

Fifth Essay:
Is Technological Civilization
Decadent, and Why?

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the age of an industrial civilization that has swept away—definitively, it now seems—humankind's other, older attempts to shape, even to produce their lives without the help of science and technology (of technology based on science and in a sense even fusing with it). This has carved so vast a cleft across the continuity of human history that some modern Enlightenment thinkers perceive the recent age of barely three hundred years as a timid beginning of the true history of humanity while all else is shunted off to prehistory. The humans of the industrial age are incomparably more powerful and have at their disposal a far greater reservoir of energy than humans of earlier ages, reaching into the subatomic regions which nourish the stars because the Earth is no longer enough for them. They live in an incomparably greater social density and can make use of it to intensify their attack on nature to force her to yield ever more of the energy they intend to integrate in the schemata of their calculations and the levers of their hands.

The mighty growth of industrial civilization appears as a trend which no difficulties can hinder, be they external or internal. The external obstacles, reflected in perhaps the sharpest and most modern idiom, physicalistic and quantitative, in the deliberations of the Club of Rome,¹ concern the exhaustion of the global supply of raw materials, demographic growth,

environmental pollution, and the impossibility of expanding the nutritional basis, with the exponential nature of growth trends indicating a possibility of not-too-distant catastrophes. Still, the alarming outlook, against which there are admittedly no incontrovertible arguments so far, has not evoked any fundamental interest in contemporary society, as rationalists were wont to expect. The internal obstacles, resulting from the way this civilization affects the nature of being human as such and which manifests itself in those human hekatombs (myriatombs, actually)² that have no analogue, have so far become historically manifest with any clarity only as a motive for seeking and finding as rapid ways of forgetting in further intensification of our achievements. European societies have evidently not only never been as rich but also have never in history carried out so vast a social undertaking as in the "postwar" time (that is, in the era following the second world war), as if this benefit could make up for the retreat of Europe from the center of history (meaning thereby the old Europe, the European West as it grew out of the Western Roman Empire). Yet on the whole this unheard-of progress proved unsatisfying and the demands on the world's wealth and therewith on the structure of a society which seems to resist such demands continue to expand. The optimism of this trend, full of vitality, defying attempts to tame it, appears more powerful than any objection that the development itself can provoke. Nor is there any shortage of objections; we could say that an entire scientific scholarly discipline, modern sociology, is basically an outgrowth of an awareness of the danger, or even of a sense of the pathological nature, of the development of the industrial civilization up to now. To some this pathology appeared as something transient, something that future development would itself cure in virtue of the inner logic which they believed they could detect therein; so Auguste Comte saw the crisis of society in a lack of social consensus, of a spontaneous harmony of perspective which, he claimed, would return as the common mode of thought would inevitably become more positive, more scientific.³ Karl Marx was no less confident, though he trusted in a different

evolution: the inevitable disintegration and burial of the mode of industrial production toward which capitalist society is driven by its very functioning. Others, though, believed that they could see evident symptoms of pathology in the increasing incidence of suicides and mental disorders;⁴ today we could add drug abuse, the revolt of the young, and the destruction of all social taboos, all of which manifest an evident conversion at anarchy as their limit.

Yet before we can answer the question posed in our title, we need to agree on a criterion, a standard by which we could judge something decadent or positive. We do not wish at this time to examine the whole question of value judgments and of their relation to the problem of truth. We shall rest content with noting that decadence and its opposite are not mere abstract "values" and "moral concepts" but, rather, are inseparable from human life in its intrinsic nature, its very being. A life can be said to be decadent when it loses its grasp on the innermost nerve of its functioning, when it is disrupted at its inmost core so that while thinking itself full it is actually draining and lanning itself with every step and act. A society can be said to be decadent if it so functions as to encourage a decadent life, a life addicted to what is inhuman by its very nature.

What manner of life is it, though, which mutilates itself precisely when it seems full and rich? The answer has to be sought in the question itself.

What would human life have to be if something like that were to be possible—if life were in truth other than as at first it appears to itself? That *things* appear differently than they are is a function of their presenting themselves always one-sidedly, at a distance, in a perspective, and as a result can assume an appearance they share with other things. That we appear to ourselves as other than we are must be based on something else. Humans are not alien to themselves as things and their mode of being appear alien to them. Humans *are* themselves. If they are to appear to themselves as otherwise, they must become estranged from themselves and this process of estrangement must be something intrinsic to their mode of being. Thus there is

something about the human way of being that humans find estrangement somehow “more pleasant” or “more natural” than their own being. Being themselves is something that “comes naturally.” It is always an achievement. In a sense, we can say that even self-estrangement is in the last instance an achievement. It is a “relief,” not a “natural” lightness but the result of a certain “act.”

Humans cannot *be with the spontaneity* of nonhuman existents; they must *accomplish* their life, must *lead* it; they must “be done with it,” “come to terms” with it. Thus it seems that humans stand ever between two equivalent possibilities. That, though, is not the case. Estrangement means that *there is no* equivalence but, rather, that only one of the possible lives is the “right” one, our own, irreplaceable, the only one that we ourselves can act out in the sense that we truly bear it, that we identify with its burden—while the other is avoidance, escape, deviation into inauthenticity and relief. Thus the perspective of “choice,” decisionism, is from the start a false, objectivized, and objectivistic perspective *from without*. The true “perspective” is one of nonequivalence for which there is a fundamental difference between the responsibility which *bears* and “exposes itself” on the one hand and avoidance and escape on the other. Thus the reality of human life does not allow a perspective from without, the perspective of a “disinterested observer.”

One other distinction is needed besides this distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic.

The opposition, authentic/inauthentic, is based on the recognition that we can never be not interested in our own being: our own responsibility always captivates us, occupies us: a decision has been made about us before “we have decided.” True, authentic being consists in our ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it.

There is, however, also the distinction between the ordinary, the “everyday,” and the exceptional, the holiday. The exceptional, the holiday also unburdens, though not by escaping from responsibility but rather by revealing that dimension

of life in which the point is not the burden of responsibility and the *escape* from it but where, rather, we are *enraptured*, where something more powerful than our free possibility, our responsibility, seems to break into our life and bestow on it meaning which it would not know otherwise. It is the dimension of the demonic and of passion. In both, humans are placed at risk; however, they are not simply escaping from themselves into the “public realm,” into the ordinary everyday, into “objectivity,” they do not become estranged in the everyday manner. It is not a self-estrangement but rather being swept along, enraptured. Here we are not escaping from ourselves but, rather, we are surprised by something, taken aback, captivated by it, and that something does not belong among things and in the ordinary day in which we can lose ourselves among the things that preoccupy us. Here we experience the world not only as the region of what is in our power but also as what opens itself to us *of itself* and, as experience (for instance of the erotic, of the sexual, of the demonic, of the dread of the holy), is then capable of penetrating and transforming our life. Face to face with this phenomenon we tend to *forget* the entire dimension of the struggle for ourselves, forget responsibility and escape, letting ourselves be drawn into a new, open dimension as if only now true life stood before us, as if this “new life” had no need to care for the dimension of responsibility.

Thus the distinction of the sacred and the profane is distinct from that of authenticity-responsibility and escape. It has to be related to responsibility by means other than escape, it cannot be simply overpowered, it has to be grafted on to responsible life.

The distinction sacred/profane is important also because the profane is essentially the realm of work and of the self-enslavement of life, of its bondage to itself. The demonic, orgasmic dimension is fundamentally opposed to the sense of enslavement experienced by humans alone and expressed most powerfully by the need to work. Work is always forced labor. Work is concern for oneself, the demonic is heedless. To the life which is bound to itself, to the self-bondage of life, there belongs an

