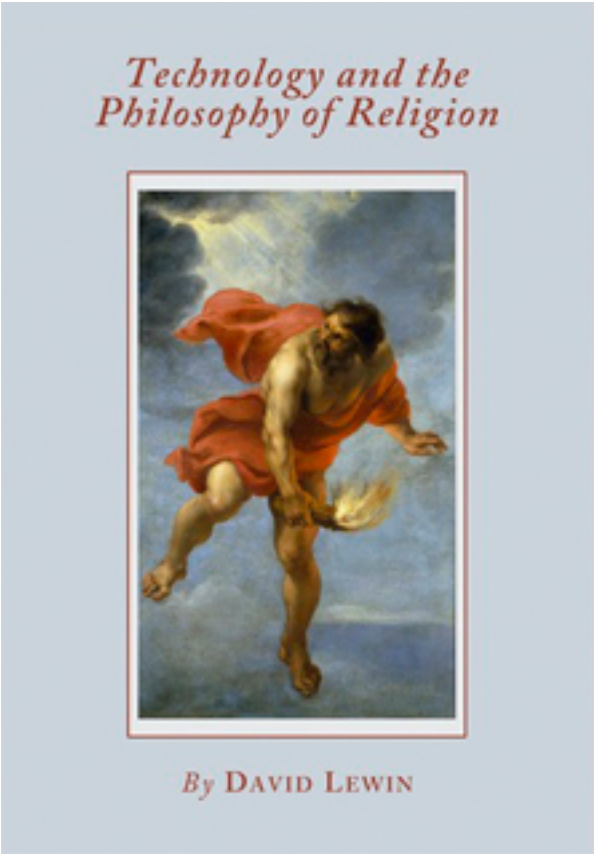

Technology and the Philosophy of Religion

by David Lewin (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011)
Reviewed by Charles Brickdale January 2012

*'**What matters is what works**'* Tony Blair.

Blair's aphorism was meant to justify such departures from socialist doctrine as the Private Finance Initiative and, perhaps, taking money from the likes of Bernie Ecclestone.

What it also does is encapsulate a mode of thinking about and experiencing the world which David Lewin describes in his thought-provoking book as 'technological nihilism', an orientation based upon a 'false anthropology which arises out of the failure to see things primarily as

given.' In other words, Lewin's concern is with the implications of living in a culture which dwells entirely in the kingdom of means and has lost sight of the kingdom of ends.

Lewin's professional academic concern is to move philosophy of technology on from what he sees as the technological modes of thinking which are the dominant modes of analysis in the field at the moment to a point at which it places technology in a much larger context, an ultimate context, in fact, of concern with the meaning of human activity and the nature of our being. His broader concern is with the role that this relatively obscure branch of philosophy can play in informing the thinking we all do about how we live and, specifically, the implications for our common understanding of how and why we live as we do and, within that, of how we conceive the nature and role of technology.

This is not the philosophy of gadgets. Lewin's whole point, drawing heavily from Heidegger, especially his paper *'The Question Concerning Technology',* is to show that the 'essence' of technology lies less in things, how they work and what we use them for and more in the extent to which our activity is grounded in ultimate value or concern, if at all. So, the proper focus of the philosophy of technology is us.

What is the 'false anthropology' which Lewin sees as characteristic of modernity? It is the view of humanity which sees us as radically free agents in a universe which has no intrinsic, given meaning and which we are, therefore, at liberty to shape according to our wishes. Nihilism is the consequence along with the exclusive focus on means referred to above.

Curiously, he makes no explicit mention of that other anthropology of modern times: the view, advanced by some New Atheists, such as Daniel Dennett, and by the philosopher John Gray in ‘Straw Dogs’, that free will and the subjective self are, crudely, illusions. What we think of as the thinking, reflecting and deciding mind is, in fact, little more than a biological machine. Given the importance of the issues this analysis raises and its implicit reduction of human beings to the status of living technology it might seem that Lewin would want to challenge it as well as the nihilist existentialist attitude.

However, one could argue that there is an implicit repudiation of neuronal determinism in the overall thesis he offers, not least his assault on the ‘what matters is what works’ view of life. Still, it is a puzzling omission.

Lewin’s main philosophical source is Heidegger; he also draws heavily on the theologian Paul

Tillich. Together, these two giants of 20th Century thought provide Lewin with the intellectual underpinning, in particular, the ontological foundations, needed to support his main argument. Several other philosophers come in for critical interrogation of their views: best known to most readers of this site, I imagine, is Herbert Marcuse.

Marcuse's concern is to end the divorce between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity and thereby to abolish alienation in all its forms. His premise is that the huge advances in productive capacity made possible by the scientific and technological revolutions cannot, under capitalism, lead to the liberation of human creative potential envisaged by Marx until the new revolutionary forces identified by the New Left have led the charge to the communist paradise. As an aside, it's a curious feature of one of the best known literary communist utopias – the one imagined by William Morris in 'News from Nowhere' – that it appears to possess virtually nothing in the way of industrial technology. Was it beyond even Morris' imaginative powers to envisage how then-modern technology could be transformed into a creative force?

Marcuse's reframing of Marxist revolutionary theory in pursuit of these objectives is, in the end, unsatisfactory, according to Lewin, because it lacks a secure ontological foundation. It leads inexorably, therefore, to the kind of subjectivist, instrumental nihilism that is already characteristic of modernity. Marcuse shares his ontological rootlessness with, according to Lewin, many of the dominant analyses of humanity's relation to technology and, indeed, of human social life in general.

The way out of this bind is suggested by Heidegger's notion that human action in the world leads to an 'unconcealing' of what otherwise remains hidden. The problem is that what the philosophical and ideological systems characteristic of modernity reveal to us is a world perceived to be a 'standing reserve' of energy, power, solutions to problems and measurable phenomena. The priority we give to this manner of, to use Heidegger's term, 'enframing' the world conceals more and deeper primal truths, cutting us off from the indeterminate depths of being.

This leaves us both without a clear frame of reasoning within which to set our immediate passions and desires and limited in our conception of how we might live by the tools (concepts and modes of organisation as well as gadgets) immediately available to us. Will is unguided and directionless: consequently, the nihilism of pointless instrumentality rules supreme. Thus is outlined, we might suggest, a possible explanation for the soulless, aimless pragmatism of much of contemporary life and for the rise to power of Anthony Charles Linton Blair.

Technology: why the anxiety?