Technology and Isolation

By reconsidering the theme of isolation in the philosophy of technology, and by drawing upon recent developments in social ontology, Lawson provides an account of technology that will be of interest and value to those working in a variety of different fields. *Technology and Isolation* includes chapters on the philosophy, history, sociology and economics of technology and contributes to such diverse topics as the historical emergence of the term 'technology', the sociality of technology, the role of technology in social acceleration, the relationship between Marx and Heidegger and the relationship between technology and those with autism. The central contribution of the book is to provide a new ontology of technology. In so doing, Lawson argues that much of the distinct character of technology can be explained or understood in terms of the dynamic that emerges from technology's peculiar constitutional mix of isolatable and non-isolatable components.

CLIVE LAWSON is currently Director of Studies in Economics and Senior College Lecturer at Girton College, Cambridge, as well as Assistant Director of Studies at Gonville and Caius College. He is an editor of the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* and a founder member of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. Lawson has published in economics, geography, psychology, sociology, philosophy and environmental economics.

Technology and Isolation

CLIVE LAWSON
University of Cambridge

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

For Lucy, Jesse and Callum

Contents

Preface

It has often been suggested that technology, whatever its benefits, comes at the expense of more isolated and impoverished human lives. This has been a recurrent theme in the philosophy of technology, especially that influenced by Heidegger, where modernity reduces everything – including us – to resources ready for optimisation and control. But the idea will also be familiar to readers of dystopian science fiction, in which technologically sophisticated societies rarely contain any recognisable or meaningful form of human community. More technology, it would seem, leads to more isolation, be it isolation of humans from nature or from each other.

In recent times, however, such ideas have become less prominent. One important reason for this is that some of the most dominant technologies of our time, such as the internet, facilitate a connectivity between people that is unlike anything we have ever known. How can the general tendency of adopting more technology result in greater isolation? One of the main motivations of this book is the intuition that, whilst it is impossible to make such simple pronouncements as 'more technology means more isolation', there are some good reasons why the theme of isolation recurs throughout discussions of technology. Although in need of substantial modification, there is much in these older debates about isolation and separation that are still of significance to current (increasingly technology-reliant) societies, despite the fact that we can so easily Skype our family or play music with strangers on other continents over the internet.

To recover more interesting conceptions of isolation and the different senses in which these have featured in older literatures, I argue, requires a return to ontology. To suggest a turn to ontology is not likely to be treated with the kind of immediate disdain it would have provoked even a few years ago. Indeed, it is almost possible to say that first critical realism and then more recently actor network theory and speculative realism, have made ontology, if not fashionable, then

certainly 'acceptable' in many quarters. However, it is also fair to say
that these developments in ontology, for different reasons, have not
really made much of a contribution to understanding the nature of
technology, even though there seems to be great scope for doing so.
One of the main concerns of this book is to develop an ontology of
technology that draws upon these recent developments in social
ontology.

It seems hardly contentious to suggest that we live in a world of
things. Indeed, the idea that the world is full of things with different
causal powers, affordances, organisational properties, etc., seems
essential to everyone's ability to get by in the world. However, it is
equally uncontentious, I think, to suggest that things operate within
and on the basis of being components in different systems. Not all
things have similar properties or ways of acting, and many of these
differences depend upon differences in the way they are organised.
Given this, a central question is the extent to which some things can
be understood to operate in relative isolation from other things.
Although philosophy and the social sciences are replete with attempts
to provide general answers to this question, ranging from reductionist
individualisms to emergentist holisms, there seems little doubt that in
practice some things are more isolatable than others; some things can
operate and be the kinds of things that they are, relatively
independently of their relations to other things, others cannot.
Moreover, the extent to which things can be understood in isolation
is for the most part a matter of empirical discovery. There is not much
that can be said a priori.

A central assumption of this book is that the social and non-social
worlds are rather different from each other when it comes to matters of
isolatability, and that these differences underlie the various ways of
being and dynamics of different phenomena, as well as setting
constraints on the methods that can be used to understand them.
Moreover, issues of isolatability, though neglected, are of particular
importance when it comes to the study of things that incorporate
aspects of both the social and the non-social in a fundamental way,
such as technology.

Although the term 'technology' is one we all capably use on a regular
basis, there are actually surprisingly few attempts, across all social
sciences and social theory, to pin down exactly what we all mean by
the term. A clear example of this is to be found in economics, where,

amongst the mainstream at least, there is little interest in developing ideas about the nature of technology. Effectively, anything that changes the relationship between inputs and outputs of some production process is referred to as technology; once we know (which of course we never do) the shape of the functional relationship between inputs and outputs, then no more knowledge of technology is required.

This book arose out of an attempt to fill this rather obvious gap by drawing upon the social ontology with which I was most familiar to try to spell out exactly what we mean by technology. One 'quick' paper divided into three or four relatively unsatisfying journal articles, and it became obvious that a book was required to make even a stab at the project I had set myself. However, the main argument that I want to make is very simple. Technology is made up of both social and non-social elements. These elements, in turn, are susceptible to different amounts of isolatability. Whilst the boundaries between the social and the non-social and the isolatable and the non-isolatable are often porous and dynamic, much that we know of the character of natural and social science, such as the status of controlled experiment in each, suggests that there are huge differences in isolatability in each domain. I will argue that much of the distinct character of technology, and our relationship to it, as well as many of the significant contributions to the study of technology, can be explained or understood in terms of the particular dynamic that emerges from technology's constitutional mix of isolatable and non-isolatable components.

I believe this dynamic explains all kinds of phenomena from economic growth, to the special relationship that those with autism tend to have with technology, to many of the criticisms levelled at current capitalism or modernity. However, to get to these arguments requires some prior setting up of the basic account of technology I want to defend. I must apologise to those readers who will find the preliminary chapters too slow and/or repetitive. But many will find, depending upon their background, that one or more of the early, introductory chapters covers familiar material that can be skipped without losing the argument the book is trying to make.

In short, this book is motivated by a concern with ideas that have currently fallen out of favour but which I believe are as important as they have ever been. It is not a book that attempts to establish whether the net effect of more technology means less community or more isolated people. Neither is it concerned with which technologies tend

to connect us and which do not (although the ontology developed in this book should be useful in answering either question). Rather, it is a book about the nature of technology more generally. By focusing upon the way that different ideas of isolation weave in and out of a variety of historical understandings and debates about technology, this book attempts to ground and give meaning to a particular, novel account of technology that is itself set in terms of a particular approach to ontology.

Acknowledgements

This book has been gestating for some time. Consequently, there are a lot of people to thank. The idea for the project first arose whilst on leave visiting the University of Western Sidney and Brian Pinkstone in particular. The main writing was done over two further sabbatical leaves in Vancouver, one visiting the University of British Columbia, the other visiting Simon Fraser University. For the first visit I am very grateful for the welcome and support from Margaret Schabas in particular. On the second visit I am indebted to Andrew Feenberg who gave very unselfishly of his time and stopped me from wasting my time reinventing the wheel. More recently, most of the main writing has taken place in a small cottage in the Breton Beacons – many thanks to Leslie Turano and Chris Taylor.

The main intellectual debt lies with members of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. Weekly meetings, thrashing out ideas about everything from markets and commodities to the ontology of traffic lights and photocopiers, have provided the main ideational resources for the book. I am especially grateful to Bahar Araz, Phil Faulkner, Tony Lawson, Helen Mussel, Stephen Pratten and Mary Wrenn for giving up their time not only to read earlier drafts of these chapters but to then patiently go through it all with me. In particular I would like to thank Tony Lawson, Stephen Pratten and Phil Faulkner for extensive comments on earlier versions of most, if not all, of these chapters. I would also like to thank Mark Burgess, Lucy Delap, John Lawson and Altuğ Yalçıntaş for comments on specific chapters.

Lastly, I want to thank my family – Lucy, Jesse and Callum – who were so wonderfully supportive and understanding over what must have seemed (and in Callum's case just about was) a lifetime.