

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to defragmenting, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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In their book, *Are We All Cyborg's Now? Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine*, Robin Phillips and Joshua Pauling examine how our ongoing interaction with especially digital technologies could be altering our conceptions and expectations about how life should be. "Under the subtle catechesis of our machines," they ask, "do we come to see our humanity, the flesh and blood bodies that God has given us, as problems to be overcome? Do we begin to perceive the human body as merely a machine or mechanism that doesn't always work very well?" In this episode, Joshua Pauling talks with Keith Plummer about how the Christian doctrines of creation, the mystery of the incarnation, the promise of the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come can and should stabilize us in the dizzying high velocity world of technological change. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

My guest today is Josh Pauling, who with Robin Phillips, is the co-author of a book I've been enjoying and profiting from, *Are We All Cyborgs Now? Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine*, published by Basilian Media. Josh is vicar at All Saints Lutheran Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He's a classical educator and has worked in public education as a high school history teacher and coach. He's contributing editor at *Salvo* and the author of a forthcoming book titled *Education's End: It's Undoing Explained, It's Hope Reclaimed*, which will be published by Just and Sinner. When I heard an interview with Josh, I knew I wanted to read his book, and I wasn't far into the book before I thought I would really like to talk with one or both of these guys and share their thinking with our audience. So, Josh, welcome to the podcast, and thank you very much for joining me.

Joshua Paulson

Hey, it's great to talk with you, Keith.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, science fiction fans may be familiar, most likely with the term cyborg, the idea of the melding of man and machine to enhance. But there are people who are giving a lot of time, attention and money to a vision of what some may have heard of concerning posthumanism, transhumanism, enhancing human nature beyond what we know it currently as. But the title of your book is not looking toward the future so much as it's asking a question about the present, *Are We All Cyborgs Now?* Tell us a bit about the meaning of that question and how it's related to what you and Robin are doing in the book.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, sure. Great question. Yeah, exactly. As you put it, when people think of cyborgs, we think of the future, we think of science fiction. We think of things that are distant and things that we would easily see coming and be able to warn against and so forth. What we're trying to do in the book is really cause us to think more deeply in ways that make us realize that maybe we've already succumbed to being cyborgs, even if there's no chip in our brain, even if we've not implanted technology within us or merged with a machine in some tangible way. The fact that we live through screens for hours and hours a day, and the fact that we go to the screen to answer our most intimate questions, the fact that we can do things through the screen in ways that would have previously been unimaginable, really should cause us to wake up and realize that maybe we are already cyborgs in some way. That's really what we're trying to do in the book is reveal how the cyborg creep is affecting all of us, even if we don't have a brain chip in our head.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The subtitle, *Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine* is related to that idea that in some ways we may already be captivated.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, the idea of the machine, there's a long tradition of using this term in the literature to refer to a system of thoughts, an ecosystem of devices and machines that cause us to think of the template for

reality as a machine, which then causes us to think of ourselves as a machine. And that really is a big problem that a bunch of people have been warning about in the realm of the philosophy of technology for a long time. And we're trying to bring that discourse into the public sphere in a little more accessible way and tapping into this long tradition of really thinking deeply about technology and what it does to our perceptions of reality, our perceptions of ourselves, and our perceptions of others.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You write in the introduction, "This book seeks to reawaken us to these central questions while exploring how Christianity offers rich and robust answers rooted in the goodness of creation, the mystery of the incarnation, the promise of the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come." You are engaged in something of a robust, interdisciplinary endeavor here. You're dealing with anthropology, philosophy, but it's all rooted in an explicitly Christian vision of the nature of reality.

Joshua Paulson

That's exactly right. It deals with theology, anthropology, metaphysics. What we're trying to do is bring to bear all of those things on these technological questions that are so practical, that are so confusing, and that we're all struggling with. And by taking that step back or step deeper, by digging deeper, we can really develop a framework for dealing with whatever technology technological questions come in the future by grounding those discussions in anthropology, what it means to be a human being; in theology, in who God is and what he's done in creating us; and then in also truth, what we would call theories of truth or theories of knowledge epistemology. All of these things are intimately related to how we think about technological questions. In a lot of the literature, there's, again, philosophical literature, academic literature about these topics. There's literature about these topics that might deal with the new devices that are coming out or practical tips for dealing with this or that. But we've got to go deeper as well as Christians to these more foundational questions, like you said, about the nature of reality the nature of the human person, truth, and the nature of God as well.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. And in that respect, I think that the times in which we are living, though they are in some ways harrowing, there's great opportunity because what this is doing is it's really forcing the church, or it should force the church, it should provoke the church to think more deeply about what it is that we say we believe and how that relates to the technological environment that we are inhabiting.

Joshua Paulson

Yes, it's exactly right. Questions that maybe used to seem distant or irrelevant all of a sudden are very relevant and very pressing. And Christianity has the answers to those. I had a conversation with Carl Truman a while back, and I said that it's like all these technological questions are throwing up this big softball, right? Christians have the resources to hit it out of the park. You just got to put those things together in our articulation of the response and also our living out of the response. That's really important as well. This has to be embodied in local communities, churches, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Joshua Paulson

Where we are the living alternative to these technological dilemmas.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In dealing with apologetics, when I talk with students about the difference between science and scientism. Scientism being the idea that science is the only way of knowing what's true or it's real, I tell them, in some people's minds, those two things are so weird or maybe even seem as identical that if they hear criticisms of scientism, they might accuse you of being anti-scientific. And I thought about that as I was reading your introduction because you say this is not a book arguing that technology is bad. And I can imagine that when some people hear some of the cautions that you and Robin are raising and some of the criticisms that you're raising, they might think, well, this is just an anti-technology approach. What is the difference between what you're doing and being anti-technology?

Joshua Paulson

Sure. Great question. I think the difference is what I'm saying is technology is not neutral. I'm not saying that it's bad. That is such a pervasive thought that people have that technology is neutral. It's just a matter of how you use it. But really, that is a very naive, I'm sorry to say, it's just a very naive perspective. Because with even simple technologies, we don't think that way. We have that good old fashioned saying, When you have a hammer, everything looks like a... Nail. Nail, right? I mean, so even with simple technologies, we know that they have an impact on how we act and how we think. I have a workshop where I make furniture, and we host some camps for kids where we do some home ec and shop class, and I give kids hammers. After the week, when I go around my shop, I find dents where I'm not supposed to find dents. Because Well, kids have a hammer. Everything looks like a nail. If we already realize that about simple technologies, how could we not apply that same metric to complex technologies that are designed to harvest our attention that are designed for specific purposes.

Joshua Paulson

That's what we need to start with, is realizing that technology is not neutral. Once we realize that, which again, should not be a very hard thing to come to realize, then we are able to pull back the layers and to more fairly evaluate the impacts of these things. I'm certainly not denying the benefits of technology. My goodness, we're having this conversation, right? We all drove cars to get to work today. There are wonderful benefits of technology as gifts of God, but it would also be foolish to not recognize the significant trade offs that those technologies bring. That's really what we all need to do is just get past that technology as neutral mindset into realizing that technology is nudging us in directions, and that it's bringing about trade offs, and that technologies are designed objects. And especially when we think about digital technologies, we're not just talking about a hammer anymore. We're talking about an omnitool, what I call a reality-mediating mechanism that talks back. When I put the hammer back on my shelf in the workshop, it doesn't talk back. It stays there until I need it again. These digital technologies are constantly alluring us, constantly talking to us.

Joshua Paulson

They're much more immersive and interactive to the point where, I would argue, we're We're in almost a new category, right? Where they're not tools. They're reality-mediating mechanisms, they're ecosystems, they're habitats in which we live, and that has even more significant impacts on our perceptions of reality in ourselves.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, That idea, I'm glad you raised that word because I appreciated the fact that you and Robin use that word nudge, that our technologies do incline us in certain directions, both in terms of thought and action. And I think many times when people hear that or they say technology is neutral, what they mean is it isn't inherently good or evil. And you would agree with that, but you're saying it's not neutral in the sense that it doesn't direct you in certain directions. Is that fair?

Joshua Paulson

I think that's fair, yeah. And I guess there might be certain technologies that are good or evil, but generally as a concept, yes, correct. What I'm saying is that they're not neutral in the sense that they don't nudge us in a direction or that they don't have a designed purpose. Even scissors. If you try to use scissors with your left hand, well, you're going to be nudged pretty quickly to using your right-hand because they're designed for the right-hand, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

You ask in the book, "Under the subtle catechesis of our machines, do we come to see our humanity, the flesh and blood bodies that God has given us as problems to be overcome Do we begin to perceive the human body as merely a machine or a mechanism that doesn't always work very well?" And that's a very thought-provoking question in terms of how is it that our inundation and saturation with particularly digital technologies, which offer the ability to place our attention at great distance from where we are, that we might come to see our limitations. And as Kelly Kapic, who's been on the podcast, has written about in terms of the goodness of finitude, we might come to see that, well,

maybe this isn't good. This is an impediment, something to be shed, to be liberated from.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that's right. These devices and technologies are training us towards disembodiment, would be another way to put this, right? To think of ourselves as separate from our bodies, that our bodies just get in the way. This is an ancient temptation to a certain degree. Gnosticism would be a term we could throw out here, certainly. There's always been a temptation to try to transcend the body as if the body were bad. But the Christian view of the body is that it's a good. God says this is very good. Now, obviously, the Fall has some implications here for what it does to the body and how that impacts our experience of frailty and suffering and so forth. But even before the fall, the body had limits. We were finite creatures, As you mentioned, Kavic, a great resource on this. His book, *You're Only Human*, is fascinating and very helpful. Yeah, humans had limits before the fall. There's things inbuilt to the human design that we should embrace. We should embrace those limits as creatures. This is another important concept. We are creatures that are designed by a creator to be in one place at a time, to be able to focus on, attend to things in our presence.

Joshua Paulson

Those aspects of our design are not accidents, and they're not things to try to obliterate. Those are things to embrace and to realize when we're using technologies that do disembody us, to realize the inherent limitations of those technologies, like the one we're using now. This is obviously an amazing technology, and Zoom allows us to even see our facial expressions and to see our smiles and some form of eye contact, although I'm looking at a digital representation of you, not your actual eyes, which Zoom fatigue plays a role in all this, too. But anyway, my point is that once you realize what our design is as creatures of God with bodies, the unity of body and soul in the human person, that then allows us to see what the inherent weaknesses of digital technologies are. So that we can compensate for those and work with the grain of human design and realize the limitations of the technologies that we have.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The book is divided into six parts, and I really want to talk on one in particular, but just to give an idea to people what you're doing here. The first part, and what I really appreciated about the book is this, that it's not necessary to read it straight through. As you say, you can skip around. But the first part, you call "Close Encounters of a Machine Kind." And there are a number of case studies exploring how different people engage with technology. And one of the things that I loved about this part of the book was another chapter that you wrote called "Steelmanning the Amish and the Luddites: the Wisdom of Communal Discernment and counteracting Alienation." And what I loved about it was, I have often said, I think that even the Luddites were not Luddites, as people use the term, to call someone a Luddite because they offer any criticism, or in some cases, maybe even some rejections of particular technologies, as though what was driving the Luddites or the Amish was simply an antipathy to technology, just fails to take into consideration. No, they were seeking to protect and preserve things that they highly valued.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And even if one-

Joshua Paulson

Precisely.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Even if one differs with the conclusions that they drew about certain technologies, the process, I think, is admirable. What is going into the thinking, I think, is really commendable. That's not what I wanted to ask you about. I had to ask you about that because that chapter in itself, I thought, yes, this is great.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, the questions they raise are vital for us to ask. And the answers, that especially the Amish come up with, are worth considering. The types of things they ask about, what will this technology do to the home, to the family, to the community? Those are the types of questions that we need to ask. Just

one little anecdote, if I could, real quick about

Dr. Keith Plummer
Sure.

Joshua Paulson

There's this... One of the Amish books I read in preparation for that chapter, the author talked about when he would give tours to non-Amish in aspects of their community or maybe like their furniture factory or whatever. He would start the tour by saying, "How many of you have ever thought about getting rid of your TV? Or that that would be a good idea. How many of you are too distracted by your devices?" Everybody's hand would go up. He'd ask a series of questions like that, and everybody's like, Oh, yeah, that's right. Then he just simply said, "We're a community that does something about it." I thought that was a pretty effective thing. Anyway.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Oh, yes. The second part of the book and the chapters in that part, "After Humanity: Cyborg Simulations and the Eclipse of the Real," dealing with the implications and impact of virtual life. The third part, looking at how it is that there are spiritual elements. You call this the "New Spirituality of the Machine, Monsters, Gods, and Bad Bots." And that is something that I've been somewhat surprised and alarmed by just seeing in the news, how it is that more and more people are attaching spiritual significance to certain aspects of AI, even in the sense of trying to recreate deceased loved ones or a variety of other mergings of something spiritual with the technological. Yes. The fourth part, "Politics, Philosophy, and Society in a Post-Human Age," where you're looking at political and cultural consequences of the digital age. And then I'm going to skip over the fifth, because that's what I really wanted to talk with you about, the sixth is where you and Robin are doing much more in terms of looking at a biblical theology of technology as well as applying it to the living out of it individually and corporately. And you call that part "From Garden to City" Being the People of God in a Technological Age."

Dr. Keith Plummer

But the fifth part, and what I had originally told you I would really love to dig down in with you, is having to do with education. And you call part five of the book "From Pencils to Pixels: The Battle for the Future of Education." And there you look at the challenges to education that our information technologies pose, as well as the benefits as well. But I'm curious, tell us a little bit about your journey through thinking about technology as it relates to education.

Joshua Paulson

Sure. Yeah, this primarily originates in my role as a high school history teacher. For 13 years, I was a large public school, taught US history, world history, geography, a bunch of the history classes. I was on both sides of the smartphone divide, if you will. My teaching career started before smartphones existed and continued in the public school setting until 2021. I was seeing in real-time the impacts of the rollout of educational technologies and also the smart phones in students' hands. I was driven by those experiences to really dig further into technological questions. I did have a background in some philosophy and theology. I have an undergrad in Christian ministries, and I went to Reformed Theological Seminary years back in Charlotte. I know you have some connections there, so we know some of the same people there and so forth. While I was at RTS, actually, I worked at RTS Virtual, which is now called RTS Global. RTS was really on the forefront of distance education. As the internet really came onto the scene, was also on the forefront of how to incorporate digital technologies and the internet into distance education. While I was there, it was the most ironic thing that one of the main tech guys and I really struck up a friendship and started reading *Philosophers of Technology*.

Joshua Paulson

We started reading Neil Postman, Martin Heidegger, Joseph Weisbaum, a bunch of these guys that were warning about the influence of this, the impacts of these things. All the while, we were trying to navigate the realm of distance education and these new technologies that were emerging. That was in the background. Then I did change career paths. I didn't become a pastor. I became a high school history teacher. I got a teaching degree. All of those prior interests and research topics really came

back to the fore as I was seeing these things impact the public school. I saw everything from the rollout of smart boards in the classroom to iPad carts to one-to-one initiatives now where every student gets a Chromebook in the district I used to teach at starting in kindergarten. All of these things were sold as great advancements, as promises to improve education. But I was seeing the exact opposite and became quite vocal in my opposition to these things, and in many cases, refused to use them in my classroom. Then I started collecting phones long before Jonathan Haidt wrote his book about phones in the classroom. I'm grateful to see that this is picking up steam.

Joshua Paulson

But I did that before it was trendy and was seeing great benefits from that. I did it by myself in my own classroom, and then the principal the next year told me to present it to the whole school for the whole school to That's really where this comes from.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What was the reaction on the part of your students when you started collecting the phones?

Joshua Paulson

Oh, yeah. At first, lots of eye rolls and arms crossed and stuff. But I sold it to them not as a new rule, but as something we're going to do together because I care about you and I care about your education. I put my phone in the pouches. They put their phone in the pouches, and I was really proud of them. By the end of the year, they had really developed a new habit and a new practice that most of them thought it was really good for them. They need breaks from their phone, and deep down, they know that. Maybe they just need a little help in actually getting out of their pocket because none of us can resist these things that are designed with persuasive design to hack our attention. It's not their fault. It's not a willpower question. It's actually we're fighting against something much bigger than ourselves. That's really the origin story of my interest in these questions in relation to education, from seeing it all unfold in real-time in the classroom.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the thinkers that you interact with is Jacques Ellul, the French theologian, sociologist, writer of the technological society. You interact with him in your chapter called, "Avoiding the Tyranny of Technique in the Classroom." Could you tell us, when Ellul talked about technique, what did he have in mind, and how does that impact, or how can it impact, our approaches to education, and why is that problematic?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, great question. When Ellul talks about technique, he's really referring to a way we approach anything, any problem, any aspect of society. It's a way where we try to analyze it from a very rationalistic or scientific perspective, where we try to put everything, maybe to connect it back to something you said earlier, into that scientific frame, almost, where that's the one thing that matters, efficiency, quantification, data, measurability. He was really sounding the alarm in all aspects of society, that technique was coming to subsume everything from the workplace to the school to the home to the government. That was his big concern, not necessarily devices themselves or new technologies per se, but the mindset of technique that was behind them all, that all of life should be put through the meat grinder of efficiency, might be a crass way to put it. That meat grinder of efficiency just gobbles up everything. It gobbles up human ways of interacting. It gobbles up the inefficiencies of life together. It he even warned it was gobbling up education.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You write in that chapter, "Certainly there is a valid place for mastering teaching techniques, designing a well-ordered curriculum, and running a classroom efficiently, but we must maintain the human aspects of teaching and learning, which frequently transcend technique and are anything but efficient." And when I read that and this whole chapter, I don't know who is responsible for saying it, but the saying, "not everything that counts can be counted."

Joshua Paulson

Yes, that's exactly right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. And as you were saying before, when you have certain tools that focus your attention on certain things, if you have the tools for quantification, then you are going to want to quantify almost everything and assess and evaluate how well you are doing in the process of education on the basis of these measurable things.

Joshua Paulson

Exactly. And that's exactly what's happened to education, right? Everything is quantified because in large part, the computer and the related digital devices that have flowed from that, nudge us toward quantification and measurability and efficiency, which aren't the highest human goods. That's exactly right. Now, when he's writing this in the '50s, you've got to keep in mind that a lot of these things didn't exist yet. He's really warning and predicting what we've seen unfold in the years to come. But it would be fair to say that already by his time, education had become a factory system. It was built on the factory model that the goal wasn't to create or form well-rounded human beings who could think for themselves. It was really to churn out factory workers. In his age, that was the technique of education, to create this docile factory worker who could work the eight-hour shift, 12-hour shift, whatever it was, do their job and go home. But since then, obviously, we've seen the mindset of efficiency and technique continue to roll out in the educational environment with all sorts of standardized tests and more and more assessments and quantifying every aspect of the educational process, all the while forgetting that these things we're measuring aren't things, that they're humans, right? Whole persons.

Dr. Keith Plummer

How do we know what is worth assessing and how? And what are some things that we can't assess in this technique-like way?

Joshua Paulson

That's a great question. I think this would force us to really think more carefully about our course objectives and the objectives that we have for each lesson. What are we really trying to accomplish and how is that measurable? Some aspects of education, especially in the intellectual realm, are measurable by tests and essays and things like that. If we're talking about information, But when we're talking about more of the human formation side, that's going to be much harder to measure on a sheet of paper. That's where I think some of these older measures and techniques of education, if I can use the word technique, maybe methods would be better, You're going to flip there, right? I'm getting absorbed by the machine. Older methods of assessment, the oral exam, the way that the teacher and the student used to have a closer relationship, a lot of one-on-one conversations. Those types of things allow for a more accurate measure of the full person, where it's not just about information exchange, but about the formation and the development of the person. Again, that requires a relationship that many teachers in our current system cannot even attempt to have because they have too many students or they're too busy.

Joshua Paulson

There'll be all sorts of ways to flush this out, but it requires us to really rethink the current paradigm of education that most of us have experienced even the conventional approach in the last 50 to 100 years.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. And particularly Christian education, whether we're talking about of children or higher ed, that will use that language of the importance of the person and discipling and so forth. There are some real challenges in those contexts to really put feet to that. I mentioned that you are a classical educator as well. And I wanted to ask you because you say classical education is itself susceptible to adopting technique. I just wanted to know, in what ways do you see that as a temptation, particularly as it relates to a classical approach.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, I think here the temptation is to think if we just implement this better curriculum, if we just adopt this technique of teaching Latin or the classics or the great books model or whatever, that then

automatically that's going to solve our problems. Then still, we are skipping over the human formation that still is going to be slow, it's still going to be inefficient, it's still going to require one-on-one conversations and a real relationship of trust between the teacher and the student. I think, especially as classical education is really expanding and growing rapidly, there is a temptation toward quantification and technique. Some of that, I understand. When you have a bigger school, you do need to be more and have more policies and things like that. But as that's happening, again, we do need to keep these things in mind to ensure that we're not just recreating a parallel series of techniques that end up in the long run being a factory model in and of itself. We've got to stay true to our core to avoid that temptation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's pause here for a few messages, and then on the other side of that, I want to pick up with how it is that some of Ellul's thinking was influential on another thinker, whom you've already mentioned, Neil Postman and *Technopoly*.

Ben Best, co-host

Cairn University invites pastors and lay leaders to our annual Church Leaders Conference. Join us on Thursday, March fifth, for a day of encouragement, fellowship, and sessions designed to equip you for effective leadership. This year's topic is recognizing, resisting, and recovering from gospel drift, which will be addressed by keynote speaker, Jared C. Wilson. Conference registration includes a copy of his book, *Lest We Drift*. Don't wait. Find more information and register today at cairn.edu/clc. That's cairn.edu/clc.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back speaking with Joshua Paulson, who is the co-author, along with Robin Phillips, of the book *Are We All Cyborgs? Now, Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine* by Basilian Media. And when we left off, we were talking about Jacques Ellul's concept of technique and his warnings about it with respect to education. And you mentioned in the chapter that we were discussing that Neil Postman's *Technopoly* was drawing significantly upon Ellul in many respects. When Postman talked about *Technopoly*, What is it that he had in mind, and how does that relate to education?

Joshua Paulson

When Postman uses the term technology, he's referring to what he called a stage of civilization, where the control of industrial resources, the reform of financial institutions, and the reorganization of social systems are all based on the findings of technologists and engineers. You can see the parallels there to efficiency and technique, that everything is being subjective to this one way of thinking. He was concerned that that, as Ellul was years before, that that was being applied to education in the way that education was being viewed as primarily information exchange, as the creation of a product, the making of a product for economic efficiency, or the benefit of the financial well-being of an individual. Postman found that those goals of education were too shallow to sustain a meaningful education. He really built on a Ellul's framework and popularized in a very popular way and tried to offer alternatives in the realm of education. We've got to remember, Postman was an educator. He was a professor and teacher and was very much involved in a lot of the cutting-edge educational theories of the time. He was interacting with Paulo Freire and the work that Freire was doing with literacy in Latin America.

Joshua Paulson

He was writing all sorts of articles and books on education. He was right on the front lines, really pushing people to try to recover a more humane education, as I call it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In that chapter, you drawing on some of Postman's thinking, you offer about five or six pieces of counsel for how it is that we can resist just yielding to technique. One of them, you say, is be a technological skeptic. Another one is don't just teach how to use technology, also teach how it uses us. There is a lot of discussion about the importance of media literacy, information literacy, the necessity to teach students how to discern true information from misinformation and so forth. But you're saying that that's not in itself enough, particularly from a Christian standpoint. Is that so?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that's right. And this gets back to what we already talked about with realizing that technologies aren't neutral. That requires us to pull back the curtain a little bit and think more intentionally about not just, for example, the computer or the internet, not just to ask questions to get answers from it, but more so to ask questions about how it's forming and shaping us. And Postman was already suggesting this about the computer itself, because in his day, it was the computer that was getting rolled out in educational spaces. He wanted students not to be taught the latest skills of using the computer per se, but more so the deeper questions of what the computer is doing to us, how does the computer actually work, what are its logical principles that it functions on, or does it even function on any principles at all? It's the same types of questions today that are very relevant when it comes to AI. I think there's also an inherent problem with the idea of teaching technological literacy, per se, in the sense of, Oh, you need to know these skills of how to use this device or that device, because the devices are changing.

Joshua Paulson

We don't know what skills will be palatable in a few years. And further or more, many of them are very intuitive to use. If you sit down on an afternoon, you can figure out how to use many programs or devices without a problem. Many children know how to use a smartphone better than their parents do. The idea I would challenge in itself to begin with, but what will be relevant? Careful thinking, wisdom, the types of things that a timeless education will cover, right? Yes. Those are always going to be relevant, and maybe even more so in the AI age.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Listening to that, I'm thinking the selling point or the marketing point of so much of, particularly higher education, is this is what you can do with this when you get it in terms of vocationally. And certainly there, I think that you I would probably say there is an appropriate place for that. But if that becomes maybe the sole consideration, then the kinds of questions that you're saying are important are going to be devalued because, well, that's not practical.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, there's certainly a place for directed vocational training or degrees that are related to certain professions and careers. But if you think about what happens with many college graduates today, my goodness, the percentage of students that can't find a job in their major is very high. Yes. Many of them change major several times and change career several times. I think I'm on my third career now. The idea that you have to get this degree because it has practical benefits in your earning power or career is really a bill of goods that we can no longer sell to students. Honestly, as I went longer in the public schools, I was seeing my students start to see through this promise. Many of them were seeing their friends not get a job in the degree they got. Many of them were coming home and living in the basement and things like that. Then they feel jaded about the whole system. They did the right thing. They got the good grades in high school. They had the great resume of, Oh, I was the leader of this club and this club. I played sports. I was on the Honor Society.

Joshua Paulson

I did AP classes. And then they get their degree, and then the promise doesn't materialize. I honestly started to tell my students, I can't promise you that if you get good grades, that you're going to make a lot of money and do better than somebody who doesn't. I cannot promise you that in the 21st century. So I'm not going to promise you that. Instead, I'm going to talk about things like human formation, developing you as a person, which always has value, even if it doesn't have monetary value.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, another piece of advice that you offer there with respect to resisting technique in terms of education is carve out spaces and times for restful reflection. You say that this is important both for the teachers as well as for students. Say a bit about that because whether it be on the elementary, secondary school, higher education level, sometimes things are so packed that the restful reflection seems to be luxurious, but you're saying this is an essential part of education. Why?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that's right. You're closing my heart rate up to go up right now just thinking about all the stress coming up with the school year and everything. Oh, my goodness. We used to joke with colleagues at the high school that, okay, basically you take a deep breath and then you go under for the first semester. You come up for a quick little reprieve at Thanksgiving, you take another breath, then you come up at Christmas, and you take another breath, then you come up at Christmas, and then you take another breath. You go down under the water all the way to spring break, and then you got one little... It is. You know it better than I do. At any level, it's a rat race. We're so busy. We've crammed our schedule so full. Teachers and students, administrators, everybody's in the same boat. The idea of restful learning just boggles the mind. But this is at its core what education was historically. Joseph Pieper has the great book *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. In the book, he talks about the word *schola*, school, scholar, both in Latin and Greek means leisure. When we say school, originally, what it meant was leisure, that this was the opportunity to reflect, to develop yourself as a person, to be a liberated person, a free person, was to have the time to think about ultimate questions, to develop yourself as a person in all the various capacities of wisdom, virtue and intellect.

Joshua Paulson

A lot of times, first day of class with my high schoolers, I would tell them this little snippet of what school actually means, that it means leisure, and they would just, No, it doesn't. School is work. School is a drag. School is boring. School is this. School is that. But at the very least, it caused them to think a little bit. It subverted the way they were thinking about education. In any classroom, you need to try to reclaim those moments of *schola*, of leisure, where you are deeply engaging with a text, with a topic, with each other in a way that isn't bound to bells or schedules. We need to find ways to reclaim that and recover it. That's going to look different depending on what level you're at, depending on what type of school you're in. Now, I teach in a classical conversations co-op community. With my seniors, we have six subjects that we have all day to cover them, and roughly, we're supposed to do an hour each. But if the discussion is going well, I just let it keep rolling. Then we just adjust our times for the rest of them, and then we compensate the next week.

Joshua Paulson

There's that flexibility there. There's that *schola* that allows us to really get into good discussions. But yeah, there's got to be ways that people can recover that in some ways, Both, like you said, for the teacher and the student. That might mean also habits of the home, right? Yeah. Managing the habits of the home to allow for that *schola* to occur in the evenings. That means maybe there's not as much homework, maybe there's not 27 other activities that students do. Yeah, things like that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It is so easy. I know from the teaching end, and this is something that I've got to restrain myself on, I got to get through the material.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's easy to lose sight of what you're talking about.

Joshua Paulson

That's right, yeah. Or even the way we talk about it, I have to cover the material. We're actually uncovering truth. We're discovering truth. We're not covering it up. It's like- Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Are you familiar with the book *The Slow Professor*?

Joshua Paulson

No.

Dr. Keith Plummer

A former dean had given it to me to read some years back. It's by Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, and it's called *The Slow Professor*. When I was reading your reflections there, made me think of a quotation from them. They say, "Slow professors advocate the liberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury, but is crucial to what we do."

Joshua Paulson

Wow, that's really good, especially in this age of rapid acceleration, where everything is at our fingertips. There's an immediacy to everything to allow for that slowness, the stillness, the attention, the attunement. Those are really important things we need to develop in our students and in ourselves.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Another chapter that you have in this section of the book is called "Reclaiming the Classroom as Sanctified Space: Human Formation Away from the Screen." And this is a chapter that follows one by your co-author, Robin Phillips, called ChatGPT in the Classroom, in which he makes a case for a limited use of ChatGPT and AI. And you say in the beginning of your chapter, I might be a bit more pessimistic than he is about bringing large language models into the classroom, even in the context of teaching information literacy. Now, I just want to ask you a bit about that, especially now in light of all that is going on with people are returning back to school and faculties are just trying to figure out what are we going to do about this, the fact that AI is out there. Tell me a little bit about your thinking. Why is some of the the restraint there?

Joshua Paulson

Sure. Well, this is something I'm still thinking about and writing about, learning about, and always getting ideas from others. I don't have the final word. I've got some articles coming out about this topic, specifically in the upcoming year. But like you were saying, as teachers come back, there's been a lot of changes, even this last summer. ChatGPT now has a study mode option in their interface. That's to, again, nudge students toward is using this for school, right? Yes. Google Classroom also has embedded Gemini into Google Classroom and is including AI tools in its normal product. My goodness, how many schools use Google Classroom? I know my district did. So these things are getting more and more embedded into the infrastructure of schooling. And so, yes, this is more relevant this year than last year than the year before. And it's not coming, it's here, right? So my hesitations with bringing that into the classroom, I think, remain. Robin's point is that you can bring it in as a tool of inquiry and show its weaknesses, and also model perhaps its appropriate uses. I'm not saying there's no appropriate use. I just think because of the nature of student brain development, primarily at that level, that maybe it's like asking them to wield a sword they can't wield yet.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yup

Joshua Paulson

There has to be a certain level of expertise and knowledge in the individual user to be able to implement it in a way that allows you to see where it's wrong and things like that. That would be, I think, a much longer discussion, But I think, again, the classroom needs to retain that pristine simplicity and low tech core. One author about this topic recently said, "If a stylist was good enough For Plato, it's good enough for me." Because, again, if education is at its core, a process of human formation, we've been doing that a long time before these devices.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, I was thinking about an analogy today in terms of if you give a tool like this to someone without the core that you were talking about, it seems somewhat like giving a motorcycle to someone who never learned how to ride a bicycle. Because there are certain things that you learn at the... Well, I mean, even that I was talking with someone else, a colleague, and she pointed out, well, even before the bicycle, usually there's a tricycle, there's training wheels, there's a bicycle, then there's the motorcycle, if you want to ride a motorcycle. There are things that you learn on those lower levels that you implement with that more powerful machine. But to just give that machine to someone who has

not mastered balance or anything like that just seems to be a recipe for disaster.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that's a really good analogy. One I like to use with my students is that having AI do your schoolwork is like watching a robot lift weights for you. You get no benefit from it, and it would just be weird, right? Yeah. But yeah, that's exactly right. Without the capacities and the skills developed, these things are perhaps more dangerous than they are beneficial.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Tell us what you mean when you talk about reclaiming the classroom as sanctified space, particularly, what do you have in mind when you say sanctified space?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, that it should be set apart in some way, that when you enter the threshold of a classroom or an educational space, whether that's a part of your house or at a beautiful university or at a school building that looks like a factory, whatever it is, there should be something about the threshold, something about the entrance to the space that communicates this is a different space. This is a space where something unique occurs. I think one of the clearest ways to do that in our current environment is to remove the technologies from the space. The screens that are so prominent in the rest of our lives, by removing them or making them less prominent in the classroom, we are sending a message about this space, that it's different and that it's humane, and that what matters here is our full presence with one another.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the things that you mention in this chapter that I really, really took to heart is the importance of engaging the body and embracing physicality as part of education. You say there, learning is not solely a mental activity. You talk about a practice or a saying, *Solvitur ambulando*.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, so this phrase has a long tradition. Basically, it means "it is solved by walking." A lot of the philosophers use this phrase. I believe Augustine did. You may know more of the history there than I do, but the idea here is that by engaging the body in some way, walking per se, you open up a space for the brain to engage in a different way. Now, this would be true primarily for non-attentional tasks, automated tasks, we might say, like walking, where you can engage in thought while doing the other task. There are certain tasks that allow that to happen. If we're talking about attentional tasks, then we cannot multitask. Multitasking is a myth. But walking and thinking, historically, have had a wonderful tradition of going together. Even if you think about Jesus and his disciples, what is he doing? Well, they're following him. He's walking and teaching. There's a great tradition of that. Just personally, I can think of many examples of that in my own life with my wife. Some of our best conversations where we were really able to come to a new consensus or a new perspective on something was when we were running or when we were walking.

Joshua Paulson

It freed up the thought process in a new way instead of staring at each other. That would be one way that this idea of embracing the body or engaging the body can be manifest. If I could throw in another way, the concept of focal practices I think here is really important. This is a concept of Albert Borgmann that we develop in the book as well. I've been thinking more about it lately, but so many of the aspects of education are really the development and honing of focal practices. A practice where you have to be fully attuned in your body and in your mind to the task at hand. Borgmann gives examples like music, playing an instrument, a great example of the unity of mind and body. But even writing is a focal practice. You have to engage your mind and your hand, your body. So many of the aspects of a traditional education are focal practices. It's time to think about what we're talking about here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You also mentioned mention reading real books as a way of embracing physicality. Venture, if you will, into why you say this is so. Because I can hear where someone's saying, Well, but if I've got my

screen, I'm still engaged physically in some way. I'm using my eyes to read it, and I'm holding it in my hand. So what is it about reading real books that is more of a way of embracing physicality?

Joshua Paulson

Well, first off, the words on the screen are there, and then they're not. They move in their location, and then eventually, they disappear when the screen is off or you click off the window or whatever it might be. Whereas the physical book, they are always there on your bookshelf. So there is a different type of physicality that one is engaging with with the actual written text. Furthermore, there's also just a lot of brain research on this, that engaging with physical books actually engages the brain in a different way because your brain creates a mental map of the book and the pages. Whereas when you're scrolling on a screen, there's no fixed location of the words, if that makes sense, in the same way that there is in a book. There's also studies about this when it comes to writing notes by hand versus writing on a computer. The note takers by hand tend to retain things better than the ones on the screen for the same reasons. Those would be some reasons there. Robin also develops in the book in this chapter called "Scrolls to Screens," a wonderful goes to the history of books and as a technology and how that value of the printed book or even before the printed book, the the manuscript book, like the medieval monks and the scribes that would write these by hand.

Joshua Paulson

There was such value in those possessions in the way that a screen-based book, it's just not there. It's cheap in some way.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. And that is another area where there is just increasing tension because the data is saying one thing, and then in terms of cost, convenience, and so forth.

Joshua Paulson

A little revenge, technique and efficiency.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. But I know someone who made me really think about this, Nicolas Carr.

Joshua Paulson

Yes. Yes, exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What he was writing about *The Shallows*, Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*. The data is there, and oftentimes it seems as though it is overlooked or ignored because it's--The data, in many respects, is inconvenient.

Joshua Paulson

It's true. If factory model schooling is the model, that's exactly right. It's very inconvenient. Yeah, so for example, at my school, they were moving to digital textbooks. Man, I tried to I kept a classroom set and we tried to use them as long as we could. But some schools are now going back to printed textbooks because they're willing to consider the data. That's an uphill climb, right? You've got to be willing to make the sacrifice. And that's Yeah, the system of public education, I spent time in it. There's many good people in it, but it's just such a big system that's just become beholden to technique and efficiency in so many ways. It's just so hard. It's such an uphill battle to do what's really best for students. It's a challenge.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, as we're winding down, I did make mention of your forthcoming book, *Education's End: It's Undoing, Explained, It's Hope, Reclaimed*. I would imagine that you're going to be elaborating on more of some of the things you've been talking about here. But if you want, could you tell us a little bit about what we can expect in that volume?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, sure. Thanks for the opportunity to share. This book really is at my experience in the public schools, and through that lens of first-hand experience, looking at cultural issues that emerge in the classroom. The first half of the book is looking at diagnosing the problem. In my subtitle, this is the *It's Undoing Explained*. I'm explaining the undoing of education, the end, the failure of modern education. We're looking at educational philosophy. We're looking at the roots of modern public schooling and why it fails. It's because its roots are wrong and has a wrong view of man, a wrong view of God, and a wrong view of truth. Then I also look at, as I said, the cultural issues that manifest in the classroom. I have a chapter on issues of sex and gender. I have a chapter on race. I have a chapter on technology. All of the types of issues that we see just being warred about in our culture are also taking place in the classroom. I talk about that. Then the second half of the book, I offer a solution. This is the *It's Hope, Reclaimed* part of the subtitle. The solution I really put forward is to reclaim education in its classical tradition and also the importance of developing a strong family culture and a strong church culture, that when church, school, and family are united in some way, we have a much better defense against the things we're seeing in our culture.

Joshua Paulson

It's diagnosis and cure both in the book and really looking and looking forward to getting that out and sharing with people.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, thank you. I'm looking forward to that. Is that going to be 2026?

Joshua Paulson

It should be out later this year, 2025.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Oh, great.

Joshua Paulson

We're getting close.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, hopefully we can have you back and talk about that.

Joshua Paulson

That'd be great.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And one other thing that I mentioned in my introduction of you, I wanted to let people know about *Salvo*. I remember when *Salvo* started. Oh, yeah. You're a contributing editor for *Salvo*. Would you just say a few words about what that publication is and what it's seeking to do.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, great. *Salvo* is a publication of the Fellowship of St. James, which also publishes *Touchstone* magazine, which readers may be familiar with. Both magazines are really putting forward a mere Christianity in the public square. *Touchstone* is more theological and philosophical. *Salvo* is really geared towards the cultural issues we're facing. Its tagline is Sex, Society, and Science. We're engaging in all the hot button issues in those realms and beyond. We're doing so from a historic Christian perspective. We've got great writers from the Catholic tradition, from the Lutheran tradition, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, all across the spectrum on these issues where we do have a common voice, where we can be putting forward a voice in the public square. It's a little edgy at times. It's geared maybe towards a younger audience, which is good. We're not afraid of being edgy, saying hard things, and engaging in a lot of the challenges and discussions that young people are having a day. It's definitely worth following and reading. We're putting out some good stuff.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And by chance, do you have a website for that?

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, sure. That's going to be Salvomag, S-A-L-V-O-M-A-G. Salvomag. Com.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great.

Joshua Paulson

Yeah, we have a blog there. We publish online articles periodically, and then it's a quarterly magazine in print as well.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, thank you for that. Well, the book that we have been discussing, which I hope many will take up and read, is *Are We All Cyborgs Now? Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine*. And that is authored by Joshua Pauling, with whom I've been speaking, and his co-author, Robin Phillips, and published by Basilian Media. Thank you again, Josh, so much. This has been a delight. Really grateful for your time, for your reflection, and looking forward to what's coming next from you.

Joshua Paulson

Thank you, Keith. It's an honor to speak with you today.

Ben Best, co-host

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