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Nature, Technology, and God: John Senior's Antidote to the Technocratic Paradigm

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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Nature, Technology, and God: John Senior's Antidote to the Technocratic Paradigm

A THESIS

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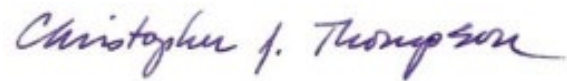
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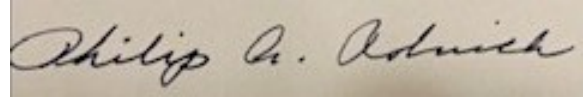
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Nature, Technology, and God: John Senior's Antidote to the Technocratic Paradigm

Within Christian theology, the theology of creation has always played an important role. Not only does it provide us with a rich account of the power, majesty, and goodness of God, it also helps us to understand the natural order and its relationship with Him. A proper theology of creation, however, presupposes an encounter with the natural order. Throughout most of Christian history, this presupposition did not warrant much attention. Most people in Christendom lived their lives in close contact with creation, and those that did not were never far removed. Such a situation can no longer be taken for granted. The increasing presence and predominance of technology in modern civilization has insulated man from nature, both physically and mentally, thus inhibiting a robust theology of creation due to a lack of experiential contact with nature.

This increasing presence and predominance of technology is part of what Pope Francis calls the “technocratic paradigm” in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. It is characterized by a tendency to subject all of human existence – the way we think, how we live our lives in the world, our relationship with nature – to the logic and demands of technology. It is my conviction that the technocratic paradigm is one of the greatest challenges facing the Church today. Besides the more conscious and explicit issues that undermine her credibility, such as the sex abuse scandals, liturgical abuses, and the increasing secularization of public life, the unchallenged supremacy of technology works against her mission in more indirect and subconscious ways. I intend to show that the unchecked reign of technology makes God not only increasingly *irrelevant*, but also increasingly *incomprehensible*. This is because many modern technologies have the tendency to estrange man from nature, and to be estranged from nature is to be estranged from the God of nature.

My approach will be to outline the problem of technocracy as it presents itself to us today by making a few preliminary observations and then moving into a more extended philosophical analysis of the relationship between nature, technology, and epistemology using the work of three separate 20th century thinkers as a guide. From there I will draw out the negative implications of living a life overrun by technology and artifice. After laying out the problem, I will introduce John Senior, a 20th century Catholic convert and university professor who is best known for his involvement with the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas during the 1970's. A gifted educator, his pedagogical strategy provides us with a powerful antidote to the poison of technocracy. Identifying the pitfalls of a technocratic way of life that is insulated from nature, he addressed these problems by nurturing the philosophy of realism in his students and placing them in vital contact with creation. I will finish by showing how, because of the continued rise of technocracy, Senior's pedagogy of realism is even more relevant today for intellectual, cultural, and theological formation than it was fifty years ago. Throughout, I aim to show that a more robust and credible theology demands an increased emphasis on returning to nature and an increased awareness of the pitfalls of an overly technological worldview.

Preliminary Observations: Physical and Mental Insulation

In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says that the Gentiles are without excuse, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." (Rom 1:19-20 *RSVCE*) Here we have an explicit and concise formulation of natural theology, which centuries of subsequent Church tradition will build upon. Apart from – and before – God's supernatural revelation via the

prophets, the Scriptures, and the Incarnation, there was God's natural revelation, in which the Creator was made manifest through creation. From time immemorial, ancient peoples of widely varying religious, sociocultural, and geographical backgrounds had posited the existence of a divine principle by observing the natural world around them. Their intimate and immediate knowledge of nature predisposed them to the idea of God.

But what happens when that knowledge becomes increasingly mediated and unfamiliar? What happens when man is insulated from nature, buffered on all sides not by God's work, but by the work of his own hands? This is one of the challenges that a technologically advanced society faces. During the last one hundred years in the United States, there has been a mass exodus of people moving from the country to the city. At the time of the 1910 census, nearly 55% of Americans lived in rural areas. In the 2010 census, that number was down to 19.3%.¹ Four out of five Americans now live in an urban environment. This trend is not unique to the United States: increasing urbanization is a global phenomenon.² It is not my intent to argue the merits or demerits of rural versus urban living, only to show that technological advance, and the industrialization and urbanization attendant upon it, has created a situation in which an increasing proportion of the world's population lives out its existence partially or entirely removed from nature. They are surrounded on all sides by artifice. Everywhere they look, they see asphalt roads, neon lights, and glass skyscrapers. The concrete jungle has supplanted the real jungle. And what is more, even the nature they do encounter (think of Central Park in New York

¹ "New Census Data Show Differences Between Urban and Rural Populations," at United States Census Bureau (8 December 2016), at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-210.html>.

² Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Urbanization," at Our World in Data (September 2016), at <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>.

City or the perfectly manicured landscaping of suburbia) is not really nature in the fullest sense, but nature on man's terms.

These are a few examples of artificiality at the macro-level, and life at the micro-level often reveals the same thing. A simple appraisal of the room you are currently occupying should be enough to prove the point. Take stock of the objects that present themselves to your sight. How many of them are organic, natural substances? How many are, rather, man-made objects, having been mass-produced in a factory somewhere? I would venture to guess that most, if not all, of the things that fill the room are artificial. It would be naïve in the extreme to think that spending the majority of our lives living in such environments would not have a profound subconscious influence on how we see the world – on how we conceive of reality itself. Such an existence lends a false sense of credibility to the ancient claim of the sophist Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things.”

As can be seen, technological advancement and urbanization tend to physically insulate man from the natural order. But there is also an epistemological component to this insulation that is subtler and, arguably, more influential. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis touches on this epistemological component when diagnosing the technocratic paradigm:

The basic problem goes even deeper: 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. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation.³

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical On Care for Our Common Home *Laudato Si* (24 May 2015), §106.

It is this last sentence in particular that grabs our attention. The technocratic paradigm perceives nature as formless, and if formless, then lacking in intelligibility also. It is only *after* man has taken hold of this formless nature and molded it to his liking that it becomes intelligible. Further on, Francis elaborates on this problematic way of looking at the world:

Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up *prizing technical thought over reality*, since “the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference”. The intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised.⁴

The roots of this epistemological outlook can be traced back to early modern philosophers such as Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. It will suffice to dwell on the reflections of a few 20th century thinkers who, though holding to different philosophical and theological commitments, cut right to the heart of modernity’s technological delusions, and by doing so, fundamentally agree with Pope Francis’s diagnosis in *Laudato Si*. Their names are Martin Heidegger, Romano Guardini, and Joseph Ratzinger.

Nature, Technology, and Epistemology

In his important work *The Question Concerning Technology*, Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher in the school of phenomenology and existentialism, attempted to define the essence of technology. In this dense little essay, he outlines various ways that technology has been conceptualized before, and then offers his own definition. Significantly, Heidegger says

⁴ *Laudato Si*, §115.

that “the essence of technology is nothing technological,”⁵ by which he means that the very driving force behind technology has nothing to do with the machines themselves. What makes something “technological” has nothing to do with pulley systems, combustion engines or microprocessor chips, nor does it have to do with the various human activities that constitute modern modes of production, communication, or transportation. Rather, for Heidegger, the essence of technology is what he calls “enframing,” which is nothing less than our fundamental orientation towards reality, the “frame of mind” with which we view the world. The word he uses in German is *gestell*, which connotes a type of “skeletal framework.” Enframing is “the human impulse to put the world into boxes, to enclose all of our experiences of the world within categories of understanding – mathematical equations, physical laws, sets of classifications – that we can control.”⁶ It encourages us to look at the natural world as a “standing-reserve,” a mass of mute, dumb raw material that is at our beck and call and must be shaped by us in order to become intelligible. This enframing refuses to allow the world to speak for itself, instead opting to blanket all of reality with our own *a priori* thought-constructs that may prove technologically useful, but fail to penetrate to the essence of nature. The fundamental truth and intelligibility of nature is thus obscured by man’s mental machinations. Says Heidegger:

The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already affected man in his essence. The rule of Enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.⁷

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 35.

⁶ “Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology,” at english.hawaii.edu, at <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/heidegger/guide6.html>.

⁷ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 28.

Just as “the essence of technology is nothing technological,” so too, “the real danger of technology is nothing technological.” That is to say, the greatest threat that technology poses does not come from the machines themselves, it comes from the erroneous – or rather, incomplete – way in which it encourages humans to view the world. For Heidegger, the dominance of the technological worldview of enframing runs the risk of denying man the possibility of experiencing “the call of a more primal truth.” To highlight the character of this “primal truth,” he uses the term *aletheia*, a Greek word whose basic translation is “truth” but has connotations of “unconcealedness” and “revealing”.⁸ It is helpful to think here of the slow, silent, almost imperceptible process by which a seed grows into a plant and blossoms into a flower, or how an egg brings forth a chick, or a cocoon a butterfly, or any of the countless other processes – from bacterial generation to weather patterns – by which nature unfolds itself. Each natural thing seeks to bring forth its own interiority, to speak of itself, to manifest its form to the world. But when we view nature through the lens of enframing, we obscure this *aletheia*, this truthful self-disclosure. What we see instead is merely a standing-reserve, an agglomeration of formless, unintelligible raw material that we alone can make intelligible by overlaying it with our own conceptual apparatus.

In addition to obscuring nature’s own self-disclosure, enframing also carries another related risk. Insofar as it conceives of nature as a formless standing-reserve, and conceives of man in the midst of this standing-reserve as nothing but its orderer and artificer,

the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists *only insofar as it is his construct*. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.⁹

⁸ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 12.

⁹ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 27.

Now alienated from nature because he believes it to be mute and meaningless, man retreats into a world of his own fashioning, one that he is familiar with and recognizes as intelligible. On all sides, he sees only the work of his own hands and thus “encounters only himself.” A kind of cosmic narcissism is at work: man looks out on the world and sees only his own reflection. To repeat, this is largely the situation that urbanized, technologized man finds himself in. He “lives and moves and has his being” within an increasingly artificial environment. The negative implications for philosophy and theology should be growing more apparent, but we will attend to those later. Now we must turn to a contemporary of Heidegger’s who, though at odds with much of his philosophical project, nevertheless identified the same disturbing trends.

Romano Guardini was an Italian-born Catholic priest and theologian who lived most of his life in Germany. He is widely considered one of the most important Catholic intellectuals of the 20th century. In *Letters from Lake Como*, a collection of open letters originally published in the mid-1920’s, he reflects on the dramatic changes to the landscape around Lake Como wrought by modern technology and industry. A cherished vacation spot of his, Guardini returned to this scenic Italian lake year after year, only to witness the progressive intrusion of alien technologies. These observations functioned for him as a springboard for deeper reflections on the relationship between nature and culture, and technology and epistemology.

Guardini remembers the days of his youth when northern European industry hadn’t yet reached this bucolic mountain landscape. He recalls how the hamlets that dotted the hillside were in deep conformity with their surrounding environment:

The lines of the roofs merged from different directions. They went through the small town set on the hillside or followed the windings of a valley. Integrated in many ways, they finally reached a climax in the belfry with its deep-toned bell. All these things were caught up and encircled by the well-constructed mountain

masses. Culture, very lofty and yet self-evident, very naturally – I have no other word.¹⁰

He saw something in these little villages that was at once deeply human and deeply natural, a synergy and an integration between man and his environment. This, he says, is true culture – “nature indwelt by humanity.”¹¹ And yet, the winds of change were beginning to blow in Lombardy. He spots something in stark contrast with its surroundings:

Yet all at once, then, on the singing lines of a small town, I saw the great box of a factory. Look how in a landscape in which all the risings and fallings and measures and proportions came together in one clear melody, along with the lofty bell tower there was suddenly a smokestack, and everything fell apart.¹²

For Guardini, the arrival of the factory marked the beginning of a great process of dying. “The world of natural humanity, of nature in which humanity dwells, was perishing. I cannot tell you how sad this made me.”¹³

In the next letter entitled *Artificiality of Existence*, he proceeds to lay out several more examples of technological progress: the sailboat replaced by the motorboat, the plow replaced by the tractor, carpentry and bricklaying replaced by prefabricated housing, homes warmed by the hearth replaced by homes warmed by steam or electricity. In each instance, genuine progress has been made – food becomes more abundant, transportation more efficient, people are lifted out of poverty, the grueling toil of manual labor is alleviated. The yoke has been made easy, the burden light. And yet, something decisive has been lost. For Guardini, the old implements represented real culture: “elevation above nature, yet decisive nearness to it.”¹⁴ With the old technologies,

¹⁰ Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 5-6.

¹¹ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 7.

¹² Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 6-7.

¹³ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 7.

¹⁴ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 12.

man remained “breast to breast with the things and forces of nature.”¹⁵ There was a harmony between his mode of living and the life of nature. Whether it was his home, work, or leisure activities, he lived more in-tune with the rhythm of creation – morning and evening, day and night, the changing of seasons. But as time progressed, this harmony was disrupted. Each technological step forward was often a step backwards from nature. The rhythm of creation was cast aside in favor of a new, artificial ordering of time, imbued with its own logic and prerogatives, and the accumulation of novel devices and instruments was placing more distance between man and his natural environment. He concludes:

The sphere in which we live is becoming more and more artificial, less and less human, more and more – I cannot help saying it – barbarian. The profound sadness of this whole process lies over Italy.¹⁶

In the next letter, entitled *Abstraction*, Guardini moves from these observations to a penetrating philosophical insight: the progressive distancing from nature that he observed all around him was merely a symptom of a deeper epistemological shift. He starts by noting that “all culture is bought at the cost of immediate vitality.”¹⁷ As was just noted, at a purely physical level, each cultural and technological development represents a step away from the immediate vitality of the natural world. The sailor of the sailboat, who harnesses the wind and the waves, is closer and more in harmony with nature than the captain of the steamer who plows indiscriminately through them. From here, he makes a further point: “all culture is bought at the cost of vital reality.”¹⁸ Whereas distance from “immediate vitality” represents a *bodily* alienation

¹⁵ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 16.

¹⁶ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 17.

¹⁷ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 20.

¹⁸ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 20.

from nature, distance from “vital reality” represents a deeper *metaphysical* and *epistemological* alienation. The two are inextricably connected:

What I have called remoteness from immediate vitality also means that we take a piece of nature, either within us or around us, and with it we move out of the sphere of the most immediate reality into another sphere. In this new sphere things are no longer directly detected, seen, grasped, formed, or enjoyed; rather, they are mediated by signs and substitutes.¹⁹

This mediation by signs and substitutes is done for the purpose of efficiency, utility, and convenience. By doing so, we no longer need to “wrestle with some definite and unique situation or danger or possibility of action,” but instead resort to more abstract concepts, laws, and mathematical formulas which allow us to “adopt an attitude that is right in many and, if possible, all cases, and in this way master the whole of the reality around us.”²⁰ However, there is a price to be paid for this mastery:

The cost of this mastery, however, is vitality. We are now no longer in the first living relation to corporeal things and people; the relation has been attenuated. We are in an abstract and artificial world, a substitute world, an improper world of significant signs. These signs no longer relate to this specific thing but to all things of this type. Universal signs, then, abstractions. *We now live only in the abstract.*²¹

Guardini points out that just as the dramatic technological advancements of the 19th and 20th centuries gave birth to an artificial existence, so too, the mode of thinking that brought about these advancements has led man’s mental life into the realm of pure abstraction. He no longer thinks via concrete and individual apprehension, he thinks in terms of universal concepts and formulas that allow him to ignore the realm of concrete particulars and go straight to the laws

¹⁹ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 20.

²⁰ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 20.

²¹ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 22-23.

which grant him mastery over nature. Guardini draws one more insightful parallel, this time between concepts and machines:

What the concept is for knowledge of things, mechanisms, instruments, and machines are for practical action. What concepts do for knowledge – i.e., grasp many things, not in their vitality, but only by means of posited signs that rightly indicate common features – machines do for action. *Machines are steel concepts.* They lay hold of many things in such a way as to disregard their individual features and to treat them as though they were all the same. Mechanical processes have the same character as conceptual thinking. Both control things by taking them out of a special living relation to what is individual and creating an artificial order into which they all, more or less, fit.²²

Just as concepts are used to conveniently “process” individual things by using universal signs to signify all things of that type – this particular oak tree or that particular pine tree under the concept “tree,” for instance – so too, machines are used to conveniently process individual things – this oak or that pine no longer existing as an individual, but as part of a mass of raw material for the woodchipper. The concept and the machine share a deep affinity: they are both labor-saving devices.

To be sure, conceptual thinking has existed for as long as humans have. Knowledge, communication, and ingenuity would be impossible without it. Guardini admits as much, acknowledging that abstract thought is part of what makes us human. But the technological advancements he witnessed in the 20th century were different than any that had come before. Somewhere along the way a line had been crossed, signaling the rise of a new era in human history. Guardini attempts to lay his finger on it:

all culture has from the very first this abstract aspect. Yet when modern thinking in mathematical concepts arrived and modern technology came into the world of action, this aspect became predominant. It became normative in our relation to the world, our conduct, and therefore our being.²³

²² Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 23-24.

²³ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 24.

Perhaps not by coincidence, another German theologian identified this same epoch-defining shift. In the first part of his famous work *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger laid out what he understood to be the three main stages in the history of human thought, the three main ways in which humans have understood the relationship between truth and reality. The first is the ancient and medieval understanding *verum est ens*, “being is truth.” For the ancient and medieval mind, Ratzinger explains, “being itself is true, in other words, apprehensible, because God, pure intellect, made it, and he made it by thinking it.”²⁴ Being and truth are convertible terms. Things *are* because they are *thought*. From this he makes the famous remark that all cognition is re-cognition: “It follows from this traditional view that human thinking is the rethinking of being itself, rethinking of the thought that is being itself.”²⁵

This was how ancient and medieval people viewed the world. But with the dawn of modernity a new understanding prevailed: *verum quia factum*, “truth is that which has been made.” No longer confident in our ability to know the truth of being, modern man concludes that all we can truly know is what we have made ourselves. Ratzinger explains:

This means that the old equation of truth and being is replaced by the new one of truth and factuality; all that can be known is the *factum*, that which we have made ourselves. It is not the task of the human mind – nor is it within its capacity – to think about being; rather, it is to think about the *factum*, what has been made, man’s own particular world, for this is all we can truly understand. Man did not produce the cosmos, and its bottommost depths remain opaque to him.²⁶

At this stage, it is no longer truth and *being* that are convertible terms, but truth and *factuality*, the result of which is the peculiarly modern equation of truth with “the facts.” What we can truly know is restricted to the realm of human production and action. Out of this is born the modern

²⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 59.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 61.

obsession with history and historicity, which enjoyed its peak in the 19th century. However, once it was discovered that even the so-called “facts of human history” were open to differing interpretations, a new formulation was needed. This marked the third major stage in human thinking, *verum quia faciendum*, “truth is that which can be made.” Man shifts from looking backwards at what *has* been made – to looking forwards at what *might* be made:

the truth with which we are now concerned is feasibility. To put it again another way: the truth with which man is concerned is neither the truth of being, nor even in the last resort that of his accomplished deeds, but the truth of changing the world, molding the world – a truth centered on future and action.²⁷

This decidedly modern attitude is perhaps best summarized by the famous words of Karl Marx: “So far philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; it is necessary to change it.”²⁸ With the belief that “truth is that which can be made,” we have entered into our present era, the era of the dominance of *techne*, a world in which “the combination of mathematical thinking and factual thinking has produced the science-orientated intellectual standpoint of modern man, which signifies devotion to reality insofar as it is capable of being shaped.”²⁹

Let us now summarize and synthesize the reflections of these three thinkers, for they have much in common. Heidegger, in his attempt to uncover the *sine qua non* of technology, concludes that it is not the “stuff” of technology that is essential – the machines, gadgets, devices and tools that we typically think of – but a particular way of viewing the world. This worldview, which he calls *enframing*, is a conceptual apparatus that encourages us to see the natural world as a standing-reserve, a mass of raw material devoid of meaning and purpose and intelligible only insofar as it is subject to the various “laws of nature” – mathematical equations, physical laws,

²⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 63.

²⁸ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *On Religion*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 72.

²⁹ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 65.

and the like. This conceptual apparatus, useful as it may be, “speaks over” nature and obscures its more primal *aletheia*, its own truthful self-disclosure. The result of such a situation is that man, understood as an intelligent creature in an otherwise unintelligible world, becomes alienated from nature and retreats into a world of his own fashioning, eventually succumbing to a form of cosmic narcissism in which he looks out on the world and “encounters only himself.”

In his early years, Guardini observed at Lake Como an authentic culture that integrated humans and their environment, one in which man remained “breast to breast with the things and forces of nature.” However, that culture was slowly being replaced by one in which man was increasingly removed from the natural world. This culture made much of life easier and more convenient, but was bought at the price of “immediate vitality.” Insulated by layers and layers of technology, man was now becoming anesthetized to the visceral life-force of nature. That loss of “immediate vitality” was but a symptom of an even deeper metaphysical and epistemological loss: the loss of “vital reality.” Guardini noticed how man’s mental life now consisted, not in an engagement with the concrete world of particular things, but in an engagement with an abstract realm of signs and substitutes. This abstract realm is, I would submit, what Heidegger meant by enframing. Whereas Heidegger focuses on the realm of human thought, Guardini observes the deeper relationship between man’s mental life and his embodied life. Man lives an increasingly *artificial* physical existence and an increasingly *abstract* mental existence, the two mutually reinforcing one another.

Ratzinger comes along and gives Guardini and Heidegger’s observations historical context. Modernity is inaugurated by a shift from the classical and medieval adage *verum est ens*, “being is truth,” to the adage *verum quia factum*, “truth is that which has been made.” The bottom-most depths of being are considered impenetrable to human thought, and man turns his

attention to the realm of human action and production. But with uncertainties about his ability to know even the past with accuracy, a newer adage is needed: *verum quia faciendum*, truth is that which *can be* made. This ushers in our contemporary age, the age of the reign of technology, an age focused on the future of human ingenuity and potential. In the era of *verum quia faciendum*, truth is heavily conditioned by both the past successes of technology and its future possibilities. This era is the era witnessed and diagnosed so well by Guardini and Heidegger in the first half of the 20th century.

Each in their own way, these three thinkers identified this epoch-defining shift – Heidegger’s “enframing,” Guardini’s realm of abstract signs and substitutes, Ratzinger’s *verum quia faciendum* – and were alarmed by its potential implications. Man’s relationship with and understanding of nature was changing, and indeed, so was the very definition of truth. For Catholics, these implications are too momentous to be ignored. They directly impinge upon the practice of theology and the classical philosophical worldview that feeds it. Let us now take a moment to identify these negative implications more specifically.

We noted earlier that St. Paul, in the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans, states that pagan peoples are “without excuse,” because, “ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” Here, St. Paul is defending the legitimacy of natural theology, stating that the existence of God is knowable without recourse to divine revelation. The First Vatican Council echoed this assertion when it said in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* that “God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the things that were created

through the natural light of human reason.”³⁰ However, as the presence of technology and artifice continues to expand and the presence of truly “created things” – the living, breathing, organic substances of the natural world – continues to recede into the peripheries of human experience, this assertion will grow less and less plausible. The almost intuitive knowledge of creation and Creator that so many ancient peoples enjoyed – and that St. Paul, writing in the first century, could take for granted – is no longer an experiential given. This is the core of the problem at the purely physical level. Just as God’s Word is made manifest explicitly through the Scriptures, it is also made manifest implicitly through the Word written into creation. It is this Word whom St. John identifies as Christ Himself, declaring that it is through Him that “all things came into being.” (Jn 1:3) And while it is certainly disturbing that modern man has grown ignorant of the Scriptures, what is perhaps even more disturbing, and, in a sense, more consequential, is the fact that we have grown ignorant of that more primordial Word expressed in nature.

But as we mentioned earlier, this lack of experiential contact with nature leads us once again to deeper epistemological issues. As Heidegger and Guardini both pointed out, at the very core of technology is a particular way of viewing and thinking about the world, one in which the primal self-disclosure of nature is ignored in favor of an *a priori* conceptual apparatus. Instead of listening attentively to the Word in creation and allowing it to speak for itself, man elects to “speak over” it. He no longer engages in the first place with the concrete, substantial things of nature, he instead lives in a realm of mental abstraction, attending to the universal laws that govern the natural order. Quality gives way to quantity, and the substantive fullness of creation

³⁰ Peter Hünemann, Helmut Hoping, Robert L. Fastiggi, Anne Englund Nash, and Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 3004.

starts to “hollow out” into thin mathematical structures. This decidedly modern phenomenon, inseparable from the logic of technology, has led to the “dis-realization” of the world. C.S. Lewis makes the point well:

It is not the greatest of modern scientists who feel most sure that the object, stripped of its qualitative properties and reduced to mere quantity, is wholly real. Little scientists, and little unscientific followers of science, may think so. The great minds know very well that the object, so treated, is an artificial abstraction, that something of its reality has been lost.³¹

By diverting our attention away from the concrete substances of nature and towards geometrical and mathematical models, the technological outlook weakens our grasp on reality. This was the concern that Heidegger expressed when he suggested that “enframing” obscures nature’s *aletheia*. Smitten with their effectiveness and utility, man falls in love with his models and discards that which the models are based upon.

This trend, which is an essential part of the technocratic paradigm, is a dramatic step away from the philosophy of realism that undergirds Catholic theology. No longer is truth an *adequatio intellectus et rei*, an identification of thought and thing. Instead, knowledge becomes a purely mental event, a relationship between concept and concept, forever relegated to the realm of the abstract. This is *de facto* a return to the philosophy of idealism, which states that true knowledge is acquired without recourse to the material world. This philosophy, as we shall see in the second half of the paper, is vehemently denied by both Aristotle and St. Thomas.

So, the problem that the technological outlook poses is twofold. First, a lack of experiential contact with nature has frustrated the “connatural knowledge” of creation and Creator that many ancient peoples enjoyed – regardless of religious, sociocultural, or

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 70-71.

geographical background. Second, according to the epistemology of modern science and technology, knowledge is no longer an *adequatio intellectus et rei*, but an entirely mental event. Both problems undermine our ability to engage in natural theology successfully by robbing us – in our mode of being and in our mode of thinking – of a truly immersive experience of the created world.

These problems are endemic to the technocratic paradigm that Pope Francis diagnoses in *Laudato Si*. They don't get as much attention in the encyclical as the social, economic, and environmental considerations do, but I am convinced that they lie at the very root of our current cultural crisis. And since the problems lie at the root, the solution lies there as well. The program that Pope Francis proposes is helpful for our purposes:

Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, *but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way*, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.³²

We must work to cast off the blinders that technocratic thinking has placed upon us, learning to gaze with fresh eyes upon the world around us. Pope John Paul II put forth the same imperative in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* when he said that philosophy must first of all recover its “sapiential dimension,” its genuinely metaphysical range in which it can move from “phenomenon to foundation.”³³ Technocratic thinking encourages us to attend only to the level of the phenomenon, analyzing it closely so as to better understand how it might be manipulated or controlled. This epistemological outlook must be transcended, we must regain the confidence

³² *Laudato Si*, §114.

³³ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), §81-83.

– which has been lost since the rise of modernity – in our ability to penetrate those “foundational things.”

Both of these calls, from Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis, are ultimately a call to return to the philosophy of realism. It is this philosophy, in both its metaphysical and epistemological components, that can address the problems that have been outlined thus far in this paper. Realism has the capacity to place us back into vital contact with creation, both in our mode of being and mode of thinking, and re-strengthen the bond of unity between man and nature that has been so severely attenuated. This philosophy can be nurtured in a variety of ways, but perhaps none more crucial than in the domain of education. That is why we will now turn our attention to John Senior, a Catholic convert and university professor best known for his work with the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas during the 1970’s, whose realist pedagogy provides a crucial antidote to the disturbing trends we have been discussing.

John Senior’s Intellectual Journey

It is necessary first to highlight some of the major moments in the life of John Senior, because they will illuminate his roundabout journey into philosophical realism and ultimately into the Catholic Church.³⁴ Senior was born in 1923 and grew up on Long Island. Like many Depression-era families, money for the Seniors was tight. His father bounced around among several poorly paying jobs just to keep the family afloat. In his boyhood years, Senior developed a love for acting, poetry, music, and all things cowboy. Dismayed by the steady urbanization of his Long Island neighborhood, he longed for a life on the open range, so much so that at age

³⁴ For his biography and many of his thoughts on education, I will be using the excellent work by Father Francis Bethel, O.S.B., titled *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism* (Merrimack, NH: Thomas More College Press, 2016).

thirteen he ran away from home, heading west and ending up on a ranch in the Badlands of South Dakota. The escapade was short lived; within a few weeks his father flew out and brought him home. Fearful of the prospect of his running away again, his parents struck a compromise. For the remainder of his adolescent years, he was allowed to spend his summers out west, fulfilling his boyhood cowboy dreams by working as a ranch hand in the Red River Valley of North Dakota. Thus, from an early age Senior cultivated a taste for the great outdoors – for life untrammelled by urbanization and unreached by the noise of the city. Though he remained rather green at his ranching work, he cherished the way of living – coffee with cowboys and campfires under the stars.

Religion was largely absent from Senior's youth. His parents were nominally Episcopalian and did not practice their faith. His two older siblings, on their own initiative, attended Sunday school and were baptized, but John did not join them. His interests laid elsewhere. John was an excellent student in high school and received a scholarship to attend Hofstra, a small liberal arts school on Long Island. He was active in debate and theater and studied literature and philosophy. After two years there, he joined the Army during World War II, never being sent overseas but instead working stateside interrogating German prisoners of war. Honorably discharged in September 1944, he took advantage of the GI Bill and decided to continue his studies at Columbia, where he would eventually receive his doctorate.

It was during his time there that he encountered Mark Van Doren, a well-known literary critic who was instrumental in the Great Books movement. Van Doren had a deep influence on Senior and his teaching style, and the two remained close for many years. Senior received his B.A. and M.A. from Columbia, and took up several intermittent teaching jobs, first at Bard College and later back at Hofstra, eventually receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia in comparative

literature. From there, he joined the English Department at Cornell University in upstate New York, one of the most prestigious schools in the country. All throughout his studies and early years teaching, Senior remained consumed by wanderlust and a desire for rustic country living. He even moved with his wife for a short time to a mountain range in New Mexico, enjoying a quaint little shack and attempting to live off the land. But just as his ranching skills were a liability, his dreams of being a mountain man were cut short by a harsh winter and lack of wilderness training.

These escapes into the backwoods, however, were but a reflection of a deeper intellectual and spiritual search that Senior was going through. Throughout his teens and twenties, he was taken by a variety of different philosophical and literary currents, first Freudianism and Marxism and later through the work of Carl Jung into the Symbolist movement and the Occult. It was upon these last two – Symbolism and Occultism – that both his academic and personal interests were eventually fixed.

Symbolism was a nineteenth and twentieth century literary and artistic movement that was grounded in Occultist philosophy. This philosophy's main tenet is that "the universe is one, single, eternal, ineffable substance."³⁵ Consequently, the concrete multiplicity of things presented to our common experience is understood to be an illusion. The practitioner of Occultism seeks enlightenment by shedding these illusions and coming to realize that even the distinction between the self and the universe, between subject and object, is illusory. This enlightenment is achieved by various techniques that aid in piercing through the illusion of everyday experience. In a similar vein, Occultist philosophy claims that there is a transcendent

³⁵ John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 39.

unity behind all world religions: the various dogmas and symbols involved are but the “exoteric clothing” of a more primordial, esoteric, hidden, interior spiritual core.³⁶

For a time, this was the philosophical space that Senior found himself in. But he was dissatisfied with the direction that the Symbolist movement was going during early 1960’s, and turned instead to Eastern spirituality, which he saw as the pure, untainted font of Occultist philosophy. With the help of two authoritative interpreters of Eastern thought, Rene Guenon and A.K. Coomaraswamy, Senior began to see its fundamental metaphysical doctrines for what they truly were. At the core of Eastern philosophy, Senior discovered, is a “metaphysics of non-duality” based upon the denial of the distinction between subject and object, self and world, and, most dramatically, the distinction between being and non-being. It is this negation of duality that lays the groundwork for a thoroughly anti-realist philosophy in which there is no difference between existence and nothingness. Senior would later remark that “Oriental doctrine brought me face to face with Nothing.”³⁷

However, Senior’s engagement with Guenon and Coomaraswamy’s thought eventually brought him into contact with St. Thomas Aquinas and his *Summa Theologiae*. The two Eastern thinkers occasionally referred to him in their work, and Senior decided to investigate him for himself. What he discovered would radically change the direction of his thought, and ultimately, his life. In both Aquinas and Aristotle, Senior found a rigorous defense of what could be called the “principle of being.” These two great Western thinkers affirmed with great philosophical clarity the common-sense belief that the extra-mental world is really out there, and one can really know it. Gone was any denial of the distinction between self and world, or any assertion that our

³⁶ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 34.

³⁷ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 52.

everyday experience of reality is a grand illusion that must be transcended. Being was normative and laid the foundation for truth and for that very first of first principles: the law of non-contradiction. Says Aquinas,

For that which, before aught else, falls under apprehension, is “being,” the notion of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends. Wherefore the first indemonstrable principle is that “the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” which is based on the notion of “being” and “not-being”: and on this principle all others are based...³⁸

By beginning with the normative force of being, Aquinas makes way for the principle of non-contradiction, in which one discovers that “this” is not “that,” and can therefore affirm the multiplicity of existing things. Being also paves the way for the classical understanding of truth we mentioned earlier, the *adequatio intellectus et rei*, the conformity of the mind to reality. In short, truth follows upon the existence of things.

The impact that these fundamental metaphysical truths had on Senior cannot be overstated. After spending years immersed in the anti-realist philosophy of Occultism and Eastern thought, the force of Aristotle and Aquinas’s arguments shocked his system. From a world of appearances and illusions, Senior was catapulted into the rock-solid world of concrete reality. After a harrowing journey to the brink of the abyss of nothingness, he could now heartily affirm what his senses had always been telling him: being is out there, and it is knowable. This affirmation paved the way for his eventual conversion and entrance into the Catholic Church.

It has been necessary to dwell on Senior’s philosophical journey so as to highlight the radical about-face that he went through, and its impact on the thought that would eventually inform his teaching style and his stance *vis-à-vis* technology. Perhaps his greatest asset as a

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II q. 94, a.2, at New Advent, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

teacher was the sheer thoroughness of his philosophical conversion. Like Paul struck down on the road to Damascus, he went from charging headlong in one direction to charging headlong in the other. No longer floating in the vacuity of anti-realist thought, he would now cling tightly and stubbornly to the concrete existence of sensible reality for the rest of his days.

What Senior had stumbled upon was the true *philosophia perennis*, realism. This philosophical tradition, which is now marginalized in contemporary public discourse, had sustained the West from the time of Aristotle through the Middle Ages to the present day. Senior put it this way:

With due respect to its failures – for it seems to be failing now – the triumph of three thousand years of Western civilization has been, from the point of view of ideas, the philosophy vaguely called Realism or the Perennial Philosophy, because it has survived so many seasons. It may be summed up in a sentence: *The real is really real*; or in a word – *is*. The terse scholastic formula defines it...truth follows upon the existence of things. According to this view, the principle of all things is “to be.”³⁹

Now thoroughly rooted in the Perennial Philosophy, Senior began to use the phrase “Perennial Heresy” to denote any of the anti-realist doctrines that denied existence’s primacy over thought or imagination. The fundamental error of these philosophies is found in their denial of the “first salute of the universe,” to use a Chestertonian phrase. Senior put it very pointedly when he said, “All questions come down at last to the assertion or denial of a reality independent of the mind which we can know by means of the mind with certainty.”⁴⁰

This willful disparagement or denial of the evident reality of things is what Senior had encountered in both Occultist and Eastern thought. But there was also a particularly modern form of this “Perennial Heresy” that Senior targeted, which brings us back to our discussion of

³⁹ John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1978), 21.

⁴⁰ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 36.

technology. For Senior, the root of modernity's technocratic outlook can be traced back to the Renaissance. Renaissance humanism initiated both a turn to human subjectivity and a new way of considering the world. Convinced of the sterility of the old Aristotelian metaphysics, philosophers turned instead to the empirical and mathematical sciences as a way forward. "It is commonly agreed," says Senior, "that at the Renaissance, science shifted from the study of things first known by the heart to the construction of mathematical models tested by instruments that quantify things."⁴¹ This shift opened the door to "the wholly unexamined assumption that the real is quantitative; that is, the real is what can be measured."⁴² And though this assumption remained wholly unexamined, the dramatic successes of such a methodological outlook lent it credence. The modern empirical sciences provided man with a newfound sense of power and control over nature. A type of utilitarianism was at play: it was true because it was useful. As a result, what was at first simply an effective methodology morphed into a much more generalized philosophical view: "we only know quantity, and quantity is all there is."⁴³

A further result of this philosophical view was the "psychologizing of knowledge" in which human knowledge became a purely mental event, as we mentioned earlier. By denying one half of the scholastic formulation of truth, knowledge came to reside solely in human thought. Truth was no longer an adequation of *thought* and *thing*, but an adequation of *thought* and *thought*, that is, the interplay of concepts, statistics, mathematical formulas, and laws of nature. In consequence, "Man began viewing [the] world as made up of empty boxes, as it were, of geometrical figures and not of trees, rivers, horses – made up of what we can measure rather than the substance of things."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 85.

⁴² Senior, *Death of Christian Culture*, 29.

⁴³ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 86.

⁴⁴ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 86.

Here we see Senior's own take on the reflections of Heidegger, Guardini, and Ratzinger that we analyzed earlier. The "psychologizing of knowledge" is akin to Heidegger's "enframing," Guardini's realm of abstract signs and substitutes, and Ratzinger's *verum quia faciendum*. This decidedly modern phenomenon has the tendency to uproot man from the rich soil of reality and trap him within the world of thought alone, thus divorcing him from nature and the God of nature. As mentioned previously, this "psychologizing of knowledge" is tantamount to idealism, wherein real knowledge is gained without reference to the material world. Senior's pedagogical strategy vehemently denies this understanding of human knowledge, but before we get to that, we must discuss his own views on technology.

Technology and Occultism

At first glance, Senior's views on technology seem excessively harsh. However, it must be noted that his criticisms are not necessarily of technology *per se*, but are rather directed towards what could be called "technolatry," an elevating of technology to the level of divinity. In a chapter titled "The Air-Conditioned Holocaust," he goes so far as to call technology "pessimism in an optimistic disguise."⁴⁵ Senior focuses on a group he calls "technologists," or whom Pope Francis today might call "technocrats." These people, Senior claims, have bought into the modernist belief that life is ultimately meaningless and insignificant, and therefore that one must use technology to construct one's own meaning and attempt to put off the inevitability of death. Technology, in this understanding, is merely an improved means to an unimproved end:

Because of the fact that life means nothing and that everything will eventually come to nothing according to the doctrine of evolutionary doom, we must act, they say, *as if* that were not so for the time being. The technologist constructs an

⁴⁵ John Senior, *The Restoration of Christian Culture* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2008), 36.

artificial optimism on the inflationary premise that you can buy now and pay later... With enough research and the manipulation of the masses, scientists can conquer poverty, outer space, war, disease and even death. In a word, science will establish the Kingdom of This World. Of course, in the long run the process will self-destruct, but for now – not yet, not yet.⁴⁶

According to Senior, the philosophy of the technologist is no different than that of the Epicurean:
“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (Isa 22:13)

Perhaps another reason for Senior’s harsh criticism of the technological mindset was because he saw in it the same impulses and tactics that were found in the Occultist philosophies he had left behind. Indeed, some very illuminating parallels can be drawn between technolatriy and Occultism. One will remember that Occultist philosophy is predicated on the idea that the normal world of everyday experience is fundamentally an illusion, and that one must use various techniques to pierce through these illusions and reach the real spiritual core underneath, thus achieving “enlightenment.” The technological outlook, which builds on the faulty assumption discussed earlier that “quantity is all there is,” holds the same basic view but in a “scientific” register. The world of everyday experience must be transcended in order to reach the fundamental, quantitative realities underneath:

When I was a child, the fifth grade teacher taught us that atoms were miniature solar systems – electrons like planets orbiting a nucleus like the sun. We drew atomic maps and memorized charts of weights, not having a single rock in front of us. We were taught to believe that atoms were real and rocks illusions. Brought up on mathematical models, we took them for reality.⁴⁷

The technologist adopts the faulty notion that H₂O is somehow “more real” than the cool, muddy creek that one swims in, that what is looked at through telescopes and microscopes is “more real” than what is seen with the naked eye, that the chemical and biological substructure

⁴⁶ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 36.

⁴⁷ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 145.

of nature, expressed in mathematics, is truly real, whereas the nature expressed in ordinary experience is illusory and misleading.⁴⁸ And what is more, both the technologist and the Occultist exploit and manipulate these underlying realities for their own gain. In the world of technology-worship, “the magician-intellect invents gigantic global systems of relativist science [and] develops virtual realities.”⁴⁹

Thirty years earlier, C.S. Lewis was making a similar point in his important work *The Abolition of Man*, itself a defense of philosophical realism. Lewis says that, to the prejudice of the modern mind, “science and technology” and “religion and magic” go together. But, he keenly observes, the more truthful pairing is “science and religion” and “technology and magic.” This is because science and religion are both comprehensive attempts to *understand* the nature of reality, whereas technology and magic are both attempts to *manipulate* it:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the ‘wisdom’ of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique...⁵⁰

To this, one could also add Arthur C. Clark’s observation that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” The fact that this technological desire to “subdue reality to the wishes of men” was essentially the same as the impulse behind Occultism and magic was no doubt part of the reason why Senior reacted so vehemently against the excesses of technology. Having just left behind the world of the Occult, he could detect its spiritual progeny everywhere. His solution was the same as Lewis’s: “Happiness consists – exactly opposite to

⁴⁸ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 145.

⁴⁹ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 144.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 77.

what the technologists say – in conformity with nature, not against it or reconstructing it according to our desires.”⁵¹

Anesthetization and Alienation

His opinions on technology that we have covered thus far have dealt with its conscious metaphysical orientation, now we must turn to the subconscious side effects of a life overrun by technology and artificiality. Alongside the connection with occultism and magic, Senior recognized another dangerous element in the technological outlook, namely, its tendency to anesthetize and alienate man from nature. He paints a startling picture of life for the modern child:

Generations brought up in centrally heated and air-conditioned schools, shot from place to place encapsulated in culturally sealed-off buses, who swim in heated, chlorinated pools devoid of current, swirl, or tide... poor little rich suburban children who have all these delights, and living in constant fluorescent glare, have never seen the stars, which St. Thomas, following Aristotle and all the ancients, says are the first begetters of that primary experience of reality formulated as the first of all principles of metaphysics, that *something is*.⁵²

And he goes on to say:

When a child looks up to learn astronomy at the city planetarium, he spontaneously invokes a strange new psalm: The ceiling proclaims the glory of man! He is not even a pantheist but a pan-anthropist who thinks that everything is man. There is almost nothing not artificial in his experience – the fibers of his clothes, the surfaces of the tables and desks he rests his elbows on, the food he eats, the air he breathes, the odor even of his fellow inmates reeks with waves of artificially scented deodorant in this space-vehicle we have made of earth.⁵³

⁵¹ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 37.

⁵² Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 83.

⁵³ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 84.

Modern children, living as they do in artificially constructed environments, effortlessly intuit the great claim of Protagoras: “man is the measure of all things.” Nowhere in their experience do they encounter the pre-existent order of nature and its claims on them. Instead, the natural world is slowly replaced by a fabricated world built to our standards and suited to our preferences. This artificial world functions as a buffer, desensitizing and alienating us from that primordial reality present in nature. No longer are we in kinship with creation, that kinship which Saint Francis expressed when he spoke of “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon,” knowing as he did that man is at home in the cosmos amongst fellow *creatura*, ontological siblings begotten by the same Creator. Instead, having sealed ourselves off from nature, we find ourselves lost and alone in an unfamiliar cosmos.

At a more practical level, what is of primary concern to Senior is the fact that the artificial existence of urbanized and technologized man disrupts and disconnects him from a healthy *sense experience* of the world around him. According to realist epistemology, such an existence spells disaster for the possibility of genuine philosophical knowledge. Without a proper orientation towards – and visceral experience of – reality, true philosophical and theological inquiry is doomed from the outset. It was this distressing situation that Senior sought to address in his own teaching, and it is to his realist pedagogy that we now turn.

Epistemological Realism

Senior’s philosophy of education could be summarized in two phrases, one philosophical and the other theological. First, *nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu* – nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses. Second, “Taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps 34:8) In his own words:

No serious restitution of society or the Church can occur without a return to first principles, yes, but before principles we must return to the ordinary reality which feeds first principles.⁵⁴

We noted at the outset of this paper that living a life overrun by technology and artificiality tends to insulate us from nature, both in our mode of physical existence and in our mode of thinking. Heidegger, Guardini, and Ratzinger each recognized the increasing abstraction and artificialization of modern life and how man had grown estranged from the natural world around him. Senior, in his own work as a university professor, recognized these trends as well. His remedy addressed these issues via epistemological realism. It will be necessary to explore this doctrine to make sense of Senior's pedagogical strategy.

We noted earlier that the modern tendency to "psychologize knowledge," especially with reference to mathematical explanations of nature, was essentially a return to the age-old philosophy of idealism. This philosophy, held most famously by Plato, asserts that knowledge is attained without reference to the material order. Recognizing the radical difference between the intellect and the senses, and knowing that the incorporeal cannot be moved by the corporeal, Plato concluded that intellectual knowledge, which is immaterial, is gained through the intellect's participation in the intelligible form. On this view, man does not come to know the concept "tree" by reference to a particular, material tree, but by the soul's participation in the form of "tree," which has a separate existence of its own in Plato's so-called "Realm of Forms."

Aquinas, building on Aristotle, presents a fundamentally different theory of human knowledge. He agrees with Plato that the intellect cannot be moved by the senses, but nevertheless asserts that the intellect does not operate without continual reference to the senses. This "bridging of the gap" between the corporeal senses and the incorporeal intellect is

⁵⁴ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 84.

accomplished by the agent intellect, which extracts the intelligible species from the phantasms – the mental images – formed in the imagination. The process of human cognition then, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, starts with the senses, moves through the imagination, and culminates with the extraction of the universal concept from the particular sense image.⁵⁵ Furthermore, “it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms.”⁵⁶ This means that, not only in the generation of new knowledge, but in the recalling of old knowledge, we must continually refer to the phantasms we have formed in our imagination. Aquinas says:

Wherefore it is clear that for the intellect to understand actually, not only when it acquires fresh knowledge, but also when it applies knowledge already acquired, there is need for the act of the imagination and of the other powers.⁵⁷

What this means practically is that, because the intellect is reliant upon the phantasms for its operation, someone with weak or distorted phantasms – a diseased imagination – *cannot actually think well*.

Aquinas then says that, as a rule, the object of knowledge is proportionate to the power of the knower. He distinguishes between three grades of cognitive powers. The first is the sense power, which is the act of a corporeal organ. These include the five senses we are all familiar with – sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. The proper object of the sense powers is the form as existing *in* corporeal matter. This is the type of cognitive power that brute animals possess. The second power is the angelic intellect, which is in no way connected with corporeal organs or corporeal matter. The proper object of the angelic intellect is the form existing *apart from* matter.

⁵⁵ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

⁵⁶ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

⁵⁷ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

The third cognitive power is the human intellect, which holds a middle ground between the first and the second. The human intellect, says Aquinas,

is not the act of an organ; yet it is a power of the soul which is the form of the body... And therefore it is proper to it to know a form existing individually in corporeal matter, but not as existing in this individual matter.⁵⁸

He concludes by noting that angels know material things through the immaterial, whereas humans acquire some knowledge of immaterial things through the material. The mistake of Plato and of all forms of idealism – including, I would submit, the modern “psychologizing of knowledge” that we have referenced previously – is that he attributes to human beings an angelic form of knowledge which we do not actually possess. *Contra* idealism, we do not come to the knowledge of universals without reference to particulars; we do not arrive at the immaterial without reference to the material. The concept “tree” is not understood without my first having experienced, through the senses, this particular tree as it exists in my backyard.

In fact, the senses play such an important role in Aquinas’s epistemology that he even goes so far as to say that “among men, those who have the best sense of touch have the best intelligence.”⁵⁹ To modern ears, this statement is almost unintelligible. But for Aquinas, who understood the sense of touch to be the ground of all the other senses, there is a clear correlation between sensitivity of touch and intelligence. He quotes Aristotle for support: “those who are refined in body are well endowed in mind.”⁶⁰ The point here is that, if the senses are to be understood as the “windows of the soul,” providing all the raw material for the operation of the intellect, then the person whose senses are especially well-attuned and receptive will possess a keener mind because of it. Conversely, a person who has “shuttered the windows,” so to speak,

⁵⁸ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 1, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

⁵⁹ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 76, a. 5, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 9, 421a20-25, in *Aristotle: De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41.

or whose sense faculties are corrupted or confused, will be less intelligent – not because they lack innate intelligence, but because their mental life has been fed a meager diet by their senses.

Senior knew this in his bones. He was well aware of the fact that, to channel the famous phrase of Thomas à Kempis, “the highest cannot stand without the lowest.” His entire outlook on education was permeated by this realization:

There is no amount of reading, remedial or advanced, no amount of study of any kind, that can substitute for the fact that we are a rooted species, rooted through our senses in the air, water, earth and fire of elemental experience.⁶¹

In contrast to the Cartesian *cogito*, Senior observed that “Before he reflects, that is, ‘bends back’ his attention to his own mental and sensory processes, a man first simply looks, smells tastes, touches, and affirms existence.”⁶²

The importance of epistemological realism extends beyond philosophy and into the realm of theology as well. One need look no further than Our Lord, who repeatedly utilized nature and agriculture imagery in expressing the Kingdom of God. He did not give his followers abstract theological principles, but instead invited them to “consider the lilies of the field” and “look at the birds of the air,” using the created things of this world to give glimpses of the uncreated. C.S. Lewis observed the same thing when he said that we get from nature “an iconography – a language of images,” noting that nature “incarnates our beliefs,” helping us to make sense of key theological ideas:

Many people – I am one myself – would never, but for what nature does to us, have had any content to put into the words we must use in confessing our faith. Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one.⁶³

⁶¹ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 111.

⁶² Senior, *Death of Christian Culture*, 22.

⁶³ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves: An Exploration of the Nature of Love* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012), 19-20.

And if I may speak anecdotally for a moment, I recently had this same realization myself. Every Sunday for as long as I can remember, I have gone to Mass and professed in the Nicene Creed that “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.” I had given what Newman calls a “notional assent” to that proposition.⁶⁴ But this past summer, I had the privilege of attending Sunday Mass on the top of a mountain in the Rockies. That morning, as I recited those same words while beholding snow-capped peaks and a crystalline sky, at that very point where heaven and earth meet, I finally *knew* what it meant to say that God was the creator of it all. This proposition of the faith had been “incarnated,” and, with leaping heart and eyes welling up with tears, I was able to give that enthusiastic “real assent” that Newman saw was so important. No longer was the Creed a mere abstract formula, it had “come down to earth” and been seared into my imagination.

In the same way, one must consider: to city-dwelling children whose night sky is choked with light pollution and sparsely populated by a few meager stars, what sense can they make of the psalmist’s proclamation that “the heavens are telling the glory of God”? And how will they appreciate the creation narrative’s assertion that God created “every living creature that moves” when all they have seen are their house pets and a few squirrels? The book of Wisdom states that “from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.” (Wis 13:5) The converse also applies: a lackluster experience of creation leads to a lackluster understanding of God.

Senior, himself deeply indebted to Newman’s work, saw the importance of stimulating real assent to theological principles through contact with the created world:

⁶⁴ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), Chapter 4.

A child can't honestly admire the Maker until he first honestly admires the things He made. It's an insult to ignore the artist's work while praising him on hearsay, as if "by the invisible things of God we come to know the visible things of earth"! *Vae fideismus!* Taste and see. This thing is good; it couldn't make itself; therefore we know He Who made it is good. Metaphysically speaking, things are good because the good God made them. But we are not metaphysical creatures; we don't think like angels; everything we know is known in things.⁶⁵

Senior echoes the point Aquinas made, referenced earlier: we don't think like angels. We are not "metaphysical creatures," that is, we are not purely spiritual beings, but embodied, enfolded, ensoiled creatures that come to know immaterial truths only with reference to the material world. To invert this process and "praise God on hearsay" is, according to Senior, a kind of fideism.

Senior's Pedagogical Practices

The practical implications of such a theory of human knowledge are far-ranging, both for philosophy and theology. It can be summed up by stating that proper thinking, *recta ratio*, cannot be accomplished without educating the *entire* person – not just the intellect, but the will, the imagination, the memory, the emotions, and, most fundamentally, the senses. During his years teaching at the University of Wyoming and later with the Integrated Humanities program at Kansas, this educational philosophy is what Senior tried to instantiate. While teaching literature to undergraduates early in his career, he began to realize that the problem wasn't that the students were not intellectually capable, but that they simply lacked that basic experience of reality necessary to read the Great Books with profit:

When you plant even the best children's literature in even the brightest young minds, if the soil of those minds has not been richly manured by natural experience, you don't get the fecund fruit of literature which is imagination, but infertile fantasy. Children need direct, everyday experience of fields, forests, streams, lakes, oceans, grass and ground...⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 138.

⁶⁶ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 112.

What Senior's students lacked was at the most fundamental level: a healthy, rich, and variegated sense experience of the natural world. Brought up in increasingly artificial environments and bereft of visceral contact with the "air, water, earth, and fire of elemental experience," their imaginations were distorted and impoverished. And because the highest cannot stand without the lowest, any attempt at philosophical and theological speculation, Senior realized, would ultimately be fruitless if the imagination, and the sense experience that feeds it, was not properly rehabilitated.

So, Senior sought to address these deficiencies with a "gradual education," based on the model of the ancient Greeks, in which the whole person was educated in correspondence with the way people naturally learn:

The structuring of learning must follow the order of nature and of the learner from sensible to imaginative to intelligible knowledge. Gymnastics, music in the wide sense and science follow in that order and cannot be skipped, reversed or mixed.⁶⁷

Here, he lays out the natural progression of human knowledge as understood by epistemological realism. Before arriving at the realm of the properly intellectual – the domain of the arts, sciences and practical training – one must first educate the senses, imagination and memory. This realm he subdivides, following the Greeks, into "gymnastic" and "musical" education. A word about both is in order.

For Senior, the proper goal of gymnastic education was "not simply recreation and health but the acuity of sensing, as sight is sharpened and coordinated by archery."⁶⁸ It was primarily about the "art of right sensation," a stimulation and cultivation of the senses to delight in reality. Pointing out that the etymological root of the word *gymnos* means "naked," Senior opined that

⁶⁷ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 121.

⁶⁸ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 83.

“the first necessity is getting ourselves and our children into ‘naked’ contact with the world God made, not just in school as study but habitually in our whole way of life.”⁶⁹ Gymnastics, then, was not just an intermittent schoolyard exercise, but a mode of living in the world, and it implicated every aspect of our daily existence:

There is a cause-effect relation between the work we do, the clothes we wear or do not wear, the houses we live in, the walls or lack of walls, the landscape, the semiconscious sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches of our ordinary lives – a close connection between these and the moral and spiritual development of souls.⁷⁰

Senior also observed that most of his students – themselves immersed in the artificial sensationalism of modernity – lacked any genuine, healthy contact with the natural world. Overstimulated by artificial and technological diversions, their senses had become dull and inattentive. They had grown unable to truly see because, ironically, there was simply *too much to see*. In his teaching, Senior sought to remedy this deficiency by such unorthodox practices as weekly stargazing sessions, having the students learn calligraphy, encouraging nature excursions, and hosting a program ball where students learned to dance. All of these were designed to heal the students’ diseased and impoverished sense experiences, and rehabilitate and reorient them towards a healthier experience of the world.

The next important step in Senior’s pedagogy was “musical education.” He used the term in its broader, ancient sense: not merely learning to play instruments and sing, but to come under the tutelage of the Muses, the Greek goddesses of inspiration. This included not only music in the narrow sense, but poetry, mythology, imaginative literature and art as well. The goal of musical education was the training of the memory, imagination, and emotions. Once the

⁶⁹ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 154.

⁷⁰ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 130.

foundational layer of gymnastic education had been laid, by which a healthy sense experience of the world had been developed, one could move onto this next highest level. The memory, imagination, and emotions are the middle ground between the purely corporeal sense powers and the spiritual powers of intellect and will:

What has been received through the senses needs to be developed and refined by the interior faculties to prepare nourishing food for the intellect and to stimulate and orientate the will.⁷¹

Building on the scholastic understanding, Senior understood that the memory was the most fundamental of the interior faculties. Without a strong memory, the imagination and emotions would have nothing to “feed on.” He also observed that modern education had neglected the importance of the memory. Because of the widespread availability of books, notebooks, computers and recording devices of various kinds, the training of the memory had waned. To correct this, Senior had his students memorize poetry and songs.

The imagination was the next faculty to be attended to. Drawing on the storehouse of the memory, the imagination is able to spontaneously recall and creatively engender a wide variety of memories and sense experiences. This faculty is much richer than the simple recall of visual images; it incorporates all of the other senses as well – the smell of freshly cut grass, the sound of a rushing stream, the taste of barbecue sauce, even the “kinesthetic sense” of how heavy something feels. All of these “images” are stored in the memory and recalled and re-tooled by the imagination. Just like the memory, the imagination of modern people is enfeebled and warped as well. Oversaturated with artificial “images” of various kinds, it has grown wearied and passive. One no longer needs to actively engage the imagination, the manifold images and videos that inhabit our screens do our “imagining” for us. Senior addressed this deficiency by having his

⁷¹ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 156.

students read good imaginative literature, starting with children's books and working their way into the classics.

The last component to musical education was the training of the emotions. Senior wanted his students not only to have a thorough experience of reality, but to respond to it in an affectively appropriate manner. He wanted them to delight in the goodness of things. He noted that "the purpose of propaedeutic [that is, gymnastic and music] is not knowledge but love."⁷² For Senior, a proper education of the emotions was vital – especially the development of a love for being:

The restoration of reason presupposes the restoration of love, and we can only love what we know because we have first touched, tasted, smelled, heard and seen. From that encounter with exterior reality, interior responses naturally arise, movements motivating, urging, releasing energies, infinitely greater than atoms, of intelligence and will.⁷³

Senior quotes a cryptic phrase from Richard of St. Victor, *Ubi amor ibi oculus* – "wherever love is, there the eye is also," which he takes to mean that "the lover is the only one who really sees the truth about the person or the thing he loves."⁷⁴ Senior understood the importance of first instilling in his students a love for existence, because he knew that it was only through the eyes of love that the world can finally be understood.

Above all, Senior tried to cultivate in his students that love for being which culminated in wonder. In a certain sense, his entire educational philosophy could be understood in terms of wonder. The motto of the Integrated Humanities Program speaks to this: *Nascantur in admiratione* – "Let them be born in wonder."⁷⁵ He wanted his students to renew their gaze upon

⁷² Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 159.

⁷³ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 14.

⁷⁴ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 13.

⁷⁵ Bethel, *Restoration of Realism*, 296.

reality, to see it as if seeing it for the first time, delighting with youthful vigor in its mystery and intelligibility. Only then, Senior knew, could learning truly begin. He took seriously the claim of Socrates, speaking for all the ancients: “philosophy begins in wonder.”⁷⁶

This, then, was the last step in the gymnastic and musical education: to cultivate a sense of wonder towards reality. Senior understood that many of his students, raised in a modernist environment of disenchantment and *ennui* and wandering aimlessly in a relativistic world, lacked any genuine desire to learn. By reintroducing them to the elemental things, and convincing them that truth was out there to be discovered, he stirred within them a yearning after real knowledge.

Only after this full-scale restoration of the senses, memory, imagination and emotions could the realm of the arts, sciences, philosophy and theology be successfully engaged in. One of the deficiencies that Senior saw in modern education was its tendency to proceed straight for the latter while neglecting the former. This fact, along with the increasing artificialization and technologization of all aspects of life, predisposes modern man towards a distorted experience and understanding of reality. Regarding theology, Senior pointed out that St. Thomas had written his great *Summa* for beginners, but lamented the fact that there aren't many real beginners anymore:

Our schools and colleges turn out advanced technicians in what are called the arts and sciences, but none has the ordinary prerequisites to traditional philosophical and theological study, none with the famous *mens sana in corpore sano* of the ancients, that is, disciplined in the perception, memory and imagination of reality.⁷⁷

Senior knew that any revival of philosophical and theological inquiry had to begin at the beginning, at the very roots of culture. A way of living – a mode of being in the world that

⁷⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d, in *Plato: Theaetetus*, trans. John McDowell (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 21.

⁷⁷ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 73.

moderns lack and that previous generations enjoyed – had to be restored. To achieve this, one must, as Senior did, cut through the thick tangle of artificiality and reconnect people with the elemental stuff of existence.

His pedagogy, with its emphasis on the education of the *entire* person, provides the antidote to the problems identified by Heidegger, Guardini, and Ratzinger. All three of these thinkers recognized the fact that modern man was slowly being uprooted from his natural environment and placed into a new, artificial world. They also realized that the driving force behind this phenomenon was philosophical, and more specifically, epistemological, in nature. Senior understood that the solution to this problem could not simply be a philosophical about-face, however. Before realism could take hold in his students' minds, it had to take root in their bodies. This is what made his pedagogy so unique, and so successful. He knew he would not be able to merely argue his students into this conversion, for, as was just stated, none of them had the ordinary prerequisites to traditional philosophical and theological study. Instead, he took a “show, don't tell” approach. He invited his students to “taste and see,” knowing that if he could rectify their mode of *being in* the world, he would then be able to rectify their mode of *thinking about* the world. Here lies the secret to Senior's dramatic success as an educator, and we would do well to embody his style in our own day and age.

An Important Caveat about Technology

Technological innovation is, in many ways, the single defining characteristic of the modern world. From communication to transportation, recreation to education, it has implicated itself in nearly every aspect of contemporary life. Because of this, the problems we have highlighted are of the utmost urgency. But we must take the time to note here that this paper

should not be construed as the diatribe of a Luddite. Technology is an authentically human possibility. Man's capacity for *techne* separates him from brute animals, and in this sense, technology is perfectly natural. In point of fact, there hasn't been a single period in human history that hasn't been shaped and influenced by the role of technology.

What is more, the dramatic benefits of technological innovation cannot and should not be denied. One could identify thousands of ways in which technology has contributed to our quality of life. These advances are all worthy of praise. But against modernity's technological adulation, we must acknowledge the fact that these advances are not all unilaterally positive. There is always a shadow side. It is naïve to suppose that technological advance is merely a benign deliverer of ever greater freedom, comfort, and control.

In sounding the alarm, I do not mean to speak of the famous doomsday scenarios potentially wrought by technology, such as a nuclear holocaust or an artificial intelligence takeover. Those are entirely separate considerations. Rather, what I wish to show is that technology's most pressing danger is its potential to conceal the truth about nature, and thus ultimately the truth about God. And even more disturbingly, as Heidegger said, this threat "has already affected man in his essence." Nuclear holocaust is not now upon us, but the technocratic worldview is.

This is, I believe, part of what Pope Francis intended to convey when in several places in *Laudato Si* he makes the assertion that "technological products are not neutral."⁷⁸ Each technology possesses its own ideological and epistemological biases, its own particular way of viewing the world. Because of this, "technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad

⁷⁸ *Laudato Si*, §107, 114.

logic.”⁷⁹ Neil Postman, a media theorist and cultural critic who wrote extensively on the role of technology, made a similar point when he said that

new technologies change what we mean by “knowing” and “truth”; they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like – a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real.⁸⁰

One other remark of Postman’s may serve as a summary for the point being made. We have noted that technological advance is neither unilaterally positive nor unilaterally negative, but always a mix of the two. We have also noted that one of technology’s most immanent dangers is its ability to subconsciously alter our perception of reality. Postman synthesizes both points when he remarks that “technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological.”⁸¹ He draws a parallel between environmental change and technological change:

If you remove the caterpillars from a given habitat, you are not left with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment, and you have reconstituted the conditions of survival... This is how the ecology of media works as well. A new technology does not add or subtract something. *It changes everything*. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe.⁸²

This, then, is why it is so urgent for theology to engage with the question of technology. During earlier periods in history, it would have been more excusable to regard technology as a secondary consideration, one among many potential cultural influences that merited theological examination. Nowadays such a stance is naïve, if not downright negligent. Technology can no longer be considered a mere tool, for it possesses world-altering and world-defining influence.

⁷⁹ *Laudato Si*, §108.

⁸⁰ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 12.

⁸¹ Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, 18.

⁸² Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, 18.

Given this fact, and given the overwhelming presence of technology in modern life, what can possibly be done? One-sided denunciations or a nostalgic yearning for a so called “pre-technological” world will not suffice. As Pope Francis noted, nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age. Senior understood this as well. Within his pessimism about the course that technology has taken, he does express hope:

Of course we can turn back the clock, by which I mean that technology must be re-gearred to the proper dimensions of the human good – and not the other way around where people, we are told, “will adjust,” which means be engineered to fit whatever schemes technologists devise...⁸³

Lines like these, scarce though they may be, temper his more fiery comments on the subject. He recognizes that technology is an authentically human possibility. But he sees, as Guardini did, how modern technology has grown dissonant with a truly human mode of existence. What he calls for is a return to properly humane technology, one in which technology is subservient to the needs of man, and not the other way around. This will not happen until we “turn back the clock,” which does not necessarily entail (though it may) readopting older technologies. Instead, it means ensuring that the technologies we invent and utilize are consonant with a human mode of living. This can only occur through a more sober-minded, even-handed evaluation of technological progress, and through a populace that is more conscientious about its own use of technology. There are, in my estimation, too many people willing to uncritically accept every new development and not enough who are willing to slow down and ask the tougher, more reflective questions about how these new developments will affect our lives – how they impinge upon our relationships with ourselves, with others, with nature, and with God.

⁸³ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 42.

I believe that this present state of affairs – with countless technological “believers” and not enough “skeptics” – exonerates Senior for any seemingly overly-critical remarks he makes. His criticisms can at times seem rather harsh and his solutions rather dramatic, but in his work one is reminded of how Flannery O’Connor justified her own, grotesque style: “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”⁸⁴ Indeed, Senior saw that modern man was growing deaf and blind to the world around him, increasingly entranced by the work of his own hands. He saw with unique clarity the dangers inherent in a life overrun with artificiality and inhuman technologies. In this way, he arrived at the same worrisome conclusion that Heidegger did: a technocratic outlook on life, both in our mode of living and our mode of thinking, threatens to obscure nature’s *aletheia*, that more fundamental, more truthful self-disclosure of the world to man. And because of this, technocracy also threatens to obscure the truth about God. But unlike Heidegger, Senior more thoroughly outlines a solution; one that is fundamentally about *recovery*, about getting back to basics and back to reality. What he fundamentally advocated for was not some Luddite’s dreamworld, but rather for what Guardini had called “real culture” – elevation above nature, yet decisive nearness to it.

Why John Senior Remains Relevant Today

With this important caveat in mind, we must conclude with the question of Senior’s contemporary relevance. The bulk of his teaching was accomplished in the 1960’s and 1970’s. One would be inclined to think that his work would be out of date, considering the rapid technological advances and cultural changes that have happened since that time. And indeed, the

⁸⁴ Flannery O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer & His Country,” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 34.

world looks very different than it did fifty years ago. But Senior's pedagogy dealt with human nature, and human nature has not changed. In fact, his work is more relevant now than ever. His admonitions about technology, culture, and education have taken on new significance.

For a man who claimed that "you cannot be serious about the restoration of the Church and the nation if you lack the common sense to smash the television set,"⁸⁵ and that "electronic reconstitutions of disintegrated sounds are not real sounds any more than reconstituted, sterilized lactates are milk,"⁸⁶ one can only imagine what he would think of today's kids (and adults, for that matter) who binge-watch Netflix, are addicted to videogames and smartphones, and listen to techno music on their AirPods. Indeed, the disturbing trends that Senior identified have only grown stronger since the time he was writing. All of the technological temptations that Senior's students would have faced in the 60's and 70's have multiplied exponentially. Today's students now have a thousand and one ways in which they can distract and divert themselves, plugging into their screens while disconnecting from reality. Generations of young kids are growing up habituated to looking down at their phones instead of up and out at the world, and more aspects of their daily lives are intertwined with technology than ever before. The potential consequences of this are unsettling, two of which can be briefly highlighted.

For one, as was briefly mentioned earlier, modern people now suffer from an acute case of overstimulation. The explosion of screens – in restaurants, waiting rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, classrooms, cars, airplanes, gas pumps, and, most importantly, in our pockets – has flooded us with distractions. The result of this is that our power of perception is rapidly growing

⁸⁵ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 23.

⁸⁶ Senior, *Restoration of Christian Culture*, 24.

weaker and weaker. Josef Pieper, the great 20th century Thomist philosopher, recognized this same problem at mid-century:

the average person of our time loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see!* There does exist something like “visual noise”, which just like the acoustical counterpart, makes clear perception impossible. One might perhaps presume that TV watchers, tabloid readers, and movie goers exercise and sharpen their eyes. But the opposite is true. The ancient sages knew exactly why they called the “concupiscence of the eyes” a “destroyer”. The restoration of man’s inner eyes can hardly be expected in this day and age – unless, first of all, one were willing and determined simply to exclude from one’s realm of life all those inane and contrived but titillating illusions incessantly generated by the entertainment industry.⁸⁷

These words are truer now than when they were first written. Assaulted by an onslaught of flickering screens, ours is an age of tired, unseeing eyes. People have largely lost the capacity for what Pieper calls “a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked.”⁸⁸ This contemplative gaze, which opens the door to the recognition of the divine, is progressively weakened when we allow ourselves to stare carelessly into our screens.

The problem of “screen time” is at the vanguard of our technological challenges, but there is another problem related to technology whose connection is not as immediately apparent: the hotly debated issues surrounding gender and sexuality. It has been noted throughout this paper that there exists in our modern world a rather antagonistic relationship between nature and technology. In many cases, the advancement of technology has come at the expense of nature, or, at the very least, has obscured it. Might it be reasonably asserted that this resulting ignorance or indifference towards nature is also an ignorance or indifference towards *natural law*? Might it be

⁸⁷ Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 32-33.

⁸⁸ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 36.

understandable how young people – who are now out of touch with nature and the various ways it “pushes back against us” and forcefully resists our manipulation, who now live in an artificial world that is infinitely malleable and bends to their every whim – how they would fall prey to the new “self-creation” ideology surrounding these issues? It seems no coincidence that highly urbanized, developed Western countries are more willing to embrace these ideologies while less developed, supposedly “backwards” countries, whose citizens live a more agrarian lifestyle that is closer to the land, spontaneously resist them. That, of course, is the subject of an entirely different paper, but it is worth at least raising the question here.

I am confident that the solution to these issues, along with innumerable others related to technology, begins with taking up John Senior’s realist pedagogy. This pedagogy, of course, is not really “his,” for it belongs to the classical Western tradition that preceded him, but he probably embodied it more successfully than any other Catholic educator in the last hundred years. He saw, with unusual clarity, that the recovery of realism was the only way forward for a restoration of the Church, and of the Western world more broadly. No amount of catechesis, no amount of apologetic argumentation or philosophizing, no amount of evangelistic outreach will ultimately take root if the seedbed of our culture remains as fallow as it is. One must till and keep the soil before the Word can be planted with success. This involves returning to nature and returning to the philosophy of realism that puts us in vital contact with it. In short, Senior realized that before man can come to know “He Who Is,” he has to be reintroduced to “Is.”

By way of conclusion, we might draw a parallel between Senior’s work and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Senior’s diagnosis of the condition of the modern world *vis-à-vis* nature mirrors Hopkins’ own observations of industrialization in England during the 19th century:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.⁸⁹

Both Senior and Hopkins recognized that nature now “wears man’s smudge” and that the soil has grown barren because of it. This, again, is not a critique of technology and industry *per se*, but of that technocratic relationship with nature which is confrontational rather than cooperative. And though Hopkins’ image is clearly meant to convey a physical truth, it conveys a metaphysical truth as well. The soil of culture has been spoiled by a “technocratic epistemology” that sees in nature, not the handwriting of God, but the handwriting of man. The rich soil of realism in which the Church has blossomed for the last two millennia is drying up, thanks to a natural philosophy that is at one and the same time fecund and sterile. Fecund, in the sense that it has endlessly multiplied new technologies and given us mastery over the world that the ancients never dreamed of. Sterile, in the sense that we have grown estranged from nature and from the inner essences of things, those inner essences that speak of their Creator.

The way forward must begin with a return to nature, gazing upon it with the fresh eyes of youthful wonder. We must, as Pope Francis says, “slow down and look at reality in a different way.” The weary, restless eyes of the technocratic outlook dart to and fro, constantly examining, analyzing, sifting, and searching things out, skimming the surface of being and missing its deeper meaning. What is needed is a renewed gaze – that state of contemplative silence and “active receptivity” that Pieper rightly identified as the basis of all genuine culture.⁹⁰ This gaze cannot be fixed upon a screen. It must find its rest in the natural world, which possesses a logic and a rhythm undisturbed by the ruthless demands of technocratic efficiency and productivity,

⁸⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128.

⁹⁰ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), Chapter 3.

and which still contains an eternal newness and vigor despite frequent abuse and exploitation.

Hopkins says it best. After observing how man has run roughshod over the earth, he concludes:

And, for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.⁹¹

For Hopkins, as for Senior, the lament over what has been lost does not end finally in despair.

There is always cause for hope, because the root of nature's vitality lies deeper than man's grasping hands, grounded as it is in the eternal newness of its Creator. We, too, can be renewed – if we but learn to turn and see again.

Let us take a moment, then, to draw a few final conclusions. Technological innovation is one of the defining characteristics of the modern world. A moment's reflection on contemporary Western life shows this to be true. And while we can acknowledge and be enormously grateful for the many fruits of technology and human ingenuity, there is also a shadow side to this progress that does not get the attention it deserves. The creeping expansion of technology and artifice into every corner of the world and every corner of our daily lives threatens to obscure nature, thus obscuring God in the process. This threat occurs not only as the result of a certain way of *living in* the world, but also a certain way of *thinking about* the world. This mode of living and mode of thinking are both elements of the technocratic paradigm. They also mutually reinforce one another: the mode of thinking gave rise to the mode of living, and now the mode of living lends credibility to the mode of thinking. Heidegger, Guardini, and Ratzinger each

⁹¹ Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *The Major Works*, 128.

identified these trends in their own unique way, along with the serious problems that they present to philosophical and theological inquiry.

The two main problems, as I have outlined here, correspond to this “living in” and “thinking about” the world, which further correspond to the dual principles at work in man: the body and the soul, our physical and mental lives. An overly “technologized” existence separates us *bodily* from nature, thus disrupting the knowledge-by-intimacy that pre-modern people had of creation. But in a deeper, more profound way (since the soul is the higher principle), we are separated from creation *mentally* by an idealistic conception of truth that suggests that real knowledge can be had without recourse to the concrete world of nature. This double alienation from nature, both bodily and spiritually, hinders modern man’s ability to encounter God via creation while also undermining the very process by which we come to truly know things – philosophical, theological or otherwise.

The solution to these problems cannot be a sweeping denunciation of technology, nor must we fall into the trap of a nostalgic yearning for “pre-technological” days-gone-by. What is needed is a renewed outlook on the world. John Senior, who was acutely aware of these issues, taught his students to see again by reintroducing them to nature, to the philosophy of realism, and to the slow, thoughtful, willful, imaginative, emotional, and sensual process by which we learn to properly orient ourselves towards reality. If we take Senior’s pedagogy seriously, which entails nothing less than a revitalization of the soil of a culture that has grown fallow, we can re-open the door to a more profound encounter with God in our modern era.

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