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How Your Moleskine Can Bring Out Your Humanity: Why Matter Matters

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Sax, David, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (PublicAffairs, 2016).

Up until very recently, if something could be digitized, its fate was a foregone conclusion... Our world would be successively rendered into bits and bytes, one program at a time, until we reached a state of digital utopia, or the Terminators came for us. (xvi)

In his 2016 book, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, journalist David Sax attempts to explain how, contrary to predictions, analog goods and ideas have clawed their way back to a state of cultural and financial relevance.

In two parts, Sax shows how, beginning in the mid-2000s, the digital takeover unexpectedly plateaued and analog began its resurgence. Part one narrates the return of four analog products through stories of the businesses behind them: teenage girls buying Taylor Swift records at the local vinyl shop; Milan Fashion Week designers sketching in their Moleskine notebooks; two bold entrepreneurs attempting to revive an iconic Italian film manufacturing company; a board game sommelier chatting up yuppies at a board game café on a Friday night in downtown Toronto.

Part two explores the revenge of analog ideas: independent bookstores opening in Manhattan; Amazon's brick-and-mortar Seattle store; students and teachers interacting in classrooms, unmediated by iPads or laptops; manufacturing jobs in Detroit; and Facebook's Analog Research Lab, where employees (and yes, this actually happens) hand-craft motivational signs to kick-off a project.

While some of these background stories include amusing anecdotes, the repetitive arc of sales-go-down, new-twist-on-an-old-classic, sales-go-up can become a bit monotonous. More interesting is Sax's analysis of why analog is on the rise. From a production standpoint the answer is simple: companies are manufacturing more and more physical products because they are profitable. Despite the effortless scalability of digital products, many technology companies, large and small, have failed to generate consistent profit. For example, Amazon's online retail division profited just 2.5% in the second quarter of 2015, following nearly two decades of unprofitable operation. Analog products provide a more certain future and a more lucrative present.

And if analog products are more profitable, it is because consumers find analog things to be more suited to human nature—or more “human centric” as Sax puts it—than digital things. Sax argues that analog helps satisfy our need for “in-real-life” relationships, which social media and other virtual ‘worlds’ cannot. The promise of person-to-person interactions at board game cafés and bookstores draw us away from video games and Amazon's ‘You-Might-Also-Like’ list. Analog products and services have built-in limitations which, Sax argues, free us to be creative, rather than overwhelming us with limitless possibilities. This is a major reason why musicians have returned to recording with analog equipment. Digital recording software allows for a practically unlimited number of takes and the splicing of the best bits of each, thus creating the idea that the perfect version of a song is within reach. Analog, on the other hand, necessarily restricts the process, which frees the musicians and producers to focus on the *performance* of the songs. The result is “more heartfelt, raw, and organic” music. Analog goods also engage more of our senses—the smell of the newspaper, the feel of a book—creating a richer and more aesthetically satisfying experience.

Sax is undoubtedly right that profit drives production and that we are drawn to physical things because we are physical and social creatures, and his book contains the seeds of a deeper analysis of the importance of the physical world. He builds the case against the usefulness of technology in education by describing a number of failed technological initiatives (including a billion-dollar iPad disaster in Los Angeles public schools) and the recent successes of new analog educational products. This suggests that learning requires more than access to information and that the student-teacher relationship, which technology disrupts, is a necessary part of that process. Sax's recurring argument that we “crave limitations” points to the inherent physical, intellectual, and temporal limitations of our human nature. In the best part of the chapter on work, Sax discusses the development of judgment and reason through manual labor. The quotes he borrows from author Nicholas Carr regarding our ability to “weave the knowledge we draw from observation and experience, from living, into a rich and fluid understanding of the world that we can then apply to any task or challenge...” has shades of Aristotle's notion of *ars* (art) and Aquinas's theory of the role of experience (*experimentum*) in cognition (*vis cogitativa*). It points to the reality that manual labor can truly engage both the body and the mind.

The motif of the pleasure of analog, which Sax returns to in each chapter, also reveals, albeit indirectly, another important aspect of our human nature. Sax describes what people enjoy in using analog products, “from the serendipity of getting a roll of film back from the developer... to the luxurious sound of unfolding the Sunday newspaper.” These aesthetic pleasures and the satisfaction of using the right tool for the job certainly help explain *why* analog. But many of the reasons Sax and his interviewees cite for the popularity of analog products and ideas are traditionally called vices: buying a Moleskine notebook to “feel creative even if they are not,” reading the Economist to “feel smarter,” using instant photography to satisfy the desire for “instant gratification,” playing board games to “liberate one another from reality,” shopping as a form of entertainment. Our use of analog goods to indulge pride, vanity, or *acedia* (sloth) would not be particularly noteworthy were it not for the fact that people use the digital world just as much for these same reasons.

There is, I think, an important lesson here, which Sax seems to miss. We often consume analog things, despite their physicality, in a way that actually de-humanizes us. For analog to be truly “human-centric” we cannot just consume it; we must encounter it more deeply. Several times Sax asserts that analog matters because it is real. But reality only leads to greater self-knowledge and wisdom when one is yoked to it. This requires more than enjoying analog products. It requires commitment to people, place, or things through good *and* bad. Only when the real world pushes back against us are we invited to self-reflect and ask the deeper questions about the world outside of ourselves, and only then can we develop the virtues that make us more human. The virtual world is almost entirely incapable of providing this kind of pushback because, from the user’s perspective, it is almost entirely the product of human imagination. There are no natures to encounter, understand, and work with (or struggle against) in the virtual world. Through essentially the same actions one can play music, purchase a book, shoot the enemy, or perform calculations. The virtual world creates a one-way relationship, existing as the expression of our desires. The analog world establishes a two-way relationship, for it has its own stable existence apart from our imagination. Ontology establishes relations and relations help form moral habits.

This all brings us back to the subtitle of the book, *Real Things and Why They Matter*. Sax provides two compelling answers. First, analog products produce a greater number of well-paying jobs than do digital products. Second, they draw us out of the virtual world and into the real world. Sax is most concerned with this latter reason: “Why a book? Why print? Because it is real.” By emphasizing, throughout the book, the ways in which analog things are more suited to our human nature, Sax points to our irrepressible desire for reality and our growing wariness of the promised digital utopia. As Hopkins once wrote, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” Analog’s revenge, however, will only be humanity’s victory if it leads us to a fuller understanding of what it means to be human.

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