TECHNICS AND ATHEISM IN GABRIEL MARCEL

Even though authors have referred to Marcel's views of technology, it is worth noting that he rarely talks about "technologie," the French cognate of our English word. What he discusses at some length is "la technique," a term sometimes translated as technology, but which would be better rendered simply as technic, even though some of its meanings do correspond to some of our usages of the English term technology. In any case, in this paper I will set forth a number of Marcel's concerns about the omnipresent role of "la technique," technic, in our society.

Marcel defines technic as a systematic ensemble of methodological procedures capable in principle of being reproduced (and so taught) and perfected, designed to achieve some goal by manipulating physical and/or mental objects.[1] Thus, as with the multiple uses of the English word technology, the term technic(s) for Marcel is used to refer to diverse objects, including concrete physical things which embody methodological procedures (things such as tools and machines), structured organizations which use such objects (for example, mines, factories, transportation networks), as well as systems of information and communication (Internet, TV networks, the media) and even more abstract objects such as computer programs, organizational structures, and logical systems. In other words, technics can refer to concrete physical things, to organized systems of such things, and to the general procedures and methods used to construct and operate those things and systems. In all cases, the physical objects, systems and procedures are instruments by

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[1] *Man Against Mass Society,* trans. G. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), p. 81 [hereafter cited as MAMS]. This work contains Marcel's most extended treatment of technics. See also, *The Mystery of Being,* Vol. I, trans. G. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), p. 25 [hereafter cited as MBI]; *Being and Having*, trans. K. Farrar (New York: Harper, 1965), pp. 126, 183 [hereafter cited as BH]; *Homo Viator*, trans. E. Crauford (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 114 [hereafter cited as HV].

which something is manipulated (physically and/or mentally) to attain a desired goal.

In what follows, I will, as I said, concentrate on some of Marcel's concerns and critiques of the all-pervasiveness and dominance of technics in our day. I do want to stress from the beginning, however, that he in no way condemns technics or technical progress as such. Though he does not spend nearly as much time discussing the positive side (and this may be the reason he is considered anti-technology by some), Marcel does say that to be against technical progress is "childish"; to seek to close factories and laboratories, he writes, would result in an "unimaginable regression for the human race."[2] Furthermore, technical progress is good not just because of the useful things it provides to mankind. It is good *in itself*, Marcel insists, for it is the incarnation of the power and creativity of human reason: an intellectual conquest which embodies in the apparent disorder of the nonhuman world a principle of order and intelligibility. It is a source of genuine pride and should enable human beings to recognize their legitimate superiority over the subhuman realm.[3] Nevertheless, he voices many objections to the tremendous influence and power of technics in modern society, and to these I now turn. Let me add that I am aware that many of Marcel's concerns have by now also been presented by others. Still, he was one of the early voices, for he set forth many of his criticisms in the early decades of this century.

As the definition given above indicates, technics for Marcel refer to things constructed by human beings as instruments to attain desired goals. Thus they are not, or should not be, taken as ends in themselves. Their value and importance should be assessed in terms

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[2]*Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. S. Jolin and P. McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1973), pp. 202-203 [hereafter cited as TWB]; MAMS, p. 82.

[3]Places where Marcel makes positive comments about technics or technology are: TWB, pp. 154, 196, 202-203; BH, p. 74; MAMS, pp. 56, 85; *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. M. Harari (New York: Citadel, 1962), pp. 33-34 [hereafter cited as PE]. I might note that in TWB, p. 245, he admits that he was, perhaps, initially overly hostile toward technology.

of their appropriateness in achieving their goal. For example, a machine or factory can be evaluated in terms of its output or productivity, a business enterprise in terms of its ability to supply a particular service or product. But in our day, Marcel believes, technics have become ends in themselves for many people, often because they do not reflect on them and ask whether there is any genuine need which they satisfy or real value which they serve.[4] What is all our technology for? To what extent do our marvelous inventions promote human life and community? These are questions our society rarely asks, Marcel says. Do the countless devices to do unimportant things easily really enhance the quality of life? Could our technical creativity and skill, not to mention our wealth, be devoted to more essential goods, for example to designing more affordable housing or medical technology for the poor (who are most of the human race) rather than more cosmetics, space probes and other playthings for the affluent? As a society we rarely raise such questions but seem to presume that an ever increasing productivity of an endless variety of consumer goods, along with bigger (and fewer) megabusinesses devoted to supplying and stimulating our appetite for these goods, offer us the opportunity for a meaningful human life. Of course such a presumption, Marcel notes, embodies a materialistic view of life for it takes for granted that the good life, one of human fulfillment and well being, comes from the possession and consumption of material goods. Pushed all the way, this position assumes that the correct technics can solve all human problems, from birth to death. It is, Marcel says, nothing less than an idolatry of technics and he calls it a "lived" (*i.e., a de facto*, even though not expressed) atheism![5]

One of the unfortunate results of placing such faith in technics and their products, according to Marcel, is that the technical comes to take priority over the natural and the living.[6] We have divorced ourselves from our own organic structure and from our roots in nature.

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[4]MAMS, pp. 59-61, 65-66, 71, 83, 97-99, 260; MB, I, p. 26; TWB, pp. 194-199, 203-204; PE, p. 31.

[5]TWB, pp. 44, 167; PE, pp. 11-13. See also the texts cited in the previous note.

[6]HV, pp. 79-81; MAMS, pp. 91-93, 182, 187; TWB, p. 247.

We exist increasingly in an artificial manmade environment, one in which we attempt to escape from the heat and cold, wind and rain, and the general rhythms of the natural weather and seasons. (Think of our modern indoor mall or domed stadium where all elements of weather are totally regulated and kept at the same temperature, humidity, pressure, etc.) In our industrialized society, we simply could not live at all without these human structures which substitute the regularity and uniformity of a manmade, or machine made, environment for the variable but rhythmic natural cycles of ourselves and our planet.

Of course, humans have always needed to domesticate nature for their survival. But in the twentieth century we have become so incredibly successful at this, Marcel observes, that we forget that we ourselves are things of nature which in the last analysis are *totally* dependent on it. In our desire to create our own environment, a desire that is at bottom a craving for self-sufficiency, we tend, Marcel fears, to lose sight of our radical dependency on that which is not our creation, including the organic side of our own being. Immersed in an artificial environment, the pace of our lives is dominated by our constructions rather than in tune with our natural bodily rhythms. Instead of eating when we are hungry, sleeping when we are tired, working or recreating or making love when we feel the need, the urge, and the energy to do so, we govern our lives by the clock, that machine which regulates all machines and organizations (which themselves are designed to operate "like well oiled machines"). Thus our daily existence is structured in almost total disregard, not only of the natural seasons and weather, but of our own moods, health, and vigor. All life, human included, has its ebbs and flows, its periods of dormancy and rest and periods of great energy and fruitfulness. Living things take time to grow, develop, flower, and eventually decline. They reach their maturity in their own way and in their own good time. As every gardener and parent knows, patience and respect for its inner laws of growth is essential for an organism's healthy development. Yet our over technologized society considers the natural inner rhythms of organic things irrelevant, or rather, hardly considers them at all. We attempt to force everything into a uniform mold dominated by the inorganic machines and bureaucratic organizations we are programmed to serve. Is it any wonder that we find this regimen extremely stressful, not to say harmful, to our physical and psychological health? Now it is, of course, true that a

certain amount of regulation and adherence to time schedules is absolutely necessary if significant numbers of people are to be effectively organized to work together to achieve a common goal, whether it be the production of an automobile or the education of young adults. Marcel never denies this. He believes, however, that in our day such structures tend to rule over too much of most people's lives and hence to reduce them to individuals who see their primary function to be the service of the machine, meaning by the latter not just physical entities but bureaucratic institutions.[7]

This brings us to another way in which our over emphasis on technology is inimical to human life and health according to Marcel, namely, its tendency to ignore, make difficult, and even to dissolve the natural bonds between human beings.[8] It is well known that Marcel characterizes our society as a "broken world," one in which intimate permanent human relationships are increasingly more difficult to sustain. One reason for this is that the technocratic mentality considers human beings, like everything else, to be of value only in terms of their use or function -- in the crudest and more obvious sense, their job or output. In their work people come together not because of any natural bonds of family or neighborhood, nor because of voluntary associations of friendship, but primarily because each performs a necessary function in the organization. Of course, true lasting friendships may and do occasionally arise, but they are fragile in an environment which tends to reduce human interactions to a meeting of functions rather than a loving and respectful encounter of unique individuals. Furthermore, the pace of life in our highly industrialized society is inimical to the establishment of lasting human relations. Like all features of life, intimate bonds of friendship and love take time and patient nurturing. Ideally they arise and develop at first in a stable and permanent family setting. However, the rapid pace of life, caused by a society which prizes unlimited production for unbridled consumption stimulated by incessant advertising, mitigates

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[7]MAMS, pp. 27-29, 95, 174, 179-180, 199, 255; MB, I, pp. 26, 34ff., 267; II, p. 50; PE, pp. 10-12; *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1963), pp. 123, 164 [hereafter cited as EBHD].

[8]*Ibid.*

against permanent relationships. Marcel mentions the frequent disruptions of people's lives which occur as they are forced to move from job to job, community to community, in search of employment. In an article devoted to the mystery of the family,[9] Marcel cites such continual uprooting as a major cause of the family's dissolution in our day, since, without a certain amount of permanence, one's roots in his/her heritage remain uncultivated. Without stability the traditions and values which are essential ingredients of the milieu and atmosphere which unite family members together remain undernourished. One might point to the great difficulty many families have in even assembling their members, with their divergent schedules, once a day around a common meal. How can deep relationships grow among people who rarely have, or take, the time or place to share themselves with each other?

The final consequence which I will mention of the modern tendency to prefer the technical over the vital and natural, according to Marcel, is that we consider only human skill and human products to be worthy of admiration.[10] The technocratic mentality sees nature in general and natural things in particular as simply forces and energy (studied in physics and chemistry) to be manipulated and used for whatever ends we desire. Thus, life, Marcel says, tends to be viewed as an imperfect technology which we must be sure to keep under control lest it disrupt our plans. The ancient idea that nature itself was a proper object for awe and wonder, or that it was a gift to be welcomed in gratitude, has almost vanished. Likewise, it is incomprehensible that one might consider him or her self to be at the service or disposal of life, as in parenthood. As mentioned above, this failure to acknowledge our radical dependency on nature, the source from which we come and which continually nourishes us, may cause us to forget that we are creatures and thus to divinize ourselves and our creations. Again, the result will be a "lived atheism!"

One of the most interesting facets of Marcel's critique of the primacy of technics is the concern he has about those who take

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[9]HV, Ch. 3, see especially pp. 78-81.

[10]HV, pp. 114-115; BH, p. 184; TWB, pp. 41-42, 106-108, 117-119; MAMS, pp. 59-60, 91, 187, 254.

advantage of the products of technology without contributing in any significant way to the discovery or perfection of the technics which produce them.[11] Needless to say the scientists, engineers, skilled artisans, etc., who do contribute in a creative way to technical progress have to possess a number of intellectual and moral virtues. They must know and understand the technics and how they work; they must develop patience, perseverance and prudence, including a great deal of self-discipline, in order to overcome successfully the obstacles in the way of invention or improvement. However, the consumer who simply uses the fruits of other's creativity hardly needs to possess any of these virtues. It almost seems that one of the goals of modern design is to render products so user friendly that only the most meager effort and intelligence is necessary to operate or use them. Likewise, in the modern factory the trend is to build as much skill as possible into the computer driven machine, with the result that the few workers who operate it are reduced to simply punching keys and watching lights.

Since neither as worker nor consumer does the individual need to develop the above mentioned intellectual and moral skills, it becomes more and more difficult to expend the effort to develop them, Marcel notes. The lack of personal development in virtue results in people becoming even more passive and dependent upon the products whose consumption promises the good life. Since they contribute so little to technical progress many may see their primary social role simply to be one of consumption. Instead of viewing their happiness and well being as primarily under their own control, and as the result of their initiative and thus as their personal responsibility, people view them as coming from without, specifically from the possession and use of the items furnished by the industry of others. It is as if a meaningful human life is attainable without a corresponding personal intellectual and moral development. The result of locating our center of gravity external to ourselves, Marcel says, is that we are "estranged" from our inner reality. We have a weakened sense of our inner self. We become the captive of our desires (to possess) and fears (of losing our possessions) and are unable to rise to a higher, or better a deeper, level, the level of being, the realm of enduring

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[11]MAMS, pp. 55-58, 72, 83, 99, 165; EBHD, pp. 159-161; BH, p. 180.

values.[12] We do not even recognize our deep rooted need for being, an ontological need which can be fulfilled only by acknowledging intrinsic values, especially the inherent values of ourselves and other persons, and by establishing deep interpersonal unions. One final point. Those who use the results of technical progress without contributing to such progress tend, Marcel claims, to develop a feeling of inferiority in regard to man's creation. Since they are painfully aware of their own meager knowledge and skill, they see the complex machine, for example the computer or robot, as possessing far more intelligence and ability than they. They may even wildly exaggerate the power of these machines, something the scientist or engineer who designs and produces them is less likely to do. All this is just another reason for the aforementioned idolatry of the technical by so many in our day.

These last points naturally lead us to ask what Marcel thinks we should do to lessen the negative impact of modern technics. Unfortunately, since he tends to focus on the negative and to offer almost no concrete suggestions, I can present only a broad sketch of what he thinks would counteract the evils of a society which overemphasizes technics. From the concerns set forth above, it seems clear that Marcel favors the following, all of which I just note in passing are basic tenets of the contemporary movement for appropriate technology.[13]

Obviously, first and foremost technics should be kept in their place and seen as means, never as ends. This requires that we as a society step back and take a critical look at them from more than an economic or technical perspective. We need to ask, Marcel says, of even the most sophisticated technical achievements, e.g., space probes or life-extending medical devices, whether they really promote

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[12]MAMS, pp. 91, 99; BH, pp. 76, 152; PE, p. 30. For a thorough study of the meanings of the term being in Marcel see my article, "Gabriel Marcel's Notions of Being," in *Philosophy Today*, XIX (Spring, 1975).

[13]E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* is usually credited with initiating this movement. The best summary of the movement is K. Willoughby's *Technology Choice: A Critique of the Appropriate Technology Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

human well being and serve truly universal values. Of course, this demands that we insure that humans are always accorded primacy over technics. And by humans, need I add, that Marcel means beings which are more than a bundle of insatiable material needs and reflexes. Humans are essentially spiritual creatures who need spiritual goods, such as intellectual and moral virtues, creativity, love, fidelity, and in general spiritual relationships with other human beings and ultimately with God, for their fulfillment.[14]

In order to be true to the human condition and to promote human flourishing, it is also essential, Marcel believes, that our society achieve more of a balance between the vital and the mechanical. While the organization with its structures and discipline and the machine with its regularity and predictability make important contributions to human well being, we need to redesign our lives and work to take more account of and be more in tune with, our natural biological cycles and rhythms. (Flextime in the workplace and work in the home seem to be steps in this direction.) We also need to become more conscious of our fundamental bond with, and our dependency on, the natural world with its balances, cycles, and seasons. We must understand that we are not simply, or even primacy, the lords and masters of life, but its product, and a product which remains utterly dependent on it. I feel certain that Marcel would welcome modern ecology's emphasis on the need for humans to live in harmony with, rather than in opposition to, nature. Indeed, how could we so abuse our natural environment if we recognized our integral connection to, and reliance on, it? Marcel speaks of the need to regain a respect and even piety toward natural things, a perspective which sees them as more than simply raw natural material to be used (or abused) according to our whims. Ultimately we should see all life as a gift to be accepted with gratitude from its Creative Source.[15]

Finally, Marcel clearly wants to change the situation where so many are able to take advantage of the fruits of techniques but

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[14]MAMS, pp. 61, 66-68, 74-75, 262, 266-271; MBI, Ch. 2; MBII, pp. 49-52; TWB, pp. 196-199.

[15]TWB, pp. 114, 117; MBII, pp. 189-190. Also see texts cited in note 7 above.

contribute little or nothing to their development. For one thing he favors the redesign of much of our work to make it more challenging and humanly engaging. Work should be an opportunity to take initiative and responsibility, to acquire skills and exercise creativity, and thus be something in which one can take a justifiable pride.[16] Technology ought ideally be a means of enhancing meaningful work, not substituting for it. More generally, I believe Marcel favors what has been called a human scale technology, one that is basically understandable and hence controllable and repairable by more than an elite few. Yet this will require the decentralization, debureaucratization, and even the democratization of our society's gigantic technical organizations and systems. Marcel is very skeptical that humanized work and humanized technics are possible in our present large and complex social-economic system dominated by a few megacorporations. Small groups provide the best environment for people to establish and develop intimate personal relationships with each other; only small organizations allow their members to exercise effective control over their operations.[17]

Marcel is well aware that his suggestions seem quite unrealistic in our present high tech culture. There are so many powerful forces arrayed against a movement toward more humanized, decentralized technical systems that he is not optimistic that the necessary systemic changes will or can be made. In the final analysis it may be that only God's special assistance or grace can rescue us from the broken world we have created by our divinization of our technics and ourselves.[18]

Marquette University **THOMAS ANDERSON**

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[16]HV, pp. 145-146; MBII, pp. 42-50, 189.

[17]MAMS, pp. 189, 204-206, 268-269; EBHD, p. 162. Though I do not have the space to document it here, the fact is that in the United States less than 1% of our business corporations (roughly 200 out of 3 million) dominate our economy, our technological research, and our market.

[18]EBHD, pp. 166ff.; MBII, 132-137, 206-210.