

Teilhard and the Future

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I would here like to correct some misconceptions which have emerged from speculations on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin concerning the future. These misconceptions are of two main kinds:

- a. technological instruments become the means of human thought and action,
- b. the human species will evolve biologically into new forms.

The first of these supposes that, with the advance of technology, higher thought and knowledge will be accessed through “super computers” which will be able to handle concepts and calculations beyond the power of the human brain. This idea transfers the noosphere back to the mechanical level of matter, to pre-conscious forms. This is the stuff of now old fashioned science fiction and is not at all what Teilhard is pointing towards.

The second misconception imagines the growth of biological super-brains, perhaps beyond the human species, or some kind of single planetary brain, which will be the noosphere. This too is a misreading of Teilhard who understood that the human brain and nervous system had already reached the highest biological complexity, and that the noosphere was already present but as yet generally unrecognised.

Teilhard sees the advance of technology not as a replacement of human action and intelligence, but rather as the means to master matter and liberate human energy from the kinds of tasks and labour which merely sustain his existence. This liberates human intelligence for higher tasks of thought, research and art, work which takes place in the community of thought, as distinct from individual labour. The noosphere is the cultural level of mankind, which for long has been the domain of only a few, even though the social organism is enriched by it. Technology belongs to the “objectifying” level of knowledge, and although part of the progress of thought and invention, does not enter the “within” of things, the realm that properly belongs to thought and consciousness with ends of a qualitatively different order. Technology is the “skeleton” of society, not its living, conscious tissue which is the inner and social level.

The brain of man is complete and already of the highest biological complexity, and thus any advance lies at a new threshold in which psychic activity comes into its own above the biological. It has long been recognised that intellectual objects exist beyond the entropy of matter – the conception of a work of art, mathematics, language, meaning, philosophy, theology. These intellectual objects also transcend physical space as they may be shared by all minds without diminution.

The work of the noosphere is concerned with the deepest knowledge of being and communion in being. The natural sciences are concerned with the morphology of the universe, while the human sciences - the humanities - are concerned with the inner being of the universe, with the intelligence that animates it. The living, psychic realm is the sphere in which man dwells and participates. This is the realm in which knowledge becomes communion, as distinct from description and explanation.

This realm is rooted in the human sense of “the whole”, the sense that all is unified. In terms of man, this manifests as the sense of kinship between all human beings, the

“sense of species” as Teilhard calls it, which is now tentatively emerging. This is reflected morphologically in the institutions which take concrete social form from thought. The subtler level of this is the inter-relations of institutions and mutual exchange between societies and cultures. Institutions belong to long time-scales, rooted in history and oriented towards the future. The realms of law, government, education and so on transmit the human intellectual inheritance from generation to generation while also advancing in knowledge and understanding. Such institutions save the human species from limiting itself by genetic transmission, a feature that halts the evolution of the lower species. The mind, and so the noosphere, is free from such limiting adaptations, and is thus open to unlimited foresight and responses to external conditions or changes. As Teilhard remarks, the human hand is free to take and to *lay down* any tool of its devising. Thus an interpretation of Teilhard which foresees technological instruments taking over from his biological limits is really to conceive of man as the instrument of technology.

Man is yet to become social to the degree that the potential of each individual may be realised. The unity of society is not a mechanical merging into an amorphous or homogenous one. Its unity is through the differentiation of each individual to their fullest autonomy since only an autonomous being may make their particular contribution to the collective growth and good. Only the autonomous individual can extend into participation, just as only two masters of chess can compete at the highest level.

Man can act only in so far as he can see. This is a fundamental principle of Teilhard. So when we direct our attention towards the future of man we need to be clear in our present understanding and perception of man. The false speculations about the future which I have noted here do not arise from perception of man but from speculations about the mechanics of technology or misconceptions about biological complexity. It is therefore important to ground such thinking in the present, and in particular in the realm of being of thought and consciousness. Situating ourselves there we can easily see the unactualized potential of man as he is now, and how present social circumstances preclude many from realising their gifts or making their contribution to evolution.

The institutions of society are still in slow formation, not yet functioning at their full potential because, as yet, their human members do not function at the level demanded. All too often such institutions see themselves as self-serving rather than serving beyond themselves. The same may be said of most large industries. They are *actually* serving society, but conceive themselves as sustaining their own existence. This inversion of the sense of service reflects only an elementary sense of participation in the whole. *The step into the noosphere is marked by the sense of serving the greater than oneself.* This step is the prelude to serving Point Omega.

This brings us to the mystical dimension of Teilhard’s vision of the future, and here we may note that Teilhard cites mystics such as Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross as examples of those showing the way ahead. Such mystics indicate that the fully formed noosphere is already here but latent. In history few have entered, but the higher mode of being, the fullness of being these mystics knew, awaits mankind generally once the threshold of the interior life is entered. Ultimately the unity of mankind depends upon the union of the soul with God as unity as such. Teilhard’s particular contribution is to show us how this ultimate union is extended throughout the life of man and to the spiritualization of the cosmos as a whole. The interior life, the “within of things” as Teilhard calls it, is in fact the universal. For Teilhard, then, there is a direct correlation between the capacity to enter into the mystical depths of

being and the power of outward action in the world, and it is this call to the fullness of being that really animates all creative human action. There is no other force that energizes man or has the power to extend his being to encompass all that is. And it is this force that calls man “from ahead” towards fulfilment and completion.

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