

BOOK REVIEW

Technology and Human Becoming

Philip Hefner

Fortress Press, Minneapolis (2003), xi + 97 pp, ISBN 0-8006-3608-2

Philip Hefner is a well-known theologian in the «dialogue theology-science». His most famous and basic thesis is that human beings are «created co-creators». Seeing in this way the human is very productive in order to analyse the technology from a theological perspective. Authors such as Friedrich Dessauer and Marie Dominique-Chenu, for example, saw the human as the creature whose mission in the Earth is, effectively, to continue God's Work. Creation is an «initial act» of the Divinity, but that has to be continued in Time because that is a «non-finished act». So, the human being «cooperates» with God, freely and responsibly, in the progressive fulfilment of Creation. In this sense, technology seems to be a «good instrument» for the humans in their relations to God and to the World. Professor Hefner moved around this *optimistic* theological perspective concerning technology — contrary to Jacques Ellul, for example, which supports a *pessimistic* theological view.

Technology and Human Becoming is a brief book that compiles several talks that were delivered by P. Hefner in the 2001 Conference, under the theme «Human Meaning in a Technological Culture», organised by the Institute on Religion and Science in an Age of Science. According to Hefner “the point of this book is that technology is opening up a new world of meaning for human life today” (p. ix). But his reflections are theological ones more than philosophical or sociological ones. The deepest meaning of the book is to show what linkages have technology with theology (or religion). It is better said: that technology is a real dimension of the religious experience. For this, Hefner says: “Indeed, technology may be more religiously gripping than a sacred liturgy and more theologically urgent than a sacred dogma” (p. 37-38). This is a polemical statement, which seems to agree that David Noble is right when he said, “the technological enterprise has been and remains suffuse with religious belief” (D. Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, Penguin Books, New York, 1999, 5). Nonetheless, according to Noble this «historical fact» — technology has been and remains suffuse with religion — is dangerous for technology because technology, in this way, has been aimed rather at the loftier goal of transcending the mortal concerns altogether and Noble wants technology, on the contrary, is directed to “more worldly and humane ends”. In fact, according to Hefner this way of seeing technology is also the really foundation of technology; namely:

“technology seems to be carried out as a strategy for denying our mortality and death”, said our author (p. 46). In this sense, the essence of technology is to be free and free to imagine: the imagination is central to technology.

These Hefner’s theological reflections concerning technology starts from the process of «human becoming» (and not «becoming human»). For Hefner this process-journey is a spiritual and religious one. The human is always in process. So, Hefner said: “This journey is a religious reality, a journey of the spirit, and if technology is a part of it, then technology is also a religious and spiritual reality” (p. 5-6). Technology is «inside» the human. Technology is not an external thing to the people, but we live *through*, *with* and *in* technology (Cf. also D. Ihde, *Technics and Praxis*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, 1979). Even more: more and more the boundary between technology and human self has been utterly erased. An important part of the our «self» and the our «world» has been rearranged by technology. Even our selfhood has been «technologized». This means that people are cyborgs or technosapiens: “these terms expresses the dimension of techno-nature within human nature” (p. 74-75). It is not possible to think the human apart from his being-with-technology, because technology is, so to speak, an ontological dimension of his humanity.

As the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset said: “the humanity outside technology is a myth”. This viewpoint is very similar to the engineers as Samuel Florman who points: “To be human is to be technological. When we are being technological we are being human”, or to the anthropologists as Arnold Gehlen, who states that the human are *Mängelwesen* and these lacks are diminished by technological devices. In this visions of technology there is an implicit assumption that human being is essentially technological and, therefore, considers technology as having not inherent problems (this is, by the way, a dangerous statement). I think Philip Hefner would accept these statements because for him “technology is not, most importantly, outside us, but within us, shaping who are and how we live our lives” (p. 74).

This deep relationship between human being and technology is expressed very well in the Hefner’s idea of technology as a «mirror» that reflects human nature and intentions. The metaphor is suggestive due to the fact that technology is a human and social construction. Nonetheless, although Hefner say technology is a constructed «techno-mirror», it seems he is not concerned of *who* construct the mirror and *why*. Yes, he said: “we do not know why create or according to what values — so we have to discover the reasons and the values” (p. 40). But he does not pay attention to technology as constructed by «few people» and those, «the others», on having related us to the technology, reflected what that «few people» thinks about the man and the world. In sum: I do not create technology and, therefore, I cannot see myself in a techno-mirror that I have not created. Technology is the outcome of a meeting of several *ways of approaching reality*, but only a few decide what «ways» are valid. That is the principal problem, because when I use a technology that «incorporated ways», these are determining me. I see the world and the human according to the values and visions that «others» have incorporated to technology. This is a very

important question in the social studies of technology, above all, in the constructivist approach of Sociology of Technology.

In fact, for Hefner the most important technology is that reflects that we are finite, frail, and mortal. Technology is an instrument for «transcending» the human finitude and, so, in its engagement with finitude and death, technology becomes almost explicitly religious and theological issue. Through technology the human brings alternative worlds into being in order to transcend our actual situation. According to Hefner the human being is free — although Hefner does not speak of God as, precisely, the infinity source of that freedom — because he has the capacity for imagining and for projecting new worlds and new situations. This imagination is, for Hefner, a symptom of the spirituality. In fact, for him spirituality is the same as capacity for imagining. From my viewpoint that is a very poor and «strange» conception of the Spirituality. From the first Greek philosophers to the current religious people Spirituality is related to an intellectual and vital feeling of being caught by the Wholeness, the Absolute or the Being (*esse*). In front of this *Absolute Reality* the human can only be silent, he does not imagine anything, only expects and contemplates. This Absolute Reality that we name God or Divinity is the source of that experience, He begins the movement of our soul to Him. In this experience neither imagination nor technology are important. The Spirituality is not the same as imagination: the former is begun for God and it is totally independent of technology, the latter is produced by the human (and that means *not* that is less important for human life) and, effectively, is related to technology. These are two different dimensions of human life.

In this sense, technology is also important for the human. In fact, as Hefner said “our culture is irretrievably technological” (p. 60). Thus, we need to create «stories» that give meaning to technology and to the human in a technological culture. But “when we are confronted with millions of meanings of life, how do we find our way?” (p. 72). This question is a religious one. The deepest task concerning religion-technology relationships is to think in mutual union these two realities. Hefner is a theilhardian theologian and, therefore, he states: “technology is now a phase of evolution, and it is now creation, a vessel for the image of God”. Traditionally the religious experience was associated with natural pretechnological places, but in a world more and more technologized is dangerous — said Hefner — to eliminate the technological dimension of the life in order to express these experiences, because if we do this we are forgetting the deepest dimension of technology and, therefore, of us — who are cyborgs. In addition, humans are always in process of transcending our actual situation, and this drive for transcending is a sign that human nature is one of self-transcending. Technology provides to humans the medium for transcending (that is to say: to imagine new situations and to create alternative realities) and for this reason it is a «sacred space». Nevertheless, from my viewpoint Hefner emphasizes too much the «self-process» of *searching for* meaning (and he said “restlessness is as fundamental as meaning”) and he does not notice that restlessness is also a restlessness beginning by God inside our soul and,

therefore, is a restlessness, so to speak, defeated for a previous stillness. God is the metaphysical foundation of the both, restlessness and stillness, but the latter always is previous. In this sense, Hefner seems to be more close to the heideggerian vision of Philosophy as an activity of endless asking (but if this is so: how God in this process take part really?).

These are some of the reflections that has suggested us the reading of Hefner's book. I think this little work is a good beginning in the theological study of technology. Nevertheless, Hefner is really learned in science, but he is not so much in technology. It seems to me that *Technology and Human Becoming* fail in the knowledge of the rich and sensible history of philosophical, sociological and theological studies concerning technology. On the other hand, Hefner has several theological statements very ambiguous. Nonetheless, his provocative suggestion about the need of thinking theologically the technology is very important. As it was said above, our culture is a technological one and this is a challenge for the traditional way of seeing the religious experience as linked to pretechnological situation. In this sense, for example, Marie Dominique-Chenu said forty years ago: "lier à une mentalité prétechnique la foi au Christ et la réussite de l'incarnation serait un propos blasphématoire". Finally, there some truth in the view of humans as cyborgs, but I do not see clearly in what way technology could help the humans to grow individually and religiously to God. At any rate, this book comes from an important theologian in the field of religion and science, and it is a good way of initiate the dialogue with technology as well.

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