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 chimerical 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 perduing 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 con-
ict. Who of us was not struck cold at the heart,
when the first atomic bomb was unleashed on Ja-
pay? 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 ex-
perimented 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, veri-
ied 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 actual-
ity, knowing that sin is part of the mystery of hu-
man wills operating concretely in time. The ques-
tions were indeed perplexing. Were given men, on
a given occasion, acting in accord with a moral or-
der? 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, level-
ing 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 Hiro-
shima, Stalin's genocide policies. What Gabriel Mar-
cel 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 at-
tachment, of any link with historical revelation, that
these acts, which we have been the witnesses or vic-
tims of, seem to us to bear the undeniable marks of
sin."

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 con-
fidence 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 complemen-
tary 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 com-
munity have receded on the scale of accepted val-
ues. In the atmosphere of the cold war, and even
perhaps apart from it, each step on the technolog-
ical 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, lit-
erally nothing is forbidden; no further step, no big-
ger 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 im-
plicit in a technology that had promised man free-
don from all his ancient bondages to time and the
world; and has in fact enslaved his spirit. That en-
slavement is in the air; it is a poison of dread and
restraint, and their counterpoint of unlimited vio-
lence.
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 impaired. 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.

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 sin-
cerity 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 disdain 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 dis-
tance. And on the other hand, a presence filled with
spirit, rather than another technique among tech-
niques; a sense of man, in fact, which admits of a
breakthrough from without.

We are speaking of course, of the presence of mys-
tery in the world. And our recourse is both logical
and useful, understanding as we do that divine mys-
tery both takes into account the evidence of experi-
ence 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 re-
ligion 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 fidel-
ity 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 mor-
al 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 narrow-
ing alternatives, all men are in measure implicated.
So are religious men. Technologists know of no prin-
ciple 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 mea-
sure, 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 ap-
lication. 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 so-
cieties 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 ques-
tion takes on growing urgency as it becomes clearer
that some form of universal peace is the only prac-
tical 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 an-
other form.

Technology as war, we have insisted, is sin. But
what of technology as peace? Is war an emblem
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 courageous-
ly into the facts of modern life, facts in no way di-
rectly 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 gal-
leries. But what form will the artifacts of the age
of peace take? Machines for artificial insemination,
machines for the manipulation of the nervous sys-
tem, 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 naî-
veté 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 dis-
traction, still remains with us. It encompasses tech-
nology in peace and in war. What is man, any-
way?