

Concealed Carry, Agency, and Attention in a Technocratic Context

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CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FIREARMS AS TECHNOLOGIES TEND to follow a certain script: attention to the prevalence and costs of gun violence inspires proposals for more stringent gun regulation. Gun rights supporters respond that (a) the problem lies not in guns themselves but the will of individuals who use them for either good or bad purposes: “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” Gun regulation proponents typically reply that the presence of a gun exerts a distinct and significant influence on people’s behavior. One version of this move draws attention to (b) the gun’s structure as a portable weapon designed to tear flesh at a distance by concentrating explosive and accurately-directed force onto a small projectile. The other version focuses instead on (c) how practices in which guns are used and legitimized mediate broader sociocultural problems (e.g., white supremacy, toxic masculinity, or militarized citizenship).

This “default script” rehearses three important positions on the agency and moral valance of any technology. (a) *Instrumentalism* views technologies as compliant expansions of preexisting human capacities, as morally neutral means that serve ends posited by users, and hence as extensions rather than interruptions or deflections of each user’s purposes and moral habits. (b) *Technological determinism* insists that a tool’s form can influence our actions, habits, moral vision, and purposes despite our initial intentions and even without our conscious awareness. Finally, (c) *cultural materialism* looks behind the tool’s form to social and cultural dynamics framing that tool’s design, normative uses, marketing, demand, and competitive advantage, such that the tool’s influence on users is primarily a function of how it embodies, benefits from, or helps sustain those broader dynamics.¹ Given how often and readily gun debates trace these main positions, it is not surprising that references to these

¹ Here I follow James F. Caccamo’s analysis in “What’s in a Tech? Factors in Evaluating the Morality of Our Information and Communication Practices,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 4, no. 1 (2015): 151–180.

debates are ubiquitous in technology critics' attempts to help others think more deeply about technologies more broadly.

Much can and remains to be achieved within this default script. For example, while social scientists have explored a fair range of possibilities from a cultural materialist perspective, they have only recently pursued robust determinist analyses by focusing sustained attention on how and why guns themselves exert a distinct influence upon the actions, emotions, or symbolism that form part of gun-related practices.² The default script, however, does not tell us the whole story about guns as technologies. This article seeks to move beyond this script and identify some productive routes forward. I shall do so by interpreting gun use via what has become a central point of departure for Catholic reflection on technology: Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*. Francis's critique of what he calls the "technocratic paradigm" identifies the importance of reading everyday technologies not only in terms of their structure or how they fit into broader sociocultural dynamics (e.g., capitalism), but also in terms of how modern technoscience operates as a general and sufficiently coherent sociocultural force in its own right, deeply influencing the design and use of everyday technologies as well as other dynamics cultural materialists habitually discern as orienting frameworks for such production and use.³

Given its growing prominence in the United States, I will focus our attention on concealed-carry defensive gun use within the culture of armed citizenship. I will explore how concealed carry embodies a search for *skilled agency* and *attention to the world*—two important tasks a robust response to the technocratic paradigm requires. On both counts, concealed carry's resistance to that paradigm is meaningful and deserves fuller attention. But closer reflection, informed by sociologically-informed technology criticism that resonates with *Laudato Si'*, reveals that concealed carry as generally performed today does not deal successfully with these two challenges. In fact, precisely where concealed carry appears to promise gun owners real resistance

² For a key step in this direction, see Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, eds., *The Lives of Guns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Cultural materialism's central insight is to expose how specific technological innovations (and their uses) are embedded in broader sociocultural patterns. Thus, while it can and often does analyze specific tools in terms of broader patterns not directly related to technology, it is also in principle open to treating modern technoscience itself as its own background dynamic. As Caccamo points out, authors such as Jacques Ellul and Langdon Winner have offered a version of such an approach by framing various innovations within specifically technocratic sociocultural dynamics ("What's in a Tech?," 159). Literature on guns, however, tends to focus only on *other* sociocultural factors (race, class, and gender) rather than reading gun use within the broader story of modern technology.

to the technocratic paradigm, it ends up largely playing into that paradigm's hand. Concealed carry's pursuit of skilled agency undercuts the sociocultural conditions needed for such agency by expressing this aspiration in terms of unsituated independent choice. Meanwhile, the practice of situational awareness through which concealed carry affirms attention to the world is focused on the anticipation of an event one cannot regularly practice. This leaves such attention wide open to undisciplined uses of memory and imagination, and these in turn prevent true attention to the world. Concealed carry is thus locked in a cycle of failed resistance to technocratic society.

“GUN INSTRUMENTALISM”: MYTH OR THEORY?

Before turning to Francis, let me begin by explaining how the gun debate itself calls for his general critique of the technocratic paradigm. Consider a puzzle that has emerged in my conversations with students, friends, and family members about the ethics of gun use. In these contexts, gun rights advocates seem easily convinced that the presence or absence of a gun can exert a morally relevant difference in how a heated and potentially violent conflict is likely to arise, proceed, and conclude. These interlocutors also admit with surprising readiness that good gun use relies heavily upon an embodied and storied formation supported by specific cultural ecologies requiring care and attention by many people. None of this guarantees that the conversation will lead these interlocutors to acknowledge the full range of concerns commonly raised about guns and defensive violence. For one thing, more “intimate” forms of violent conflict resolution have their own morally complicated cultural locations and histories.⁴ On the other hand, recognitions that responsible gun use depends on specific formative frameworks can also replicate problematic assumptions about race or gender.⁵ Still, these responses display an important gap between language and life. While centered in the rhetoric of instrumentalism, these gun rights supporters' experience of gun use—and their attempts to make sense of that experience—slips readily into determinist and cultural materialist analyses.

⁴ See, e.g., Mika LaVaque-Manty, “Dueling for Equality: Masculine Honor and the Modern Politics of Dignity,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 715–740.

⁵ Charles Fruehling Springwood, “Gun Concealment, Display, and Other Magical Habits of the Body,” *Critique of Anthropology* 34, no. 4 (2014): 467; Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Similar slippage appears in ethnographic accounts of gun users.⁶ One particularly prominent and telling example is the “Rifleman’s Creed,” which has been part of basic training for the United States Marine Corps since 1942:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.

My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will...

My rifle and myself know that what counts in this war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit...

My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will...

Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is America’s and there is no enemy, but peace!⁷

Here we see a clear affirmation not only of the importance of formative “use practices” that fully appropriate the rifle into one’s agency, but also of how each Marine is simultaneously conformed to the rifle’s structure and its corresponding “affordances” (the applications a tool suggests and the ends it opens up to the user’s moral vision). Marine and rifle “become part of each other.” The rifle “is human, even as I, because it is my life.” Neither guns nor people kill on their own. It is the marine-rifle temporary cyborg that defends country, masters enemies, and saves life. It would be hard to outdo the Rifleman’s Creed as a popular translation of Bruno Latour’s anti-instrumentalist account of gun use: “You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you. The gun is no longer the gun-

⁶ See especially Springwood, “Gun Concealment”; Patrick Blanchfield, “Prosthetic Gods: On the Semiotic and Affective Landscape of Firearms in American Politics,” in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Kristin A. Goss, and Harel Shapira (New York: Routledge, 2019), 196–210.

⁷ “Marine’s Rifle Creed,” Marine Corps University, www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Frequently-Requested-Topics/Marines-Rifle-Creed/.

in-the-armory or the gun-in-the-drawer or the gun-in-the-pocket, but the gun-in-your-hand, aimed at someone who is screaming.”⁸

How do we make sense of this frequent disconnect between the instrumentalist rhetoric often invoked by gun rights supporters and their lived (and sometimes reflective) acknowledgement that the ethics of guns (as technologies) must be considerably more complex? One could simply interpret “gun instrumentalism” less as a theory about guns as technologies than as a myth that shores up individual freedom while concealing both the gun’s agency and the user’s transformation. On this view, the slippage between rhetoric and reflective experience results from that myth’s inherent instability. By insisting that guns are “merely” self-defense tools, the myth remains charged with a reminder that to carry a gun is to hold “the power to decide life and death.”⁹

While fruitful, this interpretation runs against two limitations that can, ironically, reinforce the inconsistent deployment of gun instrumentalism. First, it only partly explains why the myth gets traction in the first place. One reason would be the NRA’s catechetical activities and how these fit within US political traditions that encourage users to see guns as a smooth means for securing individual freedom against state and individual threats—especially in a context of increasingly tenuous power in politics, economics, and culture.¹⁰ What remains unclear, however, is how and why people come to see their moral agency vis-à-vis *guns themselves* as a given rather than as an arduous and uncertain achievement. Here the NRA’s catechetical activities offer us very little explanation, since they in fact insist upon a strong normative ideal of gun ownership that requires a robust personal investment in technical and especially moral training.¹¹

A more promising explanation of how this myth gets traction opens up when we consider a second limitation: The myth isolates guns as the only tools under critical scrutiny even though (i) they are part of the broader story about modern technology and (ii) instrumentalism can operate as a myth with regard to *any* device. Isolating guns in this

⁸ Bruno Latour, “On Technical Mediation—Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 2 (1994): 33.

⁹ Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, “The Lives of Guns: An Introduction,” in *The Lives of Guns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5–6.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Anker, “Mobile Sovereigns: Agency Panic and the Feeling of Gun Ownership,” in *The Lives of Guns*, 21–42, and Firmin DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free? Democracy and the Armed Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). Both studies profitably confront gun violence as a political and not simply technical problem. However, they overcorrect by attending to technology and its bearing on agency only as a medium for other sociocultural forces.

¹¹ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 58–84.

way is convenient for *both* sides of the current gun debate. On the one hand, gun-use cultures often express critical stances before *other* modern technologies. Selective deployment of instrumentalism shields gun use from such scrutiny, but also inhibits the clarity, depth, and coherence that would result from a more integrated response to technology. On the other hand, by denouncing the myth of instrumentalism strictly in its application to guns, critics can isolate “naïve gun owners” as a discrete problem while using similarly instrumentalist discourse to support other expressions of a technocratic posture before the world. For example, gun critics often reduce the question to a technical issue adequately interpreted through criminological and public health statistics and sufficiently addressed by implementing a properly tuned regulatory apparatus. In fact, simply engaging in debate or activism about guns can entangle us in the complications of technocratic society. Who, among us, while deeply concerned about social media’s threats to democracy, has not set these worries aside and claimed easy agency over such technologies when the issues at stake in a click bait story seemed too important for fussing about the medium’s structural complications? Unless our critique of instrumentalism is comprehensive, we risk the incoherence of critiquing gun rights supporters for their instrumentalism while we continue to think as instrumentalists on other fronts.

Inconsistent deployment or critiques of instrumentalism must be recognized as a common discursive pitfall in the work of confronting modern technology.¹² The standard script for the gun debate, however, treats instrumentalism as a theory about technology that one may or may not adopt, rather than as a myth or discursive pitfall *all* sides of the gun debate must learn to overcome. That standard script thus fails to address why this myth has gained a foothold in the language and imagination of gun rights supporters even against their own reflective experience. It also obstructs the development of a more integrated and coherent confrontation with both guns and modern technology across all its various forms. Hence, reflection on guns must be rooted more fully within a critique of modern technology as a general sociocultural dynamic in its own right. Fortunately, Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* offers moral theologians ample starting points for that task.

¹² In addition to shielding the speaker from similar criticism, such selectivity can reasonably be considered a symptom of living in a society whose technocratic character confronts us as a *general* problem. In this case, selective critiques of instrumentalism also appeal because of the exhaustion and despair we feel before such a trenchant and variegated problem, our yearning for concrete acts of resistance, and craving for good conscience (and a sense of given rather than tenuous agency) when it comes to the *other* faces of the problem we have chosen not to confront.

LAUDATO SI' AND THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

Theologians and others have rightly focused on how *Laudato Si'* interprets the *content* of the technocratic paradigm. Less attention has fallen on the *form* of its critique. For Francis, however, the problem of technology is not simply a matter of subjecting our tools to the right ends, identifying morally relevant trends in how certain devices are structured, or remembering the victims at the underside of modern progress. The challenge is to systemically confront a deep-seated, metastasized, and often unobserved posture for confronting the world and perceiving the nature and “place of human beings and of human action in the world.”¹³ Accordingly, that posture shapes our encounters with technology at every level of human activity:

It can be said that many problems of today's world stem from the tendency, certainly not always conscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. The effects of imposing this model on reality as a whole, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of the reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life.¹⁴

Under this paradigm, “technological products ... create a framework” that conditions not only our uses of such products but our entire “lifestyles and social possibilities” in service to “the interests of certain powerful groups” (no. 107) and ultimately to modern technology’s “ironclad logic” oriented to power as its own end (no. 108). The paradigm both sets the terms for and is mediated by (i) the mutually supporting processes of technological design, production, marketing, and use, along with (ii) how those processes fit into and shape our lives and communities. This, of course, is perfectly consistent with Francis’s repeated insistence that “everything is interconnected” and especially his efforts towards a fully integral ecological ethic (nos. 137–162).

The logic and content of the technocratic paradigm trades on an important dichotomy. It “exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.” That object—a particular thing, or the world itself—is construed as lacking intrinsic meaning or structure except as raw material to be processed and used in service to whatever

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 107. Here Francis locates the problem in “a way of understanding human life and activity.” As the document proceeds it becomes clear that Francis is more concerned with our operative moral vision than with our explicit theories about ourselves, the world, or technology (nos. 106 and 109).

¹⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 107, with emendations to the Vatican’s English translation.

ends people happen to impose on it. We find ourselves “in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation.” Outside of this “one-dimensional” posture, interventions in nature could mean “being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves.” Within such a posture, however, “we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us” (no. 106).

Three implications relevant to our discussion follow from this. First, by imposing a single mode of knowledge upon all reality—the scientific method’s “technique of possession, mastery, and transformation” (no. 106) and “the specialization which belongs to technology”—the technocratic paradigm marginalizes contemplative and integrative forms of knowledge. This matters to Francis for many reasons, not least being the threat it poses to ecological thinking—that is, thinking that can confront contemporary problems in their full complexity and grasp the relation of parts within the cosmic whole (no. 110).¹⁵

Second, since people are here construed in terms of unhindered volition while nature is an “insensate order” of raw material (no. 115), there is nothing intrinsic to the world that coincides with the human person. Such a world is alien and external to us. Our relationship to it becomes fundamentally conflictual (no. 106). The world cannot inform or delimit our ends except through its own temporary and technologically surmountable intransigence (nos. 115–116). Thus, the cosmos becomes “a ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.” Since freedom and power are no longer intrinsically ordered to reality’s meaningful goodness, their “only norms are taken from alleged necessity, from either utility or security” (nos. 115, 105). This amounts to handing freedom over to “the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence” (no. 105).

Third, with human personhood identified with freedom so construed, the foregoing posture before the world bleeds over into our regard for our neighbors and bodies, especially when these prove “troublesome and inconvenient” for our independence, utility, and security (nos. 115–123). Yet insofar as we are also the objects of such power (and lack compelling grounds for limiting it), we also come to experience this condition as a kind of slavery: “We stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the

¹⁵ This may help further explain how we come to apply instrumentalism to guns in an isolated way. Pervasive patterns of technocratic thinking themselves discourage us from fully “ecological” confrontations with both the various tools at our disposal and the discursive frameworks we bring to those tools.

wherewithal to control it" (no. 105). Notably for our discussion, one of Francis's first examples of this tendency is nuclear warheads and the "increasingly deadly arsenal of weapons available for modern warfare" (no. 104).

How does US gun use relate to these dynamics of the technocratic paradigm? The answer is not simple. As we shall see, there are clear and important ways in which the diversity of US gun cultures embody that paradigm. But they also involve significant forms of friction against it. For example, the historical (and still prevalent) use of guns as hunting tools imposes power upon creatures and construes them as objects of lethal violence. It also frequently involves practices of silent, patient, and participative attention to the natural world (often in concert with "meat eating regimes" more conducive to an integrative perception of the food on one's plate). Similarly, as influencer videos on YouTube illustrate, gun ownership often overlaps with "off the grid" lifestyles and corresponding forms of resistance to mainstream contemporary life that converge with Francis's critique of technocracy. Unfortunately, the paucity of sociological and anthropological attention to these aspects of US gun use makes it difficult to more fully assess them.¹⁶

Yet these sectors do not represent the main (and swelling) center of gravity for US gun use. Summarizing quantitative and qualitative studies of recent US trends, the sociologist David Yamane speaks of a shift in emphasis "from recreational shooting to armed self-defense." The latter, which he calls "Gun Culture 2.0," is less intimately bound up with activities like hunting and focuses on exercising fully one's right to carry firearms as part of an ethic of "armed citizenship" aimed at protecting oneself and others against violent threats in a world viewed as profoundly unsafe. This cultural shift is both reflected in and facilitated by the liberalization of concealed carry laws¹⁷ and, more recently, the enactment of Stand Your Ground laws (which extend the "no duty to retreat" principle from inside one's home to public spaces).¹⁸ This kind of gun use deserves our primary attention

¹⁶ See David Yamane's review, "The Sociology of US Gun Use," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (2017), 1–10, especially at 3–4, doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12497. Stroud offers a promising move in this direction, but only in terms of disaster preparation (*Good Guys with Guns*, 128–132). Anthropological attention to off-the-grid living has not yet attended to how gun use intersects with these practices. See, e.g., Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart, *Off the Grid: Reassembling Domestic Life* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁷ Yamane, "The Sociology of US Gun Use," 5–6. For even more recent data that supports this trend, see Pew Research Center, "America's Complex Relationship with Guns: An In-Depth Look at the Attitudes and Experiences of US Adults," June 22, 2017, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/06/22/americas-complex-relationship-with-guns/.

¹⁸ See Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 4–7.

and has received more attention by social scientists. Let us now turn our attention to how gun use within “Gun Culture 2.0” construes personal agency and the world in ways consistent with Francis’s description of the technocratic paradigm.

GUNS, AGENCY, AND MEANINGFUL RESPONSIBILITY

The question of technology is often one about agency. The complex interactions between human and device agency must be carefully accounted for. Moreover, the way in which human agency is both construed and cultivated in the face of outside forces stands regularly in need of careful critique. In what sense, then, does US concealed carry overlap with or resist the technocratic paradigm’s specific construal of human agency? An important degree of overlap is easily discernible: the user is equipped with an immense amount of power which remains unknown to the world, is not shareable with others, and can be activated swiftly and directed indiscriminately from a distance to “stop” another person. Insofar as users have a specific kind of person in mind, the world disclosed by defensive gun carry is not simply, as Francis says, “a ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.” Yet the intended targets are people who pose violent and unjust threats to the freedom and security of the user and those the user hopes to protect. Such potential aggressors are regularly depicted as thoroughly and irredeemably “bad guys” (or “monsters,” as the NRA’s Wayne LaPierre likes to say) who cannot be reasoned with and whom “good guys” can only neutralize through violence.¹⁹ Thus the discourse justifying potential gun violence posits a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict that can only be addressed by force. There is a meaningful sense, then, in which we are faced with the kind of subject Francis sees as the product of a technocratic society—that is, one who obtains freedom and security, vis-à-vis essentially alien objects that exercise no moral claims upon us, through the skillful deployment of exquisitely engineered force.

Social scientists have shown, however, that the discourses by which gun users interpret their pursuit of agency through concealed carry often exceed the narrative of “defense of oneself and loved ones from violent crime.” Sometimes this lack of fit emerges in practice—as, e.g., when a user habitually carries his gun into the bathroom in case he needs it to repel criminals, while regularly leaving his teenage daughters alone and unarmed at home.²⁰ Other user narratives clearly link defensive gun carry to an identity as a responsible adult or to a vague but deeply felt sense of political and economic disenfranchise-

¹⁹ DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?*, 32–34; Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 83–135, 155.

²⁰ Springwood, “Gun Concealment,” 460.

ment.²¹ Especially relevant for our purposes is the work of Jennifer Carlson, whose interviews with users in the Detroit metropolitan area reveal a consistent turn to concealed carry as an act of citizenship (and thus an exercise of duties to oneself and others rather than simply the claiming of a right) through which users strive to negotiate real and perceived insecurities stemming from postindustrial socioeconomic decline (e.g., precarious employment, police inefficacy in the face of rising crime, reduced access to other social services, deteriorating social capital, and a resulting alienation from one's community and state). For male users, what Carlson dubs the "citizen-protector" model also offers a means of reclaiming their dignity, relevance, and authority as moral and responsible adults now that their traditional role as breadwinners is increasingly beyond their reach.²²

Defensive gun use, then, is a site in which many users seek not only security against irrational and irredeemable criminals, but also an ideal of personal responsibility considered crucial for the pursuit of a meaningful life. However, this ideal is often asserted in the face of real problems that can be easily identified as indirect effects of the technocratic paradigm. This turn to concealed carry as an assertion of meaningful responsibility has a deeper and more direct connection to technocracy. Guns call forward the user's skilled agency. And a persistent, direct outcome of technocratic social arrangements is to render skilled agency increasingly out of reach. Understanding why this is so helps us understand how defensive gun use offers an opportunity to resist technocratic imperatives that is *both* meaningful *and* ultimately ineffective against (and symptomatic of) our broader predicament.

Francis signaled how the technocratic paradigm yields a frequent experience of compromised agency: we turn to technical power to exercise unhindered individual will over a world construed as raw material devoid of intrinsic meaningful structure—and yet as objects in that world we also experience ourselves as "naked" when others

²¹ Anker, "Mobile Sovereigns."

²² Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*. See also Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*. It is along these lines that many cultural materialist interpretations of US gun use get some of their best traction. For quite often the armed protector, unjust aggressor, and those in need of protection—or, in users' common parlance, the sheepdog, the wolf, and the sheep—are portrayed in ways that reflect and reproduce destructive gender, race, and class dynamics. The analysis developed in this article is meant to complement rather than supplant accounts of gun use that highlight those dynamics. That said, I am certainly arguing that race/class/gender analyses are not enough. An anti-technocratic analysis is also necessary if we seek an adequate account of why gun owners see themselves as lacking agency, why they regard concealed carry as an opportune means for cultivating and expressing responsibility, and why their construal of this search for responsibility is ultimately self-defeating.

wield that same power against us without acknowledging our own intrinsic meaningful structure. Documenting and interpreting some such pattern as it compounds across the landscape of modern life is well trod ground for technology critics. A relatively visible and alarming example of this pattern is what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism”: the pervasive and fundamental structuring of digital apps, hardware, and infrastructure over the last two decades in service to the monetization of user information. Almost any instance of digital media use has become a “raw material supply operation” that extracts user behavior data in ways that aggressively bypass and erode our cultural and legal privacy protections. That data is processed through (and helps optimize) machine learning algorithms that predict and influence people’s behavior so as to link individuals to consumer goods more effectively. Thus, digital media use also becomes an arena for the deployment of prediction and influence instruments, usually without users’ knowledge, genuine consent, or ability to exercise any form of meaningful resistance. This logic in turn shapes other businesses and their respective slices of everyday life. Landlords and employers can “optimize” their choices of applicants by purchasing predictions about them. Insurance companies can calculate risk more directly and then discipline users in real time by indexing their behavior to reward point systems, rate changes, or fines.²³

Zuboff helps us appreciate how this logic—whereby technical knowledge that purports to give us mastery over a pliable world comes to objectify us as docile raw material—confronts us across a wide spectrum of daily activities. Yet examples such as these can also mask how modern technology’s agency-corroding influence across daily life has a much longer history and proceeds in ways often far less aggressive and deliberate than those orchestrated by firms like Google or Facebook. Still, her distinction between the Internet’s “public-facing text” (the content and services users enjoy) and its “shadow text” (the story told about us but not for us through the vast accumulation and processing of user data)²⁴ links up with a broader body of literature that surmounts the limitations inherent in these examples by tracing a pervasive pattern in which the compromise of user agency is tied up with a persistent separation between the goods a tool offers users and how that tool actually operates.

Albert Borgmann, for example, interprets modern technology in terms of the slow and often inconspicuous ascendancy of a “device paradigm.” Devices make “commodities” (goods provided easily,

²³ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

²⁴ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 183–187.

safely, and with minimal temporal and spatial restrictions) available to users through “machinery” that is concealed, increasingly impossible for users to understand or tinker with, and only extrinsically instrumental to the commodity’s desirability. The commodity is easily available precisely because the machinery hides from view (and thus from practical reason) whatever is burdensome, risky, or otherwise demanding in the procurement of the goods sought. But those burdensome aspects are precisely the ones that call forward personal skill as well as a more fully attentive, receptive, and mutually-attuned engagement with our natural and social environments. For example, central heating makes warmth easily, safely, instantaneously, and ubiquitously available within a home without need for the discipline, skill, and attention to social and natural ecologies involved in procuring wood and tending a hearth. Fast food similarly offers a maximally available commodity, but precisely for that reason fails to call forward our skillful and patient attention to the food served, the world gathered through that food, and those with whom we share a meal.²⁵ One could provide similar accounts of weather forecasts, music recordings, automatic car transmissions, supermarkets, many of the pills we take, and (more recently) Google Maps or the Instant Pot. Considered individually, some of these tradeoffs may at times be prudent judgments in service to a comprehensively good life. But as exhibiting a recurring pattern deeply intertwined with our consumer economy, those tradeoffs compound to reduce skilled agency and its deep entanglement in the world.

Two further aspects of Borgmann’s work are especially pertinent to our discussion. First, by discerning the “device paradigm” in objects that no longer stand out to us as alarming innovations, he invites us to appreciate the paradigm’s longstanding, taken-for-granted centrality in the basic structure of modern life. Second, while he devotes a fair amount of attention to how political, economic, and cultural factors interact with technological development, Borgmann provides a compelling account of how modern life’s corrosion of meaningful agency occurs in our relationship to our tools and not only, as the NRA would have us believe, in our relationships with other people.

This pattern is a key dynamic of the sociocultural landscape where the drama of US gun use continues to play out, particularly defensive gun carry. One point of convergence is in the intense focus on the production of handguns, holsters, purses, and clothing that maximize comfort, safety, inconspicuousness, and a quick, smooth draw when

²⁵ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40–78 and 196–210.

duty calls. Many Americans otherwise interested in concealed carry opt not to carry a gun because it is not comfortable to do so.²⁶ The aim is for concealed handguns to become like other wearable technologies such as fitness trackers and smart watches, following the device paradigm's search for commodiously available goods provided through properly concealed machinery. But this convergence between Fitbits and concealed handguns is importantly incomplete; for multiple reasons, guns are not the sort of object you forget that you are carrying. The ideal of armed citizenship encourages constant vigilance against potential threats. Further vigilance is necessary to avoid carrying into a gun-free zone or accidentally showing one's gun, which can cause awkward or dangerous social situations (and may also break local laws regarding improper exhibition or "brandishing"). Unlike other wearables, handguns loaded with hollow-point bullets (the standard choice for self-defense) are designed to immobilize bodies by tearing large holes into them and sending pressure waves that can cause severe organ damage. Even the gun's material design has a way of keeping it in the user's awareness even if it aims for concealment from the world.²⁷ Hence, fully realizing concealed carry requires relearning how to physically carry one's body through the full course of daily life. Tasks as simple as going to a public restroom require extensive tactical reasoning about—in this case, which stall to occupy and how to pull down one's pants without ceasing to have the gun in control, concealed from people in adjacent stalls, and ready-to-hand should defensive action be required.²⁸

Guns, moreover, do not simply command attention. They call forward skillful engagement. As Timothy Luke explains, "Shooters must learn to take guns in hand, manipulate their actions, work with varied ammunition on the range, and fire in different conditions. ... To know a gun will fire, remain ready for use, and hit where aimed in shooting is an elaborate set of complex skills that requires practice and focus."²⁹ Shooting, in turn, tends to be nested inside a wider web of practices "with their own different demands and complicated challenges," e.g., "gunsmithing, weapon cleaning, ammunition loading, bullet casting, weapon maintenance, target placement," and gun modification. In Borgmann's terms, users here are remarkably engaged with the machinery and not just with the commodity. Each of

²⁶ David Yamane, "The First Rule of Gunfighting is Have a Gun: Technologies of Concealed Carry in Gun Culture 2.0," in *The Lives of Guns*, 167–193.

²⁷ Dan Baum, "Happiness Is a Worn Gun: My Concealed Weapon and Me," *Harper's*, August 2010, 33.

²⁸ Harel Shapira, "How to Use the Bathroom with a Gun and Other Techniques of the Armed Body," in *The Lives of Guns*, 194–206.

²⁹ Timothy W. Luke, "Counting Up AR-15s: The Subject of Assault Rifles and the Assault Rifle as Subject," in *The Lives of Guns*, 83.

these practices make up “regimes of discipline that constitute multiple layers of gun control.” Within the orbit of the central internal good of shooting well, such practices call forward mindfulness, responsibility, and fully engaged action that integrates a broad range of bodily and psychic capacities.³⁰ In light of Borgmann’s insistence that agency-building practices must draw us into attentive and receptive engagement with our environments, it is also worth noting that, though shooting well may not be the most world-disclosing practice, it can at least meet this condition modestly. Shooters must attend closely and repeatedly to their bodily posture and stamina, environmental factors bearing on the bullet’s trajectory, the gun being fired, and the target being fired at. While this is a far cry from the world-gathering potential of a festive meal, and while the act of shooting can also be an intoxicating exercise of power, it nevertheless requires from the practitioner a real degree of respect for and collaboration with a world that does not *simply* obey one’s will.

As a search for skilled agency, then, gun use might seem appealing as a form of resistance to the technocratic paradigm. Unfortunately, this resistance runs into serious problems that, as with the myth of instrumentalism, stem from limitations in the moral language gun users often adopt to understand and justify concealed carry. Carlson and others have discerned a neoliberal ethos behind defensive gun carry’s search for meaningful responsibility (along with its disdain for reliance on police protection or its individualist understanding of crime and social decline). According to this critique, the ethic of armed citizenship renounces state-provided security (and other social services) to opt instead for privatized security and citizenship through the cultivation of a responsible subject whose “participation in the market,” as Carlson puts it, “surpasses her relationship to the state ... in defining her rights, duties, and obligations as a citizen.”³¹ But Carlson acknowledges that concealed carry is different from, say, private police or home alarm systems since only the former requires “the cultivation of particular manual skills and mental capacities.” Concealed-carry security is performed and not just purchased.³² More important than a shift from the state to the market as reference point for responsible citizenship, then, is gun users’ frequent defense of personal responsibility and skilled agency through a discourse focused

³⁰ Luke, “Counting Up AR-15s,” 84–85. Simply loading a handgun involves rarely used finger muscles with increasing force as the magazine fills up. Even experienced users may wind up with bruised and swollen hands after loading and firing a high number of rounds (Shapira, “How to Use the Bathroom with a Gun,” 197–199).

³¹ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 68. See also Anker, “Mobile Sovereigns,” 24–36; Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 114–132 and 154.

³² Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 68–69.

stringently on individual independence from the conditions that situate action (state support being but one example of such conditions).

Meaningful personal responsibility expressed in skilled agency, however, does not require and is very poorly served by this individualist discourse—especially in a technocratic society. This point has been developed particularly well by Matthew Crawford, another technology critic who emphasizes how the growing gap between commodities and machinery depletes our skills.³³ One might think appeals to skilled agency should aim to shore up a muscular individual who can stand up against the “choice architectures” that herd our attention to consumer experiences while our inner resources shrivel as their operations are outsourced onto our devices. But that, argues Crawford, would actually play directly into the problem. For it would put forward a self who can act well in *any* human ecology—regardless of access to friendships, shared attention to a complex world, cultural scaffolds that orient practical reasoning, objects to which our skills are fruitfully attuned, and the necessarily contingent and particular habits through which we are equipped for such attunement. Skilled agency is and must be situated, and a self who can be situated is one delimited through attunement to specific ecologies. Unsituated selves are, by contrast, fragile—that is, easily frustrated by deep conflicts between will and world because they are not yet equipped for responsive, adaptive, and joyful interaction with the world in its specificity. Such fragility, along with pliability to attention engineering, is the ultimate outcome of the “modern identification of freedom with choice” enshrined in our modern liberal political traditions. Such choice, Crawford writes,

is understood as a pure flashing forth of the unconditioned will. ... Thus understood, choice serves as the central totem of consumer capitalism, and those who present choices to us appear as hand-maidens to our own freedom. When the choosing will is hermetically sealed off from the fuzzy, hard-to-master contingencies of the empirical world, it becomes more “free” in a sense: free for the kind of neurotic dissociation from reality that opens the door wide for others to leap in on our behalf, and present options that are available to us without the world-disclosing effort of skillful engagement. For [an unsituated self], choosing (from a menu of ready-made solutions) replaces doing, and it follows that such a person should be more pliable to the choice architectures presented to us in mass culture.³⁴

Thus, for example, slot machine gambling has long been justified and defended from regulation by its industry’s ability to construe

³³ Matthew B. Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 23–78.

³⁴ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 76.

gambling addiction as rooted in weakness of will, morally bad choices, or—more recently—specific individuals’ blameless and preexisting predilections that compromise resistance to internal impulses. In this way, the public is distracted “from the fact that conditioning gamblers to play ‘to extinction’ is the design script that animates every aspect of the gambling experience, from the interior design of casinos to the minutiae of the machines’ displays to the carefully calibrated frequency of wins.”³⁵ In reality, addiction results from interactions between normal human psychology and the carefully engineered gambling experience: “repetition coupled with random reinforcement issues in addiction.”³⁶ The machinery, then, is built upon a keen recognition of humans as situated agents. But liberal political economy hamstring efforts at taking collective responsibility for these ecologies. We have built an economic system upon the assumption of an individually self-responsible “autonomous subject capable of acting in his own self-interest” independently of situating conditions. We therefore lack the ability to name encroachments upon our agency by commercial interests that actively engineer our situating conditions. Thus, we continue rehashing the association of heteronomy with state regulation when the most important and insidious forms of coercion come from elsewhere.³⁷

Accordingly, Crawford concurs with critics of neoliberalism when they note that deregulation of the economy tends to “ratchet up the burden of *self-regulation*,” which in turn amplifies existing inequalities. Self-discipline accumulates with capital within families, and not everyone has the financial means to offshore some of the self-regulation burden to accountants and SAT-prep companies.³⁸ But putting the problem simply as a standoff between private responsibility and state involvement also misconstrues, Crawford argues, how situated action grounds skilled agency. For various reasons, the twentieth century also saw the dismantling of broader cultural scaffolds that, though far from perfect, were coherent and robust enough to support individual people and households in their attentional and self-regulatory burdens. “The disciplinary functions of culture have in fact not been dissolved so much as privatized. They are located less in a shared order of meaning such as Protestant thrift, parental authority, or injunctions against gluttony, and more in the

³⁵ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 106. Here he draws heavily on Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 107.

³⁷ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 107–112. Zuboff, we should note, makes a very similar case regarding surveillance capitalism.

³⁸ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 41–42.

professional nagging services provided by financial planners, tutors, and personal trainers.”³⁹ But shareable public cultural ecologies are crucial for sustaining the coherent situatedness of skilled action. They also sustain fully political confrontations about the goods served by various features of shared environments. Such confrontations are our only real alternative to the anonymous nudging of attention engineers.⁴⁰ Hence, the central problem of skilled agency is not primarily that of strengthening individual self-responsibility but rather one of articulating and cultivating the full range of human ecologies needed for skilled agency to thrive.

Critics of armed citizenship as neoliberal self-responsibility have shown that gun owners regularly make use of language similar to that by which casinos defend their business model. This helps further explain gun instrumentalism’s coexistence with a strong emphasis on proper formation. Instrumentalist rhetoric resonates easily with our prevailing view of freedom as unsituated choice, while an emphasis on individual self-regulation makes it both possible and imperative to affirm the need for rigorous personal formation while disavowing any institutional support or regulation.⁴¹ But gun owners’ interest in responsible agency, as well as their experience of shooting well as a craft calling forward such agency, is neither properly explained nor served well through individualizing models of personal responsibility. To best articulate why skilled agency is a pressing issue in our time, to make the best out of practices where we rightly intuit that we are beginning to cultivate what a technocratic society corrodes, and to foster such agency across our daily life with enough consistency as to build a serious and resilient alternative—in each case we must recognize skilled humans as situated beings, who are properly attuned to, reliant upon, and creatively interacting with specific social, technological, and natural ecologies. Such a reorientation would require real work. It would also do far better justice to and render more fruitful some of the most central and defensible concerns driving the culture of armed citizenship.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS AND ATTENTION TO THE REAL WORLD

Have we thereby endorsed defensive-carry gun culture as essentially on the right track and needing only the above adjustments? Not quite. Recall how, in arguing that guns elicit skilled agency, Timothy Luke had to put forward “shooting well” as the central internal good around which other ancillary practices (e.g., weapon maintenance and modification) closely orbit. Recall also how

³⁹ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 43.

⁴⁰ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 41–44, 127–160, and 181–193.

⁴¹ I am grateful to Paul Scherz for this point.

Borgmann and Crawford stressed that skilled agency depends fundamentally upon practices and things that reveal the world to and equip us for fully human action within that world. Shooting well may be a modestly world-disclosing activity, and concealed carriers certainly practice shooting their guns. But shooting well is not the center of gravity for armed citizenship. The goal is effective armed defense against an assailant. But with a few exceptions (e.g., fighting as an infantry soldier) such an act is not the sort of thing people can actually practice. For the overwhelming majority of armed citizens, defensive gun use is an object of endless preparation exercised under safe (and therefore radically different) conditions. While many armed citizens spend a fair bit of time doing bodily drills or working through imagined scenarios on a weekly or even daily basis, what engages their daily attention more than anything else (and has the best chance of counting as a practice with internal goods) is active vigilance against such unhopied-for events—what they call “situational awareness.” All of this has important implications with regard to the quality of armed citizens’ attention to the world. Rather than opening users to the real world, concealed carry produces the subjective experience we normally associate with world-disclosing practices while instead setting users’ imaginations loose into largely fantastical accounts of their social environments.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of situational awareness as a core imperative orienting and integrating the daily actions, conversations, instruction, and regular bodily as well as spiritual exercises that make up the culture of armed citizenship. At a basic level, situational awareness has to do with incorporating into one’s daily life, to the fullest possible extent, a habit of attentive vigilance against potential threats. Such vigilance is mapped into schemas of highly embodied awareness intended to track one’s current situation and trigger appropriate responses. The default setting for an armed citizen is “condition yellow,” a state of relaxed alertness that habitually scans for potential threats in one’s environment. Condition orange begins with the identification of a specific potential threat (someone acting suspiciously) and involves keeping one’s eye on this person and coming up with a tactical plan for taking evasive or (if necessary) defensive action if the threat is actualized. Should that happen, one enters condition red and enacts the self-defense plan. To observe condition yellow is also to distinguish oneself from the sheep who remain in condition white—that is, lack of awareness of one’s surroundings and failure to remain alert for potential threats.⁴² It also involves a disposition to inhabit spaces in particular ways (e.g., taking

⁴² Jon Anderson, “Gun Owners, Ethics, and the Problem of Evil,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 3 (2017): 43; Baum, “Happiness is a Worn Gun,” 32–33.

restaurant seats against walls and with a clear view of the entrance).⁴³ More generally, situational awareness helps coordinate ethical claims constitutive of armed citizenship (obliviousness and victimhood are bad; willingness to violently defend is good), the bodily experience of carrying and shooting a gun, and important mental practices (e.g., reflecting on what kinds of violence one is prepared to exercise and why).⁴⁴ Thus, for instance, gun owners might report feeling calmer, safer, and less aggressive when carrying, not just because they can defend themselves but also because the gun elicits greater attentiveness to one's surrounding or responsibility for staying out of petty arguments.⁴⁵

Given our widespread difficulties with media representations that inhibit robustly attentive engagements with the world, ought we not celebrate the embodied attentiveness of condition yellow that is part of concealed-carry gun culture? Not if the picture of the world such attention yields is generally inaccurate in its content and skewed in its affective dispositions. Although gun violence is a serious problem in this country, the rate of violent crime (including gun homicide) has continued to drop dramatically since the early 1990s due to a range of factors among which the influence of armed civilians has yet to be demonstrated.⁴⁶ Moreover, the risk of victimization varies widely by age, income, race, and geography. In general, the risk is higher for people who are young (16–34), urban, black, and poor.⁴⁷ The data we have on concealed carry permits shows that white men are overwhelmingly more likely to submit an application and receive approval.⁴⁸ The great majority of armed citizens already live in relative safety from gun violence. Some might recognize this fact and respond that carrying is still reasonable because the consequences of being unprepared are simply too high.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the world as disclosed

⁴³ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 80.

⁴⁴ Anderson, "Gun Owners, Ethics, and the Problem of Evil," 44; Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 73–80.

⁴⁵ Baum, "Happiness is a Worn Gun," 33–34; Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 76–77.

⁴⁶ See Stroud for a good summary of this and relevant sources (*Good Guys with Guns*, 7–8).

⁴⁷ For a recent discussion of risk ratios based on the National Crime Victimization Survey, see Heather Warnken and Janet L. Lauritsen, "Who Experiences Violent Victimization and Who Accesses Services? Findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey for Expanding Our Reach," Center for Victim Research, April 2019, navaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CVR-Article_Who-Experiences-Violent-Victimization-and-Who-Accesses-Services-1.pdf.

⁴⁸ Harel Shapira, Katherine Jensen, and Ken-Hou Lin, "Trends and Patterns of Concealed Handgun License Applications: A Multistate Analysis," *Social Currents* 5, no. 1 (2018): 3–14. The trend is similar for gun ownership (Pew Research Center, "America's Complex Relationship with Guns").

⁴⁹ DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?*, 13; Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 2.

to them by the practice of armed citizenship is one in which they and their loved ones are profoundly vulnerable and where potential threats can be lurking in every corner. Stroud compellingly explains how her interlocutors' stories of perceived threat consistently lack evidence that the suspect was in fact dangerous or acted in a threatening manner. They also lack evidence of a disciplined commitment to remembering these events with accuracy and precision or to recalibrating one's situational awareness accordingly. Some carriers are set off by everyday loud noises or seeing someone with a handheld barcode scanner at Walmart. One respondent reinterprets (and profoundly regrets) his life before becoming a concealed carrier as foolishly vulnerable despite the fact that he and his family suffered no victimizations during that time. Another one compares her responsivity to her surroundings as what is experienced by "someone who's been raped or attacked."⁵⁰

Moral theologians can identify a number of reasons why this way of reading one's environment is problematic even if it does not lead directly to more gun violence. Here, however, I will focus on how such a practice of committed attention to one's surroundings can become so disconnected from reality. The way in which cultural forces like racism can set the content of such attention is certainly relevant—a number of Stroud's interlocutors indicate no other reason for feeling threatened than the fact that the other person was black.⁵¹ A whole cocktail of other forces is also surely involved: neoliberal interpretations of poverty, media depictions of fictional gun violence, news coverage of crime, NRA fearmongering, our relatively abstract relationship to real violence,⁵² or the way in which many gun owners reduce immensely complex social and cultural problems that are truly hurting them into a more cognitively manageable standoff between good and bad guys.⁵³ But how can a practice so centered on paying attention nevertheless be so incapable of offering resistance or correction to these cultural pressures?

This inability to offer resistance is baked into the practice of armed citizenship and hidden from view by the subjective experience of focused attention that situational awareness elicits. Carlson explains how the unpredictability and slim likelihood of actual defensive gun use sets off defensive training from other gun practices and, we should add, practices such as driving a car that require us to negotiate a meaningful degree of lethal risk:

⁵⁰ Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 94–111 and 144–150.

⁵¹ Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 94–104.

⁵² DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?*, 1–50.

⁵³ Anker, "Mobile Sovereigns."

Firearms handling requires a knack for manual dexterity. However, in hunting and target shooting, the shooter receives a clear verification of his or her technical proficiency: Did you hit the game? Is there a hole in the bullseye? For the vast majority of Americans armed for self-defense purposes, there's no verification of their skill readiness. NRA drills do not simulate self-defense encounters, and relatively few gun carriers will ever face an actual criminal encounter to find out whether they have the skills needed to survive. By then, it will be too late to modify their training regimen, anyway.⁵⁴

By contrast with other kinds of shooting, there is no feedback loop here between bodily action and its outcome in the world, and thus also no ongoing informed adjustment to the world that can discipline and cultivate perception. This results in a vacuum of concrete engaged experience combined with an insatiable imperative to fill that vacuum and nurture hope that such striving will suffice. As NRA materials for certification courses put it,

Your plan for responding to a potential threat should ... be regularly practiced. ... There is nothing—no shooting sport, no motion picture or instruction manual, and no training regimen—that can fully prepare you for the experience of using your defensive firearm against a violent assailant. Nonetheless, those gun owners who avail themselves of every opportunity to prepare mentally and physically for a defensive situation will almost always fare better than those who don't.⁵⁵

While some of this endless training involves repeatedly manipulating one's weapon, a large part of the vacuum is filled with mental exercises like visualizing hypothetical scenarios or imagining a target as an armed assailant. Given that situational awareness already involves proactively imagining potential threats and tactical responses, along with the need to approximate one's training to realistic situations, in a certain sense these visualization exercises themselves become part of the everyday practice of situational awareness. One instructor jokes to Carlson that he does this so habitually that "I've already killed a dozen guys since we've been sitting here."⁵⁶ Emotional habits and construals of the armed assailant can also become part of the imaginative training. As another trainer insists, "You want to conquer, destroy. You've got to work on developing this mind-set. Realize the world is a violent place. Understand your opponent, because they are not like you and me.

⁵⁴ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 81–82.

⁵⁵ NRA, *Guide to the Basics of Personal Protection in the Home* (Fairfax, VA: National Rifle Association of America, 2010), 131, 147 (cited in Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 81).

⁵⁶ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 73–80.

They would cut off your head for your jewelry. ... Visualize. Create movies in your head about you and the bad guy. You have to see yourself winning.”⁵⁷ Stroud links this blurring between real human ecologies and imaginative training to her interlocutors’ difficulty in narrating disciplined stories of actual threatening events (“I was...”) without slipping into rehearsals of generic hypothetical situations (“you pull up...”). Thus they tend to “explain any potentially threatening experience as a crime that could have been.”⁵⁸ Real stories start to operate less as experience that needs to be unpacked, remembered, and applied with care. Instead, they become quick fodder for the imagination in the infinite task of preparing intuitive response scripts for an unforeseeable event. The stakes are high—not only one’s own life and that of loved ones, but also one’s quality as responsible citizen and protector. One instructor speaks of the death of two students as gun fight “forfeits” because “they chose not to be armed” on “The Big Day.”⁵⁹ Another instructor is even more explicit: “I feel I have a responsibility, and I believe that in my afterlife I will be judged. Part of the judgment will be: Did this guy look after himself?”⁶⁰ And when the bad guys are irrational and fundamentally evil outsiders, justice means winning. It is on these terms that the relevant features of experiences with potentially threatening people are identified, remembered, and repurposed.

Here again we can see concealed carry’s entanglement with our technocratic condition. Crawford likens slot machine gambling (by serious players who come to “get in the zone” rather than make money) as lost in a kind of pseudo-autotelic activity. Real autotelic activities “are guided by intimations of something valuable that you are trying to bring more fully into view through your activity.” But “with gambling machines, the sense of something real to be apprehended is conjured up by various manipulations of our capacity for detecting patterns, and this probably contributes to their absorbing nature.”⁶¹ We get to enjoy a good-enough approximation of *the subjective experience* we would have when pursuing the goods internal to a practice and when growing in agency through that pursuit.⁶² This is a tempting apparent solution to the anxiety-inducing

⁵⁷ Anderson, “Gun Owners, Ethics, and the Problem of Evil,” 44.

⁵⁸ Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 98.

⁵⁹ Tom Givens, “Carry Your Darned Gun!,” *Rangemaster Digest* email newsletter, June 3, 2014 (cited in Yamane, “The First Rule of Gunfighting,” 169).

⁶⁰ Baum, “Happiness is a Worn Gun,” 32.

⁶¹ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 106. He attributes this account of autotelic activities to Talbot Brewer.

⁶² Here I rely on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of internal goods in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), especially at 181–225.

contradiction of living under the imperative to be unsituated and unhindered choosing selves in a world where genuine agency is increasingly beyond our grasp. “Pseudo-action” appeals to us because, as a kind of space “sealed off from the world, it is experienced as a zone of efficacy and intelligibility.”⁶³ Concealed-carry situational awareness also hunts for the apprehension of something real and is hobbled by a severed loop between action and contingent events in the world. Except that it is now the user, scaffolded by the cultural world shared with fellow armed citizens, who conjures up the phantom of something real. Moreover, instead of staring into a slot machine (or video game, news feed, or string of video recommendations), it is the real world to which the armed citizen is attending. So one can well understand how, under the strain of the tensions inherent in a technocratic society, “condition yellow” looks like a far more engaged and receptive alternative to the more obvious forms of pseudo-action on offer. But it is still a failed attempt to make real forward motion against the challenge that such a society puts before us.

CONCLUSION

We have ventured beyond the default script for reflection on guns qua technologies to catch a better glimpse of this problem from a new vantage point: Pope Francis’s critique of the technocratic paradigm as a general sociocultural force in its own right that exercises a detrimental influence across the entire spectrum of modern life. This paradigm trains us to see ourselves fundamentally in terms of unhindered and unsituated volition and to confront nature as an “insensate order” of alien raw material to be coerced through technoscience in service to our utility and security. With Francis’s critique in hand, we revisited the culture of armed citizenship in light of two pressing tasks that would be central for any serious challenge to the technocratic paradigm: the cultivation of meaningful skilled agency and of truly world-disclosing practices. On both counts, we found that concealed-carry defensive gun use is caught in a cycle of failed resistance to the technocratic paradigm. The embrace of gun use in the pursuit of meaningful responsibility is chained to a myth of autonomous choice that undercuts the cultural and social conditions necessary for mature skilled agency. Meanwhile, situational awareness in vigilant preparation for an event one cannot repeatedly practice leaves the door wide open to undisciplined imagination in the interpretation of daily experiences and equally undisciplined remembering of those experiences. Since in both cases we do find a meaningful germ of resistance, the growing center of US gun use is

⁶³ Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 93–94.

caught in the technocratic paradigm precisely by appearing to offer an adequate alternative to a life of corroded agency and disconnection from the world. It is also caught in that paradigm because it trains concealed carriers to read unjust assailants as thoroughly evil, irrational “bad guys” to be dominated through highly engineered force.

But can these germs of resistance grow into a genuine alternative? Like the lizard in Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, the myth of autonomous and unsituated choice can be severed from the search for skilled meaningful agency. Though many armed citizens would likely experience this as a profound cultural amputation, the result would make good on the best possible reasons for seeking freedom in a technocratic society.⁶⁴ What about situational awareness? In this case the broken feedback loop between bodily action and observable consequences is inherent in the practice itself. The only hope, if there is any, lies in wrapping situational awareness in a web of truly world-disclosing practices that could jointly outrun other sociocultural forces competing to fill the vacuum left open by that broken feedback loop. Concealed carriers’ situational awareness simply cannot pull its own weight as a form of attention; it can only have a place in the good life if other practices can stabilize it and give it content. Needless to say, moral theologians have much to contribute here, not least with regard to seeing potential assailants as human beings.

Thus, we return to Francis’s call for fully ecological reflection, which in the case of the gun debate would mean leaving behind the myth of gun instrumentalism by integrating questions such as those treated here into a much broader texture of everyday-life confrontations with modern technology. Such a process is difficult for everyone, not just gun owners. Comprehensive reflection upon and active resistance to technology’s diverse but compounding effects is exhausting and can elicit fear that other issues we care about will be sidelined. For those of us who have deep objections to how guns are used in the United States, the foregoing discussion should help alleviate that fear. In both of the main questions considered, standard objections to US gun use are not dismissed but simply put in a broader context when gun owners are engaged with regard to how their concerns could be addressed more justly through fully ecological reflection. Properly carried out, such reflection already moves in the direction many critics already hope to go.⁶⁵ **M**

⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 1973), 106–115.

⁶⁵ I am grateful to Michael Grigoni, Barrett Turner, and Joshua Brown for their feedback on this article’s argument, as well as to Paul Scherz for his comments on an earlier draft.

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