STIEGLER ON TECHNOLOGY

John Reader

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William Temple Foundation

Stiegler on Technology

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Temple Continental

Philosophers for our Time, Book 3

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Editors' Introduction

Philosophers for Our Time is a new series of short books from the William Temple Foundation that aims to meet two connected needs.

First, within academic theology there is a growing interest in a range of Continental thinkers, prompted, not least, by the so-called 'theological turn' that has taken place in various strands of recent philosophy. And yet, these thinkers can seem to be esoteric, voluminous and sometimes even openly hostile towards religion. *Philosophers for Our Time*, therefore, aims to demystify some of these figures by providing accessible introductions to their work: synthesising their most important ideas, defining their key terms and explaining why their work is relevant to current theology.

Second, our societies and our planet are facing some unprecedented challenges at the present time: from populist politics and technology takeovers to spiritual stagnation and climate catastrophe. And, of course, we all need to address the sort of world that is to follow the coronavirus pandemic, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaigns. The philosophers that we consider in this series all have something prescient or profound to say about one or more of these contemporary challenges. As such, each book focusses on an individual thinker and an individual topic in order to offer a focussed account, not just of the philosopher themselves, and what they might mean for theology, but also of what they can contribute to one of the key issues of our generation.

It is our hope that these new resources will encourage you to read some of these philosophers for yourself, as well as setting forth new thinking on some of the most urgent topics of our time.

Tim Howles, Series Editor

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Introduction

On August 7th 2020 news came through that Bernard Stiegler had died the previous day. To those of us familiar with his work this was a huge shock as he was only 68 and apparently still at the peak of his powers. In this tract I hope to provide an introduction to the work of this French philosopher who, in the view of those working in this field, will be recognised as one of the leading thinkers of his generation.

It is only in recent years that Stiegler's books have started appearing in translation so there is a time lag between his reception in France and in English-speaking circles. Although I will refer to the latest book available in translation, Stiegler was responsible for another text which was published in France in June 2020; although I don't have access to this as yet, the headlines on the available websites offer a sense of the importance of this shared work. It is titled *Bifurquer: L'absolue nécessité* (Stiegler, 2020). Writing with others and initiated before the pandemic struck, the project can now be interpreted as an attempt to address the post-COVID-19 context and the issues that the pandemic has highlighted for both thought and practice. It claims to be a response to our great health, climate, social and psychological crises. This is consistent with Stiegler's concerns throughout his life, albeit intensified by the impacts of the pandemic. It questions the current model of "development" which determines contemporary politics and culture, and which he argues condemns us to some form of death. In classic Stiegler style the promotional material for the book says:

> [T]his destructive model of development is reaching its ultimate limits, and its ever greater manifest and multidimensional toxicity (health, environmental, mental, epistemological, economic) is brought about above all by the fact that the current industrial economy is in all its sectors based on an outdated physical model. (Stiegler, 2020)

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In order to transform our societies and to fight against entropy—the forces of destruction of biodiversity, the climate, psyche—it is necessary to reconsider their foundations. In other words, this represents an attempt to address not just the technological dimensions of economy, politics and culture, but the whole basis on which Western economies are founded. No small task then, and an extension of the concerns about digital technology which have been at the forefront of Stiegler's work as this tract will make clear. What we can say, however, is that his work has provided us with important conceptual resources to assist in analysing these challenges and points us towards possible solutions. Although not a person of faith according to any conventional interpretations, his ideas do draw upon the contributions that religious practices can make to this process of reform and reconfiguration. As such public theology in particular would do well to be aware of his work and itself draw upon his ideas in turn.

Chapter 1

Who is Bernard Stiegler?

1.1   Brief Biography

Bernard Stiegler is probably best known as a philosopher and cultural activist. Born on 1st April 1952, he was founding director of the Pompidou Centre's Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation and director and co-founder of Ars Industrialis, an independent association promoting a critical cultural politics. His activities span scholarly research and teaching, cultural-policy intervention, coordinating technological innovations in pedagogical and cultural activities, and contributing to public debate in various fora. He is the author of over fifty monographs and has co-authored books and numerous essays and lectures, many of which are available through an online school of philosophy, Pharmakon.fr. Stiegler's philosophy and cultural politics proceed from the position that the question of technology should be appropriately incorporated into every domain of human endeavour—from art to science to economics and politics. He is often described as a philosopher of technicity, that is, a philosopher who recognises the irremediably incomplete and contingent character of human beings—beings who are always supplemented by technical prostheses. For Stiegler, critical thinking in the early 21st century involves a "pharmacological" evaluation of the adoption of technological possibility by socioeconomic and political systems. At this time of major destabilisation of social and cultural programs by a capitalist globalisation which determines the course of the digital transformation of existence, what is required is a critical assessment of the impacts of digital technology on both an individual and societal level. Technology is our pharmakon, an inescapable medicine that is at once potentially poisonous and potentially curative.

Stiegler has recently documented his own intellectual history and identified his key influences in *The Age of Disruption* (Stiegler, 2019). Perhaps the most surprising part of his biography is that he was once, in earlier years, imprisoned for armed robbery. But this also became a turning point in his life. Between 1979 and 1980, Stiegler read Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. "At that time," he writes, "I lived at Saint-Michel prison in Toulouse, where I had been incarcerated since June 1978, after having been arrested for armed robbery" (Stiegler, 2019, p. 54). He describes himself as an "outlaw", having been sentenced to eight years imprisonment. He served three years in that prison and then just under a further two in a detention centre. These years were salutary in that they saved him from what he calls a "dark fate" (Stiegler, 2019, p. 55). Remaining in prison until February 1983, he continued to read other philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger, and began a journey of exploring the somewhat complex terminology that characterises his own work. "At the end of weeks and months, progressively penetrating into this experience of the extra-ordinary, the experience of being imprisoned ceased to be painful, and became instead an adventure" (Stiegler, 2019, p. 58). He turned necessity into a virtue by thinking deeply about such subjects as ethics and justice. He found redemption (to place theological terminology into his mouth) through intensive work, surrounding himself with library books, novels, letters from family and friends, and courses that were remotely available—and then by taking copious notes which later formed part of his own writing (Stiegler, 2019, p. 59).

On being released from prison in 1983, Stiegler met Derrida and asked to be introduced to someone who might help him in what he saw as a project to make more positive use of time in prison. In fact, nothing came of this, but it is characteristic of his attempts to feed new ideas and practices into the mainstream of political and intellectual life in France.

It is important to understand Stiegler's prison experience not simply as background to his work, but as its prime motivating factor. Philosophy was not an intellectual exercise for its own sake, but a way of life in the same way that it was for the first Greek philosophers. One might call his prison experience a form of conversion and his subsequent work as being that of a "man on a mission"—that mission being to discover ways in which the stupidity, barbarism and incivility that is prevalent in contemporary political and cultural life can be resisted and replaced. Hence his commitment to practical projects as well as intellectual explorations.

1.2   Outlook and Style

When first encountering Stiegler's work, one might get the impression of someone who allows his love of words and obscure terminology to run away with him to the point where it is no longer clear what he is trying to articulate. Perhaps, one might think, there is no real substance there at all. This itself creates challenges for those who seek to penetrate his work to the point where constructing a standard glossary leads only to further unfamiliar terms and additional complexity.

The Age of Disruption is semi-autobiographical, and this is helpful as it sets a context for his thought. It reveals something of his own state of mind, both in prison and in later life, which one might perhaps best describe as being of a fairly negative and pessimistic nature. However, Stiegler himself eschews such terms and argues that his mission has simply been to raise questions and address realities that others might prefer to deny or avoid. He also makes clear that his interest in digital technology has to be seen within a wider context of concerns about capitalism generally and the wider trajectory of politics, particularly in France.

A further influence in his development was the discovery of jazz, particularly the music of John Coltrane which he had first encountered as a teenager. This proved to be another experience of that which lies beyond the normal and the everyday, albeit of a philosophical rather than a religious nature (Stiegler, 2019, p. 73). For those unfamiliar with Coltrane, he plays and composes in what feel like layers upon layers of sound, and one might describe Stiegler's writing in a similar way: layers upon layers of words and ideas.

1.3   Works and Publications

Stiegler's published work is so voluminous that it can become overwhelming. Only some of it has been translated into English, but even this constitutes a significant body of material. Rather than documenting all his work, I want to draw attention to three series which form a substantial proportion of his oeuvre. There are three volumes under the title *Technics and Time* (Stiegler, 1998; 2009; 2010a); two volumes entitled *Symbolic Misery* (Stiegler, 2014b; 2015b); and three volumes of *Disbelief and Discredit* (Stiegler, 2011; 2013a; 2014a). Then there is *What Makes Life Worth Living*

(Stiegler, 2013b), *States of Shock* (Stiegler, 2015a) and *Automatic Society, Volume 1* (Stiegler, 2016), though a second volume is yet to appear in English; and *The Age of Disruption* (Stiegler, 2019).

Chapter 2

What are Stiegler's main ideas?

For the sake of clarity, I am going to divide this chapter into three sections: technics, knowledge and the human. It needs to be acknowledged that this division has its limitations in that the threads from each are woven across the whole spectrum of Stiegler's thought and that such divisions are inherently artificial as a result. It is, however, a more straightforward way of approaching what is a complex and dense mass of material.

Stiegler stands within a wider philosophical tradition and frequently refers to other thinkers, from Plato to Derrida. If there is one theme that recurs throughout his work, it is that of disruption. It is worth noting that similar themes are to be found in the work of other French philosophers and it is important to recognise the shared concern for the impact of contemporary forms of capitalism and culture upon both philosophical thought and political practice. Just to highlight some of these: Derrida is associated with the idea of *deconstruction*, which can be interpreted as the destabilisation of all accepted meanings—but also has political implications. Gilles Deleuze talks about the importance of *difference* (and repetition) and the need to open up other possibilities of meaning. This is also a means of destabilising traditional hierarchies and forms of thought. Bruno Latour now talks about *disinhibition* which has a somewhat different meaning but refers to contemporary movements in technological and scientific practice which, when applied in practical innovations, suggest that humans are prepared to abandon the idea of limits or restrictions on what they are able to produce. Each of these thinkers then attempt to contrast current movements in culture, technology and politics with other ideals or possibilities. This does not mean a nostalgic return to some idealised past but rather the

opening up of other possibilities which can be identified from within contemporary developments. *It doesn't have to be this way, and here are some pointers towards more positive and creative options*, might be a way of summarising this. Stiegler can certainly be interpreted along these lines.

2.1 Technics

Stiegler (2016) is concerned to argue that the technological changes wrought by digital networks are disruptive to previous patterns of human functioning. This is because they operate in such a way as to short-circuit normal thought processes. These digital networks are delocalised, subject to mathematical formulae through the use of algorithms, and, although they have the advantage of being interconnected, lead to automatic decision-making rather than a more considered and reflective response. As a further development of the impact of the mass media upon people's attention spans and critical judgements, the speed at which digital networks operate militate against more thoughtful responses and mean that individuals are more easily controlled or manipulated by what is presented to them. Previous capacities of deliberation are set aside by the demands for instant attention and response. He argues that since 1993, and with the growing prevalence of the internet as mediated by companies such as Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon, we have seen the disintegration of critical thought and the subsequent growth of what he calls "the net blues". In other words, the great hopes that people had of the new technology being a positive, transformative influence have been dashed, to be replaced by what he describes as a "stunned paralysis".

I note in passing that others have raised similar concerns, although not from within a philosophical framework. For instance, Jamie Susskind (2018) talks about algorithms of distribution and how these will be used in the future to determine access to social goods such as work, credit scores, housing and insurance. Is this what the originators of the technologies had envisaged? Like Stiegler, Susskind sees the influence of the digital as becoming all-pervasive and dominating, unless alternative social and political pressures can be brought to bear on the major technology companies and their dealings with government agencies.

Stiegler's argument, though, goes beyond the purely political and draws on the thought of other philosophers. He refers to Deleuze's interpretation of the role of difference in our lives, which also links to his notion of repetition. When something is repeated through an automated process, what happens is a repetition of the same, but when repetition happens in a more natural or organic fashion, what is experienced is difference. Stiegler suggests that automated repetition, as performed by digital technology, leads to what he calls "baseness" or "indifference"–what we might call standardisation. Large scale production techniques developed in the industrial world churn out identical models of cars, washing machines and other consumer goods, and are often marketed on the basis of slight variations at best. When we begin to deal with the automatisation of ideas mediated by the internet, then the possibilities for creative difference and variation become severely diminished. As we have seen in recent elections, this means that an individual's preferences are identified in order to target them with the same basic message in ways that are likely to be accepted. On a daily basis, we are presented with a narrowed range of ideas and options to which we have limited time and capacity to respond in a critical fashion.

As we will see, this also links to what Stiegler has to say about how we as individuals develop, but the important issue in terms of the technology itself is the danger of a loss of diversity and a limiting of possibilities. Stiegler even goes so far as to argue that theories become obsolete. This is a difficult argument to follow but rests on what he calls the "retentions" that we make. Put simply, this means that our memories, which were previously recorded through writing, are now recorded through the digital, restricting possibilities for creative thought and leading to a destructive capturing of our attention and our desire. The options for genuine discernment, understanding and imagination are delegated to and subsumed by the algorithms which shape the digital, so both judgement and reflection are undermined. Scientific, moral, aesthetic and political deliberation are each undermined because there is a lack of difference available.

Stiegler also talks about the process of evolution ceasing to be one of natural selection and instead becoming that of artificial selection as technology determines how we now develop as humans. Once again, it is essentially the speed at which the latter functions which so limits the possibilities for creative human development and critical thought. Real interpretation and understanding require time for standing back, reflection and the capacity to consider a range of options, rather than being forced into instant responses and judgements. As Stiegler points out: "today the

digital reaches speeds of two hundred thousand kilometres per second, or two-thirds the speed of light, which is some four million times faster than the speed of nerve impulses" (Stiegler, 2016, p.34). In this era of big data, we end up with a "herd effect", where, if we are not careful, we are being controlled by external factors determined by the technology companies. In which case, the question becomes that of whether there is an alternative to this. If there is no alternative, then we are talking about a form of determinism and a future from which there is no escape. But this is not what Stiegler himself believes, as we will now see.

Stiegler (2013b) refers to the idea of the "pharmakon", which is one of the key concepts which recurs throughout his work (Stiegler, 2013b, p. 39). The term originates from Plato but is now probably more familiar through the current terminology of the pharmaceutical industry. Referring also to Derrida (2013), who develops the term at length, Stiegler suggests that a pharmakon is both a poison and a remedy. The idea is that digital technology has the capacity to be both a negative and a positive factor depending on the circumstances. Perhaps the most telling contribution is Derrida's when he says there is no such thing as a harmless remedy. Whatever intervention we make has an impact somewhere else in the system and can act against the original intention.

Stiegler's argument, however, is that technology can also be deployed in an alternative way and he talks about the need to develop an "Economy of Contribution" based on a contributory income. He cites his work with the organisation Ars Industrialis, which has established a ten-year project called Plaine Commune in a district in the north of Paris. This does not appear to be a project that could easily be transposed into a different context, but it is a way of showing that alternative economic and social structures might be possible, and that there are other ways of deploying the digital. Open source publishing is another example that he offers. One objective would be to redefine the meaning of work and to distinguish it from paid employment by including free time and indeed community activity. Within this setting the digital could be used to enhance and develop the capabilities and gifts of those who are otherwise excluded from the mainstream of capitalist structures. Whether there are any practical examples of this I am less clear, but it does illustrate that Stiegler does not solely hold to a deterministic, negative or backward-looking view of technology. It is important to be clear that "pharmakon" holds a positive meaning in Stiegler's overall argument and that therefore he offers a balanced interpretation of technics in general.

2.2   Knowledge

Once again it is simpler to follow one concentrated section of Stiegler's writing in order to present what is a recurrent theme in his work, in this case a short extract from *Automatic Society: Volume 1* (Stiegler, 2016). Stiegler describes how new forms of knowledge are created by what he calls the "shock" of encounters with contemporary developments. Following on from the critique described in the previous section, however, he suggests that, when these are the result of the automation and standardisation driven by the digital, what emerges is stupidity rather than knowledge (Stiegler, 2016, p.12). He makes a crucial distinction between knowledge as information and knowledge as participation. Encounters through the digital, which overwhelm us with the speed, volume and diversity of material presented to us, are in danger of reducing knowledge to information. We are bombarded with data which we do not often have the time or capacity to process and so are likely to absorb in an unreflective or uncritical fashion.

Stiegler proposes that "real knowledge", by contrast, always comes "too late upon the scene" (a reference to Hegel), as what must come first is "life-knowledge" or "savoir-vivre" (Stiegler, 2013b, p. 31). This is knowledge of how to live and therefore gives us the context in which to locate what then comes to us as "savoir-faire", which is more about how to do things—in this case as mediated by digital technology. Stiegler is concerned that the traditions, practices and general cultural environments that provide the essential background to our lives and are passed down through the generations are themselves being short-circuited by the immediate and instant access to ideas available through the internet. What is presented are more likely to be sound bites or simplified memes, easily reproduced through this new media, rather than the full depth and subtlety of those traditions. One notes that there is also a danger of presenting religious ideas via this medium and thus limiting access to our knowledge of the range of interpretations developed over time by different theologians. Difference is reduced by this form of standardisation.

According to Stiegler, the result of replacing *savoir-vivre* with *savoir-faire* is effectively a dead end or form of nihilism, and the negation of knowledge itself (Stiegler, 2016, p. 15). The problem is that we are not even aware of this as we confuse information with knowledge. Information which is not internalised and made part of our own intellectual development remains superficial and leaves us more open to manipulation. We tend to believe that which confirms our pre-existing beliefs, or

that which plays into our prejudices, as we do not have the time to give deeper reflection to the constant stream of "news" which is made available to us. So, the worst impacts of digital technology are that it destroys what Stiegler calls "desire", or the libidinal economy, and leads instead to a loss of care and attention. Is there any sort of alternative or antidote to this?

The theologian Paul Tillich talks about the knowledge of control as against the knowledge of reception and also highlights the idea of knowledge as participation (Tillich, 1978, p. 94). It is only when we are fully and practically engaged with a particular piece of work or project that we really enter into the depth of relationship which leads to the type of knowing that can change us rather than just offering a superficial encounter. This is certainly true of the religious life, which demands so much more than simply a fleeting knowledge of external practices or ideas. Time, effort, and regular discipline are involved. This perhaps is where religions, with their concepts of sacrifice, vocation, the importance of the "slow work of time" and the need to repeat through prayer and worship, come into their own. Liturgy and religious symbolism require that willingness to return, to attend fully and to be open to the other that may provide an antidote to the instant but superficial responses to the digital. Practices of care, trust, connection and the capacity to envisage alternative futures each seem to be vital in order to combat the worst excesses of the influence of the internet. This is a narrative of demands made upon us rather than services or access to information that is characteristic of the latter, one that Stiegler himself has some sympathy with.

2.3   The Human

A crucial issue when it comes to understanding the human is that of autonomy and exactly how humans develop and change. Stiegler draws extensively on the work of Gilbert Simondon (2017), and particularly his thoughts on individuation, transindividuation and metastability. Stiegler emphasises that the self is always in transition and that there is no essential self who is either good or bad but that all of us become different each day according to fortune or mood, for good or evil. The human situation is essentially relational, and we are influenced and shaped by those relationships—both individual and collective. He accepts Simondon's notion of transindividuation, within which circuits form networks, more or less long, through which intensities circulate, but always with the risk that these can be short-circuited

by the forces of the surrounding culture. The metastability of which Simondon writes can be pre-emptively determined by the influences of consumerism and marketing which operate at such a rate that we have no time to think constructively or critically.

To explain the terms Stiegler adopts from Simondon a little more fully, it needs to be recognised that this is not the same as individualising as in the sociological literature of Beck and Giddens which draws upon psychology. It is more a process of formation which is not simply about individuals but a collective process based on what Stiegler calls the pre-individual funds available in a particular culture or society. This is not the same as the conscious process of becoming more self-aware and defining oneself as an individual but rather of a locating within a wider context. Simondon, and therefore Stiegler, argue that this can be short-circuited and fail to develop in full which is what they call individuation, so falling short of a full collective and interactive development. Transindividuation is the more developed process and what is to be hoped and aimed for. The result of this short-circuiting is that those spaces and opportunities for what Stiegler calls intermittances, the dreams, desires and reflections which are an essential part of the processes of transindividuation, are denied the chance to develop. What occurs instead is an automatisation of the human brought about by encounter with the digital as determined by the forces of capitalism functioning in a much faster and all-consuming culture. If this is correct, then it forms another part of the argument that the digital itself, as employed and deployed by digital capitalism, is likely to disrupt and even potentially destroy the spaces for consideration of its impact upon relationships and society more generally.

Stiegler (2016) refers to the 2008 subprime led financial crisis and the speed at which the financial services now function: examples being CD swaps and high frequency trading. The data industry moves at such a pace that it deprives us of the possibility and opportunity to interpret our retentions and protentions, both psychic and collective (Stiegler, 2016, p. 139). Against this "Leviathan" Stiegler wants to see how the digital itself, as pharmakon, can be developed and employed to counteract these damaging impacts. He says that primary protentions are tied to the object of lived experience, through habit, reasoning or knowledge accumulated through the objects of perception. These then become secondary protentions through the means by which we remember and communicate and interpret those memories. But then in the case of the tertiary protentions which are digitally reticulated, the near-light speed at which they function prevent proper time and space for interpretation and reflection. The average speed of a nervous impulse circulating between the brain and

the hand is around 50 metres per second, whereas reticulated digital tertiary retentions can circulate at 200 million metres per second on fibre-optic networks. Such considerations call for an organology and pharmacology of speed and will (Stiegler, 2016, p. 140).

A further area of shared concern between Stiegler and theology is that of issues of fidelity and trust. Stiegler argues that what has been lost in the careless and thoughtless processes of digital engagement is exactly the element of trust. The speed and the rhythms dictated by the latter preclude or pre-empt those opportunities for critical thought and consideration that could be the basis for fidelity:

> This is so because the milieu has become fundamentally unfaithful, but according to a rhythm that no longer permits the production of new forms of fidelity, or of pathos producer of philia, or of trust, and it is the result of a much larger process of that, as 'absolute pharmakon', thereby deprives political leaders of the very possibility of making decisions and deprives scientists of the capacity to theorize their practice, that is, to form long circuits. (Stiegler, 2013b, p. 53)

This is not inevitable, however, and one of the tasks facing a renewed politics is to curate processes that re-introduce these elements of trust and fidelity. In this context Stiegler draws upon the difference between *otium* and *negotium*, two words that derive from Roman culture. So *otium* are the spaces for leisure and reflection which are required in the gaps or interstices between the *negotium* of business or even conflict. The danger currently is that the balance has shifted so far towards the *negotium* that the opportunities for *otium* have been severely reduced (perhaps what might be called the spheres of family, civic life, religion and education where different values supposedly predominate). One might speculate that one of the functions of faith groups and communities is to create and protect that space for reflection and rest, protected from the pressures of business and commerce which Stiegler appears to be talking about.

As we have already seen, Stiegler argues that the global financial crisis of 2008 is an example of this loss of fidelity, perhaps illustrated by the activities of high frequency traders and the speed at which they operate. What was in the past credit, or trust, now becomes discredit, or disbelief, as objects disappear and become obsolete with increasing rapidity, spurred on by advertising and marketing which attempt to rush us ever onwards to the next product or service. According to Stiegler, every society is, or should be, an apparatus for the production of fidelity, but our

society has been based on a developing infidelity, and hence the growing tendency towards addictions of various kinds which move into the gaps or spaces created by the breakdown in trustful and trustworthy relationships. He takes this further into the realms of psychology and psychoanalysis by suggesting that these forces of infidelity operate at the level of the unconscious and that there is a danger that we are not even aware of those activities that attempt to manipulate and control us by shaping our desires and needs. So, desire has regressed to a purely drive-based stage where we fail to identify our own genuine energy for good to the point where people question what it is that motivates them to relate constructively to others.

This leads into the final area where theology and Stiegler share common ground which is that of circulating references, an idea derived from Latour, and the understanding that what is required in order to construct those spaces of dissent is a slowing down of those references. As we have seen, Stiegler argues that what is happening through the processes of tertiary retention—that is, memory as determined now by the digital—is that the speed of activity is what is inhibiting the critical thought processes. Both the means of communication and the demands made upon us to respond instantly prevent a more considered approach to the suggestions and ideas that are presented to us. Building upon Latour, theology can argue for a slowing down of the circulating references and a slower reassembling of all the different factors and components of each matter of concern (Reader, 2017). So instead of facts, we approach things as gatherings which require careful attention. This can be linked to Stiegler's understanding of care and attention which demand a similar type of response. Long circuits produce care whereas short circuits lead to regression. Instant reactions to news events, for instance, can be misleading and dangerous and discourage people from examining cases with appropriate care and thought. But where do we encounter those opportunities to take more time, let alone to access the gatherings that make up each event and its wider environment? One might wonder now whether recently developed faith practices are also in danger of retreating into the modes of activity critiqued by Stiegler by adopting what are often forms of entertainment borrowed from the surrounding culture. The danger is that another, better form of entertainment will win out if available, and that the concepts of commitment and discipline which should be part of faith practice are lost in the process. Once again, the influences of consumer culture may have gone too far in shaping faith practice, but it is difficult to evaluate the significance of such entanglements. We can acknowledge, though, that there is enough common ground between Stiegler, theology and religious practice to make these conversations worth pursuing.

Chapter 3

Thinking about theology and technology through the lens of Stiegler

3.1   Why should theology engage with Stiegler?

Why is this important for theology, then?

First, theology should recognise that digital technology is indeed having an inescapable and profound impact upon human culture and the ways in which we develop as humans in our relationships with each other and the technology itself. We are in constant process ourselves and there are big questions about our own future as a species which our religious beliefs and practices need to address in a realistic and grounded manner. But there are also interpretations of religion itself which can offer a critical perspective on what is happening. Religion is about making connections, drawing together and assembling the different strands of our lives and societies—religion as binding in its original Latin meaning—and we are also engaged in living out what might be called "forms of life". In which case, knowledge cannot be reduced to information but involves knowing how to live more ethically and responsibly. If there is also that strand of our traditions that holds onto those experiences of God that remain beyond articulation and therefore cannot be reduced to the commercial to be exploited, then theology has things to offer that need to be brought back to the surface. Shaping, formation, sacrifice, vocation and discipline are part of our theological discourse and self-understanding, or used to be, and

depend upon a different concept of time that could be an antidote to that being presented by the commercialised aspects of digital culture. Religion, like technology, is a pharmakon, but the challenge is to identify and live out those dimensions of it that offer remedies rather than poison.

3.2   What can theology learn from Stiegler?

Stiegler's thought helps theology to analyse how digital technology is more than just a neutral or external adjunct to otherwise normal human functioning. Rather, technology has itself become an intrinsic component of contemporary existence and what can be seen now as a postdigital age. Rather than being an external set of mechanisms that allow for greater flexibility and control, the digital has now become fundamental to many aspects of life. Whether we are talking about prosthetic devices, smart phones, Facebook and Twitter, or our dependence on the internet for our information or news, we are now in the postdigital age and moving towards a posthuman era. What humans have already become and are in the process of developing further is so intimately bound up with these technologies that the human itself has been reconfigured. To ignore technics is to be blind to the realities of normal existence. In which case the challenge is to understand how the technologies function, who controls them—invariably this is the major tech companies such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple and Facebook—and to establish some form of critical engagement. A very particular version of capitalism is largely in control whether or not we are even aware of this. This is damaging to desire, the freedom to imagine and dream, and indeed to knowledge itself.

Stiegler suggests that knowledge that is not internalised risks being information rather than knowledge. Stiegler, as we have seen, is concerned when any form of calculation or infidelity assumes dominance, which would indeed be a form of control. An alternative is knowledge which is both derived from, and contributes to, genuine participation. For instance, those who perform music have a different relationship to it than those who are simply passive consumers through digital technology. Another insight of Stiegler is that knowledge always comes too late on the scene, as it presumes life knowledge (*savoir-vivre*).

Digital technology as employed by consumer culture and commercial interest risks short-circuiting the processes of reflection and critical thought. But the times and spaces provided by religion could provide an antidote to this. Stiegler now talks about the dreams and intermittances which escape external control and enable the opportunity for alternative thoughts and experiences. The latter may be better placed to acknowledge difference as over against the standardisations which result from the uncritical use of digital technology. There needs to be a collective investment in the alternative means of *savoir-vivre*—knowing how to do, live and think—so that digital technology can serve dis-autonomisation.

The worst of impacts of digital technology are the destruction of desire and the libidinal economy, thus leading to a loss of care and attention, presumably leading to the negligence which Stiegler is concerned about. Yet, religion can offer an alternative. As we have seen, he draws upon the ancient Roman distinction between *otium* and *negotium*. Religious versions of *otium* may be found in the concepts of sacrifice, vocation or the slow work of time; differently paced engagements with those others to whom one should be connected, both human and nonhuman. One might be able to see religion as assembling, linking, connecting, gathering, and creating those alternative times and spaces for engagement.

Yet there is a danger that religious organisations, keen to adopt the latest technology and to be seen to be up-to-date and on message, simply deploy the digital as one more set of technical aids, rather than forming a deeper understanding of the nature of the postdigital and working to construct an interactive critique. When access to Christian doctrine and practice is mediated through technology there is a risk of reducing the content of both to what can be easily and readily communicated, rather than exploring the deeper complexity and riches of the traditions. Information, or knowing that, replaces knowledge as participation over time and a sense of belonging to wider communities of interpretation. So, for instance, prayer and liturgy and their religious symbolisms are related to knowing how and participation, rather than knowing that. The slow work of time and the concept of formation, as recognised by the religious traditions, need to find ways of being developed and deployed in what appears to be a hostile digitised culture.

A further concern that Stiegler draws to our attention is the need to construct a new public. What does public theology look like in the digital era when so much of what is disseminated and absorbed is the result of the rapid responses of Twitter and Facebook, and issues of truth and credibility come to the fore? Rather than

encouraging people to try to discern truth from fiction, the objective seems to be to undermine the very notion of truth itself. Nothing is to be believed or trusted, so, whatever politicians say, or the media report, is of no consequence beyond its capacity to stir up emotions and shape public opinion and action. The idea of an appeal for reasoned public debate appears to be redundant.

How, then, might religion restore faith in the future or provide resources to heal the epistemic breach whereby public and political life becomes not just divisive but impervious to reasoned debate? There could, perhaps, be ways of recognising the potential role of religion in creating or protecting the trust, care, attention, connecting, fidelity, long circuits of time, intermittances and spaces of dissent, working with the pharmacological aspects of the technology to create positive alternatives at a collective and community level. This could lead to alternative forms of transindividuation and thus different ways of developing as humans in relation to the other, both human and nonhuman.

Conclusion

At the time of writing the UK is still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in addition to the public health issues, there is also concern about the ways in which the public has been kept informed about developments. We have even been told that making judgements by instinct is legitimate during this crisis. Confidence in the information being communicated, let alone the advice or guidance about appropriate activity and actions, has been damaged by poor or even deliberately misleading statements issued by political leaders. Trust, credibility and attention to detail have each suffered as a result. The potential deployment of apps to test, track and trace the virus has raised issues of privacy, and how the data collected is to be stored and for how long. Digital technology is being proposed as one way of steering a safe path out of this crisis, but questions of who devises and controls this remain on the agenda. Meanwhile the public's attention is so focussed on the pandemic that other equally important concerns such as climate change are in danger of slipping beneath the surface. The need to create and construct appropriate forms of public life highlighted by Stiegler seems even more acute as the political, economic and social impacts of the pandemic begin to unfold. One might hope that religion(s) could contribute in a positive way to the discussions that now need to take place.

Questions for further consideration

- How can religious groups contribute to constructing a "new public" in the post-digital age?

- Given that technological developments such as machine learning, AI and algorithms are controlled by major tech companies, how might it be possible for non-experts to intervene in earlier stages of development and influence how these are to be shaped, and for whose benefit?

- Is there a process whereby the resources of religious traditions can guard against their reduction to what is amenable to digital technology at the expense of depth and substance?

- When so much in the post-digital is dependent upon speed of response, how might the idea of "the slow work of time" still play a part in human thought and development? Is there such a thing as post-digital imagination or dreaming?

- How can we counter the moves to undermine notions of trust, truth, trustworthiness and credibility?

- If Stiegler is correct that younger generations are being deprived of access to the resources that give life, meaning and direction, in what ways might religious practices and traditions be able to counteract this?

- If Stiegler is correct that digital technology is a pharmakon, and so capable of being deployed in positive and creative ways as well as negative and controlling ones, where is the evidence for this and how can such movements be supported and encouraged?

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