

Technology for People – *What was the question?*

The title “Technology for People” is supposed to indicate technology designed and developed with regard to human needs and values as opposed to technology designed and developed within technology’s own feasible boundaries. It also indicates that we are in control of development, since it means ‘development of technology for the people *by* mankind itself’. If we take a closer look, matters are not quite that simple. In fact, the issue seems to be genuine philosophical and hence not easy to deal with. To be able to decide which technological development would be beneficial to mankind, one would have to analyse a number of different questions. What is the essence of technology? What are the genuine needs and values of man? What is the true character of the relationship between man and technology? On top of these questions comes other issues. For example, what does it say when a company arranges a competition about values? Is such a commercial company not biased towards some definite values which are setting the stage?

”What a tiresome polemic”, the reader might think by now. And I am probably already out of the competition by not playing the game. I am convinced though that we will get nowhere interesting taking things for granted and just go ahead with old notions and habitual assumptions. True visions demand a fresh start, and the only liberation from dusty ideas is to analyse the issue at hand and your starting point thoroughly. Nobody benefits from clichés, and we must at any price avoid the unprofitable trench warfare between ‘technoclasts’ and ‘technophiles’ in this matter. It is my humble hope that this essay - if nothing else - will be of help for the jury in evaluating the other contributions by making things more clear.

It is even more important to clear the ground in an essay concerning a desirable way for the future direction of technology, when man seems to form his needs in regard to what is feasible. The classical techno-dystopia that technology will someday get a life of its own and take charge is just a fictitious projection of a more subtle but common phenomena: That we already more or less play by the rules set by technology. Or as a graffiti in New York reads: “Technology is the answer. What was the question?”

Technology

Even though we commonly think of technology as physical instruments, machines and hardware in general, it is much more than that and covers most aspects of our lives. Everything that represents a product of systematic human effort is technique. And if the technique itself is systematically treated it becomes technology. Thus technique and technology differs only in respect to level of reflection and not in substance. Despite a slight difference in meaning, I will henceforward, for the sake of simplicity and in tune with most literature on the subject, use the terms synonymously.

Some philosophers of the past century made it clear that we shouldn't understand technology as functionality and applied science, but rather as way of conceiving the world. The concept 'technology' contains not only *techné*, which in the ancient Greece meant skillfulness in craftsmanship and the arts. It also contains a *logos*, which indicate theoretical assumptions of the basis for such a *praxis*, i.e. a fundamental theory of the essence of the world. The world humans live in can be measured, systemised, categorised, optimised and utilised. We see the wind, the sun and the river as potential energy, we conceive our surroundings as means for our use, we understand phenomena as following laws and belonging to natural categories.

I hereby do not want to suggest, that reality in itself has not got these characteristics, and that technology is just a fictitious construction. Nature *do* support such a 'reading', I am quite certain. Technology is perhaps just a focusing on certain aspects of reality, in the same manner as 'a man with a hammer detects nails everywhere'. And the human 'hammer' is probably our body and its functionality tied up with a mainly action-based relation to the world. Studies in cognitive science have indicated that our embodied way of being in the world gives rise to a number of schemas and metaphors that we conceive our surroundings through, and technical functionality is likely to have its basis therein. As the optics-metaphor suggest, it does not mean that reality is completely without technological characteristics, these are just the aspects we are adapted to focus on. As such, the world is accessible in a technological way and, to a certain point, with a very successful result.

Hence technology is not just applied science, but science itself is technological, due to its conception of reality as comprehensible and describable in a 'logocentric' language, which is primarily mathematical. Technology is therefore not just mankind's *instrument* in the struggle with life but fundamentally a way of *understanding* reality. When man is described as a 'technological being', it means more than a capability of making tools as *Homo Faber*. It means that man lives in a primarily technological world.

Another problem in understanding 'technology' as an instrumental aid in man's struggles in the world is that 'world' and 'technology' are not static and clearly separated ontological domains. Quite the contrary, technology and the so-called world transforms and mingle with each other. New technologies keeps structuring reality in different ways, and they often change our conception of the world radically. Think of telescopes, satellites, cardiac surgery, psycho analysis, quantum mechanics – the list is long. Not much in our everyday life is left untouched by technology. And we ourselves are filled with technology, from medicine to management techniques.

Not even nature is spared the technological view. Nature has also become a kind of instrumental aid, e.g. when nature serves as therapy against stress or becomes a recreational area.

In other words, it is not possible to make a clear functional demarcation of technology, and the term seems to be highly context-relative. Perhaps we could benefit from a simple formula and define the essence of technology as:

An 'A' (technique) is employed for 'B' (problem) by 'C' (agent) to achieve 'D' (wished goal).

We are perhaps able to get a clearer view on the whole matter, if we apply this simple formula on our present issue. Man ought to be protagonist (as 'C') if technology is to have any *raison d'être* and that is what this essay is all about. Then we could say that 'B' and 'D' are known as well as the problem and the goal respectively. This is not as simple as it might seem at first hand though, because you seldom recognise the real nature of the problem (that would often amount to solving the problem). There might not even be a problem.

On top of this comes the troubles with focusing on the real goal. The reason why we are often getting in troubles, when we are to determine the proper purpose of a technical device is our focusing on ‘what’ (idea phase) and ‘how’ (design phase) in the development of technology. The question we seldom ask in the strictest sense is ‘why’. The ‘wished goal’ is not always the real goal but perhaps just imaginary or feasible. Do schoolchildren have got mobile phones due to a wish of having a phone of their own, to be able to talk wireless or to get recognition among their friends? Often it is not quite clear what the real motivation behind a piece of technology is and even less so in a capitalistic era of fostering artificial needs. The vast majority of the technological equipment we use serve other ends than regular instrumentality, i.e. they play an important part of our social signalling and in the way we would like to understand ourselves. Think of the semiotics in the design of cars, televisions, stereos, clothes and a number of other goods. The direct and practical value of a product is often a minor aspect in the social, psychological and existential contexts. The narratives and values associated with the brand or the product are often much more important. That is the whole point of fashion – the queen of all artificial needs.

In charge

The idea of technology as the selfcreated aid of man in his struggles with life is old and still commonly accepted. In fact it is – if the reader will allow a little subtlety – itself a excellent expression of the technical understanding of reality as controllable. But this ‘mastering of technology’ is simply an illusion. Instead, our dealing with technology should be regarded as a kind of dialectics beyond deliberate control. Technology seems to have its own logic and imperative force: What *can* be invented *must* be invented. We are not in charge in any common sense of the word but are somehow spellbound by our allied – technology. And every time we end up in troubles with some technical device, we just invent another device or function to deal with the problem which have arisen as a consequence of our own solution to the first problem – and so on. Technology *is* the answer. In spite of the intention with technology to ease the burdens for people, it often brings new problems of their own, or at least change the game completely.

The clock were invented by Benedictine monks in the 13. century, in order to be able to attain to all prayers and services without wasting energy on such secular matters as time. It ended up being a powerful instrument to measure, standardise and make effective the working man's labour in the name of profit. In fact the clock is probably the most characteristic piece of technology, as it seeks to measure and quantify something that is primarily - at least phenomenological - a qualitative phenomenon.

The tyranny of the clock is still in effect. Today people *in general* work more and harder than ever, and we seem to be in a vortex of efficiency. Lots of statistics have documented how we actually spend *more* time earning enough to pay for all the technology we have bought to *save* time in the first place. "Technology is the effort to spare an effort" as Ortega Y Gasset once said.

There are lots of examples of the 'aid' of technology being not quite as advantageous as intended. We see how the development of still faster technology keeps making people more hurried and busy – instead of the opposite. The actuality and speed of the flow of information with today's technology has transformed attentiveness and engagement to moods of simultaneousness and made 'here-and-now' the magic pole instead. Because huge quantities of information are available, horizontal orientation has become more important than vertical orientation such as history. Yet history and experience are the basis of meaning contrary to mere information. The vast possibilities with technology has grown a demand for flexibility at the expense of integrity. The result is a desperate search for identity.

By the aid of our habitual way of rationalising the non-rational and put the unavoidable in volitional settings, we make a trend out of an uncontrollable development: Our life ought to be fast and dynamic; it delivers more success to be *flexible* than *loyal*; it is better to know *what* is going on than *why* it is going on; and it has almost become a modern neurosis to be afraid of missing anything, even if it really is nothing.

Technology for ...?

If technology truly is dialectic, so advantages always brings disadvantages and progression goes hand in hand with regression, what strategy are we to deploy on developing technol-

ogy? Maximising the good? Minimising the bad? Make cost/benefit analysis and try to reach the best score?

The problem with this is that we are not good at predicting the long term effects and analysing all aspects of our inventions and actions. Perhaps the reason is that we were evolutionary adapted to handling practical problems which were of direct relevance to our survival. We are in other words much better at surviving than actually living. If this answer bears some truth, no wonder we are so bad at long term planning and abstract strategic thinking compared to immediate action and subsequent damage control.

Besides, values are probably not static entities, but are relative to perspective and context. Thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and others have held that values stand in the service of other ends - be it will, life, legitimising social conditions, rationalising neurotic behaviour - and are not as autonomous as often believed. For the same reason values are highly evasive and adaptive, and not easy to get a firm grip on. Questions of values and technological problems respectively belong to completely different categories. There is always – in principle at least – a solution to a technical problem. Values on the other hand are often hard to detect and even more difficult to agree on. Hence the question about which values should serve as guidelines for a future strategy for technological development cannot be handled like technological problems are solved. It is also a bit naïve, or at least a techno-logical way of thinking, to expect a solution to the problem of values for a competition, when thinkers have been discussing that very issue for thousands of years without a definite result.

Technology for People

Where do we go from here? Could there be a breakthrough, a way out, in spite of all the before mentioned problems in sketching a ‘Technology for People’? It is no secret that I myself am pessimistic about a humane and beneficial development of technology. Not only does history not look very promising for such a project. The notion of a progression towards an overall better harmony between humans and technology might itself be upright meaningless, due to the dialectical nature of our relationship with technology. Maybe the whole

idea of progression is just a reminiscence of an old anthropocentric worldview. If it is not legitimate to conceive of the world in a teleological setting anymore, be it with the Bible or a humanism of the enlightenment, the idea of progression has not got the same force. In spite of its name, even the theory of evolution does not talk about progression, but only adaptive success.

I think that a reasonable attitude would be more humble on our own behalf. But for the sake of the game, let us take a look at some *principal* demands for a future technological development. Please do not get your expectations too high. After what has been said, it would be strange to start making concrete proposals about what to do with technology.

Due to our poor abilities in looking beyond our actual needs and urges, means of controlling man's eagerness for technical solutions is of great importance. It might even be necessary to apply such means systematically. If not, our usual way of building our needs and values on the present situation will dictate the development and use of technology. It is not always true that 'technology is the answer'. Not even in a version of political correctness: '**Technology** is the answer **for people**'. On the other hand, it is just as unprofitable to rely on the opposite extreme that technological solutions can be denied *to court*. We must always remember that technology is neither indispensable or replaceable.

The interesting answer to the question about a technology for people does not concern the 'what' (as this competition seems to suggest) but the 'why'. Only by asking 'why', do we reach the domain of human values, which have to be our guiding lines. Not with the prospect of certainty, but with a better chance of doing right. As such, my contribution to a technology for people should be seen as a '*memento focusi*'. A request to promote a better technological development with a concern for human values and genuine needs by reflecting on the 'why' instead of always the 'what' and 'how'. It is meant as an aid to get things straight, and a corrective to an unrestrained and unfocused attitude in dealing with technological matters. If categorised in a techno-logical way, you may even call my contribution a focusing-technique.

This essay will hopefully help clearing the ground for future analyses of what values are to form the basis for the development of technology. Even though I do not offer concrete

suggestions to technological inventions, I think that my contribution is constructive by being destructive to certain illusions. In sum, my contribution is not a device – but an advice: Even though there will never be clear answers, do not forget the perpetual motto: What was the question?

My contribution to a competition on human values and technology held by Sonofon 2001 (I did not win!)