

(121) SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY ETHICS

Technology threatens to destroy the earth and us, or rather, we are endangering both the future of the earth and of ourselves and of our children using the technological possibilities which are at our disposal. So we need an technology ethics, an ethics which gives us the possibility, the freedom to use technology with a good conscience, knowing that we do what we can to prevent ecological and human disaster.

It might well be, that “technology ethics” are not the right or the best words to cover the subject involved. I do not explore this question, just using the words as they are used on other occasions. I hope that anyway it is clear what is meant.

Of course this is a great subject and I certainly am not intending to cover the theme as such in this paper. It only is about some presuppositions of technology ethics which, as far as I understand, we need to be able to do something sensible in this field at all. If in the end it is clear that it is all wrong, then hopefully at least it has become more clear what is right.

1. Our relationship with the reality around us, the relationship with our own psychological and physical reality included, is not original, but always mediated.

1.1 We don't have a direct relationship with the world around us not directly, in our very own manner, “authentic”, and so we don't have such a direct relationship with technology either. Being together with other human beings, in a culture, we have the relationship with the reality around us, and with the reality we ourselves are, and so with technology, in the context of our culture. The culture we live in, the manner we, humans, are getting along together in that culture, decides about our relationship with the reality around us and about our relationship with technology.

This means that we can't conceive an ethics of technology, doing as if we have a direct relationship with it and with the reality we impinge upon, using it. This is per definition a hopeless undertaking. Very curiously this is reflected by the enormous scientific programs, devised to get such an ethics at all. It is clear that that must be the case. Treating our relationship with technology as a direct one, all our thinking is imprisoned in the vicious circles we have with the reality (and so with technology), which again result from the relationships we have with each other, which are imprisoned in vicious circles as well. So treating this relationship with the world as a direct one results necessarily in following the tracks of these relationships in which they actually are, ending up in extremely complicated descriptions about “reality” without a real possibility to get out of it any ethics at all. It looks like Rawls, rewritten for the relationship of humans with nature, extremely complicated, very interesting and leading to nothing practical or really convincing.

1.2 This relationship is taught to us from, at the latest, birth on, in the relationship with our mother and with all other people. The manner in which we move around in the reality of the world, the manner in which this world exists for us and we get along with it, is the manner we learnt, is the manner of our culture of which we are a part. We never are outside of culture,

never outside of the mediation of culture, we never had or can have a direct relationship with the world, with whichever aspect of it or the whole of it.

Of course this too is true, even if I try to get rid of the mediation, sailing alone, skiing alone, eventually naked. It maybe looks like that we are now in direct contact, but the relationship is mediated as ever and even more so, because we try to get rid of the mediation. Here again the minus and the plus are the same.

A very important question in the context of the subject is if we can get a relationship with the world as a whole at all. Although the media can in their manner give the impression that we do, photographs from satellites or from the moon can put us "above the earth", making it much smaller than we are (a curious paradoxical exercise, a wonderful goal for metaphysical desire) but I can't yet see this as a relationship. For ethics we need a relationship, so this is a very important question indeed.

1.3 Very generally the relationship with the world and with technology is a reflection of the sort of relationships we, humans have. If there is structure in culture, if there are differences, if there is transcendence, then there is too structure in the relationship with the surrounding world. The surrounding world, animals, plants, the whole of the earth in that case never can become a mere object, about which you don't have to have any conscience, with is destroyed ad nutum, simply because we can use it, or ever in our whims. There is respect in the relationship with nature if there is respect between the humans of the culture involved.

1.4 Culture changed dramatically. Structure, differences, transcendence, they all are disappearing or have disappeared. This means that humans become each other's rivals and model obstacles, objects in the power fights with each other, that respect disappears. So that too happened and happens with nature, with the world we live in. We fight with each other and with everything, in order to win, in order to get being, to become gods.

1.4.1 The result is that everything, all humans included, become objects and that we become absolutely heartless, virtual and often actual killers. Trying to destroy each other in order to win, everything existing is simply used in that fight. Or sweeping out of our way everything which hinders us in our fight to win. In this context technology is used nowadays.

1.4.2 All this can be said and recapitulated in the fact that we have become anthropocentric, in the meaning ethnocentric nowadays has: We have become so unsure about our own identity as humans, in the same time not being able really to acknowledge that, that we turn our violence, originating out of this anthropocentrism, originally directed at ourselves, against each other and especially against the world. This is further worked out in paper 117, Ethnocentrism in Northern Ireland.

1.4.3 The reasons we became like that of course is an important question, on which in fact there are many answers, which might all more or less be right. The end result nevertheless always is, that structure, differences, transcendence disappear and that consequently we all become wolves for each other. Homo homini lupus.

This is not meant moralistically. Meaning it moralistically would mean to belong to the romantic world of hypocrisy which is so totally rejected by Jesus. It means to be just a description of facts, about us, about myself.

1.4.4 Happily, to find ways out of this situation, or plight, we don't need to understand exactly how we did come into it. Finding new possibilities to live, to live in freedom, always means cutting the vicious circles we are in. A technology ethics which does not go back to the human relations can't find the cut. It in fact takes its point of depart in the vicious circles in order to get away from a much more stringent critical

view on us as human beings and on what we are doing with each other, with nature, with ourselves, with as a result that we are shut up in our situation and write thick books about nothing.

Here probably appears still another reason, why technology ethics can't be written in and from the relationship of humans with technology. It needs a meta-position to find cuttings in vicious circles. Without that position we repeat, doing, thinking, writing, the vicious circles.

1.5 So a real chance of finding not only an ethics, but even a way to go, and in fact the only real chance, is that we find other possibilities to get along with each other, that we get out of the rivalry and out of the model-obstacle relationships we are all in. I am quite sure that doing so, finding this way, most of the technological problems will be solved "automatically" or are at least solvable (what they are not in the present situation). To put it again in another manner: We certainly don't solve the problems resulting from technology by knowing more or even with the help of knowing more. We only solve them by becoming other people in the relationship with each other.

1.5.1 An ethics for technology, which tries to do the job "directly", as a theme about the relationship of (a) human(s) with nature, forgets, as far as I understand, the sentence of Anselm of Canterbury, of 1098: *Nondum considerasti, quanti ponderis sit peccatum.* That the situation nature is in because of the doings of humans and the manner in which humans are getting along together, have very intimately to do with each other is an ongoing insight in the Old and the New Testament. The weight of sin, our own sin is that big, that nature is destroyed with us, and can only be restored with us, we, ourselves, changing, being changed.

1.5.2 We only get other possibilities than those of "internal mediation" we now are in, destroying each other and nature, by finding back to transcendence. For me that clearly is the transcendence of the gospel, the transcendence amongst of us, of Jesus. But probably that need not be. The thinking of Levinas, anyway deeply imbued by biblical thinking, can be a big help. In how far there really are possibilities outside of the influence of biblical scriptures, outside of the reality of the God of the victims, is not clear to me but should anyway not be precluded.

2. Some aspects of the contents of technology ethics.

We certainly, can, as far as I understand, only come to something like technology ethics, when they are put in the context of humanity as such, of culture, of the relationships of humans with each other. By doing this, I suppose that something more about an eventual contents can be said.

2.1 An ethics only does its job, when it is practical and as little as possible equivoque. Further it can't be general, it has to be directed at the person, at all of us, in order that it can work at all.

2.1.1 Very general sentences, as those of the WCC, do not work. "A just, participatory and sustainable society" is, as far as I understand, not of any help in the long run. It is much too general. We can't get a real relationship with it, we can endlessly talk about what it practically means (eventually by multi-disciplinary university teams...), but everybody always has the possibility and the right to have his/her own interpretations. Practically this very often means, that the conclusions drawn from the very general program are seen as fit for others and that we ourselves always are, with a very good conscience, the exception. To

put it in another manner: However the (theological) rationalisations of the WCC, the sentences Responsible society, and its successors, are deeply ideological. They are as big as the problem. I can't get real contact with them. They can't become existential.

In fact these words and sentences are much more programmatic than ethical. Here again comes a big problem, if not a big obstacle. Programmatic sentences are looking at results. Results of ethical acting are given, are in fact always a surprise. Programming ethical life, as the sentences of the WCC do, makes out of the goal a model-obstacle, taking away all freedom and so becoming counter-productive. Again a vicious circle of technology ethics.

2.1.2 I ask myself if we should not, when we try to formulate ethics in the context of culture, of humans getting along with each other, go back to the origins of the prohibitions in culture, an origin which still is deeply reflected by the Ten Commandments. The prohibitions tell us very clearly what we should not do. They are immediately personal, which is necessary to prevent ideology, and they say what we are forbidden to do, what we simply should not do.

Of course this does not make everything simple. What should clearly be forbidden? Why? In the same time, when we really do bring back technology ethics to where it belongs, to inter-human relationships and their consequences, the answer on these questions might be found more easily than we expect we will.

2.2 It must be clear for everybody, in which manner ever, that the ethics, having to do with technology, are part of, are coming forth from the ethics about the relationships of human beings. As soon as that is forgotten, all ethics become ideologic anyway.

2.3 Technology is about cause-and-effect chains, about power over reality and power over the future. It is very clear that history is not like that, that history is "between the cristal and smoke", between structure and noise, and that any moment the noise can penetrate structure, creating something new. This is another reason that technological ethics eventually should not be projecting into the future, but only should forbid what is clearly to be forbidden. Programming not only brings into model-obstacle relationships, it clearly is against the very reality. It inherently makes anodine, idle, unhappy.

With the words I am choosing here, I refer to the "order out of chaos" investigations of the last decades. The words cristal and smoke are from the title of the book of Henri Atlan: *Entre the cristal et la fumée. Essai sure l'organisation du vivant* (1979).