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Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship

Printed: 05.10.01
Filename and date: Philarpu.doc

STATUS:

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Ivan Illich

PHILOSOPHY ... ARTIFACTS ... FRIENDSHIP

-- I speak as a xenocryst.

"Deus in adjutorium meum intende." Majid Rahnema, to you I say, "bismillahi rahmani rahim." Let me thus launch out on this triple extravagance. I am seventy, and this is the first time I address an assembly of philosophers. Second, twenty-five years ago, I promised Pope Paul VI to abstain from talking to groups of priests or nuns. This is the first time since that I face a Catholic association. Third, I speak after my teacher. Carl Mitcham has been my main guide in the field of technosophy, shepherding me for years before we met. Since I wrote Tools for Conviviality, his periodic and opinionated bibliographic forays have mapped my route into the philosophy of tools. What I have to say now grew out of the seven years I was privileged to philosophize with him, Lee Hoinacki, and a growing circle of friends at Penn State University.

Further, I am a hedge-straddler, a Zaunreiter, which is an old name for witch. With one foot I stand on my home ground in the tradition of Catholic philosophy in which more than two dozen generations have prayerfully cultivated a garden into whose trees they carefully grafted pagan Greek and Roman shoots. My other foot, the one dangling on the outside, is heavy with mud clots and scented by exotic herbs through which I have tramped.

I am here to argue for an approach I did not find on your agenda; I want to plead for recognition of the Philosophy of Technology as an essential element for askesis, and specifically for Christian askesis, in 1996. By askesis I mean the acquisition of habits that foster contemplation. For the believer, contemplation means the conversion to God's human face. Such conversion means Exodus, which is no longer just the aversion from the fleshpots of Egypt, nor even new power tools that increase my range. On the other shore of today's Nile lies a still unexplored anthropogenetic desert that we are called to enter. Understanding the characteristic features of new artifacts has become the necessary preface to this step: to dare chaste friendship, intransitive dying, and a contemplative life in a technogenic world.

I plead for an epistemology of artifacts as the antecedent to virtues that can flower into what Hugh of St. Victor calls gifts. I know that with this plea for a philosophical propedeutics I may appear to fit into your program like a xenocryst - for the crystallographer a mineral foreign to the rock in which it is embedded. But the occasion is special: You have made the philosophy of artifice into your anniversary cake. Hence, I can ask you to be patient with me.

Things are what "matter." Be this thing bread or keyboard, condom or car, things are forever at the center of belief-shaping rituals, and things are inevitably determinants of each moment of our incarnation. This has always been so. However, during the twentieth century, so-called development has increasingly turned the world into a man-made thing. Progress and growth have meant more things - more things which, as artifacts, are made to matter more, and to matter in unprecedented ways. Experientially, even though only tangentially, a fifth post-Thomist transcendental quality has been added to Being: ens aunque arte factum. For seeking the one thing that matters in the Gospel sense, namely, the itinerarium nostrae vitae in Deum, the flood of consequences following on artifacts has so far not been a central concern of passionate philosophical inquiry. Believe me,

Professor Anderson, your invitation to this seventieth anniversary of "Catholic philosophy" makes this date a red-letter day in my own seventy years, because I can address an audience in front of whom it is possible to place the foundation of Christian askesis in the philosophy of techné ... and hope to be understood.

-- Philosophia ... ancilla temperantiae.

Circumstances have made this new type of propaedeutic fundamental for the intellectus quaerens fidem. Objects were once relatively unproblematic. What they were, how they affected our appetites and distracted our minds was obvious to Elias on Mt. Carmel, to the Gregories, to Benedict and Ignatius, and to other masters of Christian prayer. This is no longer so. Economic/technological development has had at least two effects:

1. It has shifted the ontic balance from cosmic entities and objects contingent on the Creator to artifacts on which our existence has become dependent.

2. Further, development has shifted the epistemic balance from objects that can be synaesthetically grasped toward objects whose shadows appear, usually with a halo of context-sensitive help that makes them subtly irresistible, so that we become addicted to them.

The person today who feels called to a life of prayer and charity cannot eschew an intellectual grounding in the critique of perceptions, because beyond things, our perceptions are to a large extent technogenic. Both the thing perceived and the mode of perception it calls forth are the result of artifacts that are meant by their engineers to shape the users. The novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental prayer has a historically new task. He is largely removed from those things - water, sunlight, soil, and weather - that were made to speak of God's presence. In comparison with the saints whom he tries to emulate, his search for God's presence is of a new kind.

Please do not take me for a technophobe. I argue for detachment from artifacts, because only by abstaining from their use can I perceive the seductiveness of their whispers. Unlike the saintly models of yesterday, the one who begins walking now under the eyes of God must not just divest himself of bad habits that have become second nature; he must not only correct proclivities toward gold or flesh or vanity that have been ingrained in his hexis, obscuring his sight or crippling his glance. Today's convert must recognize how his senses are continuously shaped by the artifacts he uses. They are charged by design with intentional symbolic loads, something previously unknown.

The things today with decisively new consequences are systems, and these are so built that they co-opt and integrate their user's hands, ears, and eyes. The object has lost its distality by becoming systemic. No one can easily break the bonds forged by years of television absorption and curricular education that have turned eyes and ears into system components.

This was not so when, a long lifetime ago, this very Association was founded. Then, back in 1926, Jacques Ellul's technological bluff that "grips" human perception could scarcely be imagined. Virtual spaces that cannot be entered were around, but they were oddities. The very concept of context-sensitive help was unknown, information theory and systems analysis had not yet been conceived. These monsters with whom we now rub shoulders - I think of diagnosed lives that must be saved or immune systems that must be protected - were only theratogenic phantasies then.

The ob-jectum was routinely perceived as something real, external, separate - a res or an aliquid - and, at least analogically, as something that, in my conditio humana, my traditional reality, had a history. Architects drafted on paper or modeled in clay, not on a screen. True, in the time of Ford's Model A, when Thérèse of Lisieux was canonized, and I was born, the instrumental artifact moved toward its apogee; it was becoming increasingly dominant in the sensual environment. But technology was still conceived as a tool for the achievement of a telos, a final cause set by its user, not as milieu. Technology had not yet redefined homo from tool-user to co-evolved product of engineering. The nature of the object was not a quandary; it was something more or less what it had been for generations. This is no longer so. The old rules for the discernment of good from evil spirits must be complemented by new rules for the distinction of things from zombies, and objects from pictures. Temperance, what the Cappadocians call nepsis, must now guard the heart, not only from real things like sweet skin and weighty bullion, but also guide one to the sound recognition of the allurements of mere images and so-called needs.

-- Philosophia ... ancilla caritatis.

The rational distinction among things is equally basic for the relationship to persons. The faithful have been deprived of their millenary embodiment in traditional ways of life, each of which generated a second nature. These ways may have been vastly different from one another, but each was rooted, sustained, and perpetuated through its respective material culture. Each ethos, which means gait or way of life, shaped all human actions to a certain taste. These exercises of common sense, decency, fairness, and styles in the arts of cooking, suffering and swiving provided the seedbed for a set of virtues culminating in the principal one, love. With amazing speed, the hardware and software of the 1980s bulldozed the material milieu that had been generated by human action, and replaced it with a mostly technogenic, increasingly virtual, standard environment.

Paradoxically, the Church began to define her mission as inculturation in the very decade when all that was left of local folkways had been castrated, becoming raw material for a bureaucratically staged facsimile folklore. The critical grasp of the characteristics that distinguish ethnic artifacts from those that are system-engineered is arguably one of the demands of contemporary ecclesiology.

In my own pilgrimage, I engage philosophy as ancilla: on the one hand, to resist - how should I call it? - algorithmic reductionism and, on the other, to dispel the illusion that power or organization can ever enhance the practice of charity. This double conceptual shield against loving misplaced concreta, and belief in benevolent management inevitably implies the rejection of those genetic axioms from which the topology of technological thinking arises. This topology is well protected, if not hidden, by a self-image meant to give comfort to life beyond virtue and the good. The aim to make life always better has crippled the search for the appropriate, proportionate, harmonious or simply good life - hopes easily written off as simplistic or irresponsible. Only sober, unsentimental, vernacular rhetoric can possibly demonstrate the incompatibility of mathematical modeling or systems management with the quest for faith and love. The typical artifacts of our decade are at once more intimately and deviously connected to the understanding of revealed truth than hearth or arms or mill, the res agricola, res bellica, and scientia mechanica of earlier times.

I analyzed schooling as the secularization of a uniquely Catholic ritual because I wanted to grasp the mystery of the corruptio optimi. I went into the history of hospitality and care to oppose the Church-initiated sterilization of charity through its institutionalization as service. I wrote on the

degeneration of water into H2O as an instance of the disintegration of bodies and the dissolution of sacramental matter. I got myself into deep trouble with a pamphlet, Gender, on the social history of duality and its corrosion by sexuality. I wrote that piece, driven by love for Our Lady who gave birth to that Brother through whom my fraternity with ... well, a guy like Mitcham is subsumed in the mystery of the Trinity. In writing these books, I found the same mysterious pattern repeated again and again: A gift of grace was transformed into a modern horror: over and over, the corruptio optimi quae est pessima. Further, I saw that my reliance on the ancilla opened scores of unexpected perspectives on the symbolic, ritual, magic and aesthetic properties that the artifact has acquired by its recent transcendence of instrumentality.

As you see, I engage philosophy as ancilla, not just to avoid blunders on the path to the good life, but to avoid perverting the Gospel. I engage philosophy in the late twentieth century - which we may increasingly imagine, with Ellul, as one all-encompassing artifact - in order to live in such a way that I go beyond loving my neighbor "just" as myself and accept the vocation to love him as God enfleshed has done and wants to do through me.

> To love your neighbor as yourself - that was the rule God laid down before the Incarnation; he knew what a powerful motive self-love was, and he could find no higher standard by which to measure the love of one's neighbor. But this wasn't the "new commandment" Jesus gave to his apostles, his own commandment, as he calls it ... I am not just to love my neighbors as myself; I am to love them as Jesus loves them, and will love them till the end of time ...
>
> (Thérèse of Lisieux, The Story of A Soul)

This is the question that put me to search for those characteristics in contemporary artifacts that need to be faced fearlessly as issues of charity. In face of this one assembly today in Los Angeles, I can say these things without fear of being misunderstood. In this company they are trivial.

They were not trivial, you can be sure, on those tightropes on which I had to do my balancing act as a teacher. When speaking in Philadelphia or Bremen, I felt I ought to shroud my ultimate motive in apophasy. I did not want to be taken for a proselytizer, a fundamentalist - or worse, a Catholic theologian; I do not have that mission. Therefore, I did not relate the unprecedented characteristics of the modern artifact to the new commandment recorded by St. John, but to the philia traditionally understood as the flowering of politeia.

Carl and Lee and I have never found any difficulty presenting a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the modern artifact as a prerequisite for a dignified, affectionate, passionate life in the 1990s. Our students show an amazing interest in the practice of philia, the more so, the more clearly they understand the sadness of having lost all moorings. They follow with surprising attention our doubts about the possibility of ethics in the absence of shared forms of hospitality, and after the loss of respect for the art of suffering. Intuitively, they are ready to grasp our hypothesis that it is le milieu technique that conditions, reinterprets, and possibly thwarts the acquisition of ethical habits for a hexis shaped by the repetition of good actions. I never cease to be surprised by the readiness of serious students to accept my claim that the philosophical grasp of the nature of technology has become a fundamental condition for ethics in a milieu symbolized by Windows 95.

-- The ethical awakening in historical research.

I have spoken so far from the experience of a medievalist who, year after year, interprets twelfth-century texts on monastic community and friendship, an activity that inevitably leads my students into aporetic bafflement; they experience their own impotence to sympathize intellectually, sensually and bodily with the notions of chastity, humility, prudence, fortitude and the other virtues we have to translate for them. Simultaneously, many of them are shocked by the amoral sterility of their hearts, livers and loins when they attempt to address another person as Thou - to borrow an expression from Emmanuel Levinas. In other words, I try to teach philosophy as a discipline of intellectus quaerens amicum.

In my seminars, I have seen many a student look up from the exegesis of a passage by Aelred of Rivaulx, Héloïse, or Hugh of St. Vic tor, and search for a correspondence in his or her own twenty-two year-old heart, and recognize what the notions related to process, field, feedback, loop, and context sensitivity have done to their grasp. At such moments of disciplined alienation, it is then possible to foster the insight that it is almost impossible for an inhabitant of "the system" to desire an I-Thou relationship like that cultivated in Talmudic or monastic communities. Following such an awakening and finding themselves at a loss to recapture this past experience, a thirst is incited.

The desire for a self comes into existence through the respectful love of an Other. This longing, characteristic of some in 1996, is utterly different from the spirit of commitment with which the generation of 1968 awoke to a thirst for justice. They wanted to atone for privilege by making the Other an object of development, an object of economic, pedagogical or ideological transformation.

Only ten years ago, when you spoke of the need for a philosophy of things, the conversation veered toward the immanent power of modern objects to polarize society, to destroy the environment, or to control other people. But this is no more. The students I meet have a new readiness to listen to what objects say, rather than do.

The authority of "science says ... " has dwindled. With nausea, many people have become capable of recognizing that participation in systems castrates and sterilizes the heart, enervates ethical sensibility. Askesis, which means training in the renunciation of objects, is on the point of becoming an accepted first step toward theory.

Only a few years ago, students in Oldenburg and Penn State were amazed when Professor Illich announced his Science, Technology and Society course on the tradition of nepsis, the guarding of the senses, the philakia of the gaze, and spoke of high fidelity and worry about immune systems rather than of buttocks and breasts. I believe that the longing, which I just mentioned, is due to a widespread awareness of the desertification of the amorous faculties. Some speak of erotic expression or the experience of agape, but I prefer the term, philia. This yearning struggles for words, and is obscurely related to a faulty stance toward things that have mutated from instruments into systems. Students' readiness allows me to formulate the plea for philosophical attention to artifacts: Chisels and statues, text and layout, communications and systems condition the working of our senses and thereby impinge on the habitual practice of virtue. One can then begin to bring up to date the rules for the discernment of spirits, enabling one to recognize the unprecedented influence of the 1996 artifact.

Over thirty years ago, Norris Clarke, then President of the Jesuit Philosophical Association, was aware of the issue. In 1961, addressing that association, he said:

> Wrapped in the ephemeral dignity of office, I want to force upon you quite shamelessly one thought that has been causing me considerable philosophical concern during the last few years ... a serious lacuna in Thomistic metaphysics ... the lacuna concerns the metaphysics of order or "system" ... no Aristotelian or Thomistic type of accident could adequately express the mode of presence of the final cause in a non-cognitive natural agent.

Clarke points toward the fact that the nature of an epoch's modal object, the nature of the "thing" from which only the embrace of Lady Poverty can wrench me, cannot be understood at all times by the same categories. In retrospect, this seems to be eminently so in the case of technology or instrumentality. Techology as instrument has dominated western perception for 600 years, but is now fading away. Why? Simply because the moment I perceive the ob-jectum as a system I operate, it loses the otherness decisive for the character of tool.

My interest in mediation by tools was awakened by an innovation in the sacramental theology of the thirteenth century. Up to that time, organon had meant both hand and hammer and, at times, both of them in conjunction. Only in the time of Aquinas was the "tool" disembedded as causa instrumentalis, an abstraction which, arguably, became the labeling category for the macro epoch into which all of us were born.

I thought that this discovery of a novel mode of causation around 1240 was the result of fides quaerens intellectum. I thought that the mental construct, technology, was just one more instance of corruptio optimi, one more example of the secularization of a conception that had been coined to interpret the faith. Here, the contemporary horrors of technological manipulation could be traced to a corruption of sacramental theology.

I was wrong. The artifact was an instrument par excellence, not to understand the infallible action of God in the sacraments, but to explain the fallible action of angels governing heavenly spheres. Being spiritual beings, they needed heavenly bodies to govern the world below the realm of the moon. For the Scholastics, one of the principal characteristics of the universe was order. It was thought not fitting that God act directly on the world. It seemed appropriate - in proportion - that angels, pure spirits, guide these heavenly bodies. Instrumental causality thus entered philosophical thought.

In the study of theology, ecclesiology was my preferred subject; and, within this discipline, liturgy. Liturgy, like ecclesiology, is concerned with sociogenesis. It inquires into the continued embodiment of the Word through rituals. Necessarily, these rituals often center on objects like tables, tombs and chalices. So, my interest in these so-called sacra led me to the theory of instrumentally used objects. I pursued the nature of the artifact in the belief that understanding would deepen my insight into virtue in our epoch, especially the virtue of charity. Therefore, the love of friendship, philia, as practicable under the social and symbolic conditions engendered by modern artifacts, has been the constant subject of my teaching. For me, finally, philosophy is the ancilla amicitiae.

(Presentation given to The American Catholic Philosophical Association at their annual meeting in Los Angeles, California, March 23, 1996.)