Nicolas Berdyaev's Critique of Technics

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Nicolas Berdyaev ranks among the most astute and original thinkers of the twentieth century. He was a prophetic figure, who proclaimed certain spiritual truths about modern humanity at a time when doing so was often unpopular. He also anticipated the demise of Western civilization. One area in which he was particularly insightful, but has gone largely unnoticed and unappreciated, is his critique of technics and the modern mechanization of life. Berdyaev diagnosed the arrival of technics as a form of spiritual malaise so that it is both intriguing and enlightening. I found that Berdyaev's critique of technics is especially applicable to an analysis of Holocaust phenomena and other forms of totalitarian evil in the twentieth century; that the Holocaust can confirm that his insights into the preconditions, which made totalitarian evils possible, are valuable and illuminating.

The Spiritual Dynamic of Berdyaev's Critique

For Berdyaev, the arrival of technics in the modern period opens up a whole new chapter in humanity's relationship to the cosmos. With technics the relationship of spirit to reality (matter) is involved. The creative human spirit relates to nature as it invents machines and technology out of physical elements; thus, the arrival of technics is a phase in humankind's spiritual development. Yet the arrival of technics also signals humanity's enslavement to objects in the world. This is true as far as humanity has abandoned spiritual aims and values. It has begun to look to the earth and the miracles of applied science to provide life with an ultimate meaning and happiness. A novel reality has entered history. It is human organization. Because it is neither organic nor inorganic reality, technics poses a challenge to human existence. Having separated itself from God and spiritual values, modern humanity pridefully turns exclusively to the construction and organization of its material world to find meaning, happiness, and security. Technics is precisely the means by which modern humanity, apart from God, and by its own devices, seeks to achieve desired beneficial ends for itself.

In modernity, several autonomous spheres of existence seek to dominate exclusively the whole of life, and technics is one of them. Once modern humanity discarded the Medieval worldview, with its religiously integral view of reality, it has sought integrality of being in one of several spheres of life. Technics is a part of these spheres. Specifically, technics must reckon with the spheres of statism and economics. Berdyaev perceives a pernicious development in modernity in which collective forces (the "masses") look to the state, economics, and technics to provide them with total happiness and well-being. Like Dostoevsky, from whom he gleamed many insights, Berdyaev thinks that humankind's appeal to technics, statism, and economics for total well-being only leads to human self-enslavement.
Thus, humanity illustrates Dostoevsky's dictum that when humans abandon God, they (unknowingly) abandon or betray themselves as well.

Berdyaev explains more specifically that humankind has experienced certain periods in history when different relationships of spirit to matter are suggested. The ultimate outcome of the arrival of technics depends upon whether the human spirit can attain sufficient moral control over the machine to avoid a total domination and destruction by the machine. Berdyaev cites four such epochs, or periods in this development.

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- In the first period, humans are submersed in cosmic life. They are dependent upon nature. Their personalities are not yet developed. The relationship of spirit to nature is defined in terms of magic and myth.

- The second period finds humans freed from the power of cosmic forces, spirits, and demons of nature. The struggle of ascesis, rather than technics, brings this freedom.

- In the third period, we find the mechanization of nature, its scientific and technical control accompanied by the development of industry with capitalism. The emancipation of labor is accomplished.

- The fourth period finds cosmic order disrupted by the discovery of the infinitely small and large. A new organization for life distinct from organic and inorganic bodies is formed. Life is mechanized and enslaved with technics.

While these periods are topological and not strictly chronological, human history has generally developed away from the "telleurgic" epoch of the Medieval period to the technical age. The results have been a loss of an organic and spiritual core of being, and a participation in a totally secularized life broken down into several autonomous spheres. Because modern life has become fragmented in this way, human beings have lost the integral image they long for, and once partially possessed. They misdirectedly seek a regained integrality in the technical reorganization of life.

The specific logic of abused technology, according to Berdyaev, has its inception in "technique." Technique leads to the organization of life, which then leads to the mechanization and dehumanization of life, with the outcome resulting in the final mechanization of the organizer. Given the nature of this internal logic in the development of technology, religion and ethics must take seriously the arrival of technics as a spiritual problem which leads to the enslavement of human beings.

One cannot remain neutral on the question of technics. Although its arrival does arise in part out of a creative, spiritual effort by humanity, technics threatens to destroy the human image and even the physical world in the twentieth century. Berdyaev considers technics the most crucial problem of modernity that will prevail over humanity, if humans do not address its pernicious development and intensify their spiritual relationship to the cosmos.

Berdyaev expresses astonishment that no one has developed a thorough philosophy and critique of technics. He exhorts the Christian community to redress this issue with urgent concern. Responsible Christian thinkers will not, however, simply condemn technics and scientific application. They will take a concerned perspective beyond either the neutral, indifferent viewpoint or the reactionary, romanticist rejection of all technical achievements.

The History of the Spirit's Relationship to Matter and the Arrival of Technics

Berdyaev explains that, since the breakup of the Medieval worldview with its organic and hierarchical
structure, humanity has sought integrality of being in the cosmos itself. The latter phases of the
Renaissance caused the emancipation of human creative energies from God. A type of assertive
humanism, estranged from God, developed that was doomed to failure at the outset. Berdyaev agrees
with Dostoevsky that such misdirected humanism was bound to lead to the self-enslavement of
humanity (which Dostoevsky's "underground man" grapples with in the twentieth century). Only the
restored image of God in humanity can rectify this situation (especially through the God-man, Jesus
Christ). But over against that other great Russian thinker Tolstoy, who longed nostalgically for the
organic wholeness of a premodern era, Berdyaev objects to the reactionary rejection of Romanticism
in its attempt to counter the advancing march of science and technics. Romanticism was a futile
stopgap measure to return unrealistically to a lost organic past, and therefore, an inadequate attempt to
address the problem of technics.9

Modern human beings, Berdyaev tells us, having lost their organic past and undergone the failures of
humanism and romanticism, collectively turn to technics and statism for a sense of purpose and
direction in life. Having turned away from God, they are doomed to be enslaved to the products of
their own humanistic imagination, especially to technics and statism. Only if a reversal of human
loyalties takes place, away from scientism, statism, and economics, and toward spiritual values, can
humans reverse this enslaving process and free themselves from the necessity to adapt to the world of
objects (which has collectively occurred in Western history). Only with such a reversal of spiritual
priorities can humankind regain control of its future and restore the lost image of God, which gives
freedom and dignity to human existence.

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Berdyaev's Critique of Technics in Totalitarian States and in Nazi Germany

With specific regard to the role played by technics in the Holocaust, Berdyaev explains that the
sinister use of technology arises out of a concurrent development of technics and statism in the
modern period. In his quite prescient work, The Fate of Man in the Modern World (1935), he says that
the pernicious use of technics in Germany arose out of the distorted need for a pagan mentality to
implement racist aims, especially against the Jews.10

The racially motivated German masses had already been demoralized by war and collectivist
ideologies. They felt the burden of the already-present "power of technics" dominating over their
lives. Thus, they psychologically projected onto the nation-state their distorted ideals for racial
superiority. These racist goals were translated into nationalist policy, and then were implemented by
means of technics. Thus an idolatrous statism developed around totalitarian goals at the expense of
individual personhood and freedom.11

Technics comes to define both the ends (aims) of human existence, and the means by which mass
humanity executes its collectivist, totalitarian goals for a racially superior society. Berdyaev is very
perceptive in recognizing this conjunction of human self-interests in technics and nationalist aims, and
how they are coordinated in the twentieth century to produce collectivist evils.

Besides this dialectic between technics and nationalism, Berdyaev understands that, in Germany,
technics played another specific role in the generation of Nazi devotees. That is, the German racist
romanticism, pagan in its inception, created Nazism in part as a reaction to the arrival of modern
technical society (although, ironically, technics was then used in carrying out Nazi atrocities).
Berdyaev finds no contradiction in his analysis on this dual role of Germans both using and rejecting
technics, since the real contradiction lies in humanity's perfidious misrelationship to the world of
objects, in which two seemingly contradictory forms of expression emerge ñ one that exploits
technology for evil ends, the other that narrowly rejects it for romanticist reasons. This
misrelationship to the cosmos is the plight of modern humanity estranged from God and nature, which
sadly produced the tyranny of a Nazi state. This state centered on racist and romanticist notions of
blood and soil, and a fanciful apocalyptic expectation of a millennial kingdom (which instead
produced twelve years of hell).\textsuperscript{12}

One final diagnosis of Berdyaev's critique of technics involves modern humanity's misplaced
confidence in, and loyalty to, science and technocrats. Technics comes to replace religious miracles
since technics seems to produce veritable miracles of its own. Humanity has always wanted, in
defiance of God, to produce such miracles. The arrival of technics makes this dream possible.
Technics might be viewed then, as not just a means of Nazis to achieve racist ends during the
Holocaust, but as the most inordinately respected, idolatrous domain of the human enterprise, and part
of a Western Promethean revolt against God and spiritual values.

Given the absence of such spiritual values, especially Christian personalist values, before and during
the Holocaust, modern Europe possessed no adequate values foundation from which to contest
successfully the onslaught of Nazism, totalitarian states, and secularist ideologies inimical to human
dignity. Berdyaev thinks that Germany's specific demise, as manifested in its espousal of racist and
nationalist goals, suggests that Germany had not allowed Christianity fully to penetrate its life and
thought (and thus Germany never really overcame its pagan roots).\textsuperscript{12} He confirms this observation
with the fact that, despite the attainment of the zenith of German culture with Kant, Goethe, Hegel,
Schiller, and Fichte (among many others) prior to the Holocaust, this great cultural flowering did not
prevent the end of Germany in the Nazi period. This downfall from great cultural heights to decadent
Nazi civilization must be seen in spiritual terms as the loss of transcendent energies and values, so that
Germany came to participate in its own demise and self-enslavement.\textsuperscript{14}

An authentic Christian faith would not allow such an idolatrous exaltation of race, soil, and
nationhood. Like Paul Tillich, Berdyaev understands that Christianity is fundamentally at odds with
the particularism and narrow provincialism of Nazi racism and nationalism; that Christianity espouses
equality, universal and ethical expansiveness in its authentic expression of love and regard for justice
and freedom.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, in reality, as Berdyaev readily acknowledges, a historical "deformation" of
Christianity has occurred in Western civilization, and this deformation contributed to the success of
Nazism.\textsuperscript{16}

Like several outstanding interpreters of the Holocaust, Berdyaev did grasp the specific ways
technology was abused during the Holocaust period, and in the most perfidious ways imaginable
(sterilization programs, developments in Eugenics, so-called "euthanasia projects," poison gas usage,
an elaborate railway system leading to fixed killing centers, Mengle's experiments with twins and
other psychological experiments, and new, more effective ways of killing people with phenol
injections, and breeding experiments, among many other examples).

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The Jewish thinker, Irving Greenberg, cites the problem of modernity with its belief in the "secular
absolute." He explains how the loss of a sense of transcendence and ultimate values, issued in the
modern ethos of decadent thinking and living, contributed directly to the arrival of the Holocaust.
Greenberg blames secular humanism and moral relativism for their pretensions of a value-free science
and objectivity that "created unparalleled power," but weakened the moral limits of the "secular
city."\textsuperscript{17} Thus the "Lord of Science and Humanism" was erected idolatrously for the "Lord of History
and Revelation," and with devastating consequences.\textsuperscript{18} Like Berdyaev, Greenberg considers this
modern scientifically-based ethos the alternative to a Judaeo-Christian ethic and worldview. Berdyaev
explains that this modern scientific ethos has displaced the organic and hierarchical view of life of the
Medieval period, which, despite its many problems, maintained (in part) an integral view of humanity
in relationship to God and the cosmos.

These two insightful observers of our time—one Jewish and the other Christian—seek to enlighten
modern humanity to the dangers of technics and the ethos of "scientism." This worldview claims the ultimate loyalty of modern humanity with devastating consequences. What the Holocaust can do is to serve as a foil for the discussion of this issue. The Holocaust can remind modern humanity of its need for a cultivated ethic and spirituality that can resist enslavement to technics; and can also put a check on our zealous and often unqualified enthusiasm for science as a human enterprise.

Regarding the ultimate outcome of modern humanity's misuse of science and technical applications, especially in the Holocaust, I am reminded of Elie Wiesel's ascription of the "Kingdom of Night" to the Holocaust event. Berdyaev has a statement, which from our retrospective viewpoint today, strikes us as particularly insightful. He says, in his book, The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar, that with technics warfare ceased to be localized and became a matter of nations against nations, states against states, moving the world into a state of "rationalized darkness." Berdyaev avers that such a world will lead either to a "new day of creationóor a new night" (italics mine). Obviously, as Wiesel's works so eloquently remind us, the path taken by modern humanity thus far has been Berdyaev's "new night." This path involves a novel approach to killing humans on a massive, unprecedented scale. Society rationalizes this mass murder by thinking humans are mere "vermin" to be eliminated with poison gas and other devices available to modern technology.

Although the arrival of technics does not fully explain this attitude toward human beings as vermin or a disease (and other factors should also be considered), its arrival helps explain how the negative preconditions were set which made it possible for a Holocaust to occur; that racist, nationalist, totalitarian, political, economic, and religious factors conspired with technics to cause the evils of Nazism. Berdyaev's critique is especially insightful in demonstrating how technics was involved in more than just the provision of means for massive murder and dehumanization. Technics also constitutes a major form of modern idolatry from which humans seek to find totally adequate ends for life and happiness, and by which they establish a false relationship to the cosmos. The mass organization of modern Western life had a spiritual root in the misplaced human longing for integrity of being and happiness, which led to collectivist means of enslavement, dehumanization, impersonalism, apathy, and indifference (as illustrated in the Holocaust with masses of indifferent people contributing to the death of millions of human beings, and immoral brutes with PH.D's using advanced technical skills to dispose of human beings).

For those readers aware of the role of ideology in contributing to the Holocaust, Berdyaev's insights are particularly relevant. He avers that modern humanity transferred its loyalties from God and its organic sense of self, to collectivist entities and to ego. This process evolved from the telleurgic period to modernity, as seen in the subjective selfhood of Kant, then in the panlogism of Hegel, then especially with the Ego in Fichte, and finally in Nazism. German idealist philosophy tried to provide a compensation for the loss of a cosmic framework for individuals that had existed in the Medieval worldview. But German idealist philosophy also inevitably produced an ideological framework conducive to the Prometheus instincts of a will to power (as can be seen in Nietzshe, Rosenberg, and then in Nazism). Eventually this will to power built the idol of a state power, replacing the ego (and integral self) asserted by Fichte and others, and this issued in a statism inimical to personal and human values. Thus the technical epoch culminates in a subordination of spirit to collectivism, to rationalized scientism, and to a resulting dehumanization and depersonalization of modern humanity. Into such an objectivized, enslaved world, humans enter the modern period. Instead of expressing an active spiritual protest against such a

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demeaning plight, humans opt for conformity and display indifference in the face of radical evil (as Wiesel never tires of saying, "the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference").

**Conclusion**
Does Berdyaev's critique leave us on a note of despair regarding the ultimate outcome of Western civilization? Those readers familiar with Berdyaev's writings will know that he is a person of persistent hope, grounded in a Christian conviction of the anticipated victory of good over evil. Thus Berdyaev does not arrive at a totally negative assessment of modern humanity and its use of technics. Although Berdyaev offers hope, he makes a positive outcome for Western humanity contingent upon thoughtful and responsible human action and decision-making, specifically in subordinating technical interests to spiritual ends and values.25 Only realistic "intensification of spirit" he says will adequately subordinate the goals of technology to the ends of spirit and humanity; will appreciate science but reject idolatrous scientism. The arrival of technics presents humanity with an unprecedented challenge and opportunity for spiritual awakening and intensification. The whole positive relationship of humans to nature, and of God to the cosmos, has to be reconceptualized. Thus the final significance of the technical epoch is its opening up of a new spiritual reckoning with reality itself, especially considering the failure of previous ideologies to sustain humankind.26

Writing after the Holocaust and his personal, wartime endurance of hardships in France, Berdyaev was still able to maintain hope for the future. Such hope entails nothing less than the total spiritualization of life.27 Thus Berdyaev anticipated a transformation of the technical ethos into a spiritual epoch that uses science only for constructive human ends. The Holocaust reminds us constantly of the ominous implications of the issue regarding the role of technics in human history, an issue we can appreciate was earlier addressed by Berdyaev, but one which still awaits a successful resolution at the close of the twentieth century.

References

Works by Nicholas Berdyaev:


Berdyaev, Christianity and Anti-Semitism (NY: Philosophical Library, 1954)


Other Works Consulted

Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications, edited by John K. Roth and Michael

A Note on Sources Used and Works of Berdyaev Abbreviated in the Text

Abbreviation, Full Name of Work, Original Publication date

Destiny of Man, The Destiny of Man, 1931
Fate of Man, The Fate of Man in the Modern World, 1934
Realm of Spirit, The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar , 1949
Slavery and Freedom, Slavery and Freedom, 1939
Solitude and Society, Solitude and Society, 1934
Spirit and Reality, Spirit and Reality, 1937
"Man and Machine," in The Bourgeois Mind and Other Essays, 1934

Notes

1 Spirit and Reality, pp. 69-71; "Man and Machine," pp. 43-44.
2 Ibid., and "Man and Machine," p. 53.
4 Realm of Spirit, pp. 50-51.
5 Ibid., p. 54.
8 Berdyaev particularly chides Tolstoy and John Ruskin for the unrealistic, romanticist rejections of technical advancements that simplistically long for a premodern era. Indeed, the arrival of Romanticism has to be understood in context of the more ominous arrival of technics as a reaction to it. See "Man and Machine," p. 49.
10 Fate of Man, pp. 83-85, 94-96, 98, 104.
11 Ibid., pp. 8-10, 19, 26, 30-31, 71-73, 77, 81-83, 93-94; and Realm of Spirit, pp. 51-52. Berdyaev says technics is always opposed to an individuality and "is pitiless" toward human personhood. Although technics developed concurrently with capitalism, materialistic communism tries to organize life according to social demands also antiethical to human welfare (see "Man and Machine").
12 Fate of Man, pp. 25-31, 84-85, 102.
13 Fate of Man, p. 62, 68, 84-85.

14 Ibid., pp. 96, 181-182.

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15 Ibid., pp. 84, 87, 88, 98, 102.


18 Ibid.

19 A phrase used frequently by Wiesel, as in his book Night.

20 Realm of Spirit, pp. 54-55.

21 Ibid., p. 51. Berdyaev suggests that likely the situation will present the latter—a new night, although he holds out hope for a new, "eighth day" of creation.


23 See "Man and Machine," p. 47; Meaning of History, 142; and Solitude and Society, 37-41, 177-179; and Fate of Man, p. 96.


25 Realm of Spirit, p. 56; "Man and Machine," p. 55; Slavery and Freedom, p. 110. One might even question how Berdyaev can be optimistic given his negative assessment of modern forms of malaise.

26 Realm of Spirit, pp. 52-53, 56.

27 Ibid., pp. 48, 56; Spirit and Reality, pp. 70-71; and "Man and Machine," pp. 59, 62.