

## Chapter 1 A MINIMAL SOLUTION

Around the time I started working on this chapter, a columnist for the New York Post published an op-ed titled “How I Kicked the Smartphone Addiction—and You Can Too.” His secret? He disabled notifications for 112 different apps on his iPhone. “It’s relatively easy to retake control,” he optimistically concludes. These types of articles are common in the world of technology journalism. The author discovers that his relationship with his digital tools has become dysfunctional. Alarmed, he deploys a clever life hack, then reports enthusiastically that things seem much better. I’m always skeptical about these quick-fix tales. In my experience covering these topics, it’s hard to permanently reform your digital life through the use of tips and tricks alone. The problem is that small changes are not enough to solve our big issues with new technologies. The underlying behaviors we hope to fix are ingrained in our culture, and, as I argued in the previous chapter, they’re backed by powerful psychological forces that empower our base instincts. To reestablish control, we need to move beyond tweaks and instead rebuild our relationship with technology from scratch, using our deeply held values as a foundation. The New York Post columnist cited above, in other words, should look beyond the notification settings on his 112 apps and ask the more important question of why he uses so many apps in the first place. What he needs—what all of us who struggle with these issues need—is a philosophy of technology use, something that covers from the ground up which digital tools we allow into our life, for what reasons, and under what constraints. In the absence of this introspection, we’ll be left struggling in a whirlwind of addictive and appealing cyber-trinkets, vainly hoping that the right mix of ad hoc hacks will save us. As I mentioned in the introduction, I have one such philosophy to propose: Digital Minimalism A philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else. The so-called digital minimalists who follow this philosophy constantly perform implicit cost-benefit analyses. If a new technology offers little more than a minor diversion or trivial convenience, the minimalist will ignore it. Even when a new technology promises to support something the minimalist values, it must still pass a stricter test: Is this the best way to use technology to support this value? If the answer is no, the minimalist will set to work trying to optimize the tech, or search out a better option. By working backward from their deep values to their technology choices, digital minimalists transform these innovations from a source of distraction into tools to support a life well lived. By doing so, they break the spell that has made so many people feel like they’re losing control to their screens. Notice, this minimalist philosophy contrasts starkly with the

maximalist philosophy that most people deploy by default—a mind-set in which any potential for benefit is enough to start using a technology that catches your attention. A maximalist is very uncomfortable with the idea that anyone might miss out on something that's the least bit interesting or valuable. Indeed, when I first started writing publicly about the fact that I've never used Facebook, people in my professional circles were aghast for exactly this reason. "Why do I need to use Facebook?" I would ask. "I can't tell you exactly," they would respond, "but what if there's something useful to you in there that you're missing?" This argument sounds absurd to digital minimalists, because they believe that the best digital life is formed by carefully curating their tools to deliver massive and unambiguous benefits. They tend to be incredibly wary of low-value activities that can clutter up their time and attention and end up hurting more than they help. Put another way: minimalists don't mind missing out on small things; what worries them much more is diminishing the large things they already know for sure make a good life good. To make these abstract ideas more concrete, let's consider some real-world examples of digital minimalists I uncovered in my research on this emerging philosophy. For some of these minimalists, the requirement that a new technology strongly supports deep values led to the rejection of services and tools that our culture commonly believes to be mandatory. Tyler, for example, originally joined the standard social media services for the standard reasons: to help his career, to keep him connected, and to provide entertainment. Once Tyler embraced digital minimalism, however, he realized that although he valued all three of these goals, his compulsive use of social networks offered at best minor benefits, and did not qualify as the best way to use technology for these purposes. So he quit all social media to pursue more direct and effective ways to help his career, connect with other people, and be entertained. I met Tyler roughly a year after his minimalist decision to leave social media. He was clearly excited by how his life had changed during this period. He started volunteering near his home, he exercises regularly, he's reading three to four books a month, he began to learn to play the ukulele, and he told me that now that his phone is no longer glued to his hand, he's closer than he has ever been with his wife and kids. On the professional side, the increased focus he achieved after leaving these services earned him a promotion. "Some of my work clients have noticed a change in me and they will ask what I am doing differently," he told me. "When I tell them I quit social media, their response is 'I wish I could do that, but I just can't.' The reality, however, is that they literally have no good reason to be on social media!" As Tyler is quick to admit, he can't completely attribute all of these good things to his specific decision to quit social media. In theory, he could have still learned the ukulele or spent more time with his wife and kids while maintaining a Facebook account. His decision to leave these services, however, was about more than a tweak to his digital habits; it was

a symbolic gesture that reinforced his new commitment to the minimalist philosophy of working backward from your deeply held values when deciding how to live your life. Adam provides another good example of this philosophy leading to the rejection of a technology that we've been told is fundamental. Adam runs a small business, and the ability to remain connected to his employees is important for his livelihood. Recently, however, he became worried about the example he was setting for his nine- and thirteen year-old kids. He could talk to them about the importance of experiencing life beyond a glowing screen, he realized, but the message wouldn't stick until they saw him demonstrating this behavior in his own life. So he did something radical: he got rid of his smartphone and replaced it with a basic flip phone. "I have never had a better teachable moment in my life," he told me about his decision. "My kids know my business depends on a smart device and saw how much I used it, and here I was giving it up?! I was able to clearly explain why, and they got it!" As Adam admits, the loss of his smartphone made certain things in his work life more annoying. In particular, he relies heavily on text messages to coordinate with his staff, and he soon relearned how hard it is to type on the little plastic buttons of an old-fashioned cell phone. But Adam is a digital minimalist, which means maximizing convenience is prioritized much lower than using technology to support his values. As a father, teaching his kids an important lesson about embracing life beyond the screen was far more important than faster typing. Not all digital minimalists end up completely rejecting common tools. For many, the core question of "is this the best way to use technology to support this value?" leads them to carefully optimize services that most people fiddle with mindlessly. Michal, for example, decided her obsession with online media was causing more harm than good. In response, she restricted her digital information intake to a pair of email newsletter subscriptions and a handful of blogs that she checks "less than once a week." She told me that these carefully selected feeds still satisfy her craving for stimulating ideas and information without dominating her time and toying with her mood. Another digital minimalist named Charles told me a similar story. He had been a Twitter addict before adopting this philosophy. He has since quit that service and instead receives his news through a curated collection of online magazines that he checks once a day in the afternoon. He told me that he's better informed than he was during his Twitter days while also now thankfully freed of the addictive checking and refreshing that Twitter encourages in its users. Digital minimalists are also adept at stripping away superfluous features of new technologies to allow them to access functions that matter while avoiding unnecessary distraction. Carina, for example, is on the executive council of a student organization that uses a Facebook group to coordinate its activities. To prevent this service from exploiting her attention every time she logs on for council business, she reduced

her set of friends down to only the fourteen other people on the executive council and then unfollowed them. This preserves her ability to coordinate on the Facebook group while at the same time keeping her newsfeed empty. Emma found a different approach to a similar end when she discovered that she could bookmark the Facebook notifications screen, allowing her to jump straight to the page that shows posts from a graduate student group she follows—bypassing the service’s most distracting features. Blair did something similar: bookmarking the Facebook events page so she could check on upcoming community events while bypassing “[all the] junk that Facebook is made up of.” Blair told me that keeping up with local events through this bookmarked page takes about five minutes, once or twice a week. Carina and Emma report similarly minuscule times spent using the service. The average Facebook user, by contrast, uses the company’s products a little over fifty minutes per day. These optimizations might seem small, but they yield a major difference in these digital minimalists’ daily lives. A particularly heartwarming example of digital minimalism unlocking new value is the story of Dave, a creative director and father of three. After embracing minimalism, Dave reduced his persistent social media use down to only a single service, Instagram, which he felt offered significant benefits to his deep interest in art. In true minimalist fashion, however, Dave didn’t settle for simply deciding to “use” Instagram; he instead thought hard about how best to integrate this tool into his life. In the end, he settled on posting one picture every week of whatever personal art project he happens to be working on. “It’s a great way for me to have a visual archive of my projects,” he explained. He also follows only a small number of accounts, all of which belong to artists whose work inspires him—making the experience of checking his feed both fast and meaningful. The reason I like Dave’s story, however, is what was enabled by his decision to significantly cut back on how much he uses these services. As Dave explained to me, his own father wrote him a handwritten note every week during his freshman year of college. Still touched by this gesture, Dave began a habit of drawing a new picture every night to place in his oldest daughter’s lunchbox. His two youngest children watched this ritual with interest. When they became old enough for lunchboxes, they were excited to start receiving their daily drawings as well. “Fast forward a couple of years, and I’m spending a decent chunk of time every night doing three drawings!” Dave told me with obvious pride. “This wouldn’t have been possible if I didn’t protect how I spend my time.”

## THE PRINCIPLES OF DIGITAL MINIMALISM

So far in this chapter, I’ve argued that the best way to fight the tyranny of the digital in your life is to embrace a philosophy of technology use based in your deeply held values. I then proposed digital minimalism as one such philosophy, and provided examples of it in action. Before I can ask you to experiment with digital minimalism in your own life, however, I must first provide you with a more thorough explanation for why it works. My argument for this

philosophy's effectiveness rests on the following three core principles: Principle #1: Clutter is costly. Digital minimalists recognize that cluttering their time and attention with too many devices, apps, and services creates an overall negative cost that can swamp the small benefits that each individual item provides in isolation. Principle #2: Optimization is important. Digital minimalists believe that deciding a particular technology supports something they value is only the first step. To truly extract its full potential benefit, it's necessary to think carefully about how they'll use the technology. Principle #3: Intentionality is satisfying. Digital minimalists derive significant satisfaction from their general commitment to being more intentional about how they engage with new technologies. This source of satisfaction is independent of the specific decisions they make and is one of the biggest reasons that minimalism tends to be immensely meaningful to its practitioners. The validity of digital minimalism is self-evident once you accept these three principles. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to proving them true.

#### AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #1: THOREAU'S NEW ECONOMICS

Near the end of March in 1845, Henry David Thoreau borrowed an ax and walked into the woods near Walden Pond. He felled young white pine trees, which he hewed into studs and rafters and floorboards. Using more borrowed tools, he notched mortise and tenon joints and assembled these pieces into the frame of a modest cabin. Thoreau was not hurried in these efforts. Each day he brought with him a lunch of bread and butter wrapped in newspaper, and after eating his meal he would read the wrapping. He found time during this leisurely construction process to take detailed notes on the nature that surrounded him. He observed the properties of the late season ice on the pond and the fragrance of the pine pitch. One morning while soaking a hickory wedge in the cold pond water, he saw a striped snake slide into the pond and lay still on the bottom. He watched it for over a quarter of an hour. In July, Thoreau moved into the cabin where he then lived for the next two years. In the book *Walden*, he wrote about this experience, famously describing his motivation as follows: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Over the ensuing decades, as Thoreau's ideas diffused through pop culture and people became less likely to confront his actual text, his experiment at Walden Pond has taken on a poetic tinge. (Indeed, the passion-seeking boarding school students in 1989's *Dead Poets Society* open their secret poetry reading meetings by reciting the "deliberate living" quote from *Walden*.) Thoreau, we imagine, was seeking to be transformed by the subjective experience of living deliberately—planning to walk out of the woods changed by transcendence. There's truth to this interpretation, but it misses a whole other side to Thoreau's experiment. He had also been working out a new theory of economics that attempted to push back against the

worst dehumanizing effects of industrialization. To help validate his theory, he needed more data, and his time spent by the pond was designed in large part to become a source of this needed information. It's important for our purposes to understand this more pragmatic side to *Walden*, as Thoreau's often overlooked economic theory provides a powerful justification for our first principle of minimalism: that more can be less. ■ ■ ■ The first and longest chapter of *Walden* is titled "Economy." It contains many of Thoreau's signature poetic flourishes about nature and the human condition. It also, however, contains a surprising number of bland expense tables, recording costs down to a fraction of a cent, such as the following:

House	\$28.12 ½	Farm	one year	Food	eight months
Clothing, etc.,	eight months	Oil, etc.,	eight months	In all	14.72 ½ 8.74 8.40 ¾
2.00	\$61.99 ¾	Thoreau's purpose in these tables is to capture precisely (not poetically or philosophically) how much it cost to support his life at <i>Walden</i> Pond—a lifestyle that, as he argues at length in this first chapter, satisfies all the basic human needs: food, shelter, warmth, and so on. Thoreau then contrasts these costs with the hourly wages he could earn with his labor to arrive at the final value he cared most about: How much of his time must be sacrificed to support his minimalist lifestyle? After plugging in the numbers gathered during his experiment, he determined that hiring out his labor only one day per week would be sufficient. This magician's trick of shifting the units of measure from money to time is the core novelty of what the philosopher Frédéric Gros calls Thoreau's "new economics," a theory that builds on the following axiom, which Thoreau establishes early in <i>Walden</i> : "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." This new economics offers a radical rethinking of the consumerist culture that began to emerge in Thoreau's time. Standard economic theory focuses on monetary outcomes. If working one acre of land as a farmer earns you \$1 a year in profit, and working sixty acres earns you \$60, then you should, if it's at all possible, work the sixty acres—it produces strictly more money. Thoreau's new economics considers such math woefully incomplete, as it leaves out the cost in life required to achieve that extra \$59 in monetary profit. As he notes in <i>Walden</i> , working a large farm, as many of his Concord neighbors did, required large, stressful mortgages, the need to maintain numerous pieces of equipment, and endless, demanding labor. He describes these farmer neighbors as "crushed and smothered under [their] load" and famously lumps them into the "mass of men lead[ing] lives of quiet desperation." Thoreau then asks what benefits these worn-down farmers receive from the extra profit they eke out. As he proved in his <i>Walden</i> experiment, this extra work is not enabling the farmers to escape savage conditions: Thoreau was able to satisfy all of his basic needs quite comfortably with the equivalent of one day of work per week. What these farmers are actually gaining from all the life they sacrifice is slightly nicer stuff: venetian blinds, a			

better quality copper pot, perhaps a fancy wagon for traveling back and forth to town more efficiently. When analyzed through Thoreau's new economics, this exchange can come across as ill conceived. Who could justify trading a lifetime of stress and backbreaking labor for better blinds? Is a nicer-looking window treatment really worth so much of your life? Similarly, why would you add hours of extra labor in the fields to obtain a wagon? It's true that it takes more time to walk to town than to ride in a wagon, Thoreau notes, but these walks still likely require less time than the extra work hours needed to afford the wagon. It's exactly these types of calculations that lead Thoreau to observe sardonically: "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, house, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of." Thoreau's new economics was developed in an industrial age, but his basic insights apply just as well to our current digital context. The first principle of digital minimalism presented earlier in this chapter states that clutter is costly. Thoreau's new economics helps explain why. When people consider specific tools or behaviors in their digital lives, they tend to focus only on the value each produces. Maintaining an active presence on Twitter, for example, might occasionally open up an interesting new connection or expose you to an idea you hadn't heard before. Standard economic thinking says that such profits are good, and the more you receive the better. It therefore makes sense to clutter your digital life with as many of these small sources of value as you can find, much as it made sense for the Concord farmer to cultivate as many acres of land as he could afford to mortgage. Thoreau's new economics, however, demands that you balance this profit against the costs measured in terms of "your life." How much of your time and attention, he would ask, must be sacrificed to earn the small profit of occasional connections and new ideas that is earned by cultivating a significant presence on Twitter? Assume, for example, that your Twitter habit effectively consumes ten hours per week. Thoreau would note that this cost is almost certainly way too high for the limited benefits it returns. If you value new connections and exposure to interesting ideas, he might argue, why not adopt a habit of attending an interesting talk or event every month, and forcing yourself to chat with at least three people while there? This would produce similar types of value but consume only a few hours of your life per month, leaving you with an extra thirty-seven hours to dedicate to other meaningful pursuits. These costs, of course, also tend to compound. When you combine an active Twitter presence with a dozen other attention-demanding online behaviors, the cost in life becomes extreme. Like Thoreau's farmers, you end up "crushed and smothered" under the demands on your time and attention, and in the end, all you receive in return for sacrificing so much of your life is a few nicer trinkets—the digital equivalent of the farmer's venetian blinds or fancier pot—many of which, as shown in the Twitter example above, could

probably be approximated at a much lower cost, or eliminated without any major negative impact. This is why clutter is dangerous. It's easy to be seduced by the small amounts of profit offered by the latest app or service, but then forget its cost in terms of the most important resource we possess: the minutes of our life. This is also what makes Thoreau's new economics so relevant to our current moment. As Frédéric Gros argues: The striking thing with Thoreau is not the actual content of the argument. After all, sages in earliest Antiquity had already proclaimed their contempt for possessions. . . . What impresses is the form of the argument. For Thoreau's obsession with calculation runs deep. . . . He says: keep calculating, keep weighing. What exactly do I gain, or lose? Thoreau's obsession with calculation helps us move past the vague subjective sense that there are trade-offs inherent in digital clutter, and forces us instead to confront it more precisely. He asks us to treat the minutes of our life as a concrete and valuable substance—arguably the most valuable substance we possess—and to always reckon with how much of this life we trade for the various activities we allow to claim our time. When we confront our habits through this perspective, we will reach the same conclusion now that Thoreau did in his era: more often than not, the cumulative cost of the noncrucial things we clutter our lives with can far outweigh the small benefits each individual piece of clutter promises.

**AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #2: THE RETURN CURVE**

The law of diminishing returns is familiar to anyone who studies economics. It applies to the improvement of production processes and says, at a high level, that investing more resources into a process cannot indefinitely improve its output—eventually you'll approach a natural limit and start experiencing less and less extra benefit from continued investment. A classic example from economics textbooks concerns workers on a hypothetical automobile assembly line. At first, as you increase the number of workers, you generate large increases in the rate at which finished cars come off the line. If you continue to assign more workers to the line, however, these improvements will get smaller. This might happen for many reasons. Perhaps, for example, you begin to run out of space to add the new workers, or other limiting factors, like the maximum speed of the conveyer belt, come into play. If you plot this law for a given process and resource, with value produced on the y-axis and amount of resource invested on the x-axis, you'll encounter a familiar curve. At first, as additional increases in resources cause rapid improvements in output, the curve rises quickly, but over time, as the returns diminish, the curve flattens out. The exact parameters of this return curve vary between different processes and resources, but its general shape is shared by many scenarios—a reality that has made this law a fundamental component of modern economic theory. The reason I'm introducing this idea from economics in this chapter on digital minimalism is the following: if you're willing to accept some flexibility in your definition of "production process," the

law of diminishing returns can apply to the various ways in which we use new technologies to produce value in our personal lives. Once we view these personal technology processes through the perspective of diminishing returns, we'll gain the precise vocabulary we need to understand the validity of the second principle of minimalism, which states that optimizing how we use technology is just as important as how we choose what technologies to use in the first place. ■ ■ ■ When considering personal technology processes, let's focus in particular on the energy invested in trying to improve the value these processes return in your life, for example, through better selection of tools or the adoption of smarter strategies for using the tools. If you increase the amount of energy you invest into this optimization, you'll increase the amount of value the process returns. At first, these increases will be large. As the law of diminishing returns tells us, however, eventually these increases will diminish as you approach a natural limit. To make this more concrete, let's work through a brief hypothetical example. Assume that you find it important to remain informed about current events. New technologies can certainly help you support this goal. Perhaps, at first, the process you deploy is just keeping an eye on the links that pop up in your social media feeds. This process produces some value, as it keeps you more informed than if you weren't using the internet at all for this purpose, but it leaves a lot of room for improvement. With this in mind, assume you invest some energy to identify a more carefully curated set of online news sites to follow, and to find an app, like Instapaper, that allows you to clip articles from these sites and read them all together in a nice interface that culls distracting ads. This improved personal technology process for keeping informed is now producing even more value in your personal life. Perhaps, as the final step in this optimization, you discover through trial and error that you're best able to absorb complex articles when you clip them throughout the week and then sit down to read through them all on Saturday morning on a tablet over coffee at a local café. At this point, your optimization efforts have massively increased the value you receive from this personal technology process for staying informed. You can now stay up to date in a pleasing manner that has a limited impact on your time and attention during the week. As the law of diminishing returns tells us, however, you're probably nearing the natural limit, after which improving this process further will become increasingly difficult. Put more technically: you've reached the later part of the return curve. The reason the second principle of minimalism is so important is that most people invest very little energy into these types of optimizations. To use the appropriate economic terminology, most people's personal technology processes currently exist on the early part of the return curve—the location where additional attempts to optimize will yield massive improvements. It's this reality that leads digital minimalists to embrace the second principle, and focus not just on what technologies they adopt, but

also on how they use them. The example I gave above was hypothetical, but you find similar instances of optimization producing big returns when you study the stories of real-world digital minimalists. Gabriella, for example, signed up for Netflix as a better (and cheaper) source of entertainment than cable. She became prone, however, to binge-watching, which hurt her professional productivity and left her feeling unfulfilled. After some further experimentation, Gabriella adopted an optimization to this process: she's not allowed to watch Netflix alone. \* This restriction still allows her to enjoy the value Netflix offers, but to do so in a more controlled manner that limits its potential for abuse and strengthens something else she values: her social life. "Now [streaming shows is] a social activity instead of an isolating activity," she told me. Another optimization that was common among the digital minimalists I studied was to remove social media apps from their phones. Because they can still access these sites through their computer browsers, they don't lose any of the high-value benefits that keep them signed up for these services. By removing the apps from their phones, however, they eliminated their ability to browse their accounts as a knee-jerk response to boredom. The result is that these minimalists dramatically reduced the amount of time they spend engaging with these services each week, while barely diminishing the value they provide to their lives—a much better personal technology process than thoughtlessly tapping and swiping these apps throughout the day as the whim strikes. There are two major reasons why so few people have bothered to adopt the bias toward optimization exhibited by Gabriella or the minimalists who streamlined their social media experience. The first is that most of these technologies are still relatively new. Because of this reality, their role in your life can still seem novel and fun, obscuring more serious questions about the specific value they're providing. This freshness, of course, is starting to fade as the smartphone and social media era advances beyond its heady early years, which will lead people to become increasingly impatient with the shortcomings of their unpolished processes. As the author Max Brooks quipped in a 2017 TV appearance, "We need to reevaluate [our current relationship with] online information sort of the way we reevaluated free love in the 80s." The second reason so few think about optimizing their technology use is more cynical: The large attention economy conglomerates that introduced many of these new technologies don't want us thinking about optimization. These corporations make more money the more time you spend engaged with their products. They want you, therefore, to think of their offerings as a sort of fun ecosystem where you mess around and interesting things happen. This mind-set of general use makes it easier for them to exploit your psychological vulnerabilities. By contrast, if you think of these services as offering a collection of features that you can carefully put to use to serve specific values, then almost certainly you'll spend much less time using them. This is

why social media companies are purposely vague in describing their products. The Facebook mission statement, for example, describes their goal as “giv[ing] people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” This goal is generically positive, but how exactly you use Facebook to accomplish it is left underspecified. They hint that you just need to plug into their ecosystem and start sharing and connecting, and eventually good things will happen. Once you break free from this mind-set, however, and begin seeing new technologies simply as tools that you can deploy selectively, you’re able to fully embrace the second principle of minimalism and start furiously optimizing—enabling you to reap the advantages of vaulting up the return curve. Finding useful new technologies is just the first step to improving your life. The real benefits come once you start experimenting with how best to use them.

**AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #3: THE LESSONS OF THE AMISH HACKER**

The Amish complicate any serious discussion of modern technology’s impact on our culture. The popular understanding of this group is that they’re frozen in time—reluctant to adopt any tools introduced after the mid eighteenth-century period when they first began settling in America. From this perspective, these communities are mainly interesting as a living museum of an older age, a quaint curiosity. But then you start talking to scholars and writers who study the Amish seriously, and you begin to hear confusing statements that muddy these waters. John Hostetler, for example, who literally wrote the book on their society, claims the following: “Amish communities are not relics of a bygone era. Rather, they are demonstrations of a different form of modernity.” The technologist Kevin Kelly, who spent a significant amount of time among the Lancaster County Amish, goes even further, writing: “Amish lives are anything but antitechnological. In fact, on my several visits with them, I have found them to be ingenious hackers and tinkers, the ultimate makers and do-it-yourselfers. They are often, surprisingly, pro-technology.” As Kelly elaborates in his 2010 book, *What Technology Wants*, the simple notion of the Amish as Luddites vanishes as soon as you approach a standard Amish farm, where “cruising down the road you may see an Amish kid in a straw hat and suspenders zipping by on Rollerblades.” Some Amish communities use tractors, but only with metal wheels so they cannot drive on roads like cars. Some allow a gas-powered wheat thresher but require horses to pull the “smoking, noisy contraption.” Personal phones (cellular or household) are almost always prohibited, but many communities maintain a community phone booth. Almost no Amish communities allow automobile ownership, but it’s typical for Amish to travel in cars driven by others. Kelly reports that the use of electricity is common, but it’s usually forbidden to connect to the larger municipal power grid. Disposable diapers are popular, as are chemical fertilizers. In one memorable passage, Kelly talks about visiting a family that uses a \$400,000 computer controlled precision milling machine to

produce pneumatic parts needed by the community. The machine is run by the family's bonnet-wearing, ten-year-old daughter. It's housed behind their horse stable. Kelly, of course, is not the only person to notice the Amish's complicated relationship with modern technologies. Donald Kraybill, a professor at Elizabethtown College who co-authored a book on the Amish, emphasizes the changes that have occurred as more members of these communities embrace entrepreneurship over farming. He talks about an Amish woodshop with nineteen employees who use drills, saws, and nail guns, but instead of receiving power from the electric grid, they use solar panels and diesel generators. Another Amish entrepreneur has a website for his business, but it's maintained by an outside firm. Kraybill has a term for the nuanced and sometimes contrived ways that these start-ups use technology: "Amish hacking." These observations dismiss the popular belief that the Amish reject all new technologies. So what's really going on here? The Amish, it turns out, do something that's both shockingly radical and simple in our age of impulsive and complicated consumerism: they start with the things they value most, then work backward to ask whether a given new technology performs more harm than good with respect to these values. As Kraybill elaborates, they confront the following questions: "Is this going to be helpful or is it going to be detrimental? Is it going to bolster our life together, as a community, or is it going to somehow tear it down?" When a new technology rolls around, there's typically an "alpha geek" (to use Kelly's term) in any given Amish community that will ask the parish bishop permission to try it out. Usually the bishop will agree. The whole community will then observe this first adopter "intently," trying to discern the ultimate impact of the technology on the things