

# THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD

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Let me begin with an explanation for those who may think the situation I describe and my examples are too characteristically French. Someone might argue that the situation is different elsewhere, particularly in the United States. But it is, I must insist, just the same. The French have a fault. They are unbelievably logical (and not at all pragmatic), and once committed to a course of action, even after it has been shown to be a bad one, they carry on with rigorous consistency until all conclusions have been drawn from the premises. This means that, in many instances, the French provide an illuminating example. In concrete form, they show the end result of this or that assumption. Unfortunately, I would say that with many modern sociological phenomena, the French have indeed drawn the conclusions first, while others have lived out the same history, only more slowly. I refer especially to the growth and rationalization of the centralized state and the exorbitant features of public administration.

A second preliminary remark is that the theme "Technology and Philosophy" is so vast that it should not be dealt with as such. In my opinion, it is not a question of talking about Technology or Technique in general as a permanent part of *Homo faber*, from the paleolithic age on. This is the view that technology

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is an extension of man or characteristic of the human essence; that there is no essential difference between pre-historic, Greek, Chinese, or present-day techniques; that technique is always the same phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It is this global phenomenon that is then joined with philosophy, which is also taken as a whole, as if it were an activity no less inherent in man than technique. Philosophy in this sense is used to include Confucius as well as Heraclitus, Descartes along with Nietzsche. With such an approach Greece readily becomes pivotal, and it is triumphantly asserted that "technics," "technique," and "technology" all come from *techné*, meaning "art."

As far as I am concerned, this kind of study is useless and, strictly speaking, without meaning. Modern technology is not the same as what we mean by the term when applying it to past ages; there is not some one phenomenon. Similarly, Philosophy with a capital P does not exist. There are as many philosophies as there are eras, places, cultures—and, finally, as many philosophies as there are philosophers! Therefore, in order to be useful, we must limit our terms. Which technique? Which philosophy? So as not to repeat what has already been said so often, I am led to choose a theme which might sound surprising: the philosophy of the absurd and the leading edge of modern technology.

## I. THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD

It is in France more than anywhere else in the years following World War II that there developed what is called "the philosophy of the absurd," particularly in association with the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Its main theme is that life and all activity or human thought are absurd, have no meaning. Nothing has any meaning. To live is simply a fact. History has no meaning, is not leading anywhere and follows no rule nor has any permanence. Relationships with others do not have any more meaning. In any case, relationships with others are completely impossible. Whatever one person says is not and cannot be understood by others and, in return, a person cannot understand the reactions of others. There is permanent misunderstanding. What is the apparent folly of one person in the eyes of others may be perfectly reasonable to the person himself. It is impossible to communicate. The presence of others is what is most difficult to bear. "Hell is other people." "Man is backed into a corner" and cannot escape this absurd situation, because any attempt is absurd in itself. There is clearly no stability, no point of reference from which to pass judgment on events or actions. There is no Being to which it would be possible to relate. Obviously, there is no Good or Evil, and no morality is possible except for a "morality of ambiguity." Only what exists has reality, but a reality as shifting and uncertain as water or sand. Everything is formless.

This state of affairs can be read as freedom. After all, anything is as good as anything else. To do this or that makes no difference. Certainly, one is free to

do one thing or the other since both are unimportant. Choices do not have to be thought out. They simply are. The result will be disjointed and contradictory behavior. In male-female relationships, for example, there is total uncertainty; it is necessary only to be "honest" with oneself. The only possible nonabsurdity is just that—honesty with oneself, to be oneself entirely within the moment. It follows: I love a woman or a man and I devote myself to this love, but I should be on guard against this love becoming transformed into a habit, a good, a fidelity. I should be attentive to the moment when I stop loving (with force, passion, exclusiveness, etc.), and at that moment I should honestly say that it is over and break off. What about the other person in all of this? We have already said that one cannot have any true relationship with this other person.

In politics, it is exactly the same. I exist within this social body and, therefore, whether I like it or not, I am involved in politics. I cannot not be. Honesty with oneself demands recognition of this. At the same time, there is no just politics (for justice has no meaning), and there is no doctrine to which I can adhere. From this point on, political involvement, which must be willed, is an involvement of the moment, so that whatever flashes into one's mind should be done or defended for the time being. As a result, people will change political positions according to circumstances, impressions, and emotions. Sartre readily altered his own declarations, which were nevertheless always put forth like absolutes. Sometimes only two weeks apart he could say quite contradictory things (for instance, during the Hungarian and Czech crises<sup>2</sup>). Sincerity and an involvement in the moment in all areas of life lead to a succession of sincere if variegated reactions. Science likewise is rejected as a source of order and certainty, as in Sartre's famous attack in a round-table discussion with eminent physicists. "As a philosopher, I know more about matter than all the physicists. . . ."

In this wasteland, where no guidelines are possible, there is only one reality—the human being. It is therefore necessary to help him, as does the doctor in Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Of course, this is absurd too, but it is the only activity that one can choose. So there are Sartre's successive involvements on behalf of the poor and the unfortunate, but only on condition that such a response is not made out of pity, charity, or virtue. Such moral involvements have no value, nor do they confer any ultimate meaning or justification. Indeed, otherwise the only true action would be suicide, except that suicide itself is an absurd act which is not imperative. All and Nothing are identical. Hamlet's question is not a question. One can only remain backed into a corner. Obviously, such a philosophy of the absurd leads to the rejection of all previous philosophy as itself absurd.

This philosophy of the absurd does give rise, however, to a sizable body of literature—especially plays—which are generally interesting and exciting. There is, for instance, the theatre of Camus (with *Caligula* at the center), of Sartre (*Dirty Hands*, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, etc.), and then of Eugene Ionesco. From this beginning a double development takes place. First, in the literary

expression of this philosophy, we move from the theatre of the absurd to absurd theatre. In the plays of Sartre or Camus there is as in classical theatre a plot and relationships among the characters, in order to lead the spectator to conclude that life is absurd and nothing has any meaning. But that is not enough. There follows the development of a kind of theatre which is simply absurd in itself; the absurdity is not discussed but demonstrated. There are characters who exchange words without any meaning, speeches that are perfectly incoherent, without beginning or end. Samuel Beckett's plays mark a crucial transition. With Beckett, there are characters on stage who speak and who act, but whose words are constantly covered up by a thundering music. Recently in Paris there was a two-hour performance in which two characters exchanged remarks composed of sounds with no discernible meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The second development in the literature of the absurd is nihilism. Nothing is worth anything and everything must be reduced to nothing. There is both an aesthetic nihilism which leads to the idea that the artist should produce a "non-work of art," that is, nothing; and a theoretical nihilism which can be explained as such (E. M. Cioran). Such nihilism can influence the lives even of people who are neither philosophers nor artists, and can lead some to suicide (an issue of real and present importance given the suicide rate among young people), others to terrorism (joining the Russian nihilists from the end of the nineteenth century, whom Camus portrayed with such sympathy and comprehension in *The Just*). I am not saying that all the terrorists now spread throughout our world know even a little of this philosophy of the absurd; only that this philosophy, which has penetrated much deeper than we think, has brought about a psychological climate in the midst of society that enables terrorism to develop. Besides, we must not forget that some of these terrorists (e.g., the Baader-Meinhof gang) have been intellectuals.

The philosophy of the absurd itself developed within a political climate which helps in part to explain it—the Nazi occupation and Gestapo terror, the impotence felt by resistors and, at the end of the war, the discovery of the appalling atrocities of the concentration camps. Under such conditions, with this "excess of evil," and even more given the painful infighting after the Liberation, it is understandable that some philosophers should decide life is absurd and there is no exit. There is no just cause; there is no longer good or evil; man is atrocious; Caligula represents man—and André Malraux falls back on the history of art (ancient!) in order to try to discover a meaning in human history.

A final remark. It is possible that the philosophy of the absurd has even influenced scientific theory to some extent. This may seem incredible, but consider some hypotheses of the last twenty years in physics and biology. Coming out of cybernetics, the principle of feedback and other key concepts in communication theory, it is surprising to observe the development of notions such as "the whirlwind," "turbulence," "chaos," and research concerning such things as the strange form of the candle flame and its smoke—which can also

be associated with "catastrophe theory" and its applications in biology and the social sciences. Ten years ago in communication theory, "noise" was understood as a negative factor, "that which prevents information from being transmitted and received properly." Now this has changed. Noise has become an independent, if not decisive, factor in communication. The noise is itself a kind of information. Similarly, in physics, there used to be a clear conception of the opposition between order and chaos (see the laws of thermodynamics). Chaos was only randomness or disorder and, like noise, had negative connotations. Here, too, things have changed. Chaos has become a positive phenomenon in physical theory. "Order can come only from chaos (as, finally, information comes from noise)." The physicist in his research, writes Henri Atlan, must situate himself "between crystal and smoke."<sup>4</sup> Smoke is not insignificant but a physical phenomenon which also follows laws more hidden than those present in the crystal. The study of chaos and catastrophe finally involves an exacting mathematical analysis which I do not have the competence to evaluate, but it is nevertheless interesting to observe its seductive appeal.

Leaving aside mathematical abstractions, however, all this does become a subtle justification for disorder with which one can, in contemporary circumstances, readily sympathize. I do not think that it is by scientific research alone that the physicists wind up with such theories. As with all scientific hypotheses, these also belong to a society and a culture which inevitably influences their formulation. We live in a society which is highly ordered, coercive (even if morally lax), demanding, etc., and it is necessary to try to break out of its constraints. It is indispensable to revalue chaos and to deal with excessive order, to counter-balance order with disorder. That I well understand. Still, this may mean that the absurd is introduced as a positive form of disorder.

## II. THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE ABSURD

Over against the philosophy of the absurd stands the monument of the sciences, which are in themselves in no way absurd. Technical expansion especially once seemed to be a model of rationality, rigor, efficiency, and exactitude. There is nothing absurd or ambiguous here. Equally, in the systematic combinations of technique, everything appears reasonable and rational. Doubtless, it can be said that man is sometimes ill-adapted to this environment which is too organized, too systematic, and that he often exhibits incoherent reactions (for example, violence). This was well demonstrated by the 1968 student/worker challenges to the whole techno-economic environment. Still, it is human beings who are absurd in such reactions, while the technical system as such remains coherent. What is happening with recent technical developments, however, is that, especially under the influence of data processing, etc., technology has become a more positive sponsor of absurdity. Advances in technology have called forth

absurd human behavior and placed us in what are economically absurd situations. At its leading edges, contemporary technology links up with the philosophy of the absurd in completely unforeseen ways.

Surely, though, it is always possible to reply that this is a result of the human factor. Certainly man is not absent from such situations. But, I repeat, he is *led* toward absurdity by the dynamics of technology. As a small example, which need not be taken too seriously, we have all seen modern films which reconstruct the real sounds, just as they are, during some scene, so that we hear all the background noises of street, airplanes, radio music, etc., at their real volume. What is remarkable is that on the screen we see characters who talk to each other, but we can only make out a few of their words because the rest are drowned out by the noise. We catch some word, a scrap of a sentence (as would be produced in reality), but we can no longer describe noise as the background. It has become the foreground. Nevertheless, this speech, consumed by noise, about which we know only that it has been spoken, provokes our imagination—and we imagine, but cannot know, what the characters might be saying to one another. Such advanced cinematographic techniques create a kind of mass absurd theatre.

In the interests of avoiding a purely abstract and theoretical study, let me turn now to provide some more serious examples to substantiate my thesis that modern technology leads to the absurd. The first set will concern the absurdity of our relentless compulsion for technical growth. Things which nobody needs, which correspond to no use, are produced because the technical possibility is there, and this technical possibility must be exploited. We must move, inexorably and absurdly, in one direction. In like manner, products that fill no need are used in the same absurd and ridiculous way. Here are four cases.

There has been an enormous amount of propaganda in France supporting the growth of the telephone network. The number of telephone users has doubled in the last ten years. There are presently twenty million receivers installed. Unfortunately for the administration, this has proved to be a disastrous situation. The French do not use the telephone! Statistics in 1982 tell us that each telephone is used 1.3 times per day, an insignificant amount. Is this going to stop the expansion of the telephone network? Not at all. Such statistics are set aside and the technicians conclude that it is necessary to install twenty-five million telephones by 1985. This means practically one receiver per family, which would lead to a decrease in average use. To counterbalance this, someone has had the bright idea of creating situations where the French will *have* to use telephones. This has been an important factor behind the enormous international propaganda campaign by Teletel, the French telephone company, which assumes the interaction of telephones, televisions, computers (and to promote the system, people are supposed to get free computers). Thanks to this system, a telephone call can get you the number of a pen-pal, train and airplane schedules, merchandise catalogues, TV and movie programs, etc.—all of which *forces* the use of the

system. It is quite seriously proposed to cease printing telephone directories, train schedules, etc., so that users will have to phone to get such information. At this point, average telephone use is going to rise and the inevitable technical progress will have been justified. Here we have behavior absurdly dictated by the imperatives of sophisticated technologies that no one needs.

A cavil. Throughout this discussion, I will be referring to things "that no one needs." I am not unaware of the innumerable studies by psychologists and sociologists on human "needs"—natural, artificial, innate, cultural, etc. I am not going to get involved in such abstruse analyses, because I fully admit that a need which was not originally given (e.g., to drink iced drinks), can become through force of habit just as genuine, as natural, as those grounded in our physiology. In referring to what is not a need, I limit myself simply to certain elementary facts. For example, when I learn that in the USSR there are public stores full of some industrial product which no one buys, I conclude that there is no need for them and there is little chance such a need will arise. Similarly with French telephones. The point is that from the moment a technically advanced product is made available, it is important to have consumers use it—even if they are not interested. Technical progress requires it. It may be replied that this depends at least on the decision of those in charge who could, after all, choose otherwise. But precisely this is not so, *if* we want to remain among the ranks of advanced countries. Indeed, if we wish to remain on the right track, we are even obliged to come up with still further inventions—that is, even more absurd and useless things—in order to outclass the competitors.

My second case concerns the generation of electrical power. Right after the war France launched a vast construction program for hydroelectric power stations. The smallest stream in the Pyrenees or the Alps had its station. The Société Nationale de l'Electricité de France (E.D.F.) became one of the strongest economic and political forces in the country. But by 1955 there was too much electricity. The stations were not operating at their normal capacity, and so were not efficient. A huge publicity campaign was undertaken to cause the French to consume more electricity. "Grand Ensembles" housing projects were created utilizing electric power heating systems. A regressive pricing scale was introduced so that the more electricity you used, the lower the rate. All of a sudden, after 1970, the E.D.F. abruptly became aware that growth projections based on increases from the previous ten years led to electrical consumption increases of geometric proportions, so that it was absolutely necessary to build more power stations.

The nuclear electrical power program was launched, leading to violent conflicts between engineers and ecologists in the widest sense of the terms. In the latter camp were not only idealists, but also doctors, biologists, economists, etc. One study done by Le Centre d'Etudes Economiques at the University of Grenoble in 1971 concluded that, in the long run, the price per KWH of electricity generated by nuclear power would be three times higher than what had been indicated in

the (propaganda) studies of the E.D.F. (which was predicting a rate decrease), and that the program envisaged would again far outstrip need by 1985. Of course, the report was ignored. What is noteworthy is that now the Commission on Energy for the preparation of the IXth economic plan has just concluded (May 1983) that we should stop the nuclear program, that the production of electrical energy is already beyond our needs, and that the net cost will be along the lines indicated at Grenoble in 1971. The first reaction among certain groups has been to conclude that it is not necessary to stop the construction of nuclear power plants, but to launch a new publicity campaign to convince the French to consume still more electricity—for no reason except simply to use up what is going to be produced.

The absurdity here lies not only in the arbitrary campaign to sway people, but also in the situation itself, which is characterized by a failure to distinguish the necessary and meaningful from the unnecessary and meaningless. Furthermore, I am not implying that those who have supported the enormous nuclear program are dishonest, any more than that the present report for the IXth plan has been written by ecological partisans. Both are equally good, honest technicians, but incapable of projecting our true needs for the immediate future. *The absurdity lies in prediction itself.* The second level of absurdity rests with the fact that such forecasts, which necessarily lack an ability to make the crucial distinctions, are at the same time indispensable and inevitable in a technological society. Practically nothing can be done without such projections. This dependency on what is inherently absurd is of course even more absurd.

Third case. We are in the throes of producing and organizing an extremely sophisticated (and expensive) system to forecast crop production (wheat, corn, etc.) with only a 5% margin of error three months in advance. Such a system should be useful for establishing prices, markets, etc. Satellites provide photographs of agricultural districts for evaluation. The electronic apparatus allows for measurement of field temperatures (by comparing exposed and shaded areas) and calculations of moisture. Close-up photos yield estimates for the average size of (say) the ears of corn. Together, such factors can be used to develop, it seems, an exact forecast. Of course, this assumes considerable investment in equipment, properly qualified personnel (to interpret the data transmitted from the satellite), etc. Yet anyone who has lived even a short while in the countryside knows that it only takes one tornado, a sudden hailstorm, or a violent wind accompanied by rain to ruin everything at one fell swoop. And all this remains relatively unpredictable right up until the harvest. Forecasts made three months in advance often have little real meaning. Still, the campaign for such a system develops apace and becomes all caught up in technical feasibility studies, organizational management, and engineering problem solving. Questions of ultimate necessity and real value fail to be asked or are answered with *ad hoc* justifications.

A final instance involves radio and television. First, there are the three large



networks already in existence in France. These are extraordinary systems (which will become even more so when there is television by satellite), and we simply have to use them. We have to broadcast. It is an imperative to broadcast (18 out of 24 hours each day) information, spectacles, music, talk shows, interviews, movies, news, advice on health, cooking, etc. We *must* broadcast every day, and every day something new. It does not really matter what, as long as the screen is not empty. Since it is perfectly impossible to find something true, beautiful, or intelligent each and every day, something worth the effort of being heard and experienced, then perforce the media are filled with inanities. There is a constant demand for people who are more or less well known and can attract attention. It is best, however, if they do not have anything too deep or original to say, since this is always difficult to communicate. When an intellectual does appear on some program he is almost always made to talk on an insulting level. Things go better with any popular novelist. Similarly, thanks to the microphone, it is possible to have people sing who have no real voice. People who would not have been listened to fifty years ago are now the vocalists in greatest demand. The combination of a device which allows a person without excellence to be heard along with another device which, every hour, requires an endlessly new spectacle, produces the low level of almost all television broadcasting. It is important also to remember Kierkegaard's analysis of the mob or crowd which calls forth mediocrity, baseness, and lies. Since the media are directed toward a mass market, their quality will be inversely proportional to the size of the audience which, because of technical requirements, must always be expanding. Such is the absurd situation operating in the mass media.

But the same thing has happened with what in France are called the "free radio stations." When free radio stations were authorized in 1981, it was celebrated as a great victory for liberty. Now anyone was going to be able to express himself without censorship; individuals could spread ideas and information independent of state-controlled networks. Very quickly, however, financial obstacles were encountered. Only political parties, trade unions, large newspapers, etc., could actually afford broadcasting stations, and, with only a few exceptions, they exercised as much program control as the state. But the biggest difficulty was the one already mentioned. Even for the free radio stations, the questions very quickly arose, "What can we broadcast?" It was discovered that even when you thought you had "something to say to the nation," such things are very quickly exhausted. It was discovered that locally there are just not that many people who really have something to say. Most free radio stations have been reduced to repeating information already transmitted from national networks and, above all, to broadcasting music morning to night. Once more there appears one of the basic facts of technical absurdity: the device, the technology exists, but there is no use or need for it. So a meaningless use or need is created, and this in itself in a quite meaningless and absurd manner.

### III. THE ECONOMIES OF THE ABSURD

There is no need to review in detail the extent to which economic action in our world is now organized as a function of technology. The global situation is as follows. No one has succeeded in escaping the economic model developed originally in relation to the industrial system, that is, from the moment when technique was being utilized first and foremost for the promotion of material production. The scheme is always: investment-production for mass-consumption for mass-welfare (or profit, according to your preference) which can then be re-invested. You can enter the cycle at different points. If you start by taking a major part of the profit for direct investment (thereby reducing the portion directly distributed as salaries or welfare), then you have a liberal and finally Keynesian economy. If you start by directly increasing welfare or consumption, then you have a "socialist" economy. Yet in either economy efficiency, as determined by techniques of management and manufacture, will play a central role, and in so doing will introduce a certain level of uniform absurdity.

Consider some simple cases. Automation and data processing have created possibilities for unimaginably efficient productivity, so much so that it is less and less feasible to suppose that large numbers of unemployed (people deprived of employment by the introduction of new technologies) can be absorbed into new industries. Nevertheless, our economic policy remains the same: businesses should remain as efficient as possible, and we continue to hope that the unemployment problem will be solved by "economic recovery" and the creation of new businesses—businesses which should use a minimum number of people if they want to remain competitive. Surely such a situation is at least mildly absurd.

But there is another whole factor looming on the horizon—the development and manufacture of wholly new products (microwave ovens, magnetoscopes, personal computers, word processors, projection televisions, filmless photography, cars with automatic cruise control, etc.). If we consider the nature of these astonishing inventions, it is immediately apparent that, as a whole, they are simply toys or gadgets which correspond to no real need or strong desire. If we compare the *real* uses of the computer in military technologies (for which they were originally developed), in accounting, and in scientific research, with the hundreds of applications offered to the consuming public, we must conclude that superfluous gadgetry predominates. It could not be otherwise; there would not be a large enough market were production limited only to those devices which met real needs. There is thus a proliferation of objects for amusement, titillation, cheap thrills. The introduction of one of these marvellous, sophisticated, magical products into the market creates a certain temporary advantage for any company; but the market is quickly saturated, interest is exhausted, and it is necessary to come up with something else. It is a treadmill of absurdity.

The meaninglessness of this situation becomes, if possible, even worse when

one compares economies of the "developed" countries (which function as just described) with those of the Third World, in which the most basic, real needs are not even being met. In the one corner are economies which can function only by increasing the number of unemployed and creating useless gadgets; in the other, economies which cannot respond to hunger and to the minimal requirements for life. Yet our "experts" can think of no way to solve the problems of Third World countries except to lead them along the same path as ours, to help them reach the economic "take-off point" (Rostow). This is because they believe so strongly in the primacy of technical innovation and the idea that technology alone is responsible for economic progress. Have we not seen celebrated economists explaining that the present crisis, responding to a Kondratieff cycle, will be resolved exactly as previous ones have been, by some major technical innovation that will transform the whole economy? In the 1930s it was the automobile, and in the 1980s it will be the computer, which will be our economic salvation. Actually, it is the obsession with technical innovation which both leads our own system into a series of insane logical developments and distorts Third World economies—economies which are extremely diversified, very fragile, and require carefully adapted interventions, sometimes on a technical level and sometimes on a human scale. The idea that, thanks to the computer, the Third World will be able to "take off" is utterly ridiculous.

The economic primacy of technology has further consequences. Along with endless gadgets there is waste pure and simple. This is not just a question of the enormous and apparently gratuitous daily waste which is so readily denounced as scandalous (plates with far too much food being served in restaurants, so that perfectly good food goes into the garbage can, the destruction of surplus crops because they cannot bring high enough prices). There is also the waste built right into the technical economy (the increasingly rapid replacement of machines, cars, motorcycles, refrigerators, TVs, etc., which are in perfect condition but which *have* to be replaced because they are not the latest model). The great law that "you can't stop progress" applies equally on the individual and the national level, because the most perfect example of this kind of waste is the armaments industry. More powerful and sophisticated weapons are always being produced, knowing in advance that a few years later they will have to be replaced. Here we have the techno-economic absurdity in its purest form, since it entails the production of doubly negative goods. Either we use these armaments and the result is destructive or we do not use them and they are themselves destroyed (or sold to some "developing" country). I know the economic argument. In the process industry will have been revived and unemployment eased—in which case the Pharaohs who constructed pyramids were great economists.

A second kind of waste dictated by technology concerns not only natural resources such as oil, coal, minerals, etc., but also the basic elements air, water, space, and time. The elements and realities most essential for human life—which, in fact, have no economic value—are being subjected to unbridled des-

poliation. People absorbed in technique never have any time, and they lose all sense of place. The absurd irony is that such obvious and well known facts have become clichés stimulating a global tourist culture.

A third kind of waste, apparently less tragic, but still not negligible, concerns those spectacular technical sports events which every Westerner now considers his due. Formula I racing cars, for instance, each cost millions of dollars and are used only once—not to mention the waste of gas and oil in a time of scarcity. Then there are the world class sailing races with their considerable costs. (\$10 billion has been mentioned as a figure for "la route du Rhum.") Note, too, the absurd justification of technical experimentation in the case of automobile racing. These 200 km/hr. races are supposed to test out tires and engines for cars that are then limited to 80 km/hr. on public highways.

This points toward yet another aspect of the absurd economy: the size of the figures being manipulated. When we are told that the deficit in the 1983 American budget is on the order of 200 billion dollars (6.6% of the GNP), one wonders if it makes any sense to try to develop an economic mastery of such numbers. Then there is the astounding phenomenon of the indebtedness of almost every country within the world economic system, with extraordinary amounts in the case of Third World countries. Latin America, for example, has a 300 billion dollar debt and, for the group of countries "on the path to development," in five years the external debt has increased by 620 billion dollars, with current interest charges of more than \$700 million annually. Third World countries must apply 67% of their export earnings to service prior debts. None of these countries is ever going to complete such payments. Either the creditors are going to wipe out the debt, or 50% of the countries in the Third World are going to go bankrupt. And these exorbitant costs arise *exclusively* from the demands for technical growth—with arms purchases making a substantial contribution.

It is clear that economic rationality, economic logic, has gone out the window. One might even say that there is too much money in circulation in the world for logic to be good for anything. The only thing economists propose is to move faster and faster to adopt more and more quickly all the technologies (no matter what their meaning or usefulness) as soon as they appear. In liberal economies this is true across the board; in some socialist or authoritarian economies it is true only in restricted areas. There is the planned, controlled, dominated economic sector which is resolutely retrograde, outmoded, obsolete, inefficient, and then there is the sector where free rein is given to every technical development—i.e., tanks, airplanes, rockets, nuclear weapons. In this sector, there once again appears the same disorder, the same lack of coherence and economic rationality. It is quite remarkable how excessive technique leads everywhere toward absurdity, toward an unprecedented situation which we do not have the faintest idea how to escape. There is no exit. We are up against the wall. The facts outstrip the possibilities for human comprehension.

#### IV. ABSURD HUMANITY?

The foregoing observations raise a fundamental question. Will technics allow the realization of the ancestral human project—as proposed, for example, by Teilhard de Chardin? Is man, thanks to technology, becoming more human by becoming more absurd? Or is what is happening something more like a break or mutation in the human species?

With regard to modern art, I have already suggested that technology has produced a radical break, that modern artistic techniques (in music, painting, sculpture, and architecture) lead to artifacts which, although nominally classified as art, have nothing in common with what constituted art during, say, the past five thousand years. In the past, art was characterized by meaning (whether given or discovered)—by beauty, harmony, communication, happiness, or transcendence. Modern art is exactly the opposite. I am not about to argue that technicized art is not art; yet what it achieves, far from being a realization of the human project as this has been understood since antiquity, completely contradicts and abolishes it. In light of this, can one still ask whether technological man is going to become "more human"?

Let me cite another example that seems significant. Just at the time when genetic engineering was being initiated in the 1960s, a major French periodical asked a score of Nobel Prize winners in biology, chemistry, genetics, etc., about the future use and human goal for such technical powers. The answers of these great scientists to the second question were quite empty. Apart from banalities like "to make man better" or "more intelligent," they were incapable of saying what human goal they desired. In actual fact, people do not know what they mean when they say that man is going to become more human. Nobody really knows what to do with these wonderful and prodigiously effective technologies. This does not at all mean that Frankenstein monsters are going to be created, but rather that *anything at all* may be made.

There is, however, a more immediate question. What is the current effect of technology on children and adults, and what kind of person is being created by the millions, right now, without the least genetic intervention? I would describe this person, as I have encountered him in others and in myself, as a captivated, deluded, and distracted individual. In our society, having once been obsessed with work, we have now become fascinated by the multiplication of images, the intensity of noise, and the spread of information. In each area, technology impinges on anybody and everybody, even those who are not enamored of its achievement, in television and mass entertainment. There is no exit.

Consider the general increase in noise in all forms of contemporary popular music. The development of rock and hard rock illustrates the dissipation of awareness in noise. This music expresses extreme violence, submerges the lis-

tener, and prevents reflection or concentration—especially since the words are often empty and meaningless. In this respect we can adopt Alfred Jarry's phrase to refer to rock music as the "de-braining machine." A person can only disappear into the vastness of cataclysmic sounds (which we know are even physically dangerous). And such music is possible only thanks to a combination of technologies. Even when we are dealing with music that does not require high decibel levels (computer music), it seems impossible to keep from increasing the volume.

Very likely it will be replied that, "This not the fault of technique, but of the person or user who turns up the volume." This is the very point that disturbs me. The listener is in the position of an addict; he seems unable to desire anything else. Another development in this direction is the Sony "Walkman." It is absurd that young people simply cannot get through the day without this music. They are so intoxicated by a noise that drowns out everything else that they need it even in the train or car. Its magnetism undermines their awareness of the external world, obstructs impressions of reality and becomes their obsession. This "music" becomes another addition to the background noise of the urban environment. There is widespread agreement acknowledging the damage inflicted by this permanent noise (of cars, construction machines, etc.). Sometimes there is even a resolution to struggle against it. Then popular rock music imposes yet another formidable noise, all the more injurious in that it is chosen.

A similar effect is produced by the invasion of images, not only from TV and movies, but also from advertising. Advertising is no longer the neutral, passive publicity of wall posters. Thanks to technics it has become the active seduction of animated billboards in images which both engross the attention and scatter it into an artificial universe devoid of reflection, choice, deliberation. Likewise with data processing in general and computers in particular. We do not have to be reassured about cars and cameras, since they are dependent tools and not imitations, whereas with the computer we cannot help but be uneasy. Here advertising tries to persuade us that the computer is part of the family, our best friend, advisor, "pal" (a pal for games, studying, family bookkeeping, etc.), or that it puts the key to knowledge at our disposal. ("Eat of me and you will be convinced," advertises one company, recalling the promise of the serpent in Genesis.) Most striking of all is the publicity around the slogan "Data against doubt." If you have any doubts (doubt being viewed as a weakness), take refuge in the computer, which will dissipate your anxieties. Gone is the doubt of Descartes, and also the doubt within faith. It is, however, only the fascinated person, dispossessed of himself, who can be so convinced.

The computer becomes the wholly indispensable device precisely at the point where an excessive amount of information runs the risk of turning into disinformation for the normal person. Fortunately all this information is going to be fully recorded, assimilated, and always at our disposal, courtesy of the memory bank of some data processing system. Here again is the fascination of the dispossessed. The computer is not a tool in the service of a questioning human

being. It has its own function. Man is deprived of the need to choose what information to keep and what to combine—operations different from those performed by the computer. A qualitative difference enters precisely at that point where the individual sorts out and arranges the information in the presence of his essential subjectivity, a factor necessarily absent from the machine. It is subjectivity which makes information, brought together by a human being, a coherent part of a decision. A decision is never the simple solution to some problem (something a computer can figure out); it is always a "decision" that cuts through or re-orders some Gordian knot. The environment of noise, image, and information is so overwhelming, suggestive, and seductive that we cannot maintain ourselves in it by means of distancing, mediation, reflection. Only by giving ourselves up to a hypnotic immediacy devoid of guidelines can we exist within its ambience. We are like Meursault (Camus's "stranger"), transplanted from the Mediterranean beach into a shopping center mall, surfeited no longer by sea and sun but by the sounds and images of a universal artifice.

But I have also referred to the individual in the technical environment as distracted. Here the example of games becomes revealing. The game is a fundamental element in human life—although, once again, games diffused with technique no longer have much in common with the games of traditional societies. Games have always been characterized by two aspects—the metaphysical and the social. By means of games, always more or less explicitly, man is put into relationship with superhuman forces ("chance" or "fate"). Card games, board games, dice, knuckle-bones, etc., always imply another dimension. In the most banal game, between friends or at a gaming-table (e.g., roulette or baccarat), there is the emotion of who wins and who loses, a drama which is always assumed to have more meaning than that displayed by the simple facts. One is favored by luck, even cared for by God. At the same time games create social bonds on different levels, whether by the collective game in which some group establishes its identity in non-economic and non-political ways, or by intimate dialogue between two or four players.

Whatever else they are, games produced by technique no longer have quite these same characteristics. They bring about solitude, passivity, and yet provoke fascination and distraction. The slot machines of the gambling casinos are a perfect case in point. Another is video and computer games, which are most often played by individuals. One computer company offers fifteen hundred video games "which let loose the passions." Yet the player is alone with the video screen, a factor which radically alters the meaning of such a statement. It is a mistake to call these games either cultural or "educational"; they are more like a training ground in the use of computers and a pleasant way to adapt people to the information society. Above all, though, they are fascinating. We already know that the average person in France spends two hours a day in front of the TV screen, and we can count on that figure doubling once they get video games. In a curious way, we see the player obsessed, impassioned, and hypnotized by

the game, which becomes a kind of addicting drug. Such passion, which once belonged to a tiny minority who frequented the gaming halls, suddenly spreads throughout the population.

In the presence of such fascination and intoxication, what free time remains to try to understand such a world, to exercise the responsibilities of a citizen, to enter into social and personal relationships (assuming that *true* relationships can be imagined)? When human relationships are reduced to several individuals being fascinated by the video reproduction of some organized spectacle, then there remains little in the way of true relationship. For a long time we have witnessed the destruction of family life brought about by the incursion of TV into the ritual of the evening meal, where the table is re-arranged so all can watch the news or some other program rather than interact with each other and consider the events of the day in their own lives. Technical games have the same effect of creating illusory relationships and false intelligence. Even video tape machines, with which the individual is supposed to exercise some control over what he watches, are really a kind of false independence, for they too contribute to enclosing the individual a bit more within the universe of images.

I am convinced that this whole system of technological games presents a serious danger for the future. It leads us into unreality, not just for a limited time, as with the traditional festival or dance, but with a kind of addictive permanence. Our games become an unreal phantasm which there is no longer any reason to escape, from which we no longer even seek an exit. They create "distractions" in that special sense analyzed by Blaise Pascal. They not only turn people radically away from all preoccupation with meaning, truth, value (and therefore plunge them into the absurd), but they also drag them away from reality, forcing them to live in a wholly illusory world. In such circumstances, man becomes absurd (in the etymological sense) as much with regards to what might be as to what is real.

## V. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A KIERKEGAARDIAN CRITIQUE OF THE ABSURD

On the basis of these few examples at the leading edges of technological development and its social implications one cannot conclude that man or society is essentially absurd. That would be going too far, making a metaphysical statement. But it can be surmised that we are in the process of making human life appear absurd—in a precise philosophical sense. This is a new experience in human history; and we are called upon to try to figure out what it means, not just leave it as it is.

One point to be made is that a philosophy or culture of technology is not possible, despite the claim of certain modern humanists. Philosophy of technology is impossible because technique has nothing to do with wisdom but, on



the contrary, is an expression of *hubris*. Its lack of moderation goes beyond Dionysiac and Nietzschean excess, both of which remain at a human level, and takes place whether particular individuals want it or not. It has reached such an extent that we are incapable of comprehending (not directing, but merely recording) its prodigious excesses. We have had to invent a machine just to record what other machines produce. Only the computer can process the information from a satellite or planetary probe. Only the complex devices of the micro-physicists can record the phenomena that are postulated on the basis of their computations, so that Niels Bohr can truly say that, "Matter, what is real, is that which my apparatus allows to be recorded." Man is truly outside the interplay of his own machines. He is incapable of formulating a philosophy of technology which would provide limits and definitions. The dynamic of technology escapes his abilities. A philosophy constructed in terms of 1950s technique (as, for example, in the work of Pierre-Maxim Schuhl<sup>5</sup>) is meaningless for the 1980s.

It is the same problem with regard to culture. The rapidity of technical change and qualitative transformations in technique (there is a qualitative change in the "technical ensemble" with the passage from steam energy to electricity, and then another in the transition from the industrial to a data processing system) preclude the development of any true culture. The development of culture requires time and cannot be brought about from the outside or from above in some intellectual manner. Culture requires assimilation at the base by those groups involved in the conditions of their existence, the discovery of meaning, and an effort to construct a whole that derives its meaning from such experiences. All such steps are completely impossible within the technical whirlwind. It is not by virtue of millions of paperback books and musical records, nor by virtue of pictures and amateur photography, nor by virtue of disconnected information on random topics, nor by virtue of a global tourism in which people collect trinkets and snapshots—it is not by virtue of any of these things that culture comes into being. Such phenomena are even contrary to culture, since they involve more dispersal, incoherence, and non-reflection. What makes up the "technical culture" proposed by those who talk about it is always an apprenticeship to technique and the integration of people (children!) into the technological milieu. In France, people are presently searching for a technical culture, by which they mean the introduction of data processing into the schools and teaching children how to use the computer.

Far from exhibiting the potential for a philosophy or culture of technology, the tendencies and orientations of people (including intellectuals) launched on such enterprises are toward compensation and justification. To the extent that man is disoriented, ill at ease, and anguished by the constant disturbances in his technical environment, he looks for compensations which, by and large, will be by way of distraction. This need not be the extreme distraction of alcohol or drugs. It can be a distraction by something religious, the irrational, something which seems increasingly indispensable as the world becomes more and more

dangerous and incomprehensible. It is in this category that we must classify those proliferating beliefs of a religious character such as parapsychology and fundamentalist mysticism (as in Islam, where it is particularly noticeable). There is the constant hope for an opening into unknown worlds from which meaning, happiness, relief will come to us. The unprecedented and overwhelming success of *ET* witnesses to this. That such a stupid story could have stirred up masses of people and even been taken seriously by intellectuals manifests our disorientation and how far we are from any genuine philosophy. The parallel longing for justifications of the technical phenomenon or technical progress are rarely as direct. More often they appeal to politics or rely on an excessive intellectualization of the situation such as the theory of a post-industrial or information society. The supreme justification, though, is the appeal to the absurd (or nihilism). Nothing has any meaning, nothing has any value, so the development of technology is just as reasonable as anything else. This argument, in one form or another, is one that I have heard with increasing frequency in the last ten years.

In order to assess such a situation, let me turn to Soren Kierkegaard, a man who understands the absurd better than all our more contemporary absurd philosophers. As Kierkegaard points out, the self or person cannot become freely itself without entering an interplay between the possible and the necessary, freedom and necessity. There is no individual, no human person, no self, if there is no freedom, no possibility, before him. There is no meaning to life unless there is some latitude of freedom in which the self is constituted. Conversely, there is no meaning to this freedom if it does not rest on and run up against some necessity or a whole ensemble of necessities. It is the dialectic between these two realities that constitutes human existence. Man is caught in a network of determinations, but he is formed to dominate them, to use them, and to constitute his freedom in this use.

The self is already itself (necessity) but it must also become itself (possibility). "A self which has no possibility is in despair, and so in turn is the self which has no necessity."<sup>6</sup> If the possibility of giving oneself free rein overthrows and destroys necessity (when, for example, the transgression of physiological regularities or social norms and values becomes general), then the self runs away with itself without preserving any necessity to touch base with, and there is "despair under the aspect of possibility." The self becomes an abstract possibility which struggles and is exhausted within the possible and is left floundering without getting anywhere. Reciprocally, when man no longer thinks anything but necessity, when he considers that everything is determined, when everything becomes unfailing or necessary actuality, there is also "despair under the aspect of necessity."

Kierkegaard makes a simple comparison to illustrate this bond.

If one will compare the tendency to run wild in possibility with the efforts of the child to enunciate words, the lack of possibility is like being dumb. Necessity is like a sequence of consonants only, but in order to utter them, there must in addition be possibility (pp. 170-171).

There is freedom only starting from necessity and in terms of it, but also there is actuality (known, recognized by man) only in his struggle for freedom. This is true for a society just as much as the individual. Being itself is the necessary; before becoming itself, it is a possibility. It is here that the dialectical play has been fundamentally disturbed by the universalization of technique, and on two levels.

First of all, technology has become that which allows everything to be done. It is both the universal and the absolute possibility. It allows the cure of disease, the choice of sex in one's children, even whether those children will see the light of day; it allows human beings to walk on the moon (an act fraught with significance when one recalls "the man in the moon" of folklore, myth, and even popular belief); it allows speed, (false) immediacy, power, etc.—everything that people dream about or long to realize. And it does all this clearly, safely, without consequences. It now seems scandalous when a person meets with obstacles or has to accept unwanted consequences. When there is something that cannot yet be done, people find it abnormal—for example, when there is not yet a cure for cancer or AIDS, or any way to treat certain congenital defects or diseases of old age.

Immediately, however, we are forced to realize that in another sense if everything is possible, then nothing is possible. Nothing is possible for the self, because all objectivity has been transformed into the possible.

Possibility then appears to the self ever greater and greater, more and more things become possible, because nothing becomes actual. At last it is as if everything were possible—but this is precisely when the abyss has swallowed up the self. . . . At the instant something appears possible, and then a new possibility makes its appearance, at last this phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible—and this is precisely the last moment when the individual becomes for himself a mirage (p. 169).

When technology makes everything possible, then it becomes itself the absolute necessity. Necessity which was once the mother of invention, has created an inventive process which is the mother of a new necessity. "The loss of possibility signifies: either that everything has become necessary . . . or that everything has become trivial" (p. 173). In fact, with modern technology, both happen at once. For thirty years I have been describing modern technology as the fatality, the destiny, of modern man. No one escapes from technique. Every domain, every activity, every actuality is taken over by technology so that there is no longer any "preserve" beyond its reach. It becomes its own *causa sui*. This is expressed by the popular opinion that, "You can't stop progress." Now we have reached the stage where this popular maxim has become the final word in reflection. When there is a consideration of dangers, costs, etc., at the end of the discussion even the scientist or technician closes off the debate by saying, "Well, in any case, you can't stop progress." Here is that which is absolute, unassailable,

against which nothing can be done, something which simply must be obeyed: technical growth.

Put differently, there is no human possibility. There is no real freedom in the face of technology, for freedom ultimately consists in saying "yes" or "no." Who will say "no" to space exploration or genetic engineering? We might, because of budget constraints say "no" provisionally. Or we might, because of aesthetic sensibility or some public pressures, make a slight modification in the form our "yes" takes—jumbo jets instead of SSTs, rockets to Mars but not Venus. But all such alternatives are trivial; there is no absolute and unqualified "no." Here we discover a fundamental determinism (and not in our genes). Here is the source, the key, to the despair of modern man. He despairs because he can do nothing different from what is done, and he feels it vaguely even when he cannot adequately express it.

However, the final step has yet to be taken. This occurs when, far from being anguished or in despair about such a situation, we become conscious of it—and start to rationalize or justify it. People nevertheless tend to become aware of only one or another aspect of the phenomenon. Thus there are theoreticians of the human power and freedom granted by technology who ignore or deny the other side, the necessity. What is more they weigh down mankind with a wholly inhuman responsibility. If technology really does make me supremely free, if I really can do everything, then I become terrifyingly responsible for everything—for massacres in Argentina and Afghanistan, for famine throughout the Third World, for planetary pollution, even for the rights of future generations.

It is similar with those who see only the other side—the absolute determinism of history. They construct a rigorously mechanistic interpretation of politics or economics, one denying every possibility, every intervention which might be an act of freedom. From this perspective technology is transformed into an *ought*, for this "fatalism and determinism have enough imagination to despair of possibility and possibility enough to discover impossibility" (p. 174). The realistic determinist "thinks it is in control of possibility" when it limits the possible to the probable and "carries possibility around like a prisoner in the cage of the probable, shows it off, imagines itself to be master, does not take note that precisely thereby it has taken itself captive to be the slave of spiritlessness and to be the most pitiful of all things" (pp. 174–175). There is no longer any outcome except despair (in luxury or misery, in conformism or the concentration camp). By justifying the situation in which we find ourselves and by moving from sociology to metaphysics, philosophers of the necessary aggravate the weight of the human condition under the influence of technology.

But there remains one last option. What happens when, instead of becoming aware (and justifying) either the liberation of technique or its determinism, one simply affirms both at the same time? I mean without any dialectical relationship between them, without any tension, but, on the contrary, as a complete identification. What if it is simply stated that what could have freed man is that

which has become his fatality, or else that what is in reality his destiny should be lived and received as liberation. When we learn that within this technical environment possibility is true necessity and necessity becomes the only real possibility, then we have once again reached the absurd—an absurd which allows no exit. By a final route we have returned to the philosophy of the absurd from which we began, to an absurdity which becomes the ontology of a world fashioned by technology. Such, it seems to me, is the ultimate significance of the absurd within the technical universe.

—translated by Katharine Temple;  
edited by Carl Mitcham

## NOTES

1. [Ellul uses only the one word "technique" here. He is certainly right when he argues that it is etymologically incorrect to use the English "technology" to refer to anything other than technical discourse (see Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, trans. Lani K. Niles [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982], p. 177, note). Nevertheless, current English conventions require some flexibility in use of terms, so that both "technics" and "technology" are introduced here as occasional synonyms for "technique."—Editor.]
2. Sartre's political variations from 1946 to 1956 have recently been the subject of a doctoral dissertation at L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Bordeaux.
3. For a more extensive analysis of the phenomena of modernist art, see my *L'Empire du Non Sens* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980).
4. See Henri Atlan, *Entre le cristal et la fumée* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).
5. See Pierre-Maxim Schuhl, *Machinisme et philosophie* (Paris: Alcan, 1938; 2nd edition, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947; 3rd edition, Paris: P.U.F., 1969).
6. All quotations from Kierkegaard are from *The Sickness Unto Death* in Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), subsequent page references are given in parentheses following each quotation.