

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

by Thomas Molnar

There is a very interesting article by Professor David Levy in the February 1987 *The World & I*, which deserves a further meditation on the issue it raises. Two thinkers provide Levy with his point of speculative take-off: Arnold Gehlen (*Man in the Age of Technology*) and Hans Jonas (*The Imperative of Responsibility*). Their fundamental thesis, that Levy (a professor at the Middlesex Polytechnic in London) makes his own, is that modern technology has become something else and something more than the main formative influence of a new civilization—mankind faces technology as it once faced nature itself, that is, as an overwhelming power against which protection must be sought. What the 19th century called “progress,” linked to great expectations, we have come to experience as a frightening presence and a dehumanized perspective. The difference is even more important: Nature is not man’s creation; it used to stand in awesome magnitude that was imperative to reduce to manageability. Technology is a human product; it grew out of the enthusiastic effort to domesticate nature. Now that the task is to a large extent accomplished, and since we cannot go into reverse according to the modern industrial ethos, the new task, according to Jonas and Levy, is to find lessons “in archaic conceptions

of world order and man’s place within it.” These lessons would be more “salutary than [those offered by] the still potent legacy of Enlightenment optimism.” With Hans Jonas, the author opts for a “heuristic of fear” and an “ethic of cosmic responsibility,” whose consequence he expects to be the realization that we, human societies, have become as responsible for nature’s integrity as we have been for the integrity of our cultural institutions.

An admirable discovery, diagnosis, and proposal. The reasoning is a part of a great current of “reactionary” speculation by a line of authors who had dedicated themselves to the critique of modern mechanization: Bergson, Ortega, W. Weidlé, Sedlmayr, Guenon, Ellul, and, why not, Heidegger. These men have investigated the phenomenon of dehumanization and mechanization in philosophy, science, art, literature, and social institutions, and they constitute a sturdy group of opponents to our mindless enthusiasm as *Zauberlehrlinge*. The last reference suggests, by the way, that the “heuristics of fear” has roots in the perhaps overmagnified 18th century, of not only the Enlightenment but also of G. Vico, Rousseau, and Goethe. All three displayed an early sensitivity to what was to become the modern devastation.

It seems to me, however, that the call for a salutary fear and an ethics of responsibility is rather ineffective. It may also be an oversimplification to hold that technology presents us with the core of a new civilization, challenging us simply with its own problems in need of definition and human decisions. As Gehlen realistically says, men know today that “they cannot count on an internal constraint upon the use of [the now available technical] power, since the tendency for two hundred years has been exactly to remove such constraints . . . in favor of efficiency.” Thus for Levy and Jonas to expect hubris-drenched modern man to fear and denounce technology and feel responsible for the wasteland he has created is naive. By force of habit, of daily, hourly persuasion, and sophisticated indoctrination, we have reached a point where we do not sense the configuration of the milieu. Technology for us is represented by machines which do a job, from dishwashers and video cassettes to jet planes and heart transplants; we are conditioned not even to notice the further uses and misuses of technology, such as surrogate motherhood or federal monitors stationed in bathrooms to detect drugs in the employees’ urine. We are saturated with technology and its effects: the destruction of ozone in the atmosphere and the repainting, in vivid poster colors, of Michelangelo’s surfaces in the so-called restoration of the Sistine Chapel.

We were born in the midst of technology as previous generations had been born among gardens, dusty country roads, and towns surrounded by walls. In spite of sporadic awakening to ecological preoccupations, it is unrealistic to trust the consciousness, as Jonas has it, of “man’s obligation to nature,” to moderate the horrors being perpetrated daily. For one thing, every mutation of the pre-machine age—



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sedentarization, agriculture, bronze or iron production, city-building—existed under the sponsorship of divinities who fulfilled two essentially civilizational functions: they offered their followers meaning of and justification for what gods and men were doing, thereby calling for myths, rituals, and art forms. The second function was to set limits the given technical instruments could not transcend—unless the gods themselves changed, which meant another civilization.

The novelty we pay insufficient attention to is that our technological civilization so alienates man from his normal state (above nature, below the divine) that, for the first time in history, he has discarded gods, myth, ritual, symbols, and art and engaged in pure devastation, following the logic of a rationalistic calculus. The more robot-like man becomes, the greater the alienation and the more distant the prospect of rediscovering the divine gifts: meaning and limits. The previous civilizational forms were linked to the way of life of nomads, settled peasants, town builders, artisans and merchants, tribal raiders, or priestly castes. All had sufficient ideological space, that is gods with their guidance and interdicts, to allow for the play of ideas, and therefore to evolve from one form and style to another. Their heroes, sages, and societies engaged in new projects and adventures. True, mankind always felt apprehensive about the unknown, the “terror of history” (Mircea Eliade), but this danger could be conjured away by the periodic rerooting of society in the ground of permanence. The immense multiplicity of historical forms and cultures was counterbalanced by belief in a stable power outside and above, whose mundane agent was the moral conscience.

The Age of Technology, this exclusively man-created monster (its earlier icons too were monstrous figures, the Golem and Frankenstein), is the first civilization acknowledging no partial solutions, no limited forms, no respect for maturation, unforeseen change, thus *a fortiori* no meaning and no gods. It claims to be universal, lasting forever (except that it grows irreversibly like cancer), not linked to class, historical period, or spiritual insight. It is an armored Goliath, allowing no civilizational space for self-criticism or self-transformation. Rather, the mania that motivates it, the Pascalian *esprit de géométrie* in its fully unleashed passion, divides the technological space, now our only *Lebensraum*, into clear-cut segments, each of them isolating us from one another, from imagination, personhood, and history. In concrete terms, every aspect of existence is regimented, always in the name of scientifically documented, thus absolutely intolerant, rule. Prometheus was able to rebel against Zeus and thus become a popular hero; modern citizens of technological societies cannot rebel against the Surgeon General, the Kinsey Report, or Soviet atheist law without being declared unscientific and *ipso facto* insane.

It is therefore not surprising that David Levy sees our future as running an unprecedented risk. Strangely, however, though facing this danger of an altogether new magnitude, this qualitative leap toward robotization, he recommends the “application of common sense and educated citizenry.” Is it not evident that our eventual master-teachers in common sense would be unqualified for the task, since they would be, *are*, recruited among the technocrats themselves, renamed for the purpose engineers of the

psyche or therapists of fear. It is the first time in the annals of humanity that no spiritual leader would come forward to turn us around (*metanoia*) because spirituality is itself inventoried by the *esprit de géométrie* as a neatly segmented space for special cases.

In short, in a technological world there is no room for an ethics other than an ethics of technology. This is not the consequence of ill-will or of anybody’s act of decision. A civilization consists of myriads of microscopic acts, interpreted according to a network of significations, themselves invisibly pulled together by some master-concepts. The mechanization of man is the master-concept presiding over our forms of existence, and mechanization itself is the product of science. (The search for more compact master-concepts which rule us could be pursued with a relative ease, but it falls outside the limits of this essay.) Thus all that our age is able to produce is an ethics of technology which is

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not a moral reflection *about* technology but a method of finding ways to adjust to it. The truth is, one cannot harness technology without demoting science as a master-concept.

Today this seems like a totally unrealistic proposition since our words and concepts are shaped by accepted meanings and future expectations, all of them at present geometrical and mechanical. The demotion of science is literally inconceivable, which means that it cannot be conceptualized, at least in Western discourse. Our words are charged with meanings which exclude such an expression as “the dismantling of technological civilization.” Nevertheless, concepts end up by regrouping themselves behind new imperatives, in the case the saving of nature and of human nature. In this perspective, Hans Jonas is right: “We must educate our soul to a willingness to let itself be effected by the mere thought of possible fortunes and calamities of future generations.” Jonas is wrong, however, when he continues: “. . . so that the projections of futurology will not remain food for idle curiosity or equally idle pessimism.” “The ethics of cosmic responsibility,” the principles of which Jonas tries to formulate, is itself marked by technological hubris; it does not go beyond signs on space ships: “Do not litter up the galaxies!”

Futurology, as opposed to expectation or hope, is itself a product of machine civilization, an illegitimate projection of the mechanical calculus *outside* its own sphere of programmed competence, to the vast and profound problems of providence and destiny. Futurology *is* idle curiosity, the same as the experiments suggested by feminist ideologues: how to implant the fetus in the father’s abdomen.

Sin begins with such curiosity. The ethics of the technological age, if there is such a thing beyond traditional ethics, would have to be founded on the biblical understanding that not everything that is technically possible is morally licit.

WHY SOULS FLY AWAY *by Stephen J. Bodio*

"Some parrots are legal, but why cage exotic birds at all?"

—Chris Wille, NAS

Don't ask me, was my first thought. The last parrot I owned was—I swear—killed 10 years ago by an ex-friend who, with Joseph Krutch, believed that hunting was the ultimate evil. He left the bird loose in a room with my cats. Still, the larger implications of the editorial "Wildlife Caught in Miami Vice" (in NAS, the "News-Journal" of the National Audubon Society, April '86) continue to bother me.

On the surface, the editorial looks like a conventional piece of modern conservation wisdom. These days, the idea that you shouldn't "use" endangered species seems self-evident. Once this is accepted as a given, the notion that you probably shouldn't own animals, in whole or in part, begins to make sense at least to the unreflective. But has this always been so?

I am a member of several conservation groups. I write about animals, nature, and sport for my living. For nearly 20 years I have given my time to many and varied unselfish nature-oriented causes. As far as animals and wildlife and such go, I've always considered myself one of the good guys, as well as fairly *normal*, at least for somebody more interested in ecosystems and the identity of that sandpiper that just flew by than in baseball.

Lately, some of my allies in the conservation trenches

have been giving me funny looks, especially some of the more recent volunteers. The whole matter has got to the point where I feel that not only hunters (already second-class citizens in some circles, despite their unarguable contributions to conservation) but even naturalists of the traditional kind are looked upon with the scorn previously reserved for those who build shopping malls in pristine habitats. There is something unhealthy going on here, something so fundamental that a refusal to face it may permanently cripple conservation as we know it. A kind of puritanism is abroad in the land that seems to reject any involvement with nature more intimate than through the TV set. For those of us who do *not* believe that "Nature is made possible by your local Public Television Station" (as they tell us here), this could bring on a disaster of the soul.

Let's start with this matter of owning animals, if only because it's such an obvious part of my life. My house is always full of inquilines. First, I have five dogs. Most people don't object to that—yet—at least since they stopped putting mustangs in cans. Although, since I breed dogs, not one is spayed or neutered, which is becoming a sin in some quarters. Next: I, like Darwin, keep a loft of pigeons. They are neither friends, exactly, nor practical; I don't need them. They are an at-home demo of natural selection, an addition of diversity to my *oikos*. Like the dogs, they are domestic, though some are rare breeds of endangered gene pools from Moorish Spain, kept only by me and one other fancier in the States. No huge problem here except—let me whisper it—that I have been known to eat individuals of the commoner kinds. I don't really like killing animals that I know personally; humans form kinship bonds with anything

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