The Marcel-Teilhard Debate

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More than fifty years ago, on January 21, 1947, a debate took place in Paris between Gabriel Marcel and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on the following question: "To what degree does the material organization of humanity lead man to the point of spiritual maturation?" As Teilhard's biographer Cuénot observes, "it was a fine subject for two great, but very different, minds to discuss."[1] In essence, the debate concerned the value of technology in human culture, and the character of the social organization attendant upon technical civilization. Do the astounding technological advances of the last century represent a true enhancement of human existence in all its dimensions, as Teilhard believes, or is Marcel right in suggesting that technological progress is of dubious value in relation to the authentic purpose of life? Clearly, this debate has not lost its relevance. In a time when technological mastery of human life itself, through the mapping of the genome, is a reality, and when the Internet has ushered in a global connectedness which has transformed the planet's "noösphere," there is reason to reflect on the spiritual value of these attainments.

Teilhard's attitude toward technology is well-summarized in this statement made to Marcel: "to begin to know a thing in its entirety is to move from material to the spiritual"—to which Marcel retorted, "An anti-Christian concept which leads us back to Promethean man!"[2] What are the philosophies presupposed by this cryptic exchange?

Teilhard wrote as a paleontologist and evolutionary biologist who deduced from the macroscopic traces of terrestrial evolution a peculiar metaphysics. He observed the "thread" of evolution to follow a line of increasing material complexity, coupled with a heightening of consciousness. A salient and characteristic quote from *The Phenomenon of Man* states this law:

> The universe . . . presents itself to us, physico-chemically, as in process of organic involution upon itself (from the extremely simple to the extremely complex)—and moreover, this particular involution "of complexity" is experimentally bound-up with a correlative increase in interiorization, that is to say, in the psyche or consciousness.[3]

This "law" governing evolution suggests that consideration of matter alone, what Teilhard calls the "Without" of things, is inadequate for an understanding of phenomena, especially the human phenomenon. In

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addition to the "Without", there is a 'Within" to things, in other words psychism or mentality. Within the schema of the interplay of these two faces of reality, humans occupy a central position, as the "last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all the successive layers of life." With the emergence of humans, the truly interesting arena of evolution has ascended from blind biological development to conscious psycho-social development with a specific goal. The goal is the teleological apex of evolution, the temporal point designated "Omega", and identified finally with the "cosmic Christ."

Teilhard's view of technology must be understood within the context of what he sees as the duties incumbent upon humans in striving to attain union with their fellows and with Christ in the "pleroma." Because, according to Teilhard, "the world can only fulfil itself in so far as it expresses itself in a systematic and reflective perception," the development of the cosmos depends upon the creative activity of humans, expressed in the avenues of "intellectual discovery and synthesis." And since the drive of evolution is inexorably directed toward the Omega point, humans cannot simply renounce or reverse the progress of their intellectual-technical activities. These are nothing less than an expression of the "cosmic law of complexity-consciousness."

These ideas are well-illustrated by Teilhard's reaction to the detonation of the first atomic bomb. He had little patience with those who would halt the technical advance which led to nuclear technology, "as though it were not every man's duty to pursue the creative forces of knowledge and action to their uttermost end!"[4] Indeed, the harnessing of nuclear forces represented for him the essence of what is of value in technology: "man . . . using matter to serve his needs." Even more fundamentally, Teilhard valued the fact that in technology the psychic face of the world takes control of the material in a powerful and decisive way, ever heightening its own complexity in service to itself Teilhard enthusiastically catalogued such incipient scientific advances as genetic engineering and technological improvement of the human gene pool, exclaiming "have we not reason to hope that in the end we shall be able to arrange every kind of matter, following the results we have obtained in the nuclear field?"

Even this cursory glance at Teilhard's thought illuminates what is implied in his statement concerning knowledge-acquisition as a movement from the material to the spiritual. And equally well is it possible to appreciate Marcel's charge of "Prometheanism"—humans creating, even deifying, themselves. Marcel is in agreement with Teilhard on the inherent worth and value of technology. He writes in *The Decline of Wisdom*:

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> There is no doubt that in applying a technique which he has mastered the technician experiences a joy which is not only basically innocent, but even noble. It is a joy which is bound up with the consciousness of power over inanimate things, that is to say, over a reality which is subordinate and is in a sense meant to be controlled by man.[5]

However, there are at least two important criticisms of Teilhard's views to be found in Marcel's writings. The first pertains to Teilhard's historicism, or his belief in a single line of progress to which all humans, all creation, must submit. The second involves the terrible potential which technology possesses for the degradation, far more than for the "Christification," of humankind.[6]

At the very beginning of *L'homme contre l'humain* Marcel expresses a fundamental antipathy for what he terms "historical dogmatism," explained as "this formidable notion of 'the meaning of history', of 'the direction of historical progress', of a slope that we have to climb."[7] This dogma is insidious because it permits virtually any atrocity to be perpetrated against individuals who "resist the historical drive," when in fact the concept is nothing but an abstraction, a "strange, ridiculous divinity" which disguises the decisions and agency of real, flesh-and-blood human beings. Historicist dogmatism elevates the "historical current to the level of an absolute, untouchable imperative," and in so doing it cannot but "sacrifice the fundamental liberties of the human person." Teilhard's own historicism, rooted as it is in biology, would to Marcel surely be no less dangerous a dogma, especially in consideration of what Teilhard is ready to accept in obedience to the "bio-historical current."

I have already alluded to Teilhard's response to those who questioned the advance of nuclear science. He sets no practical limitations to what is permitted to humans in fulfilment of their spiritual destiny (which of course is subsumed under biological and psycho-social destiny), even to the extent of submitting themselves to the analysis and control wielded by their own sciences. Marcel offers a sharp warning of the dangers posed by such free rein. As the human environment becomes increasingly technological, he writes:

> It is impossible for man not to consider himself as part of this cosmos—or of this a-cosmos—planned and dissected by the technicians; as a result, he inevitably becomes a target for those techniques which, in principle, are legitimately applicable only to the outward world.[8]

It is in this mode of activity that technology becomes, for Marcel, associated with sin. It becomes in fact a "body of sin," as it reduces to the level of the merely "problematic"—the level of things standing in my way, to be overcome through my activity—things which are essentially

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mysteries. Mysteries are the realities within and without which are recognized not through techniques of discovery, but "only by means of a kind of inward grip."[9] In treating the mystery of humankind as a mere "problem," the sciences becomes "techniques of degradation" in the service of dehumanization.

Marcel said as much in his debate with Teilhard. Arguing for limits to the freedom of activity to be allowed technique, Marcel alluded to the doctors at Dachau as symbols of the potential sinfulness of technology, even conceived in Teilhardian terms: "What is the integrating consciousness of these scientists worth? I see nothing hominizing there." True to his principles, Teilhard maintained even in the face of this sombre example that "man, to be man, must have tried everything to the very end." This response is consistent with Darwinian biology, by which progress comes about through the trial-and error process of random mutation and natural selection. But to extend this biological model to human moral and psychic development demands rethinking of the very notion of evil.

Conceived within his cosmological framework, Teilhard claims evil to consist essentially of "refusal...of Omega."[10] On the human social plane this means a refusal to work toward social amity and communion. But on all levels, Teilhard considers evil to be "relentlessly imposed by the play of large numbers at the heart of a multitude undergoing organization," and in this sense necessarily obtains "through the very structure of the system." It follows that in the higher stages of the advance toward Omega, evil in the sense of disorganization ought to be less and less in evidence: "despite all appearances to the contrary Mankind is not only capable of living in peace, but by its very structure cannot fail eventually to achieve peace."[11]

Marcel does not share this optimism. He agrees that the present crisis is a "crisis of values", but calls it a dangerous illusion:

> to fancy that the convulsions of which we have been terrified witnesses can be explained by the coming into being of a planetary or cosmic consciousness; [that] these horrors are in some sense the price mankind has to pay for establishing himself on a new and superior level.[12]

Marcel sees evil not as something to be "biologically" overcome, but as mystery. And "when I say that evil is a mystery, I mean, very precisely, this: in no sense can the notion of evil be assimilated to that of a defect of function which could be remedied by suitable methods." Evil is not a problem "standing before," to be tackled and solved. It is instead a reality which I recognize as both outside me, and welling up from my own being. To evil as mystery there can be no technical solution.

The contrast between the two thinkers could not be more pointed. For reassurance as to our future, Teilhard looks to the "ever more numerous

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institutions and associations of men where in the search for knowledge a new spirit is silently taking shape around us." Far from seeing in such associations a sign and a means of the overcoming of evil, Marcel worries that: "There is every reason to fear that international conferences and congresses, with all their sterility and speciousness, correspond precisely to this lying version of a false unity." It is a false unity because, with the persistence of evil as intractable mystery, "the real problem is whether a unification of this sort . . .has a spiritual impact of any positive value."[13] He said to Teilhard, "I am perfectly aware of your insistence on the collective nature of this integrating consciousness, but I ask myself why such a consciousness should necessarily produce a spiritual value."[14]

Teilhard's cosmology, of course, predicts an eventual merging of all individual consciousness "in some sort of supreme consciousness,"[15] and to this conception Marcel offers two cautions. The first we have already examined: on the basis of the example of the "integrating consciousness" of the doctors at Dachau, "can one," asks Marcel, "be optimistic?"[16] Teilhard does not deny the evil of the Nazi doctors, but at the same time insists that integration of consciousness is human destiny, and in its final fulfilment in the pleroma a spiritual value will indeed obtain. But here Marcel is prompted to ask, what becomes of the human individual in the pleroma? Marcel's great fear is the depersonalization or "devouring anonymity"[17] of individuals exemplified in the institutions of technocracy. And there seems to be reason to fear that the synthesis of minds represented by the pleroma could be a "unification by reduction, unification through the loss of those differences which, to begin with, conferred on the people concerned their individuality, their value."[18]

Teilhard would hasten to assure to the contrary, as for example in the following passage: As a germination of planetary dimensions comes the thinking layer which over its full extent develops and intertwines its fibres, not to confuse and neutralize them but to reinforce them in the living unity of a single tissue."[19] He thus seeks to dissociate his view from what he elsewhere calls the "cult of the great All in which individuals were supposed to be merged like drops in the ocean." But even if the notion of a cosmic synthesis of consciousness is intelligible (Marcel thinks it is not[20]), disturbing problems remain for Teilhard's vision. Teilhard projected the Omega point to lie "thousands of years" in the future.[21] Until that point, there is every reason to fear that provisional and abortive attempts at human organization and unification will result in assaults on individuality, as the various fascisms of the century just past bear out. Again, Marcel's objection concerning the doctors at Dachau is pertinent. Dehumanizing social "accidents" such as Nazi Germany may indeed be necessary to a social evolution conceived of in Darwinian, trial-

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and-error terms. But for Marcel, the very invitation to pay homage to the future by exclaiming "*felix culpa*" in the face of atrocity stands in itself as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Teilhard's cosmology.

Superficially, one might think of the contrast between Teilhard and Marcel as that between an optimist and a pessimist. It is closer to the truth to see Marcel not as a pessimist dampening Teilhard's optimistic (and enormously influential) vision, but as a deeply reflective Christian philosopher rightly pointing out the dangers of a too-abstract view of human beings and their future, a view which conspicuously fails to appreciate in all their moral gravity the horrors witnessed in Europe so shortly before the "Marcel/Teilhard debate."

1 Claude Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin: A Biographical Study* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), p. 251.
2 Cuénot, pp. 251-2.
3 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 301 (hereafter *PM*)
4 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Some Reflections on the Spiritual Repercussions of the Atom Bomb", in *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 140 (hereafter *FM*).
5 Gabriel Marcel, *The Decline of Wisdom* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954), p. 8 (hereafter *DW*).
6 "Christification" is Teilhard's neologism denoting the union of all things in Christ, the Omega point of evolution.
7 Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (*L'homme contre l'humain*), translated by G.S. Fraser. (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, nd.), pp. 6, 240 (Hereafter *MMS*).
8 *DW*, p. 15.
9 *MMS*, p. 91.
10 *PM*, p. 28.
11 *FM*, p. 152.
12 *MMS*, p. 163.
13 *MMS*, p. 217
14 Cuénot, p.251.
15 *PM* 258
16 Cuénot, p 251.
17 *MMS* p 206.
18 *MMS* p 166
19 *PM*. 244
20 *MMS*. 167.
21 *PM*, 192.

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