
Pro Rege

Volume 10 | Number 1

Article 5

September 1981

Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Maatman, Russell W. (1981) "Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 10: No. 1, 21.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol10/iss1/5

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Book Review

by John M. Zinkand

Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge, by Egbert Schuurman (translated by Herbert Donald Morton). Toronto, Ontario: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1980. 434 pages, \$19.95. Reviewed by Russell Maatman, Professor of Chemistry.

Because of the important role technology plays in our society, it is widely discussed. Unfortunately, the discussion is usually fragmentary. As a result the reflective Christian often has difficulty in putting the pieces together. Schuurman attempts from a Christian stance to put those pieces together. He does so by analyzing the positions of other philosophers of technology and presenting a Christian response.

In the first of the four chapters Schuurman gives a philosophical analysis of modern technology. Analysis of the ideas of others is described in the very long second and third chapters. The fourth chapter gives Schuurman's own position, his Christian answer to the ideas of others described earlier.

One of the many good things about this book is that there is recognition of the positions of others: they are not all waved aside as unworthy of a Christian's attention. Schuurman carefully shows that non-Christian positions fall into one of two categories—transcendentalist or positivist—and that within each category there are significant differences. The second chapter, devoted to transcendentalism, examines the positions of Friedrich Junger, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, and Hermann Meyer. Transcendentalism is defined as the idea that technological development is inevitable, but that man must somehow transcend that development (p. 53). In the third chapter, devoted to positivism, the positions of Norbert Wiener, Karl Steinbuch, and Georg Klaus are analyzed. Positivists emphasize the given reality that is outside of man. "They take as their base the facts that are *at hand*" (p. 51). Man is a machine; in fact, positivists are preoccupied with cybernetics, "steersmanship," which Wiener founded. It is good to see Schuurman's demonstration that positivism is only one of the modern non-Christian positions. Positivists dominate such a large part of science, technology, and scientific and technological education that they seem to believe (and often impart the same ideas to others) that there is no "respectable" alternative to their position. It seems to me that positivism is greatly weakened if positivists are forced to conclude that their position is only one of the non-Christian positions.

Schuurman rejects both transcendentalism and

positivism because both philosophies are autonomous. In transcendentalism man attempts to flee from an autonomous power, technology, which man has created. This philosophy centers on man and his creation. Positivism is autonomous because it assumes that man's technology can solve the problems already caused by technology. Cybernetics, one of man's creations, leads to the modern computer, the great hope of the future. Again, man is at the center of things.

According to Schuurman, making man the beginning and the end of all things is wrong. Philosophy serves mankind only when it is anchored in a religion which confesses that God has created the world. "[God] binds the creation to His laws, and . . . the history of created reality, in which the mutual relations and coherence of all things are fixed, is led, controlled, and brought to its consummation by Him" (p. 327). God in Christ is the origin of all meaning. History discloses meaning for the Christian. In addition, ". . . [S]cience and technology can also be taken up in the disclosure of meaning. The person engaged in science and technology can render important *service* to the true progress of history" (p. 336). Thus the future will not be man-centered as envisioned by transcendentalists and positivists. The actual future will be determined by God, Who has a purpose in history.

Some comments: (1) Most of the book is fairly easy reading, but a few sections, such as the last part of the first chapter, where Schuurman describes his position in technical philosophical terms, are extremely difficult. (2) Schuurman is much stronger on evaluation and criticism than on a constructive approach, although what he does say relevant to a Christian position is quite good. (3) A helpful feature of the book is that it is very carefully outlined, with all sections numbered and most of them no longer than two or three pages.

Finally, this is an important book for Christians interested in making a serious effort in this field. Although many Christians are making a serious effort, they tend to look at only part of the problem posed by science and technology. Schuurman's insight and comprehensive survey of thought in the field should help counteract this tendency.