

# Toward a Philosophy of Technology

by HANS JONAS

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**A**re there philosophical aspects to technology? Of course there are, as there are to all things of importance in human endeavor and destiny. Modern technology touches on almost everything vital to man's existence—material, mental, and spiritual. Indeed, what of man is *not* involved? The way he lives his life and looks at objects, his intercourse with the world and with his peers, his powers and modes of action, kinds of goals, states and changes of society, objectives and forms of politics (including warfare no less than welfare), the sense and quality of life, even man's fate and that of his environment: all these are involved in the technological enterprise as it extends in magnitude and depth. The mere enumeration suggests a staggering host of potentially philosophical themes.

To put it bluntly: if there is a philosophy of science, language, history, and art; if there is social, political, and moral philosophy; philosophy of thought and of action, of reason and passion, of decision and value—all facets of the inclusive philosophy of man—how then could there not be a philosophy of technology, the focal fact of modern life? And at that a philosophy so spacious that it can house portions from all the other branches of philosophy? It is almost a truism, but at the same time so immense a proposition that its challenge staggers the mind. Economy and modesty require that we select, for a beginning, the most obvious from the multitude of aspects that invite philosophical attention.

The old but useful distinction of "form" and "matter" allows us to distinguish between these two major themes: (1) the *formal dynamics* of technology as a continuing collective enterprise, which advances by its own "laws of motion"; and (2) the *substantive content* of technology in terms of the things it puts into human use, the powers it confers, the novel objectives it opens up or dictates, and the altered manner of human action by which these objectives are realized.

The first theme considers technology as an abstract whole of movement; the second considers its concrete uses and their impact on our world and our lives. The formal approach will try to grasp the pervasive "process properties" by which modern technology propels itself—through our agency, to be sure—into ever-succeeding and superceding novelty. The material approach will look at the species of novelties themselves, their taxonomy, as it were, and try to make out how

the world furnished with them looks. A third, overarching theme is the *moral* side of technology as a burden on human responsibility, especially its long-term effects on the global condition of man and environment. This—my own main preoccupation over the past years—will only be touched upon.

## I. The Formal Dynamics of Technology

First some observations about technology's form as an abstract whole of movement. We are concerned with characteristics of *modern* technology and therefore ask first what distinguishes it *formally* from all previous technology. One major distinction is that modern technology is an enterprise and process, whereas earlier technology was a possession and a state. If we roughly describe technology as comprising the use of artificial implements for the business of life, together with their original invention, improvement, and occasional additions, such a tranquil description will do for most of technology through mankind's career (with which it is coeval), but not for modern technology. In the past, generally speaking, a given inventory of tools and procedures used to be fairly constant, tending toward a mutually adjusting, stable equilibrium of ends and means, which—once established—represented for lengthy periods an unchallenged optimum of technical competence.

To be sure, revolutions occurred, but more by accident than by design. The agricultural revolution, the metallurgical revolution that led from the neolithic to the iron age, the rise of cities, and such developments, *happened* rather than were consciously created. Their pace was so slow that only in the time-contraction of historical retrospect do they appear to be "revolutions" (with the misleading connotation that their contemporaries experienced them as such). Even where the change was sudden, as with the introduction first of the chariot, then of armed horsemen into warfare—a violent, if short-lived, revolution indeed—the innovation did not originate from within the military art of the advanced societies that it affected, but was thrust on it from outside by the (much less civilized) peoples of Central Asia. Instead of spreading through the technological universe of their time, other technical breakthroughs, like Phoenician purple-dyeing, Byzantine "greek fire," Chinese porcelain and silk, and Damascene steel-tempering, remained jealously guarded monopolies of the inventor communities. Still others, like the hydraulic and steam playthings of Alexandrian mechanics, or compass and gunpowder of the Chinese, passed unnoticed in their serious technological potentials.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole (not counting rare upheavals), the great classical civilizations had comparatively early reached a point of technological saturation—the aforementioned "optimum" in equilibrium of means with acknowledged needs

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HANS JONAS, PH.D., is Alvin Johnson Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research. This article is adapted from his presentation accepting the Institute's second Henry Knowles Beecher Award for lifetime contributions to ethics and the life sciences made at The Hastings Center's General Meeting, June 23-24, 1978, which was supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

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and goals—and had little cause later to go beyond it. From there on, convention reigned supreme. From pottery to monumental architecture, from food growing to shipbuilding, from textiles to engines of war, from time measuring to stargazing: tools, techniques, and objectives remained essentially the same over long times; improvements were sporadic and unplanned. Progress therefore—if it occurred at all\*—was by inconspicuous increments to a universally high level that still excites our admiration and, in historical fact, was more liable to regression than to surpassing. The former at least was the more noted phenomenon, deplored by the epigones with a nostalgic remembrance of a better past (as in the declining Roman world). More important, there was, even in the best and most vigorous times, no proclaimed *idea* of a future of *constant progress* in the arts. Most important, there was never a deliberate method of going about it like “research,” the willingness to undergo the risks of trying unorthodox paths, exchanging information widely about the experience, and so on. Least of all was there a “natural science” as a growing body of theory to guide such semi-theoretical, prepractical activities, plus their social institutionalization. In routines as well as panoply of instruments, accomplished as they were for the purposes they served, the “arts” seemed as settled as those purposes themselves.\*\*

### Traits of Modern Technology

The exact opposite of this picture holds for modern technology, and this is its first philosophical aspect. Let us begin with some manifest traits.

1. Every new step in whatever direction of whatever technological field tends *not* to approach an equilibrium or saturation point in the process of fitting means to ends (nor is it meant to), but, on the contrary, to give rise, if successful, to further steps in all kinds of direction and with a fluidity of the ends themselves. “Tends to” becomes a compelling “is bound to” with any major or important step (this almost being its criterion); and the innovators themselves expect, beyond the accomplishment, each time, of their immediate task, the constant future repetition of their inventive activity.

2. Every technical innovation is sure to spread quickly through the technological world community, as also do theoretical discoveries in the sciences. The spreading is in terms of knowledge and of practical adoption, the first (and

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\*Progress did, in fact, occur even at the heights of classical civilizations. The Roman arch and vault, for example, were distinct engineering advances over the horizontal entablature and flat ceiling of Greek (and Egyptian) architecture, permitting spanning feats and thereby construction objectives not contemplated before (stone bridges, aqueducts, the vast baths and other public halls of Imperial Rome). But materials, tools, and techniques were still the same, the role of human labor and crafts remained unaltered, stonemasonry and brickmaking went on as before. An existing technology was enlarged in its scope of performance, but none of its means or even goals made obsolete.

\*\*One meaning of “classical” is that those civilizations had somehow implicitly “defined” themselves and neither encouraged nor even allowed to pass beyond their innate terms. The—more or less—achieved “equilibrium” was their very pride.

its speed) guaranteed by the universal intercommunication that is itself part of the technological complex, the second enforced by the pressure of competition.

3. The relation of means to ends is not unilinear but circular. Familiar ends of long standing may find better satisfaction by new technologies whose genesis they had inspired. But equally—and increasingly typical—new technologies may suggest, create, even impose new ends, never before conceived, simply by offering their feasibility. (Who had ever wished to have in his living room the Philharmonic orchestra, or open heart surgery, or a helicopter defoliating a Vietnam forest? or to drink his coffee from a disposable plastic cup? or to have artificial insemination, test-tube babies, and host pregnancies? or to see clones of himself and others walking about?) Technology thus adds to the very objectives of human desires, including objectives for technology itself. The last point indicates the dialectics or circularity of the case: once incorporated into the socioeconomic demand diet, ends first gratuitously (perhaps accidentally) generated by technological invention become necessities of life and set technology the task of further perfecting the means of realizing them.

4. Progress, therefore, is not just an ideological gloss on modern technology, and not at all a mere option offered by it, but an inherent drive which acts willy-nilly in the formal automatics of its *modus operandi* as it interacts with society. “Progress” is here not a value term but purely descriptive. We may resent the fact and despise its fruits and yet must go along with it, for—short of a stop by the fiat of total political power, or by a sustained general strike of its clients or some internal collapse of their societies, or by self-destruction through its works (the last, alas, the least unlikely of these)—the juggernaut moves on relentlessly, spawning its always mutated progeny by coping with the challenges and lures of the now. But while not a value term, “progress” here is not a neutral term either, for which we could simply substitute “change.” For it is in the nature of the case, or a law of the series, that a later stage is always, in terms of technology itself, *superior* to the preceding stage.\* Thus we have here a case of the entropy-defying sort (organic evolution is another), where the internal motion of a system, left to itself and not interfered with, leads to ever “higher,” not “lower” states of itself. Such at least is the present evidence.\*\* If Napoleon once said, “Politics is destiny,” we may well say today, “Technology is destiny.”

These points go some way to explicate the initial statement that modern technology, unlike traditional, is an enterprise and not a possession, a process and not a state, a dynamic thrust and not a set of implements and skills. And they already adumbrate certain “laws of motion” for this restless phenomenon. What we have described, let us remember, were formal traits which as yet say little about the

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\*This only seems to be but is not a value statement, as the reflection on, for example, an ever more destructive atom bomb shows.

\*\*There may conceivably be internal degenerative factors—such as the overloading of finite information-processing capacity—that may bring the (exponential) movement to a halt or even make the system fall apart. We don’t know yet.

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contents of the enterprise. We ask two questions of this descriptive picture: *why* is this so, that is, what *causes* the restlessness of modern technology; what is the nature of the thrust? And, what is the philosophical import of the facts so explained?

### The Nature of Restless Technology

As we would expect in such a complex phenomenon, the motive forces are many, and some causal hints appeared already in the descriptive account. We have mentioned *pressure of competition*—for profit, but also for power, security, and so forth—as one perpetual mover in the universal appropriation of technical improvements. It is equally operative in their origination, that is, in the process of invention itself, nowadays dependent on constant outside subsidy and even goal-setting: potent interests see to both. War, or the threat of it, has proved an especially powerful agent. The less dramatic, but no less compelling, everyday agents are legion. To keep one's head above the water is their common principle (somewhat paradoxical, in view of an abundance already far surpassing what former ages would have lived with happily ever after). Of pressures other than the competitive ones, we must mention those of population growth and of impending exhaustion of natural resources. Since both phenomena are themselves already by-products of technology (the first by way of medical improvements, the second by the voracity of industry), they offer a good example of the more general truth that to a considerable extent technology itself begets the problems which it is then called upon to overcome by a new forward jump. (The Green Revolution and the development of synthetic substitute materials or of alternate sources of energy come under this heading.) These compulsive pressures for progress, then, would operate even for a technology in a noncompetitive, for example, a socialist setting.

A motive force more autonomous and spontaneous than these almost mechanical pushes with their "sink or swim" imperative would be the pull of the quasi-utopian *vision* of an ever better life, whether vulgarly conceived or nobly, once technology had proved the open-ended capacity for procuring the conditions for it: perceived possibility whetting the appetite ("the American dream," "the revolution of rising expectations"). This less palpable factor is more difficult to appraise, but its playing a role is undeniable. Its deliberate fostering and manipulation by the dream merchants of the industrial-mercantile complex is yet another matter and somewhat taints the spontaneity of the motive, as it also degrades the quality of the dream. It is also moot to what extent the vision itself is *post hoc* rather than *ante hoc*, that is, instilled by the dazzling feats of a technological progress already underway and thus more a response to than a motor of it.

Groping in these obscure regions of motivation, one may as well descend, for an explanation of the dynamism as such, into the Spenglerian mystery of a "Faustian soul" innate in Western culture, that drives it, nonrationally, to infinite novelty and unplumbed possibilities for their own sake; or into the Heideggerian depths of a fateful, metaphysical de-

cision of the will for boundless power over the world of things—a decision equally peculiar to the Western mind: speculative intuitions which do strike a resonance in us, but are beyond proof and disproof.

Surfacing once more, we may also look at the very sober, functional facts of industrialism as such, of production and distribution, output maximization, managerial and labor aspects, which even apart from competitive pressure provide their own incentives for technical progress. Similar observations apply to the requirements of *rule* or control in the vast and populous states of our time, those giant territorial superorganisms which for their very cohesion depend on advanced technology (for example, in information, communication, and transportation, not to speak of weaponry) and thus have a stake in its promotion: the more so, the more centralized they are. This holds for socialist systems no less than for free-market societies. May we conclude from this that even a communist world state, freed from external rivals as well as from internal free-market competition, might still have to push technology ahead for purposes of control on this colossal scale? Marxism, in any case, has its own inbuilt commitment to technological progress beyond necessity. But even disregarding all dynamics of these conjectural kinds, the most monolithic case imaginable would, at any rate, still be exposed to those noncompetitive, natural pressures like population growth and dwindling resources that beset industrialism as such. Thus, it seems, the compulsive element of technological progress may not be bound to its original breeding ground, the capitalist system. Perhaps the odds for an eventual stabilization look somewhat better in a socialist system, provided it is worldwide—and possibly totalitarian in the bargain. As it is, the pluralism we are thankful for ensures the constancy of compulsive advance.

We could go on unravelling the causal skein and would be sure to find many more strands. But none nor all of them, much as they explain, would go to the heart of the matter. For all of them have one premise in common without which they could not operate for long: the premise that there *can* be indefinite progress because there *is* always something new and better to find. The, by no means obvious, givenness of this objective condition is also the pragmatic conviction of the performers in the technological drama; but without its being true, the conviction would help as little as the dream of the alchemists. Unlike theirs, it is backed up by an impressive record of past successes, and for many this is sufficient ground for their belief. (Perhaps holding or not holding it does not even greatly matter.) What makes it more than a sanguine belief, however, is an underlying and well-grounded, theoretical view of the nature of things and of human cognition, according to which they do not set a limit to novelty of discovery and invention, indeed, that they of themselves will at each point offer another opening for the as yet unknown and undone. The corollary conviction, then, is that a technology tailored to a nature and to a knowledge of this indefinite potential ensures its indefinitely continued conversion into the practical powers, each step of it begetting the next, with never a cutoff from internal exhaustion of possibilities.

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Only habituation dulls our wonder at this wholly unprecedented belief in virtual “infinity.” And by all our present comprehension of reality, the belief is most likely true—at least enough of it to keep the road for innovative technology in the wake of advancing science open for a long time ahead. Unless we understand this ontologic-epistemological premise, we have not understood the inmost agent of technological dynamics, on which the working of all the adventitious causal factors is contingent in the long run.

Let us remember that the virtual infinitude of advance we here seek to explain is in essence different from the always avowed perfectibility of every human accomplishment. Even the undisputed master of his craft always had to admit as possible that he might be surpassed in skill or tools or materials; and no excellence of product ever foreclosed that it might still be bettered, just as today’s champion runner must know that his time may one day be beaten. But these are improvements within a given genus, not different in kind from what went before, and they must accrue in diminishing fractions. Clearly, the phenomenon of an exponentially growing *generic* innovation is qualitatively different.

### Science as a Source of Restlessness

The answer lies in the interaction of *science* and *technology* that is the hallmark of modern progress, and thus ultimately in the kind of nature which modern science progressively discloses. For it is here, in the movement of *knowledge*, where relevant novelty first and constantly occurs. This is itself a novelty. To Newtonian physics, nature appeared simple, almost crude, running its show with a few kinds of basic entities and forces by a few universal laws, and the application of those well-known laws to an ever greater variety of composite phenomena promised ever widening knowledge indeed, but no real surprises. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this minimalistic and somehow finished picture of nature has changed with breathtaking acceleration. In a reciprocal interplay with the growing subtlety of exploration (instrumental and conceptual), nature itself stands forth as ever more subtle. The progress of probing makes the object grow richer in modes of operation, not sparer as classical mechanics had expected. And instead of narrowing the margin of the still-undiscovered, science now surprises itself with unlocking dimension after dimension of new depths. The very essence of matter has turned from a blunt, irreducible ultimate to an always reopened challenge for further penetration. No one can say whether this will go on forever, but a suspicion of intrinsic infinity in the very being of things obtrudes itself and therewith an anticipation of unending inquiry of the sort where succeeding steps will not find the same old story again (Descartes’ “matter in motion”), but always add new twists to it. If then the art of technology is correlative to the knowledge of nature, technology too acquires from this source that potential of infinity for its innovative advance.

But it is not just that indefinite scientific progress offers the *option* of indefinite technological progress, to be exercised or not as other interests see fit. Rather the cognitive

process itself moves by interaction with the technological, and in the most internally vital sense: for its own *theoretical* purpose, science must generate an increasingly sophisticated and physically formidable technology as its tool. What it finds with this help initiates new departures in the practical sphere, and the latter as a whole, that is, technology at work provides with its experiences a large-scale laboratory for science again, a breeding ground for new questions, and so on in an unending cycle. In brief, a mutual feedback operates between science and technology; each requires and propels the other; and as matters now stand, they can only live together or must die together. For the dynamics of technology, with which we are here concerned, this means that (all external promptings apart) an agent of restlessness is implanted in it by its functionally integral bond with science. As long, therefore, as the cognitive impulse lasts, technology is sure to move ahead with it. The cognitive impulse, in its turn, culturally vulnerable in itself, liable to lag or to grow conservative with a treasured canon—that theoretical eros itself no longer lives on the delicate appetite for truth alone, but is spurred on by its hardier offspring, technology, which communicates to it impulses from the broadest arena of struggling, insistent life. Intellectual curiosity is seconded by interminably self-renewing practical aim.

I am conscious of the conjectural character of some of these thoughts. The revolutions in science over the last fifty years or so are a fact, and so are the revolutionary style they imparted to technology and the reciprocity between the two concurrent streams (nuclear physics is a good example). But whether those scientific revolutions, which hold primacy in the whole syndrome, will be typical for science henceforth—something like a law of motion for its future—or represent only a singular phase in its longer run, is unsure. To the extent, then, that our forecast of incessant novelty for technology was predicated on a guess concerning the future of science, even concerning the nature of things, it is hypothetical, as such extrapolations are bound to be. But even if the recent past did not usher in a state of permanent revolution for science, and the life of theory settles down again to a more sedate pace, the scope for technological innovation will not easily shrink; and what may no longer be a revolution in science, may still revolutionize our lives in its practical impact through technology. “Infinity” being too large a word anyway, let us say that present signs of potential and of incentives point to an indefinite perpetuation and fertility of the technological momentum.

### The Philosophical Implications

It remains to draw philosophical conclusions from our findings, at least to pinpoint aspects of philosophical interest. Some preceding remarks have already been straying into philosophy of science in the technical sense. Of broader issues, two will be ample to provide food for further thought beyond the limitations of this paper. One concerns the status of knowledge in the human scheme, the other the status of technology itself as a human goal, or its tendency to become that from being a means, in a dialectical inversion of the means-end order itself.

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Concerning knowledge, it is obvious that the time-honored division of theory and practice has vanished for both sides. The thirst for pure knowledge may persist undiminished, but the involvement of knowing at the heights with doing in the lowlands of life, mediated by technology, has become inextricable; and the aristocratic self-sufficiency of knowing for its own (and the knower's) sake has gone. Nobility has been exchanged for utility. With the possible exception of philosophy, which still can do with paper and pen and tossing thoughts around among peers, all knowledge has become thus tainted, or elevated if you will, whether utility is intended or not. The technological syndrome, in other words, has brought about a thorough *socializing* of the theoretical realm, enlisting it in the service of common need. What used to be the freest of human choices, an extravagance snatched from the pressure of the world—the esoteric life of thought—has become part of the great public play of necessities and a prime necessity in the action of the play.\* Remotest abstraction has become enmeshed with nearest concreteness. What this pragmatic functionalization of the once highest indulgence in impractical pursuits portends for the image of man, for the restructuring of a hallowed hierarchy of values, for the idea of “wisdom,” and so on, is surely a subject for philosophical pondering.

Concerning technology itself, its actual role in modern life (as distinct from the purely instrumental definition of technology as such) has made the relation of means and ends equivocal all the way up from the daily living to the very vocation of man. There could be no question in former technology that its role was that of humble servant—pride of workmanship and esthetic embellishment of the useful notwithstanding. The Promethean enterprise of modern technology speaks a different language. The word “enterprise” gives the clue, and its unendingness another. We have mentioned that the effect of its innovations is disequilibrating rather than equilibrating with respect to the balance of wants and supply, always breeding its own new wants. This in itself compels the constant attention of the best minds, engaging the full capital of human ingenuity for meeting challenge after challenge and seizing the new chances. It is psychologically natural for that degree of engagement to be invested with the dignity of dominant purpose. Not only does technology dominate our lives in fact, it nourishes also a belief in its being of predominant worth. The sheer grandeur of the enterprise and its seeming infinity inspire enthusiasm and fire ambition. Thus, in addition to spawning new ends (worthy or frivolous) from the mere invention of means, technology as a grand venture tends to establish *itself* as the transcendent end. At least the suggestion is there and casts

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\*There is a paradoxical side effect to this change of roles. That very science which forfeited its place in the domain of leisure to become a busy toiler in the field of common needs, creates by its toils a growing domain of leisure for the masses, who reap this with the other fruits of technology as an additional (and no less novel) article of forced consumption. Hence leisure, from a privilege of the few, has become a problem for the many to cope with. Science, not idle, provides for the needs of this idleness too: no small part of technology is spent on filling the leisure-time gap which technology itself has made a fact of life.

its spell on the modern mind. At its most modest, it means elevating *homo faber* to the essential aspect of man; at its most extravagant, it means elevating *power* to the position of his dominant and interminable goal. To become ever more masters of the world, to advance from power to power, even if only collectively and perhaps no longer by choice, *can* now be seen to be the chief vocation of mankind. Surely, this again poses philosophical questions that may well lead unto the uncertain grounds of metaphysics or of faith.

I here break off, arbitrarily, the formal account of the technological movement in general, which as yet has told us little of what the enterprise is about. To this subject I now turn, that is, to the new kinds of powers and objectives that technology opens to modern man and the consequently altered quality of human action itself.

## II. The Material Works of Technology

Technology is a species of power, and we can ask questions about how and on what object any power is exercised. Adopting Aristotle's rule in *de anima* that for understanding a faculty one should begin with its objects, we start from them too—“objects” meaning both the visible *things* technology generates and puts into human use, and the *objectives* they serve. The objects of modern technology are first everything that had always been an object of human artifice and labor: food, clothing, shelter, implements, transportation—all the material necessities and comforts of life. The technological intervention changed at first not the product but its production, in speed, ease, and quantity. However, this is true only of the very first stage of the industrial revolution with which large-scale scientific technology began. For example, the cloth for the steam-driven looms of Lancashire remained the same. Even then, one significant new product was added to the traditional list—the machines themselves, which required an entire new industry with further subsidiary industries to build them. These novel entities, machines—at first capital goods only, not consumer goods—had from the beginning their own impact on man's symbiosis with nature by being consumers themselves. For example: steam-powered water pumps facilitated coal mining, required in turn extra coal for firing their boilers, more coal for the foundries and forges that made those boilers, more for the mining of the requisite iron ore, more for its transportation to the foundries, more—both coal and iron—for the rails and locomotives made in these same foundries, more for the conveyance of the foundries' product to the pitheads and return, and finally more for the distribution of the more abundant coal to the users outside this cycle, among which were increasingly still more machines spawned by the increased availability of coal. Lest it be forgotten over this long chain, we have been speaking of James Watt's modest steam engine for pumping water out of mine shafts. This syndrome of self-proliferation—by no means a linear chain but an intricate web of reciprocity—has been part of modern technology ever since. To generalize, technology exponentially increases man's drain on nature's resources (of substances and of energy), not only through the multiplication of the final goods for consumption, but also, and perhaps more so, through the production

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and operation of its own mechanical means. And with these means—machines—it introduced a new category of goods, not for consumption, added to the furniture of our world. That is, among the objects of technology a prominent class is that of technological apparatus itself.

Soon other features also changed the initial picture of a merely mechanized production of familiar commodities. The final products reaching the consumer ceased to be the same, even if still serving the same age-old needs; new needs, or desires, were added by commodities of entirely new kinds which changed the habits of life. Of such commodities, machines themselves became increasingly part of the consumer's daily life to be used directly by himself, as an article not of production but of consumption. My survey can be brief as the facts are familiar.

### New Kinds of Commodities

When I said that the cloth of the mechanized looms of Lancashire remained the same, everyone will have thought of today's synthetic fibre textiles for which the statement surely no longer holds. This is fairly recent, but the general phenomenon starts much earlier, in the synthetic dyes and fertilizers with which the chemical industry—the first to be wholly a fruit of science—began. The original rationale of these technological feats was substitution of artificial for natural materials (for reasons of scarcity or cost), with as nearly as possible the same properties for effective use. But we need only think of plastics to realize that art progressed from substitutes to the creation of really new substances with properties not so found in any natural one, raw or processed, thereby also initiating uses not thought of before and giving rise to new classes of objects to serve them. In chemical (molecular) engineering, man does more than in mechanical (molar) engineering which constructs machinery from natural materials; his intervention is deeper, redesigning the infra-patterns of nature, making substances to specification by arbitrary disposition of molecules. And this, be it noted, is done deductively from the bottom, from the thoroughly analyzed last elements, that is, in a real *via compositiva* after the completed *via resolutiva*, very different from the long-known empirical practice of coaxing substances into new properties, as in metal alloys from the bronze age on. Artificiality or creative engineering with abstract construction invades the heart of matter. This, in molecular biology, points to further, awesome potentialities.

With the sophistication of molecular alchemy we are ahead of our story. Even in straightforward hardware engineering, right in the first blush of the mechanical revolution, the objects of use that came out of the factories did not really remain the same, even where the objectives did. Take the old objective of travel. Railroads and ocean liners are relevantly different from the stage coach and from the sailing ship, not merely in construction and efficiency but in the very feel of the user, making travel a different experience altogether, something one may do for its own sake. Airplanes, finally, leave behind any similarity with former conveyances, except the purpose of getting from here to there, with no experience

of what lies in between. And these instrumental objects occupy a prominent, even obtrusive place in our world, far beyond anything wagons and boats ever did. Also they are constantly subject to improvement of design, with obsolescence rather than wear determining their life span.

Or take the oldest, most static of artifacts: human habitation. The multistoried office building of steel, concrete, and glass is a qualitatively different entity from the wood, brick, and stone structures of old. With all that goes into it besides the structures as such—the plumbing and wiring, the elevators, the lighting, heating, and cooling systems—it embodies the end products of a whole spectrum of technologies and far-flung industries, where only at the remote sources human hands still meet with primary materials, no longer recognizable in the final result. The ultimate customer inhabiting the product is ensconced in a shell of thoroughly derivative artifacts (perhaps relieved by a nice piece of driftwood). This transformation into utter artificiality is generally, and increasingly, the effect of technology on the human environment, down to the items of daily use. Only in agriculture has the product so far escaped this transformation by the changed modes of its production. We still eat the meat and rice of our ancestors.\*

Then, speaking of the commodities that technology injects into private use, there are machines themselves, those very devices of its own running, originally confined to the economic sphere. This unprecedented novum in the records of individual living started late in the nineteenth century and has since grown to a pervading mass phenomenon in the Western world. The prime example, of course, is the automobile, but we must add to it the whole gamut of household appliances—refrigerators, washers, dryers, vacuum cleaners—by now more common in the lifestyle of the general population than running water or central heating were one hundred years ago. Add lawn mowers and other power tools for home and garden: we are mechanized in our daily chores and recreations (including the toys of our children) with every expectation that new gadgets will continue to arrive.

These paraphernalia are machines in the precise sense that they perform work and consume energy, and their moving parts are of the familiar magnitudes of our perceptual world. But an additional and profoundly different category of technical apparatus was dropped into the lap of the private citizen, not labor-saving and work-performing, partly not even utilitarian, but—with minimal energy input—catering to the senses and the mind: telephone, radio, television, tape recorders, calculators, record players—all the domestic terminals of the electronics industry, the latest arrival on the technological scene. Not only by their insubstantial, mind-addressed output, also by the subvisible, not literally “me-

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\*Not so, objects my colleague Robert Heilbroner in a letter to me; “I’m sorry to tell you that meat and rice are both *profoundly* influenced by technology. Not even they are left untouched.” Correct, but they are at least generically the same (their really profound changes lie far back in the original breeding of domesticated strains from wild ones—as in the case of all cereal plants under cultivation). I am speaking here of an order of transformation in which the results bear no resemblance to the natural materials at their source, nor to any naturally occurring state of them.

chanical” physics of their functioning do these devices differ in kind from all the macroscopic, bodily moving machinery of the classical type. Before inspecting this momentous turn from power engineering, the hallmark of the first industrial revolution, to communication engineering, which almost amounts to a second industrial-technological revolution, we must take a look at its natural base: electricity.

In the march of technology to ever greater artificiality, abstraction, and subtlety, the unlocking of electricity marks a decisive step. Here is a universal force of nature which yet does not naturally appear to man (except in lightning). It is not a datum of uncontrived experience. Its very “appearance” had to wait for science, which contrived the experience for it. Here, then, a technology depended on science for the mere providing of its “object,” the entity itself it would deal with—the first case where theory alone, not ordinary experience, wholly preceded practice (repeated later in the case of nuclear energy). And what sort of entity! Heat and steam are familiar objects of sensuous experience, their force bodily displayed in nature; the matter of chemistry is still the concrete, corporeal stuff mankind had always known. But electricity is an abstract object, disembodied, immaterial, unseen; in its usable form, it is entirely an artifact, generated in a subtle transformation from grosser forms of energy (ultimately from heat via motion). Its theory indeed had to be essentially complete before utilization could begin.

Revolutionary as electrical technology was in itself, its purpose was at first the by now conventional one of the industrial revolution in general: to supply motive power for the propulsion of machines. Its advantages lay in the unique versatility of the new force, the ease of its transmission, transformation and distribution—an unsubstantial commodity, no bulk, no weight, instantaneously delivered at the point of consumption. Nothing like it had ever existed before in man’s traffic with matter, space, and time. It made possible the spread of mechanization to every home; this alone was a tremendous boost to the technological tide, at the same time hooking private lives into centralized public networks and thus making them dependent on the functioning of a total system as never before, in fact, for every moment. Remember, you cannot hoard electricity as you can coal and oil, or flour and sugar for that matter.

But something much more unorthodox was to follow. As we all know, the discovery of the universe of electromagnetics caused a revolution in theoretical physics that is still underway. Without it, there would be no relativity theory, no quantum mechanics, no nuclear and subnuclear physics. It also caused a revolution in technology beyond what it contributed, as we noted, to its classical program. The revolution consisted in the passage from electrical to electronic technology which signifies a new level of abstraction in means and ends. It is the difference between power and communication engineering. Its object, the most impalpable of all, is information. Cognitive instruments had been known before—sextant, compass, clock, telescope, microscope, thermometer, all of them for information and not for work. At one time, they were called “philosophical” or “metaphysical” instruments. By the same general criterion, amusing as it may seem, the new electronic information devices, too, could

be classed as “philosophical instruments.” But those earlier cognitive devices, except the clock, were inert and passive, not generating information actively, as the new instrumentalities do.

Theoretically as well as practically, electronics signifies a genuinely new phase of the scientific-technological revolution. Compared with the sophistication of its theory as well as the delicacy of its apparatus, everything which came before seems crude, almost natural. To appreciate the point, take the man-made satellites now in orbit. In one sense, they are indeed an imitation of celestial mechanics—Newton’s laws finally verified by cosmic experiment: astronomy, for millenia the most purely contemplative of the physical sciences, turned into a practical art! Yet, amazing as it is, the astronomic imitation, with all the unleashing of forces and the finesse of techniques that went into it, is the least interesting aspect of those entities. In that respect, they still fall within the terms and feats of classical mechanics (except for the remote-control course corrections).

Their true interest lies in the instruments they carry through the voids of space and in what these do, their measuring, recording, analyzing, computing, their receiving, processing, and transmitting abstract information and even images over cosmic distances. There is nothing in all nature which even remotely foreshadows the kind of things that now ride the heavenly spheres. Man’s imitative practical astronomy merely provides the vehicle for something else with which he sovereignly passes beyond all the models and usages of known nature.\* That the advent of man portended, in its inner secret of mind and will, a cosmic event was known to religion and philosophy: now it manifests itself as such by fact of things and acts in the visible universe. Electronics indeed creates a range of objects imitating nothing and progressively added to by pure invention.

And no less invented are the ends they serve. Power engineering and chemistry for the most part still answered to the natural needs of man: for food, clothing, shelter, locomotion, and so forth. Communication engineering answers to needs of information and control solely created by the civilization that made this technology possible and, once started, imperative. The novelty of the means continues to engender no less novel ends—both becoming as necessary to the functioning of the civilization that spawned them as they would have been pointless for any former one. The world they help to constitute and which needs computers for its very running is no longer nature supplemented, imitated, improved, transformed, the original habitat made more habitable. In the pervasive mentalization of physical relationships it is a *trans-nature* of human making, but with this inherent paradox: that it threatens the obsolescence of man himself, as increasing automation ousts him from the places of work where he formerly proved his humanhood. And there is a further threat: its strain on nature herself may reach a breaking point.

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\*Note also that in radio technology, the medium of action is nothing material, like wires conducting currents, but the entirely immaterial electromagnetic “field,” i.e., space itself. The symbolic picture of “waves” is the last remaining link to the forms of our perceptual world.

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### The Last Stage of the Revolution?

That sentence would make a good dramatic ending. But it is not the end of the story. There may be in the offing another, conceivably the last, stage of the technological revolution, after the mechanical, chemical, electrical, electronic stages we have surveyed, and the nuclear we omitted. All these were based on physics and had to do with what man can put to his use. What about biology? And what about the user himself? Are we, perhaps, on the verge of a technology, based on biological knowledge and wielding an engineering art which, this time, has man himself for its object? This has become a theoretical possibility with the advent of molecular biology and its understanding of genetic programming; and it has been rendered morally possible by the metaphysical neutralizing of man. But the latter, while giving us the license to do as we wish, at the same time denies us the guidance for knowing what to wish. Since the same evolutionary doctrine of which genetics is a cornerstone has deprived us of a valid image of man, the actual techniques, when they are ready, may find us strangely unready for their responsible use. The anti-essentialism of prevailing theory, which knows only of *de facto* outcomes of evolutionary accident and of no valid essences that would give sanction to them, surrenders our being to a freedom without norms. Thus the technological call of the new microbiology is the twofold one of physical feasibility and metaphysical admissibility. Assuming the genetic mechanism to be completely analyzed and its script finally decoded, we can set about rewriting the text. Biologists vary in their estimates of how close we are to the capability; few seem to doubt the right to use it. Judging by the rhetoric of its prophets, the idea of taking our evolution into our own hands is intoxicating even to many scientists.

In any case, the idea of making over man is no longer fantastic, nor interdicted by an inviolable taboo. If and when *that* revolution occurs, if technological power is really going to tinker with the elemental keys on which life will have to play its melody in generations of men to come (perhaps the only such melody in the universe), then a reflection on what is humanly desirable and what should determine the choice—a reflection, in short, on the image of man, becomes an imperative more urgent than any ever inflicted on the understanding of mortal man. Philosophy, it must be confessed, is sadly unprepared for this, its first cosmic task.

### III. Toward an Ethics of Technology

The last topic has moved naturally from the descriptive and analytic plane, on which the objects of technology are displayed for inspection, onto the evaluative plane where their ethical challenge poses itself for decision. The particular case forced the transition so directly because there the (as yet hypothetical) technological object was man directly. But once removed, man is involved in all the other objects of technology, as these singly and jointly remake the worldly frame of his life, in both the narrower and the wider of its senses: that of the artificial frame of civilization in

which social man leads his life proximately, and that of the natural terrestrial environment in which this artifact is embedded and on which it ultimately depends.

Again, because of the magnitude of technological effects on both these vital environments in their totality, both the quality of human life and its very preservation in the future are at stake in the rampage of technology. In short, certainly the “image” of man, and possibly the survival of the species (or of much of it), are in jeopardy. This would summon man’s duty to his cause even if the jeopardy were not of his own making. But it is, and, in addition to his ageless obligation to meet the threat of things, he bears for the first time the responsibility of prime agent in the threatening disposition of things. Hence nothing is more natural than the passage from the objects to the ethics of technology, from the things made to the duties of their makers and users.

A similar experience of inevitable passage from analysis of fact to ethical significance, let us remember, befell us toward the end of the first section. As in the case of the matter, so also in the case of the form of the technological dynamics, the image of man appeared at stake. In view of the quasi-automatic compulsion of those dynamics, with their perspective of indefinite progression, every existential and moral question that the objects of technology raise assumes the curiously eschatological quality with which we are becoming familiar from the extrapolating guesses of futurology. But apart from thus raising all challenges of present particular matter to the higher powers of future exponential magnification, the despotic dynamics of the technological movement as such, sweeping its captive movers along in its breathless momentum, poses its own questions to man’s axiological conception of himself. Thus, form and matter of technology alike enter into the dimension of ethics.

The questions raised for ethics by the objects of technology are defined by the major areas of their impact and thus fall into such fields of knowledge as ecology (with all its biospheric subdivisions of land, sea, and air), demography, economics, biomedical and behavioral sciences (even the psychology of mind pollution by television), and so forth. Not even a sketch of the substantive problems, let alone of ethical policies for dealing with them, can here be attempted. Clearly, for a normative rationale of the latter, ethical theory must plumb the very foundations of value, obligation, and the human good.

The same holds of the different kind of questions raised for ethics by the sheer fact of the formal dynamics of technology. But here, a question of another order is added to the straightforward ethical questions of both kinds, subjecting any resolution of them to a pragmatic proviso of harrowing uncertainty. Given the mastery of the creation over its creators, which yet does not abrogate their responsibility nor silence their vital interest, what are the chances and what are the means of gaining *control* of the process, so that the results of any ethical (or even purely prudential) insights can be translated into effective action? How in short can man’s freedom prevail against the determinism he has created for himself? On this most clouded question, whereby hangs not only the effectuality or futility of the ethical search which the facts invite (assuming it to be blessed with *theoretical* suc-

cess!), but perhaps the future of mankind itself, I will make a few concluding, but—alas—inconclusive, remarks. They are intended to touch on the whole ethical enterprise.

### Problematic Preconditions of an Effective Ethics

First, a look at the novel state of determinism. *Prima facie*, it would seem that the greater and more varied powers bequeathed by technology have expanded the range of choices and hence increased human freedom. For economics, for example, the argument has been made<sup>2</sup> that the uniform compulsion which scarcity and subsistence previously imposed on economic behavior with a virtual denial of alternatives (and hence—conjoined with the universal “maximization” motive of capitalist market competition—gave classical economics at least the appearance of a deterministic “science”) has given way to a latitude of indeterminacy. The plenty and powers provided by industrial technology allow a pluralism of choosable alternatives (hence disallow scientific prediction). We are not here concerned with the status of economics as a science. But as to the altered state of things alleged in the argument, I submit that the change means rather that one, relatively homogeneous determinism (thus relatively easy to formalize into a law) has been supplanted by another, more complex, multifarious determinism, namely, that exercised by the human artifact itself upon its creator and user. We, abstractly speaking the possessors of those powers, are concretely subject to their emancipated dynamics and the sheer momentum of our own multitude, the vehicle of those dynamics.

I have spoken elsewhere<sup>3</sup> of the “new realm of necessity” set up, like a second nature, by the feedbacks of our achievements. The almighty we, or Man personified is, alas, an abstraction. *Man* may have become more powerful; *men* very probably the opposite, enmeshed as they are in more dependencies than ever before. What ideal Man now can do is not the same as what real men permit or dictate to be done. And here I am thinking not only of the immanent dynamism, almost automatism, of the impersonal technological complex I have invoked so far, but also of the pathology of its client society. Its compulsions, I fear, are at least as great as were those of unconquered nature. Talk of the blind forces of nature! Are those of the sorcerer’s creation less blind? They differ indeed in the serial shape of their causality: the action of nature’s forces is cyclical, with periodical recurrence of the same, while that of the technological forces is linear, progressive, cumulative, thus replacing the curse of constant toil with the threat of maturing crisis and possible catastrophe. Apart from this significant vector difference, I seriously wonder whether the tyranny of fate has not become greater, the latitude of spontaneity smaller; and whether man has not actually been weakened in his decision-making capacity by his accretion of collective strength.

However, in speaking, as I have just done, of “his” decision-making capacity, I have been guilty of the same abstraction I had earlier criticized in the use of the term “man.” Actually, the subject of the statement was no real or representative individual but Hobbes’ “Artificiall Man,” “that great Leviathan, called a Common-Wealth,” or the “large

horse” to which Socrates likened the city, “which because of its great size tends to be sluggish and needs stirring by a gad-fly.” Now, the chances of there being such gadflies among the numbers of the commonwealth are today no worse nor better than they have ever been, and in fact they are around and stinging in our field of concern. In that respect, the free spontaneity of personal insight, judgment, and responsible action by speech can be trusted as an ineradicable (if also incalculable) endowment of humanity, and smallness of number is in itself no impediment to shaking public complacency. The problem, however, is not so much complacency or apathy as the counterforces of active, and anything but complacent, interests and the complicity with them of all of us in our daily consumer existence. These interests themselves are factors in the determinism which technology has set up in the space of its sway. The question, then, is that of the possible chances of unselfish insight in the arena of (by nature) selfish *power*, and more particularly: of one long-range, interloping insight against the short-range goals of many incumbent powers. Is there hope that wisdom itself can become power? This renews the thorny old subject of Plato’s philosopher-king and—with that inclusion of realism which the utopian Plato did not lack—of the role of myth, not knowledge, in the education of the guardians. Applied to our topic: the *knowledge* of objective dangers and of values endangered, as well as of the technical remedies, is beginning to be there and to be disseminated; but to make it prevail in the marketplace is a matter less of the rational dissemination of truth than of public relations techniques, persuasion, indoctrination, and manipulation, also of unholy alliances, perhaps even conspiracy. The philosopher’s descent into the cave may well have to go all the way to “if you can’t lick them, join them.”

That is so not merely because of the active resistance of special interests but because of the optical illusion of the near and the far which condemns the long-range view to impotence against the enticement and threats of the nearby: it is this incurable shortsightedness of animal-human nature more than ill will that makes it difficult to move even those who have no special axe to grind, but still are in countless ways, as we all are, beneficiaries of the untamed system and so have something dear in the present to lose with the inevitable cost of its taming. The taskmaster, I fear, will have to be actual pain beginning to strike, when the far has moved close to the skin and has vulgar optics on its side. Even then, one may resort to palliatives of the hour. In any event, one should try as much as one can to forestall the advent of emergency with its high tax of suffering or, at the least, prepare for it. This is where the scientist can redeem his role in the technological estate.

The incipient knowledge about technological danger trends must be developed, coordinated, systematized, and the full force of computer-aided projection techniques be deployed to determine priorities of action, so as to inform preventive efforts wherever they can be elicited, to minimize the necessary sacrifices, and at the worst to preplan the saving measures which the terror of beginning calamity will eventually make people willing to accept. Even now, hardly a decade after the first stirrings of “environmental” con-

sciousness, much of the requisite knowledge, plus the rational persuasion, is available inside and outside academia for any well-meaning powerholder to draw upon. To this, we—the growing band of concerned intellectuals—ought persistently to contribute our bit of competence and passion.

But the real problem is to get the well-meaning into power and have that power as little as possible beholden to the interests which the technological colossus generates on its path. It is the problem of the philosopher-king compounded by the greater magnitude and complexity (also sophistication) of the forces to contend with. Ethically, it becomes a problem of playing the game by its impure rules. For the servant of truth to join in it means to sacrifice some of his time-honored role: he may have to turn apostle or agitator or political operator. This raises moral questions beyond those which technology itself poses, that of sanctioning immoral means for a surpassing end, of giving unto Caesar so as to promote what is not Caesar's. It is the grave question of moral casuistry, or of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, or of regarding cherished liberties as no longer affordable luxuries (which may well bring the anxious friend of mankind into odious political company)—questions one excusably hesitates to touch but in the further tide of things may not be permitted to evade.

What is, prior to joining the fray, the role of philosophy, that is, of a philosophically grounded ethical knowledge, in all this? The somber note of the last remarks responded to the quasi-apocalyptic prospects of the technological tide, where stark issues of planetary survival loom ahead. There, no philosophical ethics is needed to tell us that disaster must be averted. Mainly, this is the case of the ecological dangers. But there are other, noncatastrophic things afoot in technology where not the existence but the image of man is at stake. They are with us now and will accompany us and be joined by others at every new turn technology may take. Mainly, they are in the biomedical, behavioral, and social fields. They lack the stark simplicity of the survival issue, and there is none of the (at least declaratory) unanimity on them which the spectre of extreme crisis commands. It is here where a philosophical ethics or theory of values has its task. Whether its voice will be listened to in the dispute on policies is not for it to ask; perhaps it cannot even muster an authoritative voice with which to speak—a house divided, as philosophy is. But the philosopher must try for normative knowledge, and if his labors fall predictably short of producing a compelling axiomatics, at least his clarifications can counteract rashness and make people pause for a thoughtful view.

Where not existence but “quality” of life is in question, there is room for honest dissent on goals, time for theory to ponder them, and freedom from the tyranny of the lifeboat situation. Here, philosophy can have its try and its say. Not so on the extremity of the survival issue. The philosopher, to be sure, will also strive for a theoretical grounding of the very proposition that there ought to be men on earth, and that present generations are obligated to the existence of future ones. But such esoteric, ultimate validation of the perpetuity imperative for the species—whether obtainable or not to the satisfaction of reason—is happily not needed for

consensus in the face of ultimate threat. Agreement in favor of life is pretheoretical, instinctive, and universal. Averting disaster takes precedence over everything else, including pursuit of the good, and suspends otherwise inviolable prohibitions and rules. All moral standards for individual or group behavior, even demands for individual sacrifice of life, are premised on the continued existence of human life. As I have said elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> “No rules can be devised for the waiving of rules in extremities. As with the famous shipwreck examples of ethical theory, the less said about it, the better.”

Never before was there cause for considering the contingency that all mankind may find itself in a lifeboat, but this is exactly what we face when the viability of the planet is at stake. Once the situation becomes desperate, then what there is to do for salvaging it must be done, so that there be life—which “then,” after the storm has been weathered, can again be adorned by ethical conduct. The moral inference to be drawn from this lurid eventuality of a moral pause is that we must never allow a lifeboat situation for humanity to arise.<sup>5</sup> One part of the ethics of technology is precisely to guard the space in which any ethics can operate. For the rest, it must grapple with the cross-currents of value in the complexity of life.

A final word on the question of determinism versus freedom which our presentation of the technological syndrome has raised. The best hope of man rests in his most troublesome gift: the spontaneity of human acting which confounds all prediction. As the late Hannah Arendt never tired of stressing: the continuing arrival of newborn individuals in the world assures ever-new beginnings. We should expect to be surprised and to see our predictions come to naught. But those predictions themselves, with their warning voice, can have a vital share in provoking and informing the spontaneity that is going to confound them.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>But as serious an actuality as the Chinese plough “wandered” slowly westward with little traces of its route and finally caused a major, highly beneficial revolution in medieval European agriculture, which almost no one deemed worth recording when it happened (cf. Paul Leser, *Entstehung und Verbreitung des Pfluges*, Münster, 1931; reprint: The International Secretariate for Research on the History of Agricultural Implements, Brede-Lingby, Denmark, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>I here loosely refer to Adolph Lowe, “The Normative Roots of Economic Values,” in Sidney Hook, ed., *Human Values and Economic Policy* (New York: New York University Press, 1967) and, more perhaps, to the many discussions I had with Lowe over the years. For my side of the argument, see “Economic Knowledge and the Critique of Goals,” in R. L. Heilbroner, ed., *Economic Means and Social Ends* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), reprinted in Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), reprinted in Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>“The Practical Uses of Theory,” *Social Research* 26 (1959), reprinted in Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (New York, 1966). The reference is to pp. 209-10 in the latter edition.

<sup>4</sup>“Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects,” in Paul A. Freund, ed., *Experimentation with Human Subjects* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), reprinted in Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*. The reference is to pp. 124-25 in the latter edition.

<sup>5</sup>For a comprehensive view of the demands which such a situation or even its approach would make on our social and political values, see Geoffrey Vickers, *Freedom in a Rocking Boat* (London, 1970).