Spirituality, Redemption, and Education in the Wasteland of Technopoly

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In his classic work *The Technological Society* (perhaps better translated as *Technique*), Jacques Ellul provides us with a disturbing picture of what Neil Postman has more recently described as "the surrender of culture to technology."[1] Postman, paraphrasing Ellul, argues that our society has become what he calls a "technopoly." In a technopoly, technology becomes (and these are Ellul's terms) "self augmenting," "autonomous," and to a large degree "determinative." In such a society, traditional sources of value and meaning, as well as traditional ways of seeing and inquiring about reality, are usurped by techniques which create their own morality and world view. Thus, under the rule of technopoly, we can no longer pretend that "technology is neither good nor bad, that only our use of it makes it so." For technology in such a state creates and sustains its own questionable moralities and world views. Thus, in such a society, according to Ellul, "technology is not to be judged." This is due, in part, to the fact that the very languages in which such judgments (from outside the world view produced by technology) might have been made have been severely trivialized; previously significant cultural symbols, taken from classical and contemporary traditions outside the realm of technology, are co-opted in a way that furthers the imperatives of commerce, efficiency, bureaucracy, and the cult of professionalism. In a technopoly, after the death of God, one may have no other god than technique. All other alternatives began to appear incoherent or simply disappear entirely.

But what exactly is technique? For Ellul, it is "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of adaptation) in every field of human activity."[2] Of course, machines often employ technique, but so do the institutions that sustain their use, for example, the state, the media, education. In his *The Illusion of Technique* William Barrett describes the modern development, most famously in "The Dream of Descartes," of the idea that self-interpreting, error-proof recipes, rules, or methods might be discovered and employed in order to produce knowledge or learning, build bridges, win friends, and influence people.[3] Such methods, were thought to be especially valuable because they would supposedly free us from the constraints of what Aristotle called *phronesis*, fallible human judgment. Within Descartes' dream, one senses the beginnings of a loss of humility, the sense that human beings were not and could not become gods. All sorts of techniques, mechanical or otherwise, were to free us from the constraints of faith and human nature as these had traditionally been understood. In a technopoly, the search for ways to avoid *phronesis* takes on a special importance, akin to what Dewey called "the quest for certainty." Technique, or at least the illusion of technique, is worshipped above all else.

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, Nel Noddings, using a term from Mary Daly, refers to this worship as "methodolatry."[4] She describes how methodolatry has

skewed recent educational research, theory, and practice. Under the sway of methodolatry, intelligence, once symbolic of a number of different forms of thought and feeling, is more and more often understood as the mere ability to follow methods which promise both instructor proof learning and an educational system that produces the skills needed to compete adequately in the international, economic marketplace. In this context, there is no real consideration of the proper end of education beyond such economic efficiency. The very question of such an end becomes difficult to ask, and, once asked, taken seriously. Technique in education, then, "humiliates our words."[5] In short it distances itself from any number of traditions and their constituent conceptual frameworks, frameworks that might at one point have allowed us to put education under technopoly to the test. Thus, it becomes harder and harder for the products of such an education to take real alternatives seriously, understand their point or the questions they might raise against our current practices and skewed self-understanding.

Consider an example of educational technique at work within technopoly, taken from Postman: Computer technology, he argues, has begun to redefine "humans as 'information processors,' and nature itself as information to be processed. The fundamental message of the computer is that we are machines."[6] The notions of what it is to be a human, to learn, teach and know, to even have ideas and to think, becomes transformed as our more traditional, extra-technological understandings are usurped, repressed, made to seem incoherent. At prestigious institutions of learning, for example, the growing demand that faculty "do research" (itself an idea beholden to technopoly), leads to the construction of "high tech" buildings in which machines take over more and more of the teaching and learning loads. Wacky ideas such as "Socrates gone Virtual" are taken more and more seriously as legitimate candidates to replace traditional educational ideals such as the face to face, dialogical classroom. In a technopoly, then, Socrates can supposedly stay home and teach via the internet, rather than engage in personal dialogue in the public square. Soon *no one* will even have to leave home to go to college, as long as they can access the internet! I would suggest that something important is lost here, something obvious to anyone for whom Socrates' own understanding of words like "dialogue" and "teaching" still makes at least some sense.

Note the way in which technopoly revises our sense of what constitutes a "community of learning." Such a notion might, once upon a time, have brought to mind something like Plato's famous Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum, where groups of teachers and learners were brought together in one place by similar interests to pursue a common learning. In contrast, consider the direction in which life among faculty in the contemporary university is now heading. First, we find a body of scholars taken as a whole, and then even members of the same discipline or department within an institution, too specialized to have much of anything in common to teach or learn about, or even say to each other. Colleges and universities become mere "holding tanks" where "professionals" can "interface" via electronic technology with colleagues *elsewhere* who do share a similar expertise, read the same specialized journals, know the same jargon, that is, faculty buildings full of people in rooms next door to each other communicating not with their neighbors but

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with relative strangers in places perhaps hundreds and thousands of miles away. (When one thinks about this, beyond the blinders placed upon us by technopoly, what a strange picture this makes, that is, room upon room of "colleagues" talking not with each other but instead, staring into computer screens, writing to and for distant others!) Certainly there is nothing at all wrong with making connections with others far away; the problem is that *these* connections have taken on such an importance (for example, for publishing, tenure, and promotion) that all sense of a common learning community *at home* is at risk. And the student body in residence, partly as a result of this, receives an ever more fragmented education, receiving in their classes more and more of the disjointed information that is a characteristic of technopoly instead of a unified liberal education.

The really frightening thing about this, from my point of view, is that fewer and fewer educational theorists and practitioners seem to find in this anything to be disconcerted about. In order to be troubled, they would have to have a firmer grasp of more traditional meanings of our educational terminology, as located within ancient practices and traditions. Without such an ability, we are unable to understand what the new "teaching" and "learning" costs us, what constitutes the "downside" of the new sorts of "communities of learning" created by the unfettered use of technology. We have been blinded by technopoly.

It is within this context that Götz's essay on education and technology is to be welcomed. Götz's aim, "to spiritualize" rather than reject technology, to redeem *technology* and our relationship to it from what I have been calling *technopoly* (and at the same time redeem *us*) responds well to Ellul's, Postman's, and Noddings's concerns. Götz implicitly recognizes that what those of us who are more and more under the sway of technopoly need most is a reconstruction and rededication to educational contexts and traditions in which technology knows its place, that is, when it again functions as a servant to non-technological, transcendental, and spiritual values. The fact that even spirituality has been co-opted by technopoly, in immensely popular authors such as Deepak Chopra, Robert Redfield, Marianne Williamson makes Götz's project even more necessary in a culture where an ever-present yearning for escape from emptiness and anomie is too often answered with recipes for "chicken soup for the soul."[7] Within technopoly, technique "absorbs the sacred and has, in fact, become the sacred."[8] What can be done in the face of such sacrilege? Given the nature and power of technopoly against sanctity itself, it is, in fact, redemption that we truly need. Götz is to be applauded for recognizing this need.

But what exactly is Götz's spiritual model of redemptive education? He provides us with the key to an answer to this question when he stresses asceticism and purification as the necessary beginning to the process of educational redemption. Such an asceticism, Götz wisely notes, is not a purely negative thing such as "abstinence or restriction in the use of food, drink, sleep, dress, property" and, we might add, technology.[9] Rather it has the same reference as the Greek term *askesis* did for those philosophers French historian Pierre Hadot understands as the first true spiritual masters of the classical period, that is "inner activities of the thought and will" as prescribed by Socrates, the Stoics and Epicureans, and those early Christians

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who, with the help of Jews such as Philo of Alexandria, followed these figures in designing a monastic philosophy that was only gradually overshadowed by a scholasticism more favorable to the illusion of technique.

What are some of these activities? Hadot refers to "ancient spiritual exercises" as, in the Greek and Hellenistic philosophers, including such things as attention, meditation, dialogue and contemplation, development of an idea of what is and is not within our power, a sense of what is worthy of our desire and what is not. In monasticism, prayer, according to Hadot, is added to this list along with the strong and coherent sense that we view reality properly only through the lens of metaphor, that literalism is the death of the spirit, that experience rather than theory is what ultimately counts, as well as humility and the desire for God.[10] Today, under the guise of technopoly, we have a good deal of trouble understanding the very notion of spiritual exercise, incorporating as it does a notion of philosophy as a way of life rather than a mode of mere representation, a profoundly personal way of living subjectively (Kierkegaard), within the realm of the ordinary (Wittgenstein), experiencing consciousness not as a thing to be theoretically dissected but, rather, as a moment within experience in which the individuality and peculiarity of things, as well as their abstract nature, is given adequate attention (William James). Technopoly, with its scientistic methodolatry, entrenched within the increasingly professionalized and specialized confines of the modern university, trivializes Hadot's tradition of philosophy as a way of life or spiritual exercise by distorting its vocabulary and practice in such a way that we are less and less able to understand or appreciate what its most famous practitioners, past and present, thought was most important in education, and in life.[11]

There have been those who would confront the wasteland of modernity through what George Friedman refers to as "militant politics or social revolution."[12] Such persons, and the movements within which they function, have been prone as of late to condemn Hadot's type of philosophy as apolitical, life-denying, and despairing escapism. But the recent prominence of this way of looking at philosophy as a way of life, as well as things "spiritual," as "infantile regression" or "the opiate of the people" only indicates further how technopoly distorts our way of looking at its possible alternatives, its potential remedies. It may be true that the desert monks, for example, who perhaps founded the monastic Christian tradition, often did attempt an escape from their own particular Babylons to the solitude of the desert. But they did this only so that "in order to prepare for the (most authentic) revolution they might make themselves worthy of it."[13]

My own sense, a sense I believe that I share to some extent with Götz, is that the ultimate solution to the blight of technopoly must grow out of an education that increases self-awareness and sensitivity to the true names of things, including our present liabilities and blind spots, especially our penchant for illusory technique. We need an education in desire, a desire ultimately for something much more enriching than the goods offered us by the gods of efficiency and consumerism. We need an education that keeps the pride and hubris technopoly creates in us in its proper place, that gives us a realistic sense of our limits as human beings as well as of our freedom,

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that teaches an honest humility. In order to properly use and appreciate technology, in order not to succumb to technopoly, nothing is more important than to recover and practice the ancient spiritual exercises that can provide at least an introduction to this kind of education. If I, along with Götz, am at all on the right track, we have no better guides than Hadot's philosophers, monks, their fellow travelers, and successors to steer our way.

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1. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) and Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

2. Ellul, *The Technological Society*.

3. William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1979). The phrase "Dream of Descartes" and general idea is taken from Jacques Maritain's The *Dream of Descartes* (New York: Scribners, 1944).

4. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 7 and chap. 1.

5. This phrase comes from Ellul; see Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of Words* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Erdmans, 1985).

6. Postman, *Technopoly*, 111, and chap. 7.

7. For a recent journalistic account of the trivialization and commercialism of spirituality, see the cover story of *Newsweek*, "Deepak Chopra: Spirituality for Sale," 20 October 1997, 52-62.

8. Jacques Ellul, "Technology and Democracy," in *Democracy in a Technological Society*, ed. Langdon Winner (The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1992), 36.

9. With this quote I begin to rely on the extremely important work of Pierre Hadot on philosophy as spiritual exercise. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 128.

10. This delineation of the qualities of monasticism is taken not only from Hadot but also from Kathleen Norris's fine, recent account, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997). For a more scholarly account, see Jean LeClercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study in Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1964).

11. Bruce Wilshire beautifully dissects the modern university and its pathologies in Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

12. Freidman is quoted in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81.

13. Ibid.

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