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Graduate Symposium

Nov 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## A Reflection on Leon Kass and the Problems of Technology

With modernity, technology has become inextricable from human experience. One's possessions, relationality with others, and macro infrastructures required for maintaining social order and sustenance are all connected to technology. Technology has embedded itself so thoroughly that it no longer exists only as an externality but also as a psychological phenomenon, shaping the way humans perceive. Problems arising from technology become apparent when acknowledging its vast influence. Leon Kas, in "The Problem of Technology and Liberal Democracy" provides a description of the development of technology along with the unfolding of several issues resulting from technological advancements. Kas claims that technology is the mind's tendency to control uncertainties and subdue nature for the purpose of serving itself. It flourishes in liberal democracies centered on scientific development at the cost of privacy and freedom and can only be overcome through education and active change.

Historically speaking, the first notion of technology appears with the Greeks. This notion however is one which denotes art and rhetoric, the crafting of art. This interpretation, *techne*, is one which implies the construction and ordering of rationality (Kas, 2002). Humans are different from other animals because they not only follow instinctual tendencies, but deliberately order, create, and plan according to reason. In this sense, the ancients considered technology a craft and production.

In modernity, technology is characterized by its attempt to harness power and control energy. It is no longer a production but rather an imposition. A demand upon nature to provide us with resources which we manipulate and transform in ways that serve us. Technology aims towards efficiency and ease. It holds humans in the incubator of comfort. With its expansion, technology is no longer simply a tool that enables more efficient production, it is a mode of life.

Technology assimilates itself with human experience, constantly transitioning from luxury to necessity. It evolves from a merely physical manifestation to a cognitive one (Kas, 2002).

Technology makes its way into psyche and shapes it. As Leon Kas eloquently expresses, technology is the mind's inclination to structurally order and control that which it encounters in an effort to reduce and eliminate chance and spontaneity for human benefit; mastery of the external through rationality (Kas, 2002).

What is the origin or intention behind our desire to assert mastery over nature? Kas draws examples from various explanations which have been given over the course of technology's development. Some suggest that technology supplements our weakness. It allows us to overcome difficult circumstances. Others suggest that laziness, boredom, pride, or an array of other vices cultivate our desire to expand technologically. We may note that these qualities of human character are not limited to the modern era, yet it is only within the modern era that technology has increased exponentially. It is the advancement of science that distinguishes modern technology from its past manifestations. Tests of trial and error designed to understand how things work not only employ technology but further its scope. This, of course, leads to an understanding of nature as mechanistic, as having hidden systems of functioning which can only be discovered through experimentation. As opposed to the ancients, whose inquiry with respect to the nature of reality entailed questions of composition, modern inquiry is methodical, systematic. On this point, modern science, and technology merge.

Now that we have described the evolution of technology, we can assess the *problem* or problems associated with its advances. Kas suggests that the problem of technology begins with our very own approach to the situation; that we see it in terms of a problem (Kas, 2002). To suggest that technology is a problem is to assume two aspects. First, that there is a situation at

hand, with an obstruction that necessitates a solution. Secondly, that there is a direct solution which *solves* the problem, thus inferring a closed system. This is the exact method technology follows. It establishes a problem, postulates solutions, then executes the optimal solution with the intent of bringing the issue to a close. Thus, to identify technology as a problem, is to affirm a technological way of thinking (Kas, 2002).

Acknowledging that technology's influence upon the mind is inescapable in our assessment of the problem is insufficient grounds for abandoning the inquiry. Leon Kas states that there are three problematic underpinnings with respect to technology: its feasibility, lack of clear future oriented positive outcomes, and the self-contradiction inherent within itself (Kas, 2002).

First, we must assess whether technology can achieve its aim towards humankind's mastery of the natural environment. For instance, with the scope of eliminating famine, technologies have developed to efficiently mass produce food. While this solves the problem of starvation, it creates a new problem, pollution. One issue has been exchanged for another. How are we to determine whether the problems technology solves do not elicit further problems, more devastating problems? Technology does not appear to be contained and limited in its scope, thus it poses the danger of generating issues of increasing severity.

Now, let us assume that technology can be controlled, that unwelcomed effects can be averted, and its current trajectory controlled. What is the end? Common expectations of technology include sustainable comfort with respect to basic needs, unwavering health, and longevity. However, do these goals ensure happiness or fulfillment? If everything is scrupulously controlled, can desire or will exist? Existence reduced to a mechanism loses meaning and the

need for a thinking being. If chance and spontaneity have been subdued, rationality, as the act of bringing order out of chaos, no longer has its place.

Finally, technology becomes a tragedy, for it not only fails to accomplish the tasks which it is designed for i.e. the control of externalities, but it sets in motion a mentality that is harmful for the human psyche (Kas, 2002). In “The Troubled Dream of Life”, Daniel Callahan describes how carefully controlled medical technologies are designed to obtain mastery over the body. Callahan asserts that there is a clinical drive towards developing technologies that continuously expand the bounds within which we can save and extend life. He asks that we examine the tradeoffs of a fixated pursuit of life extending technology. Before medical technology’s development, illnesses were characterized by their rapid onset and resolution (Callahan, 2000). People often died within two weeks, with some fatal diseases lasting four weeks or rarely eight weeks before the afflicted individual would die. In the late 1800s, as the conquest against infectious disease began and effective therapies emerged, life expectancy rapidly increased (Callahan, 2000). While this is seemingly positive, we have exchanged a shorter life for a sicker life (Callahan, 2000). Relatively sudden deaths have been replaced by chronic and degenerative conditions leading to death. Callahan claims that technologies influence on medicine has changed our perceptions of death, evoking in us a fear of death unlike that of preceding generations, and further making us desperate for, and fixated on advances that will help us avoid death for as long as possible (Callahan, 2000). As Kas suggests, the mind seeks solace in new innovations. The technological innovations, despite their superficial appeal, can create the illusion of security when in fact, the situation does not attenuate in severity (Kas, 2002).

Now, with respect to liberal democracy, Kas suggests that the American Republic became the first regime to embrace technological advancement (Kas, 2002). However, scientific

advancement was not sought simply for the sake of progress, but rather for the benefit of the general welfare of the people, for liberty. With time, the development of technology in tandem with mass corporatization, bureaucratization, and government expansion led to the individualism and materialism characteristic of modern American democracy (Kas, 2002). For the egocentric individual, technology is the good because it satisfies immediate needs with ease. Such individuals are under the impression that they live freely because technology takes care of things that would otherwise consume their time. However, liberty does not entail self-indulgence. Liberty is the opportunity to self-rule, to contribute to the political sphere in a way that defends our rights and dignity.

Furthermore, liberty assumes the freedom of privacy, of private life. Private life is where we can be ourselves, where we can retreat and experience the sacred aspects of life unobserved. The mind and body need rest from the imposing influences of the external world. Conversely, with technology as it is today, the home no longer offers this solace. Education is required to ensure that our liberty is not replaced by technology. We must not allow technology to make us senseless and idle. We must actively engage and be aware of the threats technological advancements pose, and we must seek wisdom towards approaching these issues.

Leon Kas identifies the trajectory technology has taken over the course of its development. Only within the last generations has technology advanced at such an alarming rate. The human mind, now inescapable from the reaches of technology, strives to control and mitigate all uncertainties present in the external environment. Technology is both the means for this, and the thing which fosters the mindset of needing control, of solving problems. The risks associated with technology are severe and largely unforeseeable. The privacy and freedom of individuals slowly dissipates as technology's grasp on the modern era strengthens. We must

dedicate ourselves to the acknowledgement and education of this technological tragedy, tread with care, and move in unison towards a flourishing life.

## Works Cited

Callahan, Daniel. (2000) *The Troubled Dream of Life*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press

Kass, Leon. (2002) *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*. San Francisco: Encounter Books