

The Technological Paradigm and Discerning Our Response

Rev. George E. Schultze, SJ

Abstract

Pope Francis has spoken about the technological paradigm and humanity's responsibility to guard against the negative consequences of technology—objectification of human beings, the idolatry of pleasure seeking, and the enslavement of men and women to addictive behavior (e.g., consumerism).

The business world, to support the common good, requires leaders who know at the minimum the cardinal virtues—prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude—and hopefully the theological virtues. Prudence and fortitude hold sway in an era of accelerating change even for non-believers who fail to recognize the theological virtues. I will address the means to discern the judgments and actions needed to reach faith-filled and reasonable responses to these changes. For Catholics (especially the Holy Father), Ignatian discernment is appropriate for business leaders and others who will make judgments from a Christian perspective. Such discernment considers our feelings, instinct, reason and faith. On the one hand, recent revelations of Facebook founding President Sean Parker attest to the use of psychological conditioning—feelings and instincts—to condition and direct the decisions of participants in social media. He has criticized this as negative conditioning. Catholicism, on the other hand, provides positive/hopeful responses to technological change to support God's sons and daughters. Good discernment will not allow robotics, automation and/or artificial intelligence to lead us into idolatry.

Robots, whether imitating pets or human beings, can become ersatz substitutes for the authentic reality offered by God. Recreational drugs become crutches for the wounded and despairing—biotechnology can have similar deleterious effects without prudent thinking. Leaders of the future need to recognize the limits of people, suffering will inevitably occur, and the sacrifice of the cross will continue to make sense of any future world. The technological paradigm offers the lie of the divinization of humanity and/or the divinization of technology; humanity has suffered from such hubris from the beginning of creation. People will still need to surrender to a loving God to find meaning and happiness. This will require the spiritual formation and education of people, and Catholics have the tools to help others work through the technological paradigm.