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Short Communication

## Berdyaev Returns

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### Abstract

Religious criticisms of technology attempt to examine it from the perspective of ethics, with ethics resting, at least in the Abrahamic traditions, on some relationship to divinity. The religious dimension of human life has both practical and theoretical sides: morals and theology. Although these two subjects cannot be completely separated, it is useful to consider religious critiques that approach technology from the perspective of practical religious life or of religious thought, that is, theology. Nikolai Berdyaev sought to elucidate the basic characteristics of the technical age and how it brings to a close the earth-centered period of human history and democratizes society. Accepting the new civilization as historically given, he inquires into its religious consequences: What is the religious meaning of the technical-mechanical form of civilization? According to Berdyaev and Jacques Ellul something radically important is being lost in the technoscientific lifeworld in which technology has become a dehumanizing, life-distorting addiction. The only truly human or spiritual way forward is by renewing and reapplying the radical Christian tactic of attacking all false gods. Just as Christianity demythologized the natural-organic world of myths and superstition, Christianity can reassert human freedom and spiritually by demythologizing the technical-mechanical world. The attack on the false gods of nature disenchanting nature, opening a pathway to the modern science of nature, and thereby to modern technology and the techno-lifeworld. Now the same tactic must be re-deployed to torpedo our enchantments with and by technology.

**Keywords:** Nikolai Berdyaev; Jacques Ellul; Natural-organic; Technical-mechanical

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Краткое сообщение

## Бердяев возвращается

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### Аннотация

Религиозная критика технологии пытается рассмотреть ее с точки зрения этики, а этика, по крайней мере в авраамических традициях, основывается на определенном отношении к божественному. Религиозное измерение человеческой жизни имеет как практическую, так и теоретическую стороны: мораль и теологию. Хотя эти два предмета нельзя полностью разделить, полезно рассмотреть религиозную критику, которая подходит к технологии с точки зрения практической религиозной жизни или религиозной мысли, то есть теологии. Николай Бердяев стремился выяснить основные характеристики технического века и то, как он завершает геоцентричный период человеческой истории и демократизирует общество. Принимая новую цивилизацию как исторически данную, он задается вопросом о ее религиозных последствиях: Каково религиозное значение технико-механической формы цивилизации? По мнению Бердяева и Жака Эллюля, в технонаучном жизненном мире, в котором технология стала дегуманизирующей, искажающей жизнь зависимостью, теряется нечто радикально важное. Единственный по-настоящему человеческий или духовный путь вперед лежит через обновление и повторное применение радикальной христианской тактики нападения на всех ложных богов. Подобно тому, как христианство демифологизировало природно-органический мир мифов и суеверий, христианство может вновь утвердить человеческую свободу и духовность путем демифологизации технико-механического мира. Нападение на ложных богов природы лишило природу чар, открыв путь к современной науке о природе, и тем самым к современной технологии и техно-жизни. Теперь та же тактика должна быть применена вновь, чтобы атаковать нашу зачарованность технологией.

**Ключевые слова:** Николай Бердяев; Жак Эллюль; Естественно-органическое; Технико-механическое

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It was while doing research that led to the early 1970s publication of the Mitcham & Mackey *Philosophy and Technology* collection (Mitcham & Mackey, 1972) and *Bibliography of the Philosophy of Technology* (Mitcham & Mackey, 1973) that I discovered Nikolai Berdyaev's essay on "Man and Machine." It struck me as articulating a position with which I, as a young man disenchanted with middle class American culture, an opponent of the Vietnam War, and a recently converted Catholic – converted in part by a graduate seminar on Thomas Aquinas – had some sympathy. Berdyaev's article was the lead piece in a section of *Philosophy and Technology* labeled "Religious Critiques," a section that followed the much larger section of "Ethical Critiques."

Religious criticisms of technology also attempt to examine it from the perspective of ethics but now ethics resting, at least in the Abrahamic traditions, on some relationship to divinity. The religious dimension of human life has both practical and theoretical sides: morals and theology. Although these two subjects cannot be completely separated, I took it as useful to classify articles in the religious critiques section according to whether they approach technology from the perspective of practical religious life or of religious thought, that is, theology.

Nikolai Berdyaev was among the earliest Christian thinkers to recognize that technology (or technique) poses special problems for Christian culture. In "Man and Machine" he situates these problems within a historico-theological framework. According to Berdyaev, history is divided into three main periods: the natural-organic, the cultural, and the present technical-mechanical. Central to differentiating among these periods is the distinction between organism and organization. Extending notions we find in German vitalist philosophy, Berdyaev conceives of an organic entity as one with an inherent purpose, whereas organizations (such as machines) derive whatever purpose they might have from an extrinsic user.

In consequence, each type of entity is characterized by a different kind of activity. The difference between the natural-organic and the technical-mechanical periods is the predominance of organisms in the former and organizations in the latter; the transition from one period to the other occurs as the activity of mechanical construction is substituted for that of natural growth.

However, in between the organic and the organized is a third kind of object, the object of art, the presence of which characterizes the cultural period of history. Art produces neither strictly organic nor simply organized objects. Art, while using organization, prolongs the natural world into the human realm in a way that organizations do not; perhaps it may be said to point toward or symbolize the organic by means of organization.

As a historical religion Christianity arose within and became closely associated with the artistic activities of the cultural period. But this period has come to an end, to be replaced by the technical-mechanical era. The question therefore arises: Is the conjunction of Christianity and art merely accidental? Which kind of activity – artistic or mechanical construction – is most in harmony with the Christian way of life?

Berdyaev refuses to deal directly with this question. Instead, after trying to elucidate the basic characteristics of the technical age – how it brings to a close the earth-centered period of human history and democratizes society – he prefers to ask: What is the



religious meaning of the technical-mechanical form of civilization? In other words, he simply accepts the new civilization as historically given and inquires into its religious consequences.

His inquiry here points in two directions. On the one hand, technique destroys the earth-centered, telluric or autochthonic forms of religion, and creates grave dangers for the emotional aspects of life and the autonomy of the person. On the other, technical civilization “requires a more intense form of spirituality.” When human beings have the power to destroy the world, “then everything becomes dependent on the spiritual and moral state of a person, what they will use this power for, what kind of spirit this person has.” Technological civilization calls for a spiritual renewal to control the dehumanizing and enslaving powers of technology (Berdyayev, 1933/2023).

But the natural-organic world once enslaved human beings as well, under the guise of myths and superstitions. Just as Christianity demythologized that world, and deprived it of its enslaving power, so Berdyayev implies, can Christianity reassert human freedom and spiritually by demythologizing the technical-mechanical world. It is interesting to note here that the translation used in *Philosophy and Technology*, the only one available at the time, dropped a lengthy reference to the Orthodox theologian Nikolai Federov, who “combined faith in the power of technology with a spirit directly opposite to the one which prevails in the technical era” (Berdyayev, 1933/2023).

What Berdyayev argued is markedly similar to what Jacques Ellul would argue two decades later. Something deeply important is being lost in the technoscientific lifeworld in which technology has become a dehumanizing, life-distorting addiction, if not an idol – but there is no going back. The only truly human or spiritual way forward is by renewing and reapplying the radical Christian tactic of attacking all false gods. The attack on the false gods of nature disenchanting nature, opening a pathway to the modern science of nature, and thereby to modern technology and the techno-lifeworld. Now the same tactic must be re-deployed to torpedo our enchantments with and by technology.

Echoes of Berdyayev’s argument can also be found in the intellectual quarters of the conservative Christian revival in the United States. Rod Dreher (2015), conservative Christian American expatriate writer now living in Hungary, in „The End of Our Time“ included a lengthy quotation from Berdyayev’s (1933) *The End of Our Time*. There is a clear continuing appeal of Berdyayev’s mixture of apocalypse and spiritual rebellion that deserves to be interrogated from the perspective of other religious traditions.

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