

## THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS

William Ray Arney

In 1958, just after Sputnik, the first satellite, had beeped its way through earth orbit for three months, Hannah Arendt said this about *The Human Condition*: “The discovery of the earth, the mapping of her lands and the chartering of her waters, ... has only now begun to come to an end. Only now has man taken full possession of his mortal dwelling place and gathered the infinite horizons ... into a globe. ... The famous shrinkage of the globe began [and] each man is as much an inhabitant of the earth as he is an inhabitant of his country. Men now live in an earth-wide continuous whole.”<sup>1</sup> In 1995 Ivan Illich and a group of friends wrote the “Declaration on Soil”<sup>2</sup> in philosophical opposition to the new fact that we live in an earth-wide continuous whole. They said, “The ecological discourse about planet earth, global hunger, threats to life urges us to look down at the soil, humbly, as philosophers. We stand on soil, not the earth.”

Questions to begin: Where are we? Where do we stand? And once you’ve answered that, what kind of persons must we become to live there, on the earth or on the soil? What kind of experiences of time and place, what kind of relationships with other people, what kind of practices, desires, actions are cultivated or encouraged by where we are?<sup>3</sup> What difference does it make if we live on soil or as yet another inhabitant of an earth-wide continuous whole?

The “Declaration on Soil” was a part of Ivan’s response to what he called the Age of Systems. The Age of Systems, our historical time, is the far side of one of those watersheds in history where, once crossed, everything has changed irrevocably, right down to the root metaphors that ground understanding and action. You know things are different and there’s no going back, even if that knowledge dawns on you slowly, as it did for Ivan.<sup>4</sup> The “Declaration on Soil” and other works after 1980 were at once efforts to recall times and ages past so that, perhaps, we moderns might enjoy the freedom of knowing that we don’t have to live like we do, as components in systems, and they were invitations to join with others to figure out, as he put it, “how to keep awake in the computer age” or as Barbara Duden wrote, how to choose “aliveness” over becoming yet another “life that can be added to other lives and managed.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Age of Systems

On the historically prior side of the watershed that ushered us into the age of systems was the age of tools or, perhaps, the machine age. That age, which Ivan and Carl Mitchum said lasted from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was undergirded by the idea that people could create tools and machines that would be “means [that are] shaped to my arbitrary purpose.”<sup>6</sup> People, with their individual and collective interests, intensions, desires and aims, stood apart from their tools but could pick them up at will and use them to fashion “objects of daily use”<sup>7</sup> that might change a person’s estate for the better, whatever his or her notion of “better” might be. Ivan said the age of tools was characterized by “distality”—a “distinction

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Illich, soil

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sacacas, “technology”

<sup>4</sup> Rivers North

<sup>5</sup> Duden, p. 53. See also

<sup>6</sup> Rivers North

<sup>7</sup> RN p. 75

between the hand [that picks up the tool] and the thing which it holds”—and he knew that this distality, our distance from our tools that had to be bridged by a human act, left human intention free to its own pursuits.

The age of systems was marked, first, by a collapse of that distality. “When you become the user of a system you become a part of the system.”<sup>8</sup> People are literally incorporated as system components or as sub-systems, from the person who must position himself correctly in relation to his sound system to optimize his listening experience [Can you see how system-speak invades common tasks like listening to recorded music?] to the one who is a member of a family system that is embedded in the urban electrical-, transportation-, communication- and so on-systems, on up through the eco-system. Who we are nowadays is a system of systems (circulatory, electrolyte transport, reproductive...) embedded in systems (family, school, health, criminal justice) within systems (the eco-system, solar system...). We moderns are, clearly, inhabitants of systems that situate us in an earth-wide continuous whole.

But, you may be thinking, I still *feel free*, free to pursue my own arbitrary purposes. I still have tools in my tool box and can do what I want with them. The first question one has to ask, of course, is whether that *feeling* of freedom, that perception of distality, might not be the results of the systems that are in place to encourage us to *feel* free in this historically new age. We call those the school system and the mental health system. Beyond that we have to be willing to look honestly at our situations. How long are the phone menu-trees through which one must persist to access the “customer service” system (which will, in the end, invite your participation in a survey about the quality of your experience)? And at the end you speak with a person—if it is, in fact, a person—who sounds very much like a robot because they are following the system’s customer help script on their screens. And honestly, I end up sounding like a robot too. But I am getting ahead of myself.

### **The Tyranny of Experts**

My assigned topic is “The Tyranny of Experts.” Who are these experts, these tyrants who have put us into these inhuman systems where we follow systems’ dehumanizing scripts instead of pursuing our own intentions and purposes?

For the first Earth Day in 1971 the cartoonist Walt Kelly made a poster featuring his Everyman opossum named Pogo. Pogo stands in a forest that is littered with the cast-offs of modern times, appliances, clothes, bicycles, automobiles, other trash. He looks sadly over his shoulder toward the reader. The caption says, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Earth Day was a rallying cry on behalf of the eco-system. It urged us to educate ourselves so that we could become expert critics of those other experts—experts on the economy, politics, and so on—who had screwed up the eco-system. Earth Day told us that we had to become experts who are “specialists in the general.” From 1977: “The “science of ecology ... is an effort to bridge the gap between specialties and make possible the rational management of the whole human household,” a gigantic, comprehensive task that “will require us, in effect, to become specialists in the general,”<sup>9</sup> which was, in fact, a new kind of expert. The aim is not mastery of tools and competencies to be able to pursue one’s arbitrary purpose in order to live better, but the aim is management that will allow the system to persist, the eco-system in this case. From the 1972

---

<sup>8</sup> RN 78

<sup>9</sup> Ophuls,

book *A Systems View of the World* by Ervin Laszlo: People need to “*learn to respect*” the “*norms of our manifold ecologic, economic, political, and cultural systems*”<sup>10</sup> because a systemic error—undertaking actions that are not “compatible with the structured hierarchy of terrestrial nature”—can lead the system to move beyond natural “limits,” the limits to growth, the limits of carbon emissions—which can put us in “immediate peril.”<sup>11</sup> (As I was writing this Delta Airlines suffered a “system failure,” the collapse of the whole system that got its airplanes loaded, into the air, and to their destinations. It very quickly because a *globe-wide* failure.) To escape the perils of a system failure or collapse, to learn to respect the norms of our systems, we must become the experts we need, über-experts who will make sure that those specialist experts “get with the program” (as computer-system speak would put it) and help the eco-system realize its optimal functioning. Our task is to school ourselves and to teach others to respect the norms of systems. As the expert critics and potential enemy of the systems on which we depend, we have to learn to watch ourselves, put ourselves under constant surveillance, and, like the prisoners in Betham’s Panopticon prison, we make power play spontaneously over ourselves.<sup>12</sup> Walter Kirn had his own take on surveillance and its common effect, self-surveillance: “My fear is that [if] we [don’t defend that] interior space [that part of our selves that is the source of fantasies, creativity, desires, wishes and the like] we’ll start to ... censor our very inner life in a way that doesn’t cause us any anxiety. And the real cost of surveillance is that our inner lives become impoverished, that the set of moves we make as thinkers and emotional beings and so on becomes reduced. In that way we start to become the machines that we’re afraid are invading our lives.”<sup>13</sup>

You can see where I’m going. Pogo says, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” But Earth Day also said, “We have met the expert and he is us.” To live better, perhaps even to live at all, we have to become the experts, us, who will take on the enemy, who is us, in order to protect the functioning of the systems on which we depend. The tyranny of experts? Yes, we are.

### **Thin Experience: “Our ... lives become impoverished”**

My sense is that smearing oneself across an earth-wide continuous whole thins out, and even de-dimensionalizes human experience. When we are constantly watching ourselves, or at least the data that give us indications of our condition, we become tame. We listen for science to tell us the stories of systems and their norms and we give up even a desire for freedom, what Curtis White calls the “story [of freedom] we have committed ourselves to *as if* our lives depended on it. And they obviously do depend on it.”<sup>14</sup>

If you want a measure of the thinness of experience today you could look at the thickness of our smart phones, which are getting thinner, or perhaps the chips that drive them. That is our apocalyptic device, in the sense that it is through those gadgets that everything is revealed. At least they show us everything we need to know to live in the age of systems.

---

<sup>10</sup> Laszlo, *A Systems View of the World*, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> Laszlo, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

<sup>13</sup> “Is My Phone Eavesdropping on Me?,” *Note to Self Podcast*, November 5, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> White, *We, Robots*, p. 105

Arendt wrote about how the historically immense physical distances of the earth were, through the abstractions of mathematics, reduced in scale:

Prior to the shrinkage of space and the abolition of distance through railroads, steamships, and airplanes, there is the infinitely greater and more effective shrinkage which comes about through the surveying capacity of the human mind, whose use of numbers, symbols, and models [the stuff of computers and systems] can condense and scale earthly physical distance down to the size of the human body's natural sense and understanding.<sup>15</sup>

With the palm of your hand you can cover Europe on the thin, outmost layer of a globe. But such silly, abstract “actions” as that are not shareable and they are not even meaningful; it is just something I can do because the whole world is brought down to the size of my body’s natural sense and understanding. Arendt said philosophy has abetted such silliness by inventing the “self,” that monad self that is now the measure of all things.

One of the most persistent trends in modern philosophy since Descartes and perhaps its most original contribution to philosophy has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself.<sup>16</sup>

If we are ever gathered with other people, we often find ourselves “alone together,” a new sociological category that Sherry Turkle invented to describe her observations of one principal effect of being tethered to our gadgets. When we are, in fact, alone with our phones, she says, people easily convince ourselves that they are “together” with absent others who are on their phones somewhere else, but also, when we are together with others, we are often, in fact, alone on our phones. (She even discovered a “rule of three,” a modern norm for dining or gathering with friends that says no matter what size the group, there must be at least three people not on their phones. When one person puts her phone down I can feel free to pick my phone up and drop out of the group conversation, as long as three people will remain, so to speak, at the table.) Emotional depth is lost in the shallows of “alone together.” In an earlier book Turkle said that the principal activity of people who are online is “persona management,”<sup>17</sup> the careful construction and maintenance of our various social masks so we never have to face others, masks that have to remain in place lest we be subjected to that inner life that can be stirred and churned by actually meeting and being with another person. Arendt put a point on her comment about modern philosophy’s concern with the self by saying

The greatness of Max Weber's discovery about the origins of capitalism lay precisely in his demonstration that *an enormous, strictly mundane activity is*

---

<sup>15</sup> *Human Condition*, pp. 250-251

<sup>16</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 254

<sup>17</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*. Earlier in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, she had argued that in cyberspace, “we can change our name, our appearance, even our sex, and test ourselves in that different persona. ‘We can easily move through multiple identities,’ Turkle says, ‘and we can embrace--or be trapped by--cyberspace as a way of life.’” (*Los Angeles Times*, 12/25/1995, [http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-25/news/ls-17779\\_1\\_sherry-turkle](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-25/news/ls-17779_1_sherry-turkle))

possible without any care for or enjoyment of the world whatever, an activity whose deepest motivation, on the contrary, is worry and care about the self.

And to worry about the persona who is never supposed to be worried, never excited, , maybe never surprised. The broadcast from which I took Walter Kirn's comments on surveillance led with an anonymous person saying, "It's really hard to surprise me anymore. I feel like the Internet has desensitized me." Illich, in *Deschooling Society*, wrote that we may have to re-learn the capacity to be surprised.

Let me give a few more specific examples that, for me, demonstrate effects of living in the age of systems, the thinning of experience.

The ethos of the age of tools, the machine age, was one of confident optimism in progress. The ethos in the age of systems is an actively engaged passivity. We monitor everything, try to manage all risks, keep busy, have a love/hate relationship with distraction, and turn whatever we can into entertainment.

One commentator said, "Ask people at a social gathering how they are and the stock answer is 'super busy,' 'crazy busy' or 'insanely busy.' Nobody is just 'fine' anymore. When people aren't super busy at work, they are crazy busy exercising, entertaining or taking their kids to Chinese lessons," but people wore these descriptors as a badge of honor. People enjoy "crazy busy" because they can't stand to be alone with their own thoughts. There was a study published in *Science* in 2014 about experiments which started from the observation that the majority of 700 study participants "reported that they found it unpleasant to be alone in a room with their thoughts for just 6 to 15 minutes." The stunning finding, however, was how far people would go in order not to experience that feeling of being alone with their thoughts: "in one experiment, 64 percent of men and 15 percent of women began self-administering electric shocks when left alone to think."<sup>18</sup> Of course, there are plenty of suggestions for the "crazy busy" among us, which mostly have to do with "getting in touch" with yourself, allowing yourself to ruminate, even on negative thoughts, and so forth. Just some psycho-babble suggestions to keep you busy thinking about the self.

Americans seem to like being "crazy busy" so much that they do not take vacations that we are paid to take. On average, Americans who have held a job for 25 years get only 16 days of paid vacation a year. We take only 60% of those days as vacations and over half of us have unused vacation time at the end of the year. It is as if being "crazy busy" carries status.

A person who cannot stand to be alone with his or her thoughts and does not take vacations from work cannot construct a narrative account of her life and its meaning, something essential to knowing your own "arbitrary purposes but also a way to be social. There is, especially, no chance to construct the narrative links between our "personal troubles" and "public issues," the link between history and biography that C. Wright Mills said activates "the sociological imagination" that allows individuals and groups to imagine creative political responses to our social situation. If you cannot stand to be alone with your thoughts there is no chance to construct those stories on which your life may depend.

---

<sup>18</sup> It didn't matter if the subjects engaged in the contemplative exercise at home or in the laboratory, or if they were given suggestions of what to think about, like a coming vacation; they just didn't like being in their own heads.

If we protect ourselves from our thoughts, we also tend to protect ourselves from being touched, literally as well as figuratively. Doctors touch patients less. Even to take a pulse, they use a gadget; they scan instead of palpating soft tissue. “Hand-to-hand combat” is replaced by death that happens on screens filmed by drones. Touch has been commoditized: People will go to a massage therapist instead of asking someone to rub his feet or help with a pain in the neck. In Spike Jonze’s 2013 movie *Her*, which is set in the near future, the protagonist, Theodore Twombly, works for a corporation called Beautifully Handwritten Letters where he writes personal letters, often love letters, for other people who pay for them. The drama turns on Twombly falling in love with his computer’s operating system which calls herself “Samantha.” They talk, tell jokes, reveal secrets, sit next to one another and muse on how delightful it would be if they could have sex. Clever “Samantha” recruits a surrogate “body”—a live woman—to be present with Twombly he listens to “Samantha”’s voice and vocalizations in his earpiece. He can’t stand it and breaks off this “love making.” Comment: “The spilt between the digital absence and the carnal presence is unbearable.”<sup>19</sup> And in the real world of statistics, recent studies show that millennials have more hookups but fewer sex partners and, in general, less sex than any previous generation since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> No touch.

People engage in “passion by proxy.” You tell people your positions on matters of public discussion by sending them to some “expert” who represents your view best or by posting material on Facebook. People avoid face-to-face discussion where you have the chance to see and to feel the effects of your thoughts and words, and where you have a chance to empathize with the other. And we read that schooled children suffer deficits in empathy. The Internet encourages a “spiral of silence” in which people seek out views similar to their own, not contrary views. And they avoid discussions for fear of confronting an “adversary.” We can’t be alone with our thoughts, and we can’t figure out how to be with others.

But even movement is diminished. An add-on gadget for our phones is the health tracker, like Apple’s fitbit, a wearable computer that tracks steps, heartbeats, calories and more. It is at the forefront of the Quantified Self movement, a crazy chimera that fuses modern philosophy’s “self” with science’s measurements of abstraction in order to promise “self knowledge through numbers.” Keeping track of your steps is a useful way to distract yourself from, say, walking. Instead of walking, you are acquiring steps and “meeting your number goals,” burning calories... Again Arendt anticipated this sort of self-monitoring and its reductive effects when she said our science, which is reduced to mathematics, “permits replacement of what is sensuously given by a system of mathematical equations where all real relationships are dissolved into logical relations between man-made symbols.”<sup>21</sup> So you are on your own with your data. But what do the data aggregators see when they take my life, as revealed in my data, and add it to other lives and then offer life management dicta? “Stanford cardiologist Alan

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard Kearney, “In a Virtual World, Are We Losing Our Sense of Touch,” *The Irish Times*, Sept. 2, 2014. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/in-a-virtual-world-are-we-losing-our-sense-of-touch-1.1914545>

<sup>20</sup> Mindy Weisberger, “Hookups Trend Down: Millennial Sex Lives Lag Behind Gen X,” *LiveScience*, August 2, 2016. <http://www.livescience.com/55620-millennials-not-having-sex.html> and Karen Kaplan, “The paradox of millennial sex: More casual hookups, fewer partners,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-millennials-sex-attitudes-20150508-story.html>

<sup>21</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 284.

Yeung and his colleagues are mapping the second-by-second minutiae of how we move. Not just the count of our steps, but all sorts of measures, including our velocity and orientation in space.” *The Washington Post* led with the most provocative finding of Yeung’s study of data from over 100,000 people who allowed their phones to send their data to Yeung’s gigantic and ever-expanding data base:

Not only are many of us not exercising, the early data also show that a huge percentage of us are barely moving. The finding applies even to people in their 20s through 40s, supposedly the prime of life. “This was a surprise,” Yeung said. “A lot of people are spending most of their time sitting around — not even standing, not even going up and down.”<sup>22</sup>

So people who buy gadgets that come with instructions<sup>23</sup> on the many ways 10,000 steps a day can improve your health simply don’t move. They get in their cars, drive to Costco and shop from a battery driven golf cart-like contraption with a giant basket on the front. “Crisis understood as a call for acceleration ... also justifies the depredation of space, time and resources for the sake of motorized wheels and it does so to the detriment of people who want to use their feet.”<sup>24</sup> Using your feet can be risky.

You might say we have become *senseless*. As Ivan wrote of our senses in *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, “most of the time we find ourselves out of *touch* with our world, out of *sight* of those for whom we work, and out of tune with what we *feel*.”<sup>25</sup> Is it in any way surprising that we prefer the pleasure of the image to what Arendt called “the sensuously given”? Daniel Boorstin published *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* in 1962, 50 years ago, and argued that Americans lived in a “thicket of unreality.” Advertising and public relations tried to excite expectations and sell everything and we became willing participants to the point where, Boorstin said, “The American citizen lives in a world where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than its original. We hardly dare to face our bewilderment, because our ambiguous experience is so pleasantly iridescent, and the solace of belief in contrived reality is so thoroughly real. We have become eager accessories to the great hoaxes of the age. These are the hoaxes we play on ourselves.”<sup>26</sup> Now, of course, our screens provide us an “enhanced reality” where we do get to go outside, looking always at the screen but never around us, to try to “see” the Pokémon figures that are “enhancing” that reality out there. And coming soon to a headset, helmet or body suit near you, virtual reality. Of course. Ivan wrote about this in 1978: “Engineered staples of images, ideas, feelings and opinions, packaged and delivered through the media, assault our sensibilities with round-the-clock regularity.” The result: “Autonomous and creative human action, required to make man’s universe bloom, atrophies.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ariana Eunjung Cha, “Is 10,000-steps goal more myth than science? Study seeks fitness truths through our phones and more,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/05/26/is-10000-steps-goal-more-myth-than-science-study-seeks-fitness-truths-through-our-phones-and-more/?tid=a\\_inl](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/05/26/is-10000-steps-goal-more-myth-than-science-study-seeks-fitness-truths-through-our-phones-and-more/?tid=a_inl)

<sup>23</sup> For example, this from Apple: <https://blog.fitbit.com/should-you-really-take-10000-steps-a-day/>

<sup>24</sup> *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Useful Unemployment*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1962, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Useful Unemployment*, pp. 17-18, 23.

Even language became flat and desiccated. Ivan wrote in 1978 that he had “found that the language that would permit us to insist on” autonomous action instead of heteronomous management “has to be recovered with pains.”<sup>28</sup> That’s because, as Uwe Pörksen outlined in *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language*, language itself has been thinned out into mathematical-like abstractions. His plastic words—system, process, input, basic needs, development, management, model; there are fewer than 100 of them—are abstract word husks that “the speaker lacks the power to define” and that “cannot be made clearer by tone of voice or pantomime, or gesture,” but that confer on the user of these words considerable power. And more power still to those who plug these Lego-like modular words together in sentences: “The development of a management model and, eventually, a system to process inputs for basic needs...” or “The basic need of a management model is a process of system development.” Using these words and sentences has effects on our experience. One effect is that “Abstract language allows the world to be planned, levels it out evenly, and makes it available to the drawing board. It constructs homogeneous and easily visualized spaces. It avoids sensuousness, diversity, and individual variation, and focuses on what remains when one gets rid of individual variation.” This is the language of experts, which also infects the everyday language of us moderns—and it “robs the senses of their reality... The language of the experts is expansive,” which, just as when compressed air [is] released from its container, its warmth and pressure are lost, this language thins and empties itself in its expansion.”<sup>29</sup> These experts are like the American military general Benjamin DeMott imagined after he went, as the title of his 1960 essay put it, “Looking for Intelligence in Washington”:

Who am I? says the lieutenant general, unable to recall the style of the lost, spikily independent military self. I am not a maker of events but a remover of obstructions. For progress’ sake, and in acknowledgment of the insuperable uncontrollability of “forces,” I march with affairs—and am in truth hardly a man of war at all. Patron of industry? supporter of research? Even these titles imply an improper separation from the huge machine that encompasses all. I am simply “of the community,” and in the service of things as they are.<sup>30</sup>

Yes, we, the inhabitants of an earth-wide continuous whole, are in service of things as they are.

## **The End**

John Caputo, a scholar of religion, tries to use a deconstructive approach to look past institutionalized religion, beliefs and creeds to what he calls an “underlying form of life, not the beliefs inside our head but the desires inside our heart, an underlying faith, a desire beyond desire, a hope against hope, something which these inherited beliefs contain without being able to contain.” His prognosis for one who loses that sort of “faith”—he puts it in quotation marks—is bleak: “if you lose ‘faith,’ in the sense this word is used in deconstruction, everything is lost. You have lost your faith in life, lost hope in the future, lost heart, and you cannot go on.”<sup>31</sup>

But that made me wonder, where is the dimensionality, the depth of experience, that gives the "under" to that "underlying faith..."? Where is the overlying, overarching dimension

---

<sup>28</sup> *Useful Unemployment*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Plastic Words*, pp. 22-26, 85, 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Demott Commentary*

<sup>31</sup> Gutting, “Deconstructing God.”

you need to speak of "life itself" without invoking the earth-wide continuous whole of "the ecosystem" with its processes of living? (T. S. Eliot's poem, which Ivan loved, asked "Where is the (capital-L) Life we have lost in living?"<sup>32</sup>) Where can one find that kind of faith, the sense of aliveness that comes with it, the conviviality of being together, breathing together (Ivan's *conspiratio*, conspiracy), pursuing autonomous action together. Ivan thought you found it by looking down, humbly and noticing that you are standing on soil, not on the earth. The first dimension that is recovered by looking down, humbly, is the moral dimension:

As philosophers, we search below our feet because our generation has lost its grounding in both soil and virtue. By virtue, we mean that shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor; we mean practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture that enhances the memories of a place.<sup>33</sup>

That's a richly dimensional notion of the good. Choices and decisions are not, as Uwe Pörksen says, "reduced to trendlines determined by data,"<sup>34</sup> but are made within one's reach, one's "habitual reach." Choices are *informed by*—not determined by—the past, history, tradition, choices made earlier by people in my past in this place, on this soil. The social dimension: My decisions are recognized and judged by others as good, good as seen by my local culture. And my decisions have a future also because my current actions "enhance the memories" available to future inhabitants of this place. Experiences on soil are thick, multi-dimensional. I don't learn from experts; I learn from attentiveness to others, to history, to my own actions, to others' reactions to my actions and so on. Hannah Arendt reminds us that "the language of the Romans ... used the words 'to live' and 'to be among men' as synonyms."<sup>35</sup> Illich thought that that sort of language, language that might permit us to live well, "has to be recovered with pains," but book after book, discussion after discussion, he kept to that work and invited others to do so too.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Where is the Life we have lost in living?*  
*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*  
*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*  
*The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries*  
*Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.*  
T. S. Eliot, "Two Choruses from the Rock"

<sup>33</sup> Declaration on Soil.

<sup>34</sup> *Plastic Words*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 7.