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Review of Mark Kingwell's *The Barbed Gift of Leisure*

Mark Kingwell is mistaken in his postulation that embracing technological advances by offloading most of the tasks to robots is “human downgrading” (par. 34). He fails to recognize that it is humans who through their efforts and creativity are able to realize these intelligent machines before putting them into use. He has based his argument on the efforts of various individuals trying to make their lives easier through creative problem-solving. He begins by ridiculing a young person who has a dream of inventing a robot later in his life that would make his bed for him every morning (par. 1). Kingwell questions why someone would strive to excel in a course like computer science for such a seemingly trivial goal. He argues that the invention of robots might be used with good intentions, but their creation will always have a dark side.

Kingwell further claims that the main reason why the robots are being invented is basically as a result of man's desire to avoid indulging in physical work that has little pay, to strive for managerial or white-collar positions (par. 4). Kingwell expresses concern that robots could eventually displace humans who would otherwise have done those jobs. He feels that this is dangerous because an individual with too much free time will seek relief from boredom (par. 7). His argument sounds very much like the old adage “Idle hands are the work of the Devil.” Here, Kingwell is demonstrating his attitude that creating robots for manual labor has a dark side to it.

Kingwell further believes that humans have already come to the point of being cyborgs, that robot technology has already become part of man's life, resulting in a mixture of human and non-living features (par. 8). He claims that, with time, these robots that are meant to assist humans will end up rising against man, like in the movie *The Terminator*. He asserts that sooner or later these machines will develop human-like intelligence and will begin demanding equal rights in society (par. 11). These demands will be the result of abuse by humans, such as being assigned an overload of work. Eventually, demands will turn to acts of revenge (par. 13), like in the movie *Blade Runner*.

In addition, Kingwell claims that humans will no longer anticipate the weekend for leisurely activities after a long week of work. This, he says, is as a result of having gadgets that allow one to enjoy social media in the comfort of their offices (par. 18). He goes on to argue that it is preferable to have some kind of constructive idling as he does writing rather than spending it in useless play. Kingwell feels that leisure is a form of consumption which will lead humans to competing with each other. He says that such competition ends only in death (par. 28).

With such a lifestyle of mere competition in almost everything, Kingwell asserts that humans end up ceasing to be workers and real owners; instead, they produce and consume imagined products. This is because technological advancements will lead to excessive idleness and, hence, creative fancies, leaving humans to nonstop indulging in desires (par. 33). He finishes his argument by saying that, even with such leisure, humans still die, and no robot can prevent death.

Kingwell's assertion that too much embracing of technology to complete chores is human downgrading is mistaken because he has completely forgotten that the same technology comes

about through human involvement. For example, the young person who wants to invent a robot to make his bed realizes that his goal will be achieved only through his hard work and commitment to his studies. Kingwood does not acknowledge these efforts; rather, he looks towards the final results when the fruits of labor have been reaped (par. 1).

Kingwell's reasoning is faulty when he asserts that robots are invented to free humans of physical jobs, leaving the man in managerial positions. Kingwell does not understand that robots are meant to assist and not totally substitute for mankind in completing work-related tasks. This means humans are still involved. As Kingwell states, robots must at all times obey the orders given to them by humans (par. 6). It is clear that the robots can never be totally independent.

Kingwell further claims that our involvement in techno-use has turned our human nature into something very different. He asserts that we are cyborgs (par. 8). This is not the case as the interaction with technology allows humans to make even further technological advancements. Developing new technologies does not mean that changes take place in human nature (par. 10); rather, it provides an opportunity to embrace and explore the benefits of their endeavors. As new developments are realized, the great difference between humans and non-humans is more clearly demonstrated.

Moreover, Kingwell is wrong when he says that the robots, which he calls manufactured workers, can reach a point of ganging up against humans. How will such machines be able to reason on their own without man's instructions? All the inventions that humans develop are all within man's scope. Kingwell lacks evidence to claim that such metallic objects can have feelings and consciousness (par. 13). His claim is unfounded in stating that the reliance on robots

gives too much leisure time to humans. Humans must still use time to direct the robotic activities. Kingwell's argument is a fallacy in thinking.

In condemning the seeming slacker (par 18), Kingwell demonstrates his lack of understanding the importance of reflection in formulating and developing ideas. He argues that it is not productive to just sit and reflect. He neglects to see the value in the outcome of an individual's reflective thinking, but insists, instead, that the reflective thinker is being idle (par 23). What Kingwell does not understand is that not all important work is completed through physical assertion. Believing that leisure time depletes man of the fruits from his labor is unsound thinking (par 27). The author fails to recognize the human need for relaxation, brainstorming, and the sharing of ideas that in the end may result in new advancements. Instead of looking at it from this angle, he claims that such indulgences only lead to competition in leisurely activities.

In general, as much as Kingwell tries to point out the problems that come with technological growth, he needs to look at the other side of the coin, too. The benefits are great. He criticizes mankind when it takes a deserved rest, and labeling it as idle (par 21). He sees the majority not getting involved in their free time as he does. "...my job is itself arguably an enjoyable and rewarding form of idling" (Par.23). However, Kingwell should appreciate the fact that humans live differently from each other. He is, therefore, mistaken in his postulation that embracing technological advances by offloading most of the tasks to robots is "human downgrading" because he fails to recognize the fact that it is humans who through their efforts and creativity are able to realize these intelligent machines before putting them into use. Hence in his article "The Barbed Gift of Leisure," though Kingwell portrays human as mere consumers, they are the real workers and, hence, deserved owners of intellectual properties.

Works Cited

Kingwell, Mark. "*The Barbed Gift of Leisure.*" *The Chronicle Review*, March 25, 2013.  
Web. March 20, 2014.