Techno-Eschatology

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It is difficult to find any fault with David F. Noble's historical scholarship. His book *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* is an amazing testimony to meticulous research into the metaphysical hopes of countless scientists, technologists and other intellectuals, whose musings have managed to find their way onto paper. Nobel's main thesis is that increasingly most Western people are unconscious participants in a religion of technology that strives towards the fulfillment of a "millenarian promise of restoring mankind to its original God-like perfection" (201). This of course, as Noble obliquely acknowledges at several points in the book, is an elaboration of the hypothesis, first presented by the American historian Lynn White in his classic 1967 article in *Science,* that the Judeo-Christian metaphysical outlook is the source of the Western domineering attitude toward nature. Unfortunately, a work of the sort that Noble has undertaken must rise and fall not on the accuracy of the historical evidence he amasses for the documented expression of such an attitude, but on an argument that takes into account other possible explanations the environmental crisis. This is necessary because Noble's (and White's) hypothesis for explaining the inadequately critical attitude toward technology that characterizes modern societies is not the only way of explaining the origins of this attitude.

Therefore, before assessing the contribution of Noble's book, it is necessary to have a sense of some of the alternative ways of explaining the origins of the environmental crisis and the popular belief in the inherent goodness of technology in general. Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey in their early survey of the field of the philosophy of technology, point to three prominent types of explanation of our society's seemingly limited ability to "redirect" technology toward more environmentally responsible ends. They describe these three positions as follows:

> If [Emmanuel G.] Mesthene is right that technology is physical possibility, then a redirection of technology requires only that we choose

> to realize the new end; a "recovery of nerve" is what is essential. However, if [Nathan] Rotenstreich is right, that technology is rooted in the authoritarian mentality, then any significant change in direction of technology would involve a general alteration in man's root attitude toward the world. Whereas if [Jacques] Ellul is correct, such redirection seems out of the question, because technology develops by its own intrinsic principles. (Mitcham and Mackey 1972, 30)

Rotenstreich's position closely parallels the hypothesis presented by White that a dominant Western metaphysical outlook is the real culprit behind many contemporary social woes, such as the environmental crisis.   In contrast, Ellul's position suggests that any people, regardless of their overt metaphysical beliefs, enclosed "within the technical realm" might face various kinds of restrictions on their ability to change fundamental aspects of that realm (Mitcham and Mackey 1972, 30). Mesthene's position is that it is simply a lack of moral will to do what is right, which prevents people from adequately rising to the task of addressing the challenges that technology presents.

When it comes to the explanation of the systematic failure of Western civilization to come to proper grips with its technological excesses these three positions can help us to categorize the range of positions on the origins of the environmental crisis. White's position, for example, is a popular outlook among prominent environmental philosophers, such as Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold or Albert Scweitzer. Mesthene's position has strong appeal among advocates or various forms of technology assessment and appropriate technology.   However, in the field of the philosophy of technology, it is also common to find positions like that of Jacques Ellul, the common feature of which is the notion of technological dependency.

The notion of technological dependency represents any kind of theoretical hypothesis that there are features of technological practice itself that can systematically prevent critical ethical judgement of such practice to take place. In other words, technology as normally manifests itself might involve certain built-in biases that prevent proper ethical assessment of technological practices. If one believes that such biases are strong enough to prevent meaningful ethical assessment of technology and technological activities to occur at all, then one is also a supporter of a notion technological determinism. But if one believes there is some room for countervailing action, then one is simply a supporter of some

specific form of dependency theory. However, there are many ways of explaining the source of dependency.

Three prominent and seminal of theories of technological dependency are those presented by Marshall McLuhan, Herbert Marcuse and Ellul. McLuhan portrays technology as being inescapably united with a form of over-stimulation or numbness brought on by habitual practice, which results in an ability of technological devices and actions to slip from conscious awareness. Marcuse portrays technology as form of bribery or vested interest that emerges from the process of technological progress, which results in a reluctance to criticize technological devices and actions. Jacques Ellul often portrays it as a form of unconscious religious zealotry. That is to say, technology, while not being an overt religion, is able to somehow galvanize the same feelings of total commitment that religions can generate in their followers. However, by its character as an unconscious faith, this kind of religion is normally beyond rational scrutiny and criticism.

Noble's position shares some affinity with Ellul's position, but it is ultimately closer to White's. Like White, he often suggests that it is simply the dominant metaphysical picture presented in the Judaic and Christian traditions of human beings being granted "sovereignty" that is the most likely source of a generally pro-technology outlook of many Western individuals. For instance, at the end of chapter devoted to surveying the gushing technological optimism of participants in the space program, Noble quotes Johannes Kepler to summarize the most common attitude of these participants: "Should the kind of Creator who brought forth nature out of nothing deprive the spirit of man, the master of Creation and the Lord's own image, of every heavenly delight?" (142). On other occasions Noble makes suggestions more akin to Ellul, such as when he also suggests that a belief in technological progress has become an unconscious religion, when he poses the question: "But can we any longer afford to abide this system of blind belief?" (208). However, there is a difficulty with Noble's argument at this point. His historical analysis actually involves an intense investigation of the metaphysical theories he feels have helped support such belief. The historical figures he examines are not "blind" believers in a religion of progress. They are conscious advocates of various metaphysical visions that emphasize the redemptive power of technological change.

If Noble is to adequately defend his claim that modern societies have generally fallen under the sway of a "popular faith" that is, for most people, subliminally

indulged he will have to make a very different kind of argument than the one he presents. Rather than suggesting how such a view could have become so dominant, his book consists almost exclusively of a survey of the metaphysical views of Western intellectuals who support a belief in progress. The characteristic that they share is the belief that increasing technological mastery can somehow contribute to the "perfection" of humankind and ultimately act as "a means to salvation." There are obviously a great number of such examples in Western history.

Noble begins his story with a sustained analysis of the views of John Scotus Erigena, who he claims contributed to the overturning of a fundamentally negative view of technology of Augustine, who viewed technology as a crutch used by humankind to vainly attempt to overcome its fundamentally sinful nature. According to Noble, Erigena re-wrote Capellas' fifth century allegorical work *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* to include the "heretofore disdained mechanical arts." According to Noble "Erigena's boldly innovative and spiritually promising reconceptualization of the arts signaled a turning point in the ideological history of technology. Some of the other major intellectual contributors to the developing religion of technology discussed in depth by Noble are Hugh of St. Victor, Joachim of Fiore, and on the protestant side of things, Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Comenius and Samuel Hartlib.

However, there is no protracted discussion of countervailing voices, or religious movements, such as the Mennonites, or theologians in the line of the Augustinian tradition of the inherent sinfulness of humankind. Instead, Noble focuses on the most millenarian aspects of the Western Religious tradition and in particular on those interpretations of the end times that focus on the image-likeness that human beings have to God as a sign of the possible perfectibility of human beings. A central claim throughout the book is that "the revivalistic mentality was sibling to the technological" (91). However, Noble does not discuss in detail how general notions of providence and hope in the future, which characterize many religious outlooks, morph into the hyper-technological optimism of his subjects, especially in the face of powerful countervailing doctrines like that of original sin. Nor does he make clear how the overt religiously dressed utopian sentiments of a select group of Western intellectuals was able to morph into a covert religion of the masses. He provides an abundance of citations of utopian/religious sentiments, but this cannot replace a specific explanation of how these various sentiments have come to supposedly dominate the ideals of large numbers of

Western individuals. Nor does he explain how such sentiments seem impervious to stark decline of overt religious observance in Western societies.

Millenarianism is not a part of all the sects of Christianity, and attitudes in Judaism about the ultimate fate of humankind are also highly contested. Although Noble provides a wealth of valuable historical information about the religious expectations of certain Western intellectuals, in the end his work can only be taken to represent a partial sampling, which cannot by itself, support the full weight of his general thesis. In general he seems to assume too great a uniformity in the religious attitudes of people in western societies. The result is that he ignores thinkers who hold more critical or ambivalent attitudes towards technology, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Albert the Great, Calvin, and Meno, as well as a host of twentieth century religious critics of technology. The result is that his argument seems one-sided and incomplete. However, the vast detail regarding pro-technological attitudes towards technological development does make an important contribution to the general argument presented by White. One can only hope that Noble has a second installment of his book in the works, in which he delves into the conflicts within the Western world.

References

Mitcham, Carl, and Robert Mackey, eds. (1972). *Philosophy and Technology: Readings in the Philosophical Problems of Technology*. New York: The Free Press, 1972.