlights the key elements of “subdue” and “dominion” in this story of creation, which seems to put humankind in a hierarchical relationship over nature. We are to direct it and utilize it for the pursuit of our own ends, and to cultivate it to meet our needs. Examining the contours of Francis’ argument, Cajetan Iheka (2017) remarks that “although the various life forms are brought together in an interdependent relationship, Pope Francis’ integral ecology reserves a unique status for humans who remain at the apex of this ecological relationship” (256). On the one hand, this is not a novel view of nature, per se. It envisions nature as having some value for the sake of humans and our pursuit of our own ends.

Yet Francis argues forcefully that this does not settle the content of our relationship, nor does it do to treat nature as a passive element that exists solely for the ends of human beings:

The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gen 2:15*). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. (Francis 51)

Here Francis emphasizes a need for a contextual awareness in terms of both conceptualizing and actualizing our relationship with nature. In this process, he makes an important move to argue that our proper hermeneutic of “dominion” has been perverted into a relationship of domination, of subjugation of nature and our connection to it as *only* meeting our own ends. Nature has become something that is merely a resource to be used for human consumption. As he puts it, the focus on interpreting dominion as domination “has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting [humans] as domineering and destructive by nature” (50). This improper hermeneutic has distorted both our own humanity (by pushing us to dominate nature), as well as the ontological status of nature itself. Notice the distinct character of this claim: He does not dispute that nature was created for us to have dominion over it for our own ends but rather he *does* dispute that this comprises the sole element of nature. Furthermore, this move plays an important function for assigning moral responsibility on Francis’ argument, for as Iheka notes “privileging humans also allows the pope to appropriately assign the responsibility of tackling the ecological crisis” (256)

Throughout the encyclical, I argue that Francis develops a novel approach by discussing our environment in a particularly robust ontological manner. Nature is not

merely a backdrop in which human activity occurs, nor is it just a passive recipient of the “tilling and keeping” in which humans are to engage. Instead, he denotes nature as something with a status in and of itself:

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion. (Francis 56)

In speaking of the environment or nature as “creation,” Francis argues it comprises a level of “reality” that is part of the “universal communion” into which we are all called. Notice the use of “we”: by this, he refers not only to us as human beings, but also to creation/nature. In this way, nature has its own “value and significance” independent of human beings; it is inherent in it. As I noted above with reference to Iheka, Francis acknowledges that this does not mean that all members in creation are equal, as humans still occupy an elevated place in some version of a natural hierarchy. Instead, the focus is that the value of nature cannot be captured or merely subordinated to human ends. He elsewhere speaks of human beings as having a duty to “cultivate their abilities in order to protect [creation] and develop its potential” (Francis 57). In a sense, this raises the stakes of our interactions with nature. It is no longer merely the backdrop for our own lives, nor raw material that can be utilized solely for human ends. Instead, it has its own potential independent of human beings and our ends. While it is true that we may enhance our own potential through our interactions with nature (whether in positive or exploitative ways, whether our selves in the world or our digital selves), Francis pushes us to realize that nature is an entity in and of itself with whom we relate, not merely something for our own ends. In adopting this paradigm, Francis’ language serves to reinforce this relationship

between humans and nature as one of alterity, where we are interacting with a distinct “other.” He first speaks of nature and the earth as “burdened and laid waste...among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor,” and at many points in the document he refers to earth as our “sister” (9). Doing so makes nature (in a variety of senses, such as earth, ecosystems, or even species) visible to us and deepens the sense in which we must respond to her needs. As Iheka puts it, “the pope humanizes the environment to establish relationality” (248). Nature is then a subject to whom we relate, rather than a mere object. Following Jane Bennett’s (2010) criticism of anthropocentrism, this may go as far as a recognition of rationality in the various elements of nature as well. In navigating this relationship, we have a moral imperative to act in “dominion” with respect to nature, but in a way that recognizes and pursues both our own ends and the ends of nature. To “till and keep” then becomes a practice that must involve considering the impacts of our approach on nature.

Technology Between Us and Nature

Thinking back to how our encounters with nature often occur through the medium of technology (such as mobile phone cameras), I argue there are two major problems present, ones that aid in the perversion of our relationship from dominion into domination. In other words, technology in the service of social media creates ethical pitfalls for acting out of an appropriate concern for nature as the other with whom we are in a relationship.

The first and most direct way in which technology negatively impacts our relationship with nature comes in how it is viewed not as an other in and of itself, but rather as something to be used for the curation of our digital selves. Says Francis:

It is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the

concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.

He goes on:

It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. (Francis 76)

It is imperative to notice the way in which Francis speaks here of “control” and “manipulation,” which connects to his paradigm of dominion perverted to domination.

When approaching nature from the standpoint of the concerns of our digital self, we see it as some raw material to be an object of utility for our own ends; we discard any concern for the inherent dignity of nature, let alone any rationality or ends for its own sake. Here Francis (2015: 82-83) cites Romano Guardini (1957: 55) in arguing that in these moments we approach nature as something that we can use to situate ourselves in space, with utter indifference to the ends of nature itself. Our interaction with nature here compromises the intrinsic dignity of nature, and in turn the dignity of ourselves that is gained here in the human interaction with nature. We utilize what Francis considers a “techno-economic” or “technocratic” paradigm, which offers us no break from a fully Anthropocene worldview in which nature is merely an object of raw material to be dominated. In more concrete terms, using technology such as mobile phone cameras treats nature merely as aesthetic raw material that provides us (and those who interact with our digital selves on social media) with pleasant vistas and images. We filter and frame our connection to nature through the (very literal) lens of the camera, and in doing so we sift away our actual connection of appropriate dominion in that moment.

Our anthropocentrism has gone even further, to become tyrannical insofar as nature becomes consumerized. This consumerization is perhaps nothing new; people have long

purchased pictures of landscapes to hang on their walls, taken small rocks or leaves home with them to remind them of experiences, and so forth. Yet it is the impact on our relationship and the ways in which we engage with these artifacts that is problematic. Rather than the experience with nature as an other or even our memories of such an encounter being primary, the artifact of the encounter becomes that with which we engage. Even in such engagement, it is worth recognizing that these kinds of artifacts never fully nor accurately capture the full weight of the original experience. Even when using increasingly sophisticated mobile phones, our pictures are never as close nor sharp as what we remember. And yet they are what we often take away from the experience and what we interact with over time, despite their being a vastly inferior form of the experience.

Another analogy from my own experience comes from going to rock music concerts, where people oftentimes spend much of the event with their mobile phones held high, recording the performance. In that moment, they are mediating their experience of the event through the lens of the camera, presumably to document it. As such, their digital self can have “been” at the concert, and the experience and music are now appropriated to that self. Yet for the person in that moment, the event did not in fact occur, for they were too busy looking at their screen to be sure that the image was captured appropriately. (This is to say nothing of the vastly inferior sound quality of any such recording on a phone compared to the live sound.) The artifact that exists as a result of this interaction is not the memory of having been there, but rather the recording.

Thus, a primary concern for curating our digital selves lends itself to the kind of technocratic/techno-economic paradigm of which Francis speaks, and it moves us to interact with nature solely along the lines of a consumer. We only seek to obtain an artifact

that will enhance our digital appearance in some way. If we cannot take anything away from the experience, we cannot document the event, and in that way, it is almost as if it did not happen for our digital self.

Viewing nature only through the lens of technology and the penchant for appreciating nature solely as raw material for our digital self then lends itself to another problem. If we interact with nature only through the event mediated by technology, it makes it far less likely (if possible) that we can fully appreciate the independent ontological status of nature. If we cannot conceptualize the alterity relationship in which we are with nature, then it undermines the possibility of our acting in ways that fully respect the value of nature. On Francis' view, part of what is necessary to motivate us to act to combat environmental degradation and climate change, for instance, is a recognition that there is an actual harm being done to the environment. If we can appreciate the ways in which nature is harmed, we are much more likely to respond by showing concern for nature. An integral ecology founded on an appropriate dominion thus cannot come to fruition.

Yet utilizing the medium of technology can cause such problems even when we have what seem like more benign intentions, such as when we interact with nature merely along the lines of aesthetic consumption for our own ends. While we might eschew the connection to digital curation, we still may view nature merely as a backdrop for our own identity. Francis elucidates this worry by arguing that "the alliance between the economy and technology ends up sidelining anything unrelated to its immediate interests. Consequently, the most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment" (Francis 42). Merely because we claim concern for nature or say that we seek to appreciate it for its own sake, it does not

necessarily follow that we do not consumerize nature nor that we are motivated to act out of concern for the ends of nature. Sharing and growing concern for nature as an other must start with viewing and interacting with that other on the grounds that they are intrinsically valuable. Harkening back to Francis' imagery of nature as our "sister" and one of "our poor" should give us pause when reflecting on the historical ways in which we have viewed women and those in poverty in our society, and how their humanity has not always been a given. In the same way, we must begin with the value and potential of nature as valuable for its own sake.

Francis further moves to indict new technologies in this minimization of the value of others: "When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how...to think deeply and to love generously" (35-36). In this case, Francis is speaking of this thinking and love between all of "us," *including nature*. We do not consider the value of nature for its own sake, nor whether we are connecting with it in any meaningful way for ourselves and for its own sake. We grow not from the experience, but rather have commodified it. This also raises a related worry, insofar as our mistaken relationship with nature, facilitated by technology and social media, can in turn undermine our having true human relationships with other people.

Recall that Francis' overarching concern in *Laudato Si'* is to detail a renewed ethic for "Care for our Common Home"; it is action for the sake of nature, in the context of an integral ecology and spiritually robust dominion, that he is after. It is true that there is more work to be done in interrogating the alterity of nature and to considering the myriad of relationships in which we might find ourselves enmeshed when we consider the interaction between us and "nature" (See Morton 2009). Yet the interactions that our

technological selves are concerned with do not lend themselves to reifying or acting in accordance with this appropriate moral relationship (or perhaps set of relationships).

While he has been criticized on this front (Reno 2015), it is clear that Francis is not out to eschew technology as a whole. Rather, as detailed above, it is a Baconian view of using the nexus of science and technology to dominate nature that is his target. The wholesale abandonment of the technology that is so pervasive in our lives is neither practical nor desirable. The problem is not solely the use of technology, but rather the unquestioned adoption of a technocratic paradigm through which we view nature, and the mere one-dimensional interactions that this affords us. Taking a picture is not an inherently problematic act, and it is certainly something we as humans have done for some time now. Obtaining artifacts for our memory and as reminders of our interactions can be a powerful way in which we can in fact consider our relationship and show concern for others in times when we cannot actively engage with them. Given Francis' development of an alterity relationship with nature, we can see that upside to artifacts goes for both humans, as well as nature.

Francis, for his part, notes that “[Technoscience] can...enable men and women immersed in the material world to “leap” into the world of beauty” (74). On his view, if our technology is “well directed” it can enable us to engage with nature at a robust level. Yet this direction is an active and aware process on our part; on Francis' argument it is not something that comes part and parcel with the utilization of technology. As he puts it, it is not “as if reality, goodness, and truth automatically flow from technological...power as such” (75).

Thinking back to the topic of social media and our digital selves, there are upsides that can stem from our curation if we do it with full awareness of our need to interact with nature as a discrete other. Given the global reach of our digital selves through social media, we have a medium for bearing witness to the degradation and harms to nature that are wrought in our world today, and can further seek to generate solidarity and activism on behalf of nature. I am not arguing that the act of curation vis-a-vis nature is inherently problematic, but rather that we must be aware of the ways in which we use technology as a lens between us and the other, and that we can quickly move our goals from ones that respect nature as an other to viewing it as raw material for our own uses in the digital realm. Without this awareness, we can find ourselves in a “lack of physical contact and encounter...[that] can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality” (49).

Thus, we must recognize our relationship of alterity with nature and move in both the natural and digital worlds with the awareness of how technology must be intentionally directed towards beneficial ends, for both us and our “poor sister” that is nature.

Conclusion

Francis is correct to identify that in our world today we operate within a technocratic paradigm, and there is little evidence that this will recede in any way. Again, this is not in and of itself problematic, but we cannot operate under the uncritical assumption that such pervasive technology necessarily enhances our relationships with others. In the case of nature, we must break from the ways in which technology facilitates our further perversion of our relationship to nature from dominion to domination.

To do so, we must be aware of how we practice dominion in our own lives through the use of technology in the service of social media and our digital selves. Technology must be “well directed,” as Francis argues, to facilitate an authentic relationship of alterity between ourselves and nature in our individual interactions. It cannot merely provide us another uncritically adopted avenue by which we can continue to dominate nature solely for our own ends.

Furthermore, the intimate relationship between humans and nature (understood in terms of an integral ecology based in alterity) works in two directions: both from us to nature, and in the reverse direction. “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (Francis 98). The harms a domination relationship creates for nature, it creates for us just the same. Just as nature is “our poor,” we impoverish ourselves by failing to relate to it in a meaningful way. We must recognize the ways in which we utilize technology in the service of our digital selves and be willing to constrain ourselves when doing so would otherwise be out of step with an integral ecology. Our selves are integrated with nature, and thus we have a role with respect to each other in the context of our relationship; it is not separate from us, nor we from “our sister.” Our interactions with nature can in fact be more fulfilling for us and provide us a more robust window into the aesthetic.

What does this look like in practice? Francis references Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in inviting us to practice the “little way of love,” wherein “an integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” (Francis 152). It is, at the end, critical that we “regain the conviction that we

need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it” (151). In doing so, Francis argues that we are engaged in an “act of love which expresses *our own dignity*” (142, emphasis mine). This small-scale approach contrasts with a more political approach to the larger problems wrought by our inappropriate relationship to nature, ones of which Francis is quite cognizant: climate change, deforestation, wholesale destruction of various ecosystems. Yet as M. Anthony Mills (2015) comments, “What *Laudato Si’* offers us is not a blueprint for political revolution to transport us out of modernity into a utopian future or past, but a moral philosophy for addressing the forces characteristic of modernity” (46). In doing something for the other (nature), we are provided something as well, yet only in the context of the genuine recognized relationship of concern for all members within the relationship. In turn, this can help us to be involved in the broader political project to address the climate issues of our time. But in order to do so, we must first be aware of the ways in which technology and the digital environment encourage us to orient ourselves towards other ends with respect to nature. This must mean being willing to limit the use technology and social media for both the sake of nature as well as for ourselves:

If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power. (Francis 57)

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