A Web of Our Own Making

Antón Barba-Kay. *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 275pp. $90. Hardcover. 9781009324793.

In *A Web of Our Own Making*, author Antón Barba-Kay reveals a world in which the insidious nature of digital technology leads humanity to will lesser goods. Far from fiction, Barba-Kay unfolds a complex argument that humanity's current use of digital technology has become a mind-altering mirror, which is warping our political and social life and our very understanding of what it means to be human. In light of the digital screen, according to Barba-Kay, we reassess the very nature of reality (as what is *not virtual*), strive to dominate others by creating an obedient artificial intelligence (AI) in our image, and judge our perfection by digital standards. In so doing, we are settling for a *summum bonum* that is, in fact, merely a digital idol of an imagined ideal self. A digitally driven humanity is all but destined to will lesser goods, such as a "value-free neutrality," as we simultaneously unlearn the higher goods—the goods that give us agency and keep us fully human and alive. The alternative, the author suggests, is to hold out for encounters in which we find ourselves and what exceeds us, in which we are real and at stake, and in which our attention and value reveal something other than us (185).

Barba-Kay makes his aim quite clear from the outset: "to call things by their name in order to give voice to them. Because what is not claimed by open clarity is what dominates us" (4). He wants readers to notice what is happening to our understanding of ourselves as human, as well as to our will and desires, so that we might resist the dehumanizing force of digital technology. By the end of the book, if the reader acknowledges some truth to what the author has named—and it would be hard not to find some elements of truth within these pages—then Barba-Kay has accomplished his aim. Even if readers take issue with certain terms and categories he describes, he succeeds in clearing some fog from our digitized lenses, presenting an incisive critique of our present use of and hopes for digital technology.

With passing references to various media scholars, politicians, and philosophers, among others, he assumes his readers have a broad, if general, knowledge of media studies, current events, and Western philosophy. This is not an introductory-level read, but it is accessible to a wide audience of scholars, given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter.

Barba-Kay blends multiple styles of writing into the book to make his point. The introduction provides a densely packed overview of his argument, which is examined in detail in subsequent chapters. The following chapters address the unique nature of digital media, the author's theory of technology, digital technology's impact on politics and society, and the ideals humans pursue in digital technology that reshape values and goods. The final chapter takes the form of a letter, where he plays devil's advocate with a sarcastic diatribe (and a job offer) from a big tech company in Silicon Valley. The overall style is rich but accessible; even if some attempts at humor fall flat, their presence is welcomed when considering the book's sobering content.

While Barba-Kay's style is engaging, and he hopes to provide clarity on such a critical topic, his argument is sometimes hard to follow. To capture everything, the reader might need to give this book a second or third read-through, which could speak to its brilliance or its failure to argue a point clearly throughout. The book could have benefited from more liberal use of footnotes to clarify ideas, connect thoughts, and shed light on philosophical assumptions (although it also engages

in some unnecessary secondary referencing). Still, more footnoting could have helped nuance the author's usage of certain terms and clarify his logical moves.

The chapter on politics and social life seems like an outlier that does not significantly impact the book's overall argument. The ideas are engaging, and Barba-Kay connects them to his overall argument in the introduction, but the concepts in that chapter are not as clearly interwoven throughout the rest of the book as they are in other chapters. Perhaps that chapter should have been a separate book entirely. Where the first chapter outlines the overall argument, the second chapter could have explored that thesis related specifically to global politics, society, and polarization. That would have afforded Barba-Kay space to delve more deeply into those issues and the concepts of the mind, will, and religion touched on in *The Web of Our Own Making*.

Writing as an American scholar of Western philosophy, his perspective is noticeably limited. He refers to digital technology as a "master metaphor" through which we view our life and writes about its impact on humanity and society, likely resonating with people of certain cultures, especially those from largely affluent countries. One wonders, though, about individuals and groups that have no significant access to digital technology worldwide—are they implicated in his argument? How might non-Western philosophers describe the societal reshaping caused by digital technology, or would they reframe the question entirely?

Despite these limitations, *A Web of Our Own Making* is a fascinating and important book. Its greatest strength lies in its revelatory nature, which is made all the more successful through the author's adept use of creative and interesting examples from pop culture, Greek mythology, and historical events, among others. Barba-Kay uses these examples to illuminate aspects of digital technology that often lurk unseen. He refuses to shy away from or skirt around concepts of how we are using digital technology to reshape the world in our digital image. He refuses to give in or give up, which makes his argument and writing that much more compelling. From the first few pages, he draws the reader in, noting that "the digital transformation is not an event occurring at a distance, but a change happening through and within each one of us" and that "there is, in fact, no internet outside us... we've lost our minds to it" (4–5). Barba-Kay not only identifies and connects many concerns others have raised (or that we have intuited) about digital technology, but also takes those concerns and places them in a philosophical framework, asking questions about what is good, about political and social life, and about humanity.

Where other books on this topic may have sparks of insight amid stories for mass appeal, this book cuts to the heart of the matter with terrifying precision. Barba-Kay is not interested in helping people find and pursue what is "real" based on a "virtual" and "real" binary; he wants people to reject the binary altogether. Other books that offer ways to unplug, slow down, or detox pale in comparison to Barba-Kay's revelatory exploration of how we use digital technology while recreating ourselves and our values in the process. Barba-Kay engages these issues critically and deeply, forcing the reader to work to understand his argument in a rich, challenging, and rewarding way.

The significance of this book for theological scholarship cannot be understated. Barba-Kay engages in a wide range of important topics in theological discourse today, making him a wonderful interdisciplinary dialogue partner. While theologians may disagree with his understanding of religion, will, identity, and other fundamental concepts, the issues he raises concerning digital technology are undeniably similar to concerns theologians likely share, even if for slightly different reasons. This work raises numerous questions theologians must address in their own right: How is digital technology influencing our desires, values, and understanding of what it means to be human? How should we understand the changing culture, including a new concept of time and

place, as a result of digital technology? How has digital technology shaped our understanding of community and family, of the church, and of unity? In a post-pandemic, highly digitized world that is rapidly embracing the use of AI, Barba-Kay's voice of reason in *A Web of Our Own Making* is a voice worth hearing. Theologians engaging the Digital Age and related topics, and theological libraries supporting them, should consider adding this to their shelves.

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