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Violent Tech. A Philosophical and Theological Reflection

JOSHUA K. SMITH


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Violent Tech:

A Philosophical and Theological Reflection

Joshua K. Smith

Ethics and Robotics, vol. 3

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Violent Tech: A Philosophical and Theological Reflection
Joshua K. Smith
eISBN 978-615-6405-85-2
Ethics and Robotics, vol. 3
ISSN 2939-5992
Responsible publisher: Teodora C. Artimon
https://trivent-publishing.eu/76-ethics-and-robotics

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First published in 2023 by Trivent Publishing

Trivent Publishing
1119 Budapest, Etele ut 59–61
Hungary

For more information, visit our website: http://trivent-publishing.eu

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And no more defiance
We just need your compliance
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We won't let you feel lost anymore

No more self-reliance
(Com-com-com-com-compliance)
Fall into line, you will do as you're told
No choice fatigue, your blood is running cold
We lose control, the world will fall apart
Love of your life will mend your broken heart
Life lived in fear, you need protection

You're all alone, too much rejection
We have what you need, just reach out and touch
We can save you (We can save you), we just need your
Cover your tracks, we know what's best for you
You've bitten off much more than you can chew
You're running scared, you'll run into our arms
Come join our clique, we'll keep you safe from harm

Our toy soldier, you'll do the dirty work
Stay loyal to us, we'll take away the hurt
We have what you need, just reach out and touch
We can save you (We can save you), just give us your

Muse, "Compliance," *Will of the People*, 2022

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FOREWORD

By Elke Schwarz

It is a pleasure to write the foreword to this powerful book. That is perhaps a strange thing to say about a text with such a grim subject matter. Speaking about violence is not an easy task. It is difficult to address openly and frankly what we often would rather pretend not to see or know about. To do so in the context of both religion and technology is an even more challenging endeavor, but one that is sorely needed in a world marred by technological modes of destruction that could very well wipe out the last shreds of humanity. This book is an important call to not avert one's eyes. It presents a clear and unflinching look at the violent substrate of our lives. This is what makes *Violent Tech* such a daring book. It is also a timely book, because we are at a juncture where technologies of violence increasingly appear to subsume the need for justifications of violence and, indeed, normalise greater use of violence through the veil of efficiency and neutrality. More and more, we are losing the space to contest the ostensible justness of lethal technology, and we are losing sight of the fact that violence is always a choice for which someone must take responsibility. Although the book takes a theological perspective, *Violent Tech* makes a strong case for human agency. We have a choice in how we wish to proceed with our

technological innovations: continue to fold them into military endeavours, even though this will likely bring about more and not less violence; or else make a conscious and concerted effort to design technologies that positively cultivate the relationships we have with others, as well as with ourselves.

The book takes us through a conceptually rich theological reading of its key concepts (violence and technology), underwritten by an impressive command of a wide range of literatures. I particularly welcome how the text foregrounds the thought and insights of women scholars. This is rare, but absolutely necessary, for a book on violence. The business of war, destruction, and violence is all too often considered to be the purview of men, whether as politicians, perpetrators, or analysts, and more so still as violence and technology become closely entwined. Indeed, as many have highlighted, the very notion of technology is typically ascribed to the domain of male activity. The couplet 'man and machine' sadly still rolls off the tongue as easily as 'military and masculinity'. This leaves the debate on violent technologies single-focused and anemic. This is despite many, many women scholars having tirelessly raised their voices as credible analysts, experts, and critics of violence in past centuries. The approach Joshua Smith offers in this book opens perspectives and viewpoints up to these voices, giving the discussions in this text a particular depth and strength, and that is so very important.

With this firm grounding in place, the book examines how the unfettered advancement of death machines has become wired into the contemporary psyche. Death machines are cast as exciting innovations; they are insidiously folded into gaming and other modes of entertainment; they represent the manifestation of power in all its dimensions. Often occluded in this casting is how they "violate personal space, privacy, body and even soul as they determine and alter how the human team member operates", as Joshua Smith points out in the text. The goal, the telos, of any violent technology, he says, is the exploitation of the human. This observation is spot-on and forms the basis for what I take to be the book's core critique: that the pursuit of violent technology is a pathway to the complete dehumanization of both those targeted and those applying the violence.

Technologies of violence are not mere instruments; they shape norms and normalize violent practices; they create rifts between us, but cannot

create new positive or indeed peaceful contexts. As Hannah Arendt already noted in her 1970 essay *On Violence*, violence is instrumental, it is means-ends oriented. In fact, it relies to a considerable degree on instrumental implements, tools, and technologies for its execution. Violence can destroy power. But power cannot grow out of violence. Violence cannot promote causes, or make a different future. By extension, neither can violent technologies. Yet the casting of new Artificial Intelligence (AI) enabled weapons as somehow ethically superior, or as bestowing some form of exquisite power which is so prominent in military discourses today, suggests exactly that – that violence can "make" something better. Following Arendt, violence as a creative force serving the notion of "making" a human history is not possible. Violence breaks, it injures, it ends things. It does not create – it is the opposite of new beginnings, the opposite of fostering relations. If violence is used to bring about a new relationship of care or peace, it will fail, as such interpersonal outcomes cannot be secured through violence. Joshua Smith's thoughtful and rigorous book helps us better understand just how misguided current views on the potential of AI weapons are!

Yet this is also a book of hope; hope that by looking unflinchingly at the violence-technology-theology nexus, we can reveal the myths that underwrite the addiction to violence through technology that marks our modern existence, and, importantly, "think otherwise". The book argues that we can do so, and that we have a duty to our fellow creatures to do so. In this vein, we must focus on making technologies only with positive aims in mind ("gardens, not guns"). Moreover, we should recognize a duty to be more attentive to the machines we are making in terms of their moral worth. I, myself, would perhaps not quite take quite such an intrepid leap into extending moral ontologies, but I understand this move in the context of a deep concern with ethics, and with this I sympathize.

I am certainly a fellow traveler in trying to think the world as something other than intrinsically violent, in thinking that we can be otherwise, and that we have an ethical responsibility to our fellow creatures to do so. But everything depends on our willingness to do so. At a recent high-level summit on responsible military Artificial Intelligence, one of the most frequently used metaphors by delegates was that 'the train has left the station' – we have AI weapons and so we should just focus now on using them responsibly. Very few voices were heard pushing against this strange self-fulfilling prophecy of runaway

violent technologies. But there is a way to think against this grain and *Violent Tech* is a wonderful resource for doing so.

I have no doubt that everyone reading this book will come away from it a richer person.

INTRODUCTION

This is a dangerous book. There were several moments in the process of reflecting on both texts of violence and technology where I contemplated abandoning the project altogether. Since the beginning of this project, I have suffered many episodes of anxiety, moral injury, and depression. At the beginning I would caution the reader to continue at their own risk. I serve as a pastor in a rural part of Mississippi. On a weekly account my job requires me to walk alongside people in their trauma, hurt, grief, and pursuit of reconciliation with the violence of this world. Because of this reality, there are moments of pessimism in my writing and what I believe about the future of our relationship with technology. All hope is not lost. Education is our pathway to freedom, and this is certainly the case in regard to understanding those that promote the use of violent technologies. There is a healthy fear of AI and robots evidenced in the lineage of science fiction. How poetic that a female writer and scholar such as Mary Shelley warned modernity of the dangers of creating implements without ethical consideration. I say this is poetic because much of modern technology we owe to the forethought of the female mind. Chemistry and medicine are rooted in cooking, architecture is rooted in weaving, for a few examples. I am not sure that anyone understands violence and technology the way that women do. Nor do I believe that there is a shred of significant technology that is not linked to the female mind.

I would like to take this opportunity at the forefront to acknowledge the unfortunate hiddenness of women in holding up beneficial and ethical technology. I am grateful for the edited work of Joan Rothschild *Machina ex Dea*[1] and the various feminist perspectives on technology that it brought to my attention. I am also deeply indebted to the scholarship that preceded me, many of whom are female. In the long survey of literature that surrounds both violence and technology, I noticed a different authorial voice between men and women. Specifically, the female voices, especially those of minorities, had a more holistic perspective of both the political nature of violence and technology and how such reverberates throughout generations. I do not think this is a coincidence at all. Rather, it is informed by the mental and physical experience of the female body throughout history.

I struggle to think about violence and warfare without a womanist framework.[2] Works like Elaine Brown Crawford's *Hope in the Holler* frame the reality of violence and its mediation through technology astutely. Yet, there is a continual voice of hope and resistance. Womanist theology is opposed to the idealized future visions of frameworks like Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope which orients the perspective toward the future. Thus, scholars like G. Clarke Chapman and James Cone have criticized this framing for ignoring the impossibility of this future for people of color.[3] Voices like Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan in her work *Violence and Theology*[4] examines the pandemic of violence in the late 80s and 90s toward women and children, offering theological reflections on how to move forward. I also think about the work of Bell Hooks and the issue of self-love and identity that many black communities suffered both from physical rape, beatings, and torture, as well as psychological, for

[1] Joan Rothschild, eds. *Machina ex Dea: Feminist Perspectives on Technology*, The Athene Series (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983).

[2] This term originates from the work of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). It stems from the work *womanish* in reference to African American woman or Black Feminism. It is a literary means of understanding the oppression of women of color.

[3] G. Clark Chapman, "Black Theology and Theology of Hope: What Have They to Say to Each Other?" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 193–215; James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1988), 126–32.

[4] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Violence and Theology*, Horizons in Theology (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006).

example, being taught to hate their phenotype. As the reader will see in this book, I mention womanist theology for a couple of reasons. While this is not a work of womanist theology, that is, it does not solely focus on a womanist hermeneutic or reading of African American experience strictly for ethical formulation; I have found the focus on the victim-survivor experience helpful in my theological and philosophical reflection. For as the brilliant works of Ruha Benjamin, Cathy O'Neil, and Safiya Umoja Noble[5] have also taught us, violence does not end with ideology; instead, it continues in our technology. No, this is not a womanist critique of violence and technology, but it does share the concerns of said approach. I cannot faithfully articulate and analyze the experience of violent tech upon the perspective of a woman, but I can share its concern to find pathways to healing, liberation, and hopefully transformation.[6] Although I am not claiming that this work is one of womanist theology or ethics, this work is concerned with the marginalization of the powerless and the violation of persons (emotional and physical). It is in this spirit of overcoming adversity that I seek to conclude each chapter, asking the question: Where are justice and hope amid death, destruction, and dehumanization employed in violent tech?

As a pastor-theologian, I must be a voice of hope amid technological pessimism. Too many critiques of technologies, especially from a Christian perspective, promote a luddite approach that neither deals with practical solutions nor promotes hope for our relationship to technological innovation. A trajectory of hope begins with an ethical reading of why violence occurs and why implements inevitably become our partners in crime. Reading as an ethical project gives me hope, but also holds me to realism, avoiding the pitfalls of what has become known today as *Longtermism*: an ethical framework that gives priority to the future. I do not think this stance is anything new, rather it is what I, and others, label as *Robotic Futurism*: placing hope in a better future in the

[5] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (New York: Polity Press, 2019); Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017); and Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

[6] Toinette M. Eugene, "…If You Get There Before I Do…!": A Womanist Ethical Response to Sexual Violence and Abuse," in *Perspectives on Womanist Theology*, ed. Jacquelyn Grant (Atlanta: GA: ITC Press, 1995), 95.

hands of technological implements. In these ethical frameworks, most, if not all, of our current political and economic circumstances will dissolve (somehow) by future innovation. That is not to say that those who hold these views do not value present ethical dilemmas, but that they equally view the future of society as a concern in their ethical considerations.[7]

Reading is not only an ethical project but also a moral formation. Through encountering the text of the Bible, its stories of violence, and the modern justification of death machines, the reader will see the aid of narrative ethics. While there are many authors that can aid the reader here, my choice in this work bends toward the Levinasian influence. Why Emmanuel Levinas? In dealing with the heaviness and ethical problems around nebulous topics like violence and technology; Levinas is of great importance because of his emphasis on alterity and responsibility. Understanding the ontology of violent implements, from a Levinasian perspective, is not the primary focus of ethical philosophy. What is learned about ethical responsibility through the limited understanding of the ontological difference between humans and machines? Per the discussion in chapter 5, not much is answered in this understanding, nor does it solve all of the problems facing their use in warfare and policing.

While Levinas can be used as a guide for reading the biblical text, I seek to bring in his ethical framings more so on the philosophical side of our consideration of violent implements. For the hermeneutical lens employed in chapter 2 (and most other theological sections), I will employ a narrative ethic that resembles the work of Amy C. Cottrill per her work on biblical violence, *Uncovering Violence: Reading Biblical Narratives as an Ethical Project.* [8] Likewise, Corttill uses both a Levinasian approach and the hermeneutical lens of Martha Nussaum and Adam Zachery Newton. The purpose of reading the narratives this way is to do ethics, rather than merely extracting an application for modernity. It is, as Cottrill writes, "recognizing the alterity of the biblical world and the biblical texts as well as their force and infectious potential."[9] The bible is not an instrumental technology, but an invitation to the suffering and experiences of the world it reflects in conversation with the reader.

[7] William MacAskill, "The Case for Longtermism," *New York Times*, August 7, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/opinion/the-case-for-longtermism.html.
[8] Amy C. Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence: Reading Biblical Narratives as an Ethical Project* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2021).
[9] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 39.

Cottrill gives some helpful principles that I consider in my reading of narrative ethics:

> (1) Narrative ethics is attentive to the aesthetic shape, form, and particularity of the text as an invitation to otherness. (2) Narrative ethics resist summative claims or ethical prescriptions … (3) Narrative ethics assumes an understanding of the self that is porous and responsive to the other, including the text. (4) Narrative ethics assumes that what is felt within the bodies of readers is valuable and formative knowledge about violence and its effects on those bodily impulses and sensation shape and construct the cognitive landscape in which conscious awareness and reasoned reflection occur … (5)Narrative ethics affords a way of reading texts that focuses on what one can see, touch, and be accountable to as a result of being in proximity to the other, or to the text; this mode of ethics is distinct from one that priorities articulation of ethical values, principles, or conclusions.[10]

By using a variety of ethical frameworks to read and interpret, I hope to provide the reader with a wider perspective on how to understand violence and its relation to technologies of death and harm. It is impossible to assume that one monograph on violent technology will solve all the problems of reading difficult text and how it relates to the struggle for peace and freedom from oppression. I hope and pray this work is one that further promotes peacemaking, reconciliation, and forgiveness in the anthropological struggle for security and significance.

Chapter 1 will survey the terminology of violence, technology, and what happens when the two merge into one. In understanding the metaphysical and religious undertones of technology, one can see how violence links to a vast number of implements. Here, it is also necessary to explore Christian perspectives of violence and the fall, indicating the connection between the legacy of violence and the desires humanity has held that technology would bring about. In chapter 2, the reader will examine the alterity of human violence through three lenses: the episode

[10] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 39–40.

of Cain and Abel, war texts, and the non-retaliation of Jesus. Here we will also explore the theological implications of violent tech and the theological vision of hope.

The bad romance between DARPA and the Department of Defense will be the focus of Chapter 3. This book will assess violent technologies such as autonomous weapons systems and the ethical, ecological, and economic costs behind these systems. The US military-industrial complex's addiction to war-making is a theological as well as a philosophical issue for both the consumer and combatant. While robots designed for the theatres of war are modern conceptions, the desire for security and economic stability is an ancient one. The justification of violence through warfare is based on both political and theological ideologies. Chapter 4 will explore the use of violent video games by both civilians and militaries, and the narrative it communicates about violence. In addition, this chapter will cover the moral injury and potential of redemption of these technologies for such technology.

Chapter 5 will critique the use of violent tech, especially lethal autonomous weapons, in light of just war theory. In this chapter, I posit the ethical and economic cost of these implements and provide some practical recommendations, per our Levinasian and narrative ethic lens, about our future among such desires for implements of war.

CHAPTER 1

Violence + Technology = Violent Technology

The terms *violence* and *technology* are as broad as they are ambiguous. This reality makes both terms elastic, and perhaps this is for a good reason. Authors and researchers pull and stretch these terms to mold them to a particular meaning that is in a particular discussion. Regrettably, there is an application of *psychological essentialism* involved in this framing of terms. Because there is ambiguity within the terminology, one can operationalize the terms to fit their ideological, religious, and philosophical context. The irony here is that this is a sort of *violence* that is being imposed upon the very words meant to conceptualize the subject under discussion. The history of interpretation of the Bible alone is witness to this phenomenon. While that may be, the reader should not lose heart, for there is a large body of literature to help guide us on this journey to understand violence and its implements.

How do we find the *true* meaning of such eclectic terms? One way is the use of heuristics, and whether that is for restoration or for ruin depends on the cognitive abilities of the interlocutor and the informational fidelity of the resources at hand. We cannot exegete technology without using a *technique*, nor can we faithfully examine a piece of technology in isolation from a worldview that is situated in a world of violence and violation. Two important works help the modern reader in formulating technology: Martin Heidegger's essay, "The Question

Concerning Technology"[1] and Marshall McLuhan's work in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.[2] McLuhan's thesis argued that technology extends oneself and thus technology has a lateral effect on society. This reading of technology as a mere tool or "extension" is important, but it is only half of the story, so to speak. McLuhan is right in the sense that technology, through the combination of materials, reemerges into new *media* of slight but significant change upon and within the operators' ethical frameworks.

McLuhan's view made room for the most disparate places found within discussion of technology. For the religious scholar, one can quickly locate McLuhan's extension view as an adaption of Thomas Aquinas' work on formal causality. It is important to note here that McLuhan (later in his life) was Catholic. Remember, one's worldview shapes the hermeneutical process for understanding any technology and the role the self plays within it. In a letter to Fr. John Culkin, McLuhan wrote,

> My own approach to the media has been entirely from formal cause. Since formal causes are hidden and environmental, they exert their structural pressure by interval and interface with whatever is in their environmental territory. Formal cause[s] are always hidden, whereas the things upon which they act are visible.[3]

We will return to McLuhan's theory momentarily; however, first we need to clarify what he means by formal causes. For those not familiar with the scholastic metaphysics mentioned above, let me give a brief primer. Since the 1700s there has been a revulsion to the binary conceptualization of Aristotelian metaphysics which is recapitulated in

[1] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2013), 3–35.

[2] Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

[3] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szkiarek (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), xx–xxi.