

# TECHNOLOGY AND THE SPIRIT OF MAN

An Absurd and Terrifying World Has Become Our Real World

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Men have invariably gone forward in history with the assumption that violent shifts in their relation to the world, or in their relations to other men, were subject to a limiting principle: to critique, to reason, to the review of memory. Rarely during the event, more frequently after violence has spent itself, revolutions in the physical and moral order were understood to be subject to the judgment of the community that has brought them to pass, or of the civilized community as a whole. Revolutions brought new freedom in their wake, or they suppressed freedom; they opened new geographical and spiritual horizons, or they cut them down. Sometimes the revolutions were predictable, often they were contained. And always after the fact, they were subject to a critique of reason, an admission of guilt, a search for forgiveness, an investigation of meaning. They were usually, at very least, the occasion of a chastened and hopeful future. Revolutions stood, in this sense, under the most tenacious of human presuppositions; which is the supposition that events in the world must be ordered to human good, that man is responsible for them, that a world of irresponsibility is inhuman; and that the greatest absurdity conceivable is a world in which revolution brought the human adventure to an end.

This minimal supposition, of man's responsibility toward his future, this sense of the radical incompleteness of the world in his moral absence, a sense of what we might call the absurdity and horror of events which are not subject to judgment—all this must not be thought of as merely a conclusion which experience has forced on man. The truth that man belongs responsibly in the world, expresses in fact a passionate attachment to a reality which is the extension and completion of his being. He discovers the world, not so much opposite himself, as within himself. In the biological order of things, he comes

up through the world, body and spirit. He is born of its times and seasons, he breathes its air; through others, as Buber says, he comes to imagine the world. Through others he may even come to entrust himself to it.

Man and the world form a moral unity. And man is forbidden to destroy this harmony. The law is a conclusion of his active power of touching reality in history and of forming his future, and of rejecting chimerae or moral folly that would threaten his existence. Man can conceive of a beginning of the world which coincides with his own beginnings. He can even conceive of an end of things which includes his own last day. But he cannot imagine without doing violence to his being, a world of order or meaning perduring without him. He finds senseless and horrifying the notion of a post-human universe. No event that is, from within the world, issuing from human minds and executed with human hands, can be accepted as ending human existence.

Our conclusion is not merely an imaginative recoiling; it is also a moral one. Man's almost infinite capacity for living with crime and pain and sin and wars allows him to pick up the pieces of almost any catastrophe and to go on—as the second war, and Dresden and Hiroshima and Buchenwald witness. But we cannot consent to our own willed extinction, as a hypothesis which could be called a moral hypothesis.

It is perhaps necessary to preface our discussion with these remarks, in order to set off our present situation from any crisis that has gone before. No one of them prior to our own generation, nor all of them taken in their sum, could have brought us to the brink where we stand today. There was never a time that is, when men could announce the simple power to end time, to end man, to end history, to bring down the world. Every prior crisis granted, at very least, space for the unborn, an inhabitable area for the majority, blueprints for the future, some trace of cultural vision, living men and purpose issuing from ruin.

No such luxury is granted us now. Technology, as no one needs to be told, has introduced on the

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scene an altogether new possibility, in the form of total war. The news at its deepest is not military news, nor even philosophic news. It is a question of the will of God and the will of man, in open conflict. Who of us was not struck cold at the heart, when the first atomic bomb was unleashed on Japan? Our moral existence, our relationships to other men, or guilt, had taken an entirely new form. We knew, and we could never forget, that we had experimented with mankind in the test tube of a great city.

But we are justified today in speaking of a new and universal form of the ancient myth of sin, verified through technology. Throughout history, sin has always been present. Human advance has been brought about by sinful men, men who were forced to live with the deepest perplexities as they assumed responsibility for the future. And man would live with his questions, conscious that absolutely sinless activity in history is an ideal rather than an actuality, knowing that sin is part of the mystery of human wills operating concretely in time. The questions were indeed perplexing. Were given men, on a given occasion, acting in accord with a moral order? Were they moving forward under the light of reason, toward the fuller good of their being and the good of community? Or were they indulging their ego in a promethean and destructive way, leveling all before them in obedience to the dark forces of pride?

History indeed, offers some light, after the fact at least, on these questions. It offers certain broad areas for judgment upon political, scientific and social change. We have no difficulty as moral beings, in judging Hitler's racism, apartheid, the event at Hiroshima, Stalin's genocide policies. What Gabriel Marcel calls a "deep sense of poetry toward life" comes to our aid in qualifying such horrors. Marcel goes on to say, "It is in connection with this spontaneous piety, as an outrage against it, and more often than not, quite independently of any positive religious attachment, of any link with historical revelation, that these acts, which we have been the witnesses or victims of, seem to us to bear the undeniable marks of sin."

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But a different irony, or at least a modifying irony, stands clear in today's effort to bend technology to war. It has something to do with a nearly total confidence in the forces of nature, and a nearly total loss of confidence in the forces of spirit. And the two attitudes let us not hesitate to say, are complementary excesses.

Tentativeness, finality, stepping softly in unknown areas, are no longer considered indispensable to man's effort to transform the world. World effort spirals upward, in a narrowing cone; at the vent, stands one man's control, or one nation's pride. The good of the person, and the good of the human community have receded on the scale of accepted values. In the atmosphere of the cold war, and even perhaps apart from it, each step on the technological high wire is looked on as a value in itself, a kind of teasing invitation; we have gotten so far, why not further? The simple law of action is: since a given breakthrough has happened, a further one is possible. Therefore, beyond any reasonable doubt, it is desirable. Let us take the step.

Our topic cannot be realistically considered apart from cold-war technology. Technique and science have been almost exclusively applied in the last twenty years to war and war preparation. It must be said quite simply that such activity has been a deliberate, and enormously effective assault on man's spirit. It has expressed its contempt for man in its working assumption that when the forces of nature are brought to a certain point of useful control, literally nothing is forbidden; no further step, no bigger bomb, no passage from nuclear to hydrogen weaponry, no inclusion of larger populations and larger land units in the calculations of death.

In such ways, war technique has implemented its contempt for reason; it has mounted a world arsenal built on the poverty of the multitudes, debased the moral sense of men with a massive propaganda of self-justification, compelled the freedom and breadth of human inquiry underground into a dark single-minded obsession. Its contempt for man has assigned him finally only two possibilities: destruction or the arms race. These are the Neanderthal alternatives of a mankind of infinite resources. Their symbols are those of hideout and counterforce—the London tube shelters of the second world war, and the saturation bombing of the German cities; the shotgun at the shelter door, and the nuclear atmospheric testing programs.

It is this ironic limitation of human possibility, brought about by techniques that had promised men all heaven and earth, that must detain us. It includes as we suggested, the condemnation of man to the ground; Our topic can only hint at the ironies implicit in a technology that had promised man freedom from all his ancient bondages to time and the world; and has in fact enslaved his spirit. That enslavement is in the air; it is a poison of dread and restraint, and their counterpoint of unlimited violence.

Yet spirit has its own definitions, and we should pay them tribute. Spirit speaks of possibility; the sacred overflow of truth and beauty; resources of altruism; the passionate tendency of man to give himself and in the gift to renew himself; love without measure or limit, moral dominion over a servant universe, an infinite hunger to be and to become, to imagine and trust the world.

Technology too has its definition, not to be confused with its misuses. It can only be considered as the servant universe itself, the forces of nature existing on behalf of man, then procedures of knowledge, methods of determining the forces at the disposal of intelligence, of organizing and exploiting these forces. These are the general procedures which our own age has brought to a brilliant climax.

The golden age, no matter how fervently we might have hoped that it would take a technological form, simply has not occurred. Only here and there, as a kind of extracurricular effort, compassion and technique have broken through; in the efforts of specialist teams abroad, in the foreign aid programs of the Western and Eastern governments. But in comparison with the war efforts, these have been little more than distractions or interludes. They have never seriously interfered with the arms race, or allowed men to forget that the main issue of the world today is not man at all, but man the enemy.

For all of us, this period of war preparation and war spending and the pouring of ingenuity and resources into war, is hard and exhausting indeed. No one in the world has been left untouched by the angel of death. For the poor, its touch is further poverty; for the affluent, it is neurosis, estrangement, acedia, despair. Technology in military uniform has claimed our laboratories and research centers and universities. Its shadow has lain heavily on the nights and days of our political leaders.

In the dead calm before the storm, something else occurs. A radical, permeating change in the atmosphere of life, brings about a qualitative change in those who must live under it. And changes of this moment always occur without our being conscious of them, through the activity of spirit upon spirit. Breathed long enough, the war atmosphere may be said simply to work a change in the heart of man. The transformation is complete when we come to accept our climate as a normal and coherent attitude toward life and human beings—self-justifying, self-evident, a logic which suits our state of soul and justifies activity carried on according to its own norms.

In such an atmosphere, the order of reality is altered. Our capacity for goodness and truth are im-

paired. And our convictions about who we are, are transformed into illusions expressing only what we once were, or what we wish we could be. We live on in the dream world of the schizoid or the adolescent, our sense of identity victimized by its controlled sources. We hang suspended above a world we can no longer bear to live in.

Such an atmosphere also restricts the activity of those who could, in normal circumstances, bring relief to it. The restriction operates in two main ways; first, by narrowing the imaginative possibilities, suggesting constantly that solutions to illness lie beyond the capacities of the non-specialists. So gradually, even men of intelligence and capacity come to a personal dead end. They no longer see themselves in a healing role, forced to think through the responsibilities their gifts lay on them. Such an atmosphere also tends to restrict peacemaking into a channel which is strictly controllable. Peacemaking, which is the profound and first issue of the times, and the first capacity of healthy men, is no longer allowed to be seen as a spiritual power, capable of bringing evil under the control of reason. The work of peace no longer belongs in any true sense to the people; the artists, the intellectuals, the men of wisdom, are neither consulted nor involved.

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Gradually, the same task is withdrawn from the churches; eventually, they no longer think to claim it. Peacemaking in a war atmosphere becomes inevitably the specialty of small groups of diplomats and military experts. They control the peace by controlling the means of war. And we have come full circle, to the absurdity with which, one may presume, the first arrow was launched at the first enemy. In order to make peace, one prepares for and wages war.

The critique of our society, which can go forward only in a communion with a world society, is halted. As a result, Americans and their neighbors tend more and more to construct a view of themselves which has been sternly defined for them somewhat like an order of the day in a city under siege. The clichés and fears of nationalism, operating in ignorance of the world, are our teachers. They repeat everything we would like to hear; they tell us indeed that we have every right to be respected and loved, to be regarded as generous and peaceable and large minded. But it goes without saying that the world, when it can be heard, has other news for us.

What we have to say to the world cannot, as we know well, be said from a distance. We cannot re-

treat to theological barricades in order to declare that technology as war is the active enemy of man as spirit. Such a retreat places in question the sincerity of those who speak: the world can only be healed, as the Bible makes clear, by those who take its flesh.

We stay with the world, and at the same time, we quarrel with or modify or even disclaim the world's reasons for its own fidelity. Only such a stance, that of love of our times and fidelity to our faith, can lend us the qualifications for responsible action. I mean the gift of true presence, and the gift of prophecy—a prophecy which has undergone the world, and hence speaks out of knowledge and compassion, rather than prophecy from safety or distance. And on the other hand, a presence filled with spirit, rather than another technique among techniques; a sense of man, in fact, which admits of a breakthrough from without.

We are speaking of course, of the presence of mystery in the world. And our recourse is both logical and useful, understanding as we do that divine mystery both takes into account the evidence of experience and transcends it. Mystery, understood rightly, is implied in a religion that seeks to live in the world, seeks to be in the most exalted sense, a religion of the world. Applied to our present concern, mystery grants us immediacy and breathing space; and both are crucial to embattled men who have not given up on God because new and shocking data has come in from the world fronts; and who on the other hand, have not given up on the world because they have read their scriptures. Somewhere in fidelity to both sources of wisdom, life in the world and life in God, an approach will be found. I will not say an approach to a solution, which implies that faith is merely a superior form of problem-solving, but an approach to light and liberation.

Our reflections are meant in no sense to draw moral lines that will exclude ourselves from guilt. We stand within the cold-war universe; we are part of it. In each of our crises and their gradually narrowing alternatives, all men are in measure implicated. So are religious men. Technologists knew of no principle of control, and their work brought them very little light on the existence of such a principle. The failure of outside direction lies, at least within measure, at the door of those who have at their disposal the forces of spirit, and who for whatever reasons, fail to communicate, fail in more instances, even to protest.

In this failure, which is a common failure, it can at least be said that a fuller understanding of the limits of technology is becoming clear. Technique

has been organized in view of a task it could never in fact accomplish. Technology could not, given the fact of sinful men in the world, guarantee the peace. The failure is a parable which admits of a wider application. Technology will never of itself guarantee the good life, in any human way. The one failure must be taken in all seriousness, as the corollary of the other. We cannot suppose, that is, that only if we get over the hump of the cold war, and apply the techniques we have learned to the needs of societies at peace, all will be well. This indeed is the theme of the social engineers and psychologists who do not dare to look too deeply into the witch's brew we have concocted.

Our question remains. If the cold war is halted, what of technological society in peace? The question takes on growing urgency as it becomes clearer that some form of universal peace is the only practical alternative to destruction; and as the men who have placed their stake in the cold war, come to realize that their usefulness must inevitably take another form.

Technology as war, we have insisted, is sin. But what of technology as peace? Is war an embolism in a healthy body which can eventually heal its own disease and restore itself? Or is the body of man, which is now a technological body, no more than an organized pandemic illness? Before we attempt an answer, our reflections must carry us courageously into the facts of modern life, facts in no way directly connected with the cold war, but indubitably connected with a technical civilization.

Armaments indeed are not our chief difficulty. To single them out as the present greatest danger to man, is only to reflect on their symbolic content, to reflect that they stand as image of all the objects men place around themselves, as images of their own state of soul. That state of soul appalls us, as it fashions for its chief art objects, the merciless engines of death standing in our underground galleries. But what form will the artifacts of the age of peace take? Machines for artificial insemination, machines for the manipulation of the nervous system, machines for the elimination of undesirables, machines of universal control of life from the test tube to the grave. Such is the sober planning of the social architects, joining a primitive destructive naïveté to our worst nightmares.

Indeed the destruction of arms would be an act on behalf of mankind; but the real question, from which war-making has been the great historic distraction, still remains with us. It encompasses technology in peace and in war. What is man, anyway?