

# ETHICS FOR THE NEW MAN

*Bernard Murchland*

Nothing stays fixed very long in our world. Change is the natural context of our lives. Some would claim that it is the very philosophical climate of the times. The spontaneous operation of the modern consciousness is to strain anxiously toward the possible, the not-yet. This is now so habitual a stance that we sometimes forget it is a relatively recent one. It is our principal heritage from the nineteenth century. Before then, change had never been experienced as so vital a factor in cultural life. That century, if we agree with J. S. Mill, was marked by a transition from a prevailing worldview that was relatively static and timeless to one predicated upon constant and even violent change.

There is no doubt that science and technology have been the principal agencies of change. With good reason much recent criticism has been an attempt to discern the ethical import of what Victor Ferkiss calls the "existentialist revolution" in his new book *Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality*. His thesis in brief is this: man stands on the threshold of self-transfiguration; he has, or shortly will have, the power to radically alter the meaning and character of human existence. Ferkiss documents this possibility at some length and rightly sees the electronic transformation of our environment (automation, computers, man-machine symbiosis, etc.) and the life sciences as holding out the most promise for a new species. "At the deepest level of human existence," he writes, "man as we have known him is on the verge of becoming something else. He will be the new technological man as opposed to the bourgeois-industrial man of the past. The breakthroughs in genetics, bio-chemistry and medicine are alone grounds for belief in a radical transmutation of man. As George Steiner has observed, the time has come when man's mastery of his psycho-physiological structure can be at least comparable to mastery of his physical habitat."

So much for possibility. In reality, Ferkiss argues convincingly, there is no such "new man." There is a powerful backwater of cultural inertia that must be taken into consideration whenever we speculate about the future. Old value orders have remarkable staying

power. Received doctrines die hard. Thus our ruling ideas usually draw their sustenance from the past. A substantial portion of Ferkiss' book is an attempt to demonstrate that economically and politically man hasn't changed at all. Our thought modes and behavior patterns in these domains remain basically unaltered. The rational ethics of individualism is still operative; economic activity is still motivated by wealth and power, our popular heroes remain the successful competitors. As Ferkiss puts it: "Our political structures in even the most technologically advanced nations render man bewildered and impotent, a prisoner of his most primitive atavisms and the plaything of the fates."

In this sense, then, the possible man of the future is more myth than reality. Bourgeois man is still in the saddle. How true. And how sad. The nub of the whole problem and a chief source of the alienation that besets us is a failure to create a new value framework that can assimilate and order the consequences of our newly achieved scientific prowess. One of the oddest contrasts in twentieth-century man is that between his great respect for scientific thinking on the one hand and the muddle of his socio-political life on the other. This is not simply a matter of setting the wrong priorities. Of course, we *could* clean up the cities and solve the poverty problem if we stopped the flow of money to Vietnam and moon shots. More fundamentally, our problem is (as I think the above-mentioned contrast indicates) that we have no ethically grounded criteria for establishing priorities, a much more serious matter. A society which multiplies problems faster than it can solve them is a peculiar comment on any scientific ideology. The essential task of ethics is to clarify the problem of human excellence. What is happiness, the good life, or whatever we choose to call it? Would we recognize a *good man* if we saw one? It would perhaps be generally agreed upon that we lack an effective ethos of excellence. What is dismaying is that the very ones who admit this also deny the possibility of such an ethics. Those most enamored of scientific method are very often most adamant in rejecting any cognitive status to man's ethical activity. Art, religion, etc. get relegated to a limbo of unverifiability, the purely subjective. The resultant cleavage (between the way we think and the way we act) has weakened the fabric

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of modern culture and goes far in explaining our multiple afflictions.

Ferkiss refreshingly argues that technological man must give birth to himself since he does not yet exist. He will be a man who is "in control of his own development within the context of a meaningful philosophy of the role of technology in human evolution. He will be a new cultural type who will leaven all the leadership echelons of society." Ferkiss suggests clearly enough that technological man will give priority to value questions, that he will make a sustained effort to formulate acceptable criteria of human excellence. I would hope that one day Ferkiss would spell this out in more detail for he seems equipped to do so. Until then, much of what he says will remain too general to be of any practical help to us. For example, he stresses the need for man to control scientific developments. But the question is: How is he to control them? This recommendation begs a serious ethical question and points to an unresolved dilemma in science itself. Scientists view man in two quite different perspectives. On the one hand he is thought to be determined — the result of random mutation and natural selection, and as such a fit object of scientific investigation. On the other hand, it is claimed that scientific knowledge gives man greater control over his own nature, in a word, greater freedom. The question is how and in what respects he is both determined and free. Because man is determined he can be controlled. Because he is the controller he is free. This is a first order paradox. Until it is resolved, our understanding of the relevance of science to humanism will remain cloudy.

It has been suggested that one step towards the kind of control Ferkiss asks for might be a moratorium

on the unrestrained proliferation of technology. Much of it serves affluence and violence. Most of it is undertaken without due concern for its implications. None of it seems subtended by anything but the vaguest ethical sensitivity. So-called "free" technology is as likely to be a fierce enemy as a reliable friend and it might seem sane to call some sort of halt until we have an ethics to deal with it. Innovation for innovation's sake is simply a form of tyranny. This suggestion is not made in any anti-scientific spirit. It has long been clear that science has immense potential to enhance the ethical possibilities of man. The problem is rather our capacity to digest and direct it to humanistic ends. In this perspective it could be argued that we have far more science and technology than is really good for us.

Still, even this sort of proposal is unrealistic. For who will bell the cat? On what grounds can we offer such a criticism? For what reasons would it be heeded? What is the larger context of excellence that would make a suggestion of this sort compelling? Ferkiss does not answer such questions. He concludes his stimulating study with the thought that technological man will create his own future. Once he has done so he can then turn to his real purposes, "which are play and cultivation of the deeps of the inner space of the individual and society." Perhaps. But what one desires to know most at the end of *Technological Man* is what kind of ethics will guide his destiny. What, in a word, makes technological man so desirable a creature? How will he be a more excellent man? Ferkiss' "new man" — like the "new left," the "new humanism," or what have you — suffers from a lack of theoretical grounding. However admirable he may be we cannot afford to admire him uncritically.

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