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Focal Things and Practices—in the West and in Japan
*Criticism of Technology in Cultural Comparison*¹

What is the relation between technology and the good life? To many people this sounds like a trivial question or one that is easily answered by cost-benefit analysis. Technology promotes the good life and makes it easier and richer. The only problems they see are that sometimes there are risks involved, and that these need to be scrutinized by experts.

But I want to argue that the question is more problematic than it may initially appear. My argument draws on work by the North American philosopher Albert Borgmann, who has spent the last thirty years reflecting on this issue. I attempt to expand his critical reflections through a comparison with traditional forms of Japanese culture such as the martial art of *Kendo* and the tea ceremony, *Chado*. The argument begins with a review of Borgmann's central concepts and considers some criticisms of his thought. From there it proceeds to an account of the Japanese practices, returns to reconsider Borgmann's ideas, and after some questions concludes with a defense of Borgmann's perspective.

I The Device Paradigm

The central concepts in Borgmann's philosophy of technology, which are developed in his book *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984),² are the device paradigm in contrast with focal things and practices. The device paradigm is "the pattern of technology." According to Borgmann, life has been and is being structured in a new way as technological revolutions and devices permeate our culture. One telling example concerns heat. It used to be that heat was produced by a hearth, which kept the temperature in the house comfortable and provided energy for cooking. A fireplace or old-fashioned stove, however, required care. Someone needed to

harvest and split wood, carry it in, and maintain the fire. All this demanded skill and created familial divisions of labor as well as a small social network around the stove. The hearth was also a concrete thing, a stone or metal construction often placed in a central corner of the house establishing a place where the family gathered for warmth, for food, and often just to chat. All this sounds romantic, but taking care of the hearth was burdensome, too: There could be a shortage of wood, which might be green or wet, quarrels about sharing the different jobs involved, and regular chores to do.³

Today most houses no longer have hearths. We have been disburdened from the tasks of heating through the gradual creation of the central heating system. With such a system we often do not even know where the heating plant is located; we just receive the commodity it produces: warmth. There is no hassle, no smell of smoke, no artifact taking up space in the room—and no connecting point either. The traditional wood stove has been replaced by an invisible device for production of heat—and perhaps a virtual hearth for decorative purposes.

Borgmann's analysis takes off from such a simple example to examine how the device paradigm, while penetrating culture, sharpens various oppositions, such as those between individual and community, body and mind, work and leisure, and how it reorganizes the relationship of means and ends. For present purposes it is sufficient to note how Borgmann describes life in the ambit of the device paradigm. He argues that the disburdenment provided by the device leads to a life that is neither noble nor truly happy, and that the common lifestyle in advanced societies cannot make the best out of the possibilities provided by the modernization process. Work transformed by devices often becomes monotonous and devoid of challenges, since it requires few real skills. The job is a mere means for earning money. Leisure declines in nobility as well, since it easily turns into shallow activities energized by excessive consumption and entertainment. All these points Borgmann has continued to explore in subsequent work such as *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992), *Holding On to Reality* (1999), and *Power Failure* (2003).⁴

II Focal Things and Practices

If Borgmann's diagnosis of the character of the contemporary life were to be summarized in one word, it would be "unfocused" or "disintegrated." His response is thus to propose as a therapy the introduction of focal things and practices. What American culture lacks in its material wealth and diversity is a focus and depth.⁵

In short, his argument is that we are mistaken if we expect technological disburdenment itself to lead to a deep or meaningful life. Rather, technology should free us to enjoy things and practices in their old-fashioned sense. Consider, concretely, some further examples. A family dinner is a traditional focal practice, and many of the material objects involved can be focal things within that practice—as opposed to fast food and ready-made meals with their disposable utensils. Borgmann discusses the "culture of the table" that can involve more than just cooking and eating: It has a beginning and an end; it is a tangible way in which a family comes together; it is in dialogue with culinary traditions; in religious families it may involve a grace through which one expresses gratitude for the gifts of the earth. Fly-fishing is another possible focal practice, with the fishing rod and/or the trout as focal things. For a runner the running route is focal, for a backpacker the wilderness. Arts and crafts can be seen as focal practices.⁶

Beyond examples, Borgmann also brings an analytic perspective to focal things and practices. While dealing with focal phenomena, he argues, one is guided by a commanding presence that contrasts with the distractions associated with devices. Focal practices call forth exertion, skill, self-transcendence, perseverance, endurance, patience, commitment, and attention—qualities that device-enhanced leisure tends to undermine or dissipate. In this way, focal practices can re-center our lives and provide contexts in which we can strive for virtue and excellence. Discontinuity characterizes the activities within the device paradigm, whereas focal practices lead to unification and integration: in fly-fishing, body and mind work together; the runner merges in the environment in which she is running; in backpacking culture and nature as well as previous hiking traditions and the present action converge. The same applies for means and ends; in most focal practices they cannot be strictly separated—running is simultaneously an end itself and a

means to maintain well-being: “[I]n the runner, effort and joy are one; the split between means and ends, labor and leisure is healed.”⁷

Within the device paradigm everything is controlled, everything is made predictable; in contrast, otherness lives within focal practices. Indeed, for Borgmann it is “when we allow ourselves to be guided by focal things, matters of ultimate concern that are other and greater than ourselves” that the question of the good life—not just life—becomes an issue in poetic discourse.⁸

In such discourse, speech concerning focal practices is testimonial in character. One cannot force others to recognize focal things. Yet once one has witnessed the orienting power of a focal thing, one wants to share the discovery. In this way focal things not only provide better ways of life but act as touchstones that make possible the assessment of technology. As individuals and as a culture dominated by devices, we easily forget other ways to be in the world. Interaction with focal things generates a new perspective on life in the technological world. In this sense Borgmann calls focal things and practices “metatechnological things and practices.”⁹

Looking at focal things and practices in the context of standard philosophy, two points are noteworthy. First, it is evident that Borgmann’s discourse on focal practices is an attempt to provide practical content to an existentialist quest for authenticity. This attempt is grounded in social philosophical arguments and phenomenological analysis of the life in a technological world. Second, the starting point for Borgmann’s thinking on things is Martin Heidegger’s later philosophy. Heidegger argued that the history of Western metaphysics and science has resulted in a situation where there are no things any longer but mere objects. But with regard to both points it is also clear that Borgmann goes beyond his sources to develop a unique and insightful perspective on contemporary technological culture.¹⁰

III Critique of Focal Things and Practices

All philosophical positions are nevertheless open to criticisms, and Borgmann’s stance is no exception. He has been criticized in numerous ways, since *Technology and the Character of*

Contemporary Life was first published in 1984. One criticism concerns the definition of a focal thing. It is often remarked that Borgmann's examples have a somewhat romantic and old-fashioned feel. Taking care of a wood stove is a focal practice while computer gaming is not. How much personal taste and idiosyncratic thinking is inherent in Borgmann's account of focal things and practices? Is Borgmann nostalgic? Why does it appear that old things trump new ones in his philosophy? Among others, Andrew Feenberg raises such questions in his article in *Technology and the Good Life?* (2000), a collection of articles addressed to Borgmann's work.¹¹

Larry Hickman, in the same collection, has proposed that focal practices and their wholesome effects should be empirically tested. In response, Borgmann has denied this possibility. According to Borgmann, we can fail in our evaluations of focal things and practices, but in principle they are not testable. Borgmann's position is understandable. Testing focal things would mean some kind operationalization (or even quantification), which would contradict the highly context-related nature of focal things and their numerous aspects. However, this inability to evaluate focal things without ambiguities means that questions concerning them remain open.¹²

Furthermore, an uncharitable reader of Borgmann might ask, "Is he saying that 'good hobbies' will save us from the problems of technological modernity?" In fact, Borgmann does have more substantial ideas considering larger socio-economic settings, but they are related to the role of focal things in our lives. Thus the uncharitable question mostly misses the point. Still, if one contrasts, for instance, farming as a focal practice with running and fly-fishing, it is evident that farming is a way of life and livelihood, which the others are not: They are hobbies. The problem is that farming, and most other traditional occupations, are not available as livelihoods to—and probably not even desired by—most people.

IV Focal Things and Practices in Japan

One way of assessing focal things and practices different from but in the spirit of Hickman's proposal would be by cross-cultural comparison. If things like what Borgmann calls focal things

and practices can be found in all cultures then this would be strong support for his argument. Indeed, I would suggest that sports, arts, pilgrimages and other religious activities, sauna culture, story-telling, and more are examples of focal things and practices in many cultures. The difference between earlier things and practices and their contemporary equivalents is that the focal nature of earlier practices was seldom consciously treasured. The mother who kept fire in the hearth hardly noticed any special satisfaction or depth in her work; because of this she would often have been happy to give up her burden.

There are, however, a few interesting examples of consciously retained focal practices in diverse cultures, comparison with which may bring a new appreciation for Borgmann's analyses. Perhaps one of the best such examples is to be found in Japan, where traditional culture exhibits various practices with explicitly focal characters that have indeed been highlighted by the encounter with modern technology.

In addition to scholarly work and literature, my own awareness of possible comparisons here has been stimulated by the experience of Zen practice in my native Scandinavia and a year of study in the Bukkoku-ji temple in Obama, Fukui-ken, where I practiced Zen under the guidance of Harada Tangen Roshi. Further observations relevant to the present argument have also been derived from a few years of practice of *Karate* and *Kendo*. These personal references are relevant, because as Borgmann argues one cannot properly speak about focal things and practices without having some experience of their character. What follows, however, does not pretend to be any exposition of Zen in itself. Here Zen is treated more as illustrating a philosophical approach to culture, and all references to Japan are meant as cultural-philosophical rather than sociological or historical.

Consider, then, the case of *Kendo*, an art of sword practice the roots of which go back to prehistorical Japan, but which was formed into a conscious focal practice with elaborate philosophy during the Tokugawa Period (1600–1868). Today the tradition of *Kendo* is preserved by the *All Japan Kendo Federation* (founded 1952). According to *The Concept of Kendo*, the official statement of the *Kendo Federation*, “[t]he concept of *Kendo* is to discipline the human

character through the application of the principles of the *Katana* (sword).” Later the text speaks of cultivating a vigorous spirit, associating with others with sincerity, and forever pursuing the cultivation of oneself. Is this not exactly the kind of centering, exertion, and striving for excellence for which Borgmann is looking?¹³

Another example of a Japanese focal practice is the tea ceremony, *Chado*. The idea behind the tea ceremony is to make, share, and drink tea observing the principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquillity. In short, the tea ceremony is a focal practice created around the focal thing, tea. *Kendo*, the Way of the Sword, and *Chado*, the Way of Tea, present focal thing and focal practice structures even in their names.

The aim of cherishing focal things within focal practices is also evident in the arts of gardening, flower arrangement, calligraphy, and brush painting. In modern times such new practices as *Judo* and *Aikido* have been formed from classical martial arts. The idea of all these cultural practices is to come to know oneself, others, and reality more deeply through practicing the respective art.

As a derivative of Chinese *tao*, the Japanese word *do*, “the way,” has many interrelated meanings. In the deepest sense it refers to ultimate reality, as in the Chinese Taoist classic *Tao Te Ching*. But as the translation “way” implies, according to the Asian understanding, the ultimate reality is not static, and *do* refers to the dynamics of the real. Hence *do* also refers to the way one lives and acts when in harmony with reality. Further, it includes the method for approaching the knowledge of reality and the harmonious way to live.¹⁴

In the traditions of the martial arts, the distinction between *do* and *jutsu* was maintained. Whereas *do* is “the way,” *jutsu* refers to the purely technical side of an art or practice. *Kenjutsu* names the technique of fencing with the *ken* or sword; *Kendo* names the way of life and the method for seeking it through the *ken*.¹⁵

For present purposes, it is interesting that in Japan the method for attaining the way appears to

have been, and still to some extent is, the employment of focal things and practices. In the context of swordsmanship, the sword was regarded as a samurai's soul.¹⁶ Could one revere a thing more? The formal manners in the tea ceremony preserve an admiration for the teacup, with a refined tradition of making ceramics and other utensils. Furthermore, the tearoom itself is also a focal thing or a focal place.¹⁷ D.T. Suzuki's poetic description of a tearoom ends like this:

To take a cup of tea with friends in this environment, talking probably about the Sumiye [brush painting] in the alcove or some art topic suggested by the utensils in the room, wonderfully lifts the mind above the perplexities of life. The warrior is saved from his daily occupation of fighting, and the business man from his ever-present idea of money-making. Is it not something, indeed, to find in this world of struggles and vanities a corner, however humble, where one can rise above the limits of relativity and even have a glimpse of eternity?¹⁸

In general, Japanese culture values material things, especially artfully crafted ones, more than the Western. This is manifested even in language. For instance, chopsticks, *hashi*, receive a honorary prefix "o," and hence they are usually called *o-hashi*. The same applies to tea, which is called *o-cha*. Moreover, in the contemporary zen monastery, modern house-holding tasks, such as vacuum cleaning, are to be done not only carefully in a concentrated manner, but also respecting the material devices. When Bukkoku-ji temple got a new steam iron, it inspired Harada Tangen Roshi to give a poetic table speech in which he described the proper ways to use the iron. In fact, in zen training "treat the inanimate objects *as if* they were animate" is a rule of thumb in dealing with material things.

The above-mentioned practices owe their philosophical and spiritual support to various sources. There are Shinto as well as Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist influences in the concepts and practices of these different Ways. But consider again the Zen Buddhist ideas that have affected swordsmanship and the tea ceremony.¹⁹ Such practices often appear to be elitist phenomena bound up with the class distinctions of feudal Japan.

This suspicion or uneasiness about the undemocratic character of *Kendo* and *Chado* is actually fruitful, since it points to a deeper understanding of focal practices. In zen training, even

quotidian concrete tasks, such as cooking, chopping wood, and carrying water, are spiritual practices when they are performed with the free mind and full awareness. Disburdenment from them would actually mean a spiritual loss for a zen trainee.

In fact, for a zen practitioner almost anything may become a focal practice. The founder of Japanese Soto school of Zen, Dogen Zenji (1200–1253) wrote a text *Tenzo Kyōkun* (Instructions for the Cook), in which he implies that the cook's office in a monastery provides an excellent opportunity to practice Zen, better than reading or chanting *sutras*. In Dogen's teaching, undivided activity in ordinary tasks leads to insight and realization that transcend all conceptual dualisms. Of these antagonisms, existentially the most pressing are the contrapositions of life and death as well as ego and non-ego. Moreover, Dogen emphasizes overcoming likes and dislikes.

The zen understanding of focal practices is always tied to the primary focal practice, *zazen*, sitting meditation. The zen approach to meditation is very practical and non-speculative. In Zen, meditation is often merely referred to as "sitting." In fact, a very exalted form of *zazen* is called *shikantaza*, "just sitting," since it does not include any object for concentration, such as breathing or some *koan* (zen paradox), but in just sitting, one is just sitting. In *zazen* there is a focal thing as well, namely the *zafu*, the cushion. In zen monasteries monks always bow to their *zafus* before practicing *zazen*, since the cushion helps them to practice and eventually attain *satori*, awakening.²⁰ The practice of just sitting helps one to understand the zen approach to the tasks of ordinary life. If there is just sitting, which is the fundamental practice, accordingly there can be "just washing the dishes," "just cleaning," or "just changing the diapers."

V Reflections and Conclusion

Consider now what follows from a comparison of Borgmann's thought with various phenomena of traditional Japanese culture. First, there is clearly a connection to the zen teaching of "just doing." The zen viewpoint of focal practices appears to indicate that anything can be a focal practice if the practitioner's attitude is correct. In contrast, Borgmann's focal practices seem to be very selective of proper contexts and the availability of focal things. For instance, Borgmann

analyzes how a running treadmill simulation spoils running as a focal practice. Further, he is critical of Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), which argues that tasks amidst the technological realm can be vehicles for realization of peace of mind. Following Pirsig, one could yet ask: What is the role of a person's *openness* for a commanding presence in focal practices? Could we enlarge the sphere of the focal practices by changing our attitude according to Dogen Zenji's instructions? ²¹

In response to the suggestion that any object, even a device such as a central heating system, might function as a focal thing with its associated focal practice, Borgmann would be justified to note three points. First, devices lack commanding presence for their users. Indeed, things such as hearths become central heating system devices precisely by having commanding presence engineered out of them. This reduces any practical engagement with them to bare minimum. Any focal practice with a central heating system would be a thin one. Second, for mechanics or service technicians who do experience central heating devices as commanding, Borgmann would have to admit that they can serve as focal things for focal practice. Third, an observation that makes Borgmann's selectiveness for the contexts understandable is that the Japanese did build special tearooms, rock gardens, and *Kendo dojos* in which their focal practices come alive.

A second connection between Japanese focal culture and Borgmann's philosophy concerns the spiritual backing of focal practices. In the Japanese tradition, focal practices are vehicles for self-knowledge and enlightenment, an aspect absent in Borgmann's thinking. He only speaks of the good life and self-realization in connection to focal practices. Moreover, in zen focal practices more fundamental oppositions (e.g, life and death) are transcended than in Borgmannian ones (e.g., means and ends). The common aspect is that both consider overcoming them crucial in focal practices. Borgmann agrees, however, that human beings should be grounded in (physical) reality by focal things and practices before they can understand the need for spiritual salvation, with "salvation" understood in Christian terms. Focal practices do not directly contribute to salvation but indirectly prepare the way for it. This is understandable, since in the Western context the idea that someone would go to heaven or get enlightened through running, fly-

fishing, cooking meticulously, or drinking tea is certainly strange. Still, reflecting more on the self-knowledge aspects of focal things and practices might deepen Borgmann's perspective.

Third, it is worth asking: Why did Japan have the culture of consciously cherished focal things and practices? An exotic answer is offered by Alexander Kojève (1902-1968) in the context of his neo-Hegelian analyses of the end of history. This concept refers to the historical arrival of a universal and homogenous state where all dialectical challenges have been dissolved—nature is mastered, there are no wars, and people are equal. Kojève argues that Japan during the Tokugawa Period in many respects had achieved an end of history state. There were no inner or outer wars, and the samurai class was granted the privilege of not having to work. One of the end of history questions concerns what will happen to human beings in this state. Will they sink back into animal life without ideals, once there is nothing “real” to do? Will they become Friedrich Nietzsche's “last men”? Kojève's answer was negative, if we can take Tokugawa Japan as an example. In the end state the Japanese cultivated such refined and “snobbish” practices as the tea ceremony and flower arrangement—and no animal can be snobbish. In fact, in the 1950s he forecast that the West would be Japanized in the future.²² It remains to be seen to what extent this may occur.

The argument here, then, is that Japanese practices, such as *Kendo*, *Judo*, and *Chado*, are essentially focal practices involving focal things in the sense that Borgmann applies these concepts. Since Japan has long and philosophically reflected traditions of focal practices, it is clear that, in general, Borgmann's argument is not so idiosyncratic or unrealistic after all. Acknowledging this parallel provides support for Borgmann's stance that consciously cherished focal things and practices are the ground for a deep and meaningful life within the technological world. Without them, life lacks gravity and loses reality. Furthermore, focal things provide a metatechnological viewpoint that enables us to weigh technological devices.

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