



TECHNOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES AND THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE *

Modesto Santos

Present-day society is advancing on two fronts of great human interest. On the one hand, there is a clearly growing awareness of the dignity of the human person and of the human rights which are founded on this dignity. On the other hand, man today contemplates with satisfaction the new technological conquests of science and their application in many fields, especially in those dealing with human life. A clear sign of this is the progress achieved by the biological and medical sciences. Thanks to this progress man today has at his disposal a multitude of technological possibilities which promise the solution for many problems affecting health, human life and man's attempt to improve the quality of his life.

In other words, today's man feels attracted by two forces that are bearing different meanings, namely, the sense of *respect* for the dignity of the person and for his fundamental goods, and an interest in *efficiency*, in the values of *utility* which can today and tomorrow offer man possibilities opened by science and technology.

Man has not always known how to reconcile human values and technical values towards which the two mentioned forces are respectively pointing. It is a notorious fact that both values have often clashed in the past and in present-day society. That this clash can become more extended and seriously jeopardize

* Comunicación presentada al XIII Congreso Mundial de Filosofía del Derecho y Filosofía Social, celebrado en Kobe (Japón) del 20 al 26 de agosto de 1987.

the future of humankind is an idea which is increasingly shared by the men and women of our time.

In one way or another we all perceive the consequences which can be wrought by a technology which is not rationally controlled. And we see that an urgent task which concerns us all is that of fostering the effective recognition of the dignity of the human being and of the fundamental goods and values which are proper to the human person.

Within the framework of this urgent task, a primordial role falls to those of us, who dedicate our intellectual efforts, as given to the study of the Philosophy of Law and of Social Philosophy, towards delving into the fundamentals upon which a rationally free and socially just humankind can be built.

The reflexions which I will now proceed to elaborate are an attempt towards contributing in this sense.

To begin with I should like to point out with all clarity that in no way whatsoever do I consider as incompatible the technological progress achieved by all the sciences in general and in a particular manner the biological and medical sciences on the one hand, and on the other, specifically human progress achieved in the anthropological, ethical and juridical orders. Quite the contrary, I believe that, far from being in themselves incompatible, they are in fact complementary: they mutually seek out each other.

Incompatibility is produced when the true meaning of either progress and the relationship, which must become established between both, are not understood in theory and not recognized in practice.

Referring to the concrete area of Medicine, Professor Edmund Pellegrino clearly perceived the problem put forth when he wrote the following words:

«Modern Medicine is painfully torn between its technologic (sic) possibilities and its traditional trusteeship of the integrity and dignity of the persons it serves. Positioned squarely between the sciences and the humanities and uniquely combining both in the lives of individuals and communities, Medicine can be man's most potent instrument of enhancing his existence. Yet, in few endeavors is man so much in danger of being overshadowed by one of his creations»¹.

1. E. PELLEGRINO, *Humanism in Human Experimentation: Some Notes of*



Clearly this is the challenge we are facing in our present day and age: to avoid technological possibilities from converting themselves into a force operating against man, to make them truly become powerful instruments at the service of man himself and of his goods, among which the dignity of human life itself is a basic value.

This challenge is expressed with complete accuracy by Professor Pellegrino when he further writes:

«Can Medicine somehow unite its humanistic and scientific elements and become the genius of a new humanism, in which technology serves human purpose? Or will Medicine become the paradigm of a technocratic antihumanism, in which man himself becomes an abstraction?»².

The Ethical Meaning of Technological Possibilities

Technocratic antihumanism or technology at the service of the integrity and dignity of the human person: here we find the two extremes of the alternative which the modern biological and medical sciences and their possible technological applications offer to the free decision of man.

It is precisely in the possibility which man has to make free decisions where we most clearly find the specifically human dominion: that which defines man as lord and master of his own acts and of his own tasks and technical productions which, for this very reason, can and must be placed at the service of his best possibilities for choosing.

Ethics, which in the ultimate instance is the logic of human freedom and which impels and sheds light upon the correct exercise of this freedom, thus fully bears upon the area of specially human dominion and, for this very reason, becomes present at the very heart of the alternative put forth between technocratic antihumanism and technology at the service of the dignity of the person, accurately defined as the heart of ontological, psychological and moral self-possession.

the Investigator's Fiduciary Role, in Texas Report on Biology and Medicine, Volume 32, Number A, Spring, 1974, page 311.

2. *Ibidem*.

Ethics therefore does not appear on the horizon of technology as a foreing and bothersome visitor which nobody has invited.

Ethics does not come to hinder or discretid through its axiological and normative baggage the earnest effort of the scientific community and their achievements in the field of biology and medicine, present or future.

Neither does it come to interfere within a field to which it does not belong, nor does it meddle in or limit the just methodological and thematic autonomy of sciences dealing with the physical realities of man.

It appears, on the contrary, as a field sought from the very interior of these sciences which hold man as the subject, creator and beneficiary —for better or for worse— of their conquests and multiple applications.

The technological possibilities offered to man by these sciences are precisely this: *possibilities*. As such, they do not automatically guarantee a correct *usage* and application; this is a task which falls squarely upon the free decision of man who, for this reason, is in need of rational criteria —man being a rational agent— for its correct exercise. These are most certainly elementary ideas. But perhaps for this very reason they are not grasped by those who are biased —in the most literal meaning of the term— in the sense that they hold that any ethical assessment of scientific and technical matters is an unjustifiable intrusion which comes to place obstacles in the ascending path of these same techniques and sciences.

Present-day literature —both in scientific treatises and in the mass media— are not exempt from such a bias in many cases. Perhaps this is the first hurdle to be overcome so as to bring about the desired coming together of sciences and humanities in order to prevent man from yielding to the danger —mentioned by Pellegrino— of being eclipsed by his own technological creations.

This is, in my opinion, the first consideration to be made in order rightly to understand the relationship between technical progress and human progress: that of the ethical dimension which any technological possibility capable of being applied to the human person intrisically entails. Any technical progress



deprived of its ethical dimension is not *human* technical progress. Any progress is, in the ultimate instance, human progress or else it is not progress at all. The idea of progress carries with it the idea of the real improvement of man considered integrally; the contrary is nothing else but a dehumanizing backward step: technocratic antihumanism.

Technical values must be at the service of human values. Man must dominate technique and place it at his service, and not be dominated by technique. To point out the primacy of ethics over technique is of great importance in order for today's society, which is immersed within the world of technology, to be able to progress sensibly towards ever greater heights of liberty and justice.

I consider in this sense that one of the factors which in this day and age is hindering the ascendings curve of an authentically human progress is that which so rightly has been called ethical emotivism. That is to say, the approach, so widespread within our contemporary socio-cultural milieu, whereby ethical values are not capable of being rationally decided, but rather a matter of purely subjective preferences and sentiments. As Alasdair MacIntyre so rightly points out, emotivism «entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations»³.

An urgent task in order to be able to set down the rational bases of authentic human progress is that of freeing the concept of rationality from the reduction to which it has become subjected by scientific positivism which comes to identify it with scientific rationality. From a reduced conception of rationality, science and technique become converted into absolute values. Technical progress thus converts itself into the only «rational» form of progress. The rupture between technical progress and human progress becomes permanently established. I believe that here we can find some of the clues which allow us to understand the inordinate exaltation heaped upon the world of technology, which attains mythical heights in open detriment of human values, which are based upon a concept of practical rationality which goes above and beyond mere technical rationality.

3. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981, page 22.

Technology, Ethics and Anthropology

Having admitted the intrinsically regulating function which corresponds to Ethics with regard to the usage of technological possibilities, it is almost unanimously proclaimed that the fundamental principle upon which Ethics rests is the dignity of the human person, subject and beneficiary of said technological possibilities.

Given the limits of my dissertation I am obviously not going to proceed to develop here a theory of the human person. I will stick to pointing out that it is not enough merely to proclaim the concept of the dignity of the human person in a purely formal manner. At the present moment we use terms and notions which have lost their original semantical contents because of their having been divorced from the conceptual framework in which they arose. These are frequently unrooted and devalued notions and principles which are linked to their original meaning in name only.

The expression «dignity of the human person» is not foreign to the mentioned devaluation. Many are the voices —proceeding from the most varied and even opposing stances within present-day thought— which decry the formalistic inflation of so many of our most noble concepts such as, among others, those of freedom, right, justice, morals and this very concept of dignity of the human person.

From all these stances there stems a rightful outcry stating that merely formal notions are absolutely sterile in order effectively to regulate a real and authentic human progress.

In the face of these formalisms my position is that, if we truly want to join together the humanistic and scientific elements which integrate technical and human progress, we have to recuperate the *real contents* of the notion of the human person. In other words, we have to recuperate the *integral truth of man*.

Respect towards the dignity of the human person —the basis for the ethical assessment of any authentic progress— requires as a previous condition the recognition of each and every element which integrates personal reality itself. In other words, respect will be full and effective insofar as it is coexten-



sive with the integral truth of man. And the other way around, any abbreviation of the conceptual contents of personal reality generates, *eo ipso*, a *reduction* of the *ethical category* of respect and an *undue expansion* of the *technical category* of manipulating efficiency.

Perhaps the first act of dominion which man is called to carry out is that which has as its object the self-possession—through knowledge and the will—of one's own reality, of what man is by his very nature. Man must not lose or leave outside of his dominion what truly belongs to him, with the resulting consequence of having it become manipulated by those who, from the vantage point of a previous and unjustified reduction of the sphere of the personal, feel themselves to be duly justified to use what pertains to him as mere objects.

I believe that the recuperation of the integral truth of man requires the overcoming of cartesian anthropological dualism, which is present in vast sectors of contemporary anthropological thought and according to which man is understood as a *thinking subject*, which relegates *corporality* to the world of what is merely physical and lacking in personal meaning.

In this manner within the very heart of man's integral reality there stems a rupture between the *mind* and the *body* which entails a *spiritualist* reduction of the person and a *physicist* reduction of the body.

According to the current thinking inspired by the cartesian dualism just referred to, the person is not *body* and, therefore, the biological processes which are given and the laws governing them all lack human value in themselves; they have to be «assumed» by the rational in order to be «humanized». All this belongs to the category of pure means—and not of ends—and therefore it can and must be utilized, manipulated, placed at the service of that being having «exclusively rational» projects which is the human person. The human body is not something which the human person *is*, but rather something which he *has*: a mere instrument which the person must use in order to achieve «rational values». The corporal reality of man—life, health, illness, his very mortal condition—thus enters within the category of technique. Bereft of the condition of *person*, the corporal dimension of man enters within the sphere of *things*.

Whereas the person is the object of respect since it has dignity, the human body and all the processes taking place within it, from the very beginning of life until its very end are pure materials subject to the criteria of efficiency, utility, governed by a calculating mind which only measures things according to their results.

This anthropological dualism is what lies at the base of the manipulation of the biological realities and processes of man at the hands of techniques of a genetic, biological or medical which are not measured from the ethical standpoint of respect which the human body is worthy of, since it is a constituting element of the human person, but rather which are inspired on the contrary by the utilitarian criterion of results at all costs.

The Integral Truth of Man and the Dignity of Human Life

By contrast, in the face of this anthropological dualism and of the manipulation of the biological processes of the human body wrought by techniques deprived of an ethical criterion and of an anthropological foundation, I consider that the base upon which to found the harmonizing of technological possibilities with the dignity of human life is, as I have already stated, the full and effective recognition of the integral truth of man.

Both philosophical anthropology and biological anthropology are in agreement on this point: in that man is not a being which is divided into mind and body, but rather a *corporeal-spiritual unitary reality*.

Human life from its very outset until its termination has dignity because it is the life of a human person. Whence technological possibilities —whether of a genetic, biological or medical nature— have to be placed at the service of the dignity of that human life.

In the ultimate instance it is in the full and effective recognition of the dignity of the human person —of his mind and of his body as a unitary reality— where the conciliation between technical progress and specifically human progress truly becomes possible. Only thus can man successfully overcome the



challenge facing our technological society today and tomorrow; only thus can man make of technology a powerful instrument at his service and not convert it into a regressive process which destroys and degrades the quality which all human life must possess.

Upon these bases of an anthropological and ethical nature which I have just put forth can we truly speak of an authentically human society, in which fundamental human rights—among which human life occupies a basic place as a primordial juridical good—stop being something which is proclaimed as a purely formal value and become transformed into an effective, living and acclaimed reality which is respected and fostered by all men.

Our society would thereby journey along the path of true human progress. The values of *respect* and of *efficiency* to which we referred at the beginning would no longer be incompatible categories. Technical possibilities would be placed at the service of *man's integral improvement*—of the *whole man* who in his corporeal and spiritual human condition is *already* and at all times worthy of *efficient respect* and called to offer and receive *efficacious and respectful help* with this dignity.

The *power* of technology will attain its maximum dignity precisely when, inspired by the *respect* for man, it becomes transformed into an instrument of *service* for all men.