EXPLORATORY ETHICS

by Roger L. Shinn

Abstract. Ian Barbour is wisely aware of two kinds of ethical problems that constantly interact: first, those where we know the good but lack the will to do it; second, those where, in uncertainties and conflicts of values, we have to discover the best course of action. Both have long histories; but new technologies, which mean new powers, accentuate both. Three issues in Barbour's work deserve comment here: (1) the ways in which technology requires new ethical thinking, but cannot of itself make ethical prescriptions; (2) the perplexing relation of technology to political processes; (3) the relation between need and greed, a valid distinction that may be more puzzling than Barbour allows because a technological culture multiplies needs. I applaud Barbour's achievement. I find it ironic that I occasionally think him a shade too optimistic, whereas he has occasionally said the same of me.

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My words of appreciation to Ian Barbour are far more than the conventional compliments uttered by scholar-hawks as they circle for the kill. In conversations ranging over many years I have come to appreciate the comprehensiveness of his mind. Very few living people could produce anything like the two volumes of his Gifford Lectures, exploring vast areas of science and technology, metaphysics, ethics, and theology. I couldn't come close.

Barbour's characteristic procedure is to lift up an issue, to show the diverse judgments of many thinkers and doers, to explain the conflicts, then to take a stand and explain why he has chosen it.

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He expresses firm convictions and commitments. But rather than caricature the opinions he rejects, he is eminently fair. And he does not hide his uncertainties and perplexities.

ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT

The context of Barbour's inquiry in *Ethics in an Age of Technology* (1993) is the relation between the two terms of his title: *ethics* and *age of technology*. What do these two terms have to do with each other? Barbour, without laboring the point, shows an awareness of two quite different kinds of ethical problems. In the first, the ethical demand is clear and the question is whether an individual or society has the courage, the generosity, and the persistence to act responsibly. Ian quotes the Apostle Paul: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (p. 42, quoting Romans 7:19). That persistent problem—classically known as the bondage of the will—antedates this technological age. Technology neither produces nor solves the problem.

The second kind of problem arises when we do not easily know what is good and right. We have to search, examine diverse claims on our loyalties, and struggle through confusions and conflict to determine what we ought to do. The pure in heart, if any can be found, are as perplexed as the rest of us. Philosophers may wistfully try to harmonize conflicting values or arrange them in a hierarchy, with the lesser values subsumed under greater ones. But hard conflicts remain. This kind of problem, like the first, antedates the age of high technology. It is the stuff of folklore and myth, of Greek tragedy, of family life through the ages, of the political organization of societies. When Barbour uses the title "Conflicting Values" for part 1 (the first third) of the present book, he tells us that he is aiming primarily at the second kind of problem. But he never forgets that the first kind, centering in the corrupt will, constantly infiltrates the second.

Given that understanding, technology ceaselessly impinges on ethics. The most obvious reason is that technology is a form of power, and the use of power is as fundamental an ethical problem as any. Barbour rejects both the messianism that expects a "technological fix" to remove ethical conflicts by making everybody happy and the reification and demonizing of technology as an alien force that overrides conscious purpose, determining the direction of life. He also rejects a third belief: that technology is innocently neutral, subject to human will, which directs it for good or bad purposes. Granted, a laser can be used for healing or incorporated into weaponry. But

technology, in general, is ambivalent rather than neutral; it is a social construction, incorporating the values of its designers and constructors. A look at the spectacular technological achievements of our time reveals a lot about the aims and priorities of our societies, including their governments and industries. Technologies are not lying around, waiting to be discovered, then waiting a little longer to be applied. They are, for the most part, purposefully developed, usually by the strong and the wealthy, and they usually enhance the power of the powerful.

THREE ISSUES

The Relation between Technology and Ethics.   Within this general context, I shall comment on three issues. The first is the relation between ethics and science with its associated technologies. Here I agree with Barbour: "We face unprecedented choices for which traditional ethics give us little guidance. The evaluation of technology today must be global, anticipatory, and interdisciplinary" (p. xvi). This is not to disdain ethical and religious tradition. A rootless people is unlikely to rise to the ethical challenges of our time. The insights of the Hebrew prophets into the qualities of justice are as pertinent now as when they were first stated. But the particular prescriptions of biblical law for feeding the hungry and caring for widows are almost useless for our time. We need scientific knowledge and technological skill to produce and distribute food to a world that will soon include 6 billion people. The genetic foolishness of Plato is utterly inadequate to our perplexities about gene splicing. The traditional ethics of war and violence do not mention Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia, terrorism at the World Trade Center and on the streets of Cairo, or nuclear proliferation. Technology has changed the options before us.

Yet science and technology cannot, of themselves, prescribe valid decisions. Think of a few technological achievements of recent memory: cheap and safe abortions, mechanisms that allow politicians to send their messages into homes, supersonic aircraft, nuclear weapons, manipulation of DNA. The existence of new human powers does not certify their desirability. To put the case in a single sentence, policy decisions increasingly must be informed by science and technological know-how, but they cannot be prescribed by science or technology alone. Here I thoroughly agree with Barbour.

Technology and Politics.   This leads to a second issue: the consequences of technology for political life. The new "age of

information" might seem, at first glance, to fulfill ancient dreams of an informed citizenry. But the impression is delusory. Would anybody say that the current U.S. Congress is better informed for its tasks than the first Congress meeting in 1789? When James Madison and his colleagues drafted the U.S. Constitution, they assumed that geographical representation would give expression to the varied interests of the total nation. They assumed also that elected senators and representatives would be able to understand the proposals on which they were expected to vote. Both expectations have since become somewhat surreal. Many interests clamoring for political attention are only remotely connected with congressional districts. And in every session of Congress, legislators must vote on many matters they don't understand.

One consequence is that decision making is increasingly shifted from the floors of Congress to committees and their staffs. That means that excessive power moves through arcane channels where conniving is easily concealed. As for technical expertise, that is provided in abundance by lobbies, well paid to work for the advantage of corporations and interest groups. There is some help from the National Academy of Sciences, a federally chartered but independent group of scientists, which chooses panels qualified to evaluate technical proposals. Scientists are themselves not totally disinterested parties when they evaluate proposals dear to their own hearts, but they are at least a few steps removed from the partisanship of lobbies. The average citizen, however, doesn't know that the National Academy of Sciences exists. The same citizen has heard about the tobacco and armaments lobbies but is aware of no more than a fraction of their operations behind the scenes. The most obvious recent example is seen in the fiasco over health care legislation in the 1994 congressional session. According to the estimate of *Newsweek*, "the interest groups spent at least $300 million—more than the Democratic and Republican 1988 and 1992 presidential nominees combined—to defeat health care. Much of this money was spent on blatantly untrue advertisements designed to scare the public" (19 Sept. 1994, 28).

Health care is a beautifully clear—or notoriously muddy—example of the complexities of establishing justice in an "age of technology." High-tech medicine is expensive. As a consumer, I have almost no ability to judge my needs. No *Consumer Reports* article can tell me whether I need another CAT scan or MRI. I am virtually certain that I have received some treatments that were excessive, but I lacked the skill or courage to reject the advice of the medical expert. Beyond such questions, there is the issue of justice. What demands

have I a moral right to make on the public (through Medicare) when I have already surpassed my biblically allotted three score years and ten? The ethical issues are almost intractable, even apart from the confusion deliberately spread by high-spending interest groups.

Technology, Need and Greed.   I am already edging into my third issue. Here I turn to Barbour's statement in his preface: "Provided that population growth is curbed, global resources are sufficient for every need, but not for every greed." I think it was Gandhi who first coined the statement, often echoed since his time, contrasting need and greed. Part of me wants to applaud the proposition—and the whole philosophy behind it, with its recognition of the moral offense of incredible luxury in a world of desperate need. The other part of me wants to turn a skeptical eye on the claim.

Part of the uniqueness of the human creature in the midst of the whole creation is the elusiveness of the definition of its needs. Among animals, sexual desire is pretty well governed by instincts relating to times and seasons. Human freedom means a vast expansion of the scope and variety—and inevitably the marketing—of sexual expression. It is often said that humans are the only species that makes love all the year round, that only among humans does the female engage in sexual intercourse after menopause. I am not competent to verify those claims to the last detail, but the general idea is clear. It's not easy to define human need. To take another example, many people give their dogs a healthier diet than they enjoy themselves. We know pretty well what constitutes a healthy diet for household pets, but people want and think they need a variety of delectable foods. Maintenance of physical health is only one of the reasons why people eat.

Is music an expression of need or greed? What about the other fine arts? What about flower gardens and golf courses, which occupy land that might be dedicated to life-sustaining agriculture? If planting flowers rather than beans leads directly to the death of one child from starvation, I'll favor the child and the beans. But do I really want a world with no flowers? My point is that Ian, who has identified technology as a social construction, might want to go on and identify "need" also as a social construction.

Even on a subsistence level, our needs are often social constructions. Is electrical refrigeration a need or an object of greed? Obviously it is not an absolute need. Moses and Socrates, Confucius and Gautama Buddha, Croesus and Julius Caesar, along with the vast majority of the human race, got along without it. Electrical refrigerators have been known for maybe one hundredth of a percent

of human history, and not the most glorious hundredth of a percent. But when millions of people jam into cities, far from their food supplies, electrical refrigeration becomes a need, not an object of greed. Certainly I would not tell the mothers in Mexico City or in Harlem to stifle their greed for refrigerators and be content with lesser needs.

For better or worse, we have organized societies that convert luxuries into necessities. Vast systems of water purification and waste disposal, unknown in most of the past, have become needs in a technological society. I want to resist the gloomy conclusion that an "age of technology" creates needs faster than it creates the means to satisfy the needs, but in some times and locations that is the case.

When we move beyond questions of subsistence, the problems multiply. Was my journey to Chicago for this meeting of the American Academy of Religion an act of need or greed? Imagine Gandhi's judgment on the extravagance of this meeting! What of my automobile, my word processor, my telephone, the electronic keyboard in my living room, my library?

Let's pause just a minute on the telephone. I suppose we all have moments when we wish we didn't have that infernal instrument, but it's a good example of the way in which a technological society transforms what were once luxuries into necessities. Everybody my age has grandparents who had no telephone and did not miss it. As late as 1932 the *Literary Digest* lost its credibility, and consequently its existence, because its famous presidential poll showed Herbert Hoover defeating Franklin D. Roosevelt—all because the magazine overrelied on telephone subscribers, apparently unaware that they were an economically privileged sample of the population. Now most people regard a telephone as a necessity. Without a phone, a family is likely to be economically dysfunctional. Just as important, those without phones are excluded from communities of discourse that are essential to selfhood. Socrates was not underprivileged because he could not phone Protagoras; maybe he was better off conversing in the marketplace, where Plato could listen in. Today, we must assume, without a phone he'd be a nonentity.

I must add one other twist to this discussion. It comes from Fred Hirsch's brilliant and disturbing book *Social Limits to Growth* (1977). Since Barbour was generous enough to thank me in his preface for a few suggestions about his present book, I must now publicly repent for not urging him to include Hirsch's argument. Hirsch published about five years after *The Limits to Growth*, the famous first report to the Club of Rome, written by Donella Meadows and her colleagues (1972). The earlier volume was the most dramatic of several books

that, at that time, emphasized the physical limits to the carrying capacity of the earth, considered in terms of population, resources, and pollution. Hirsch, while aware of the physical constraints, chose to emphasize the social limits. His argument was based on an observation about human nature plus a simple application of logic. What most people want, said Hirsch, is more than their neighbors have. And there is no way—unless in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon—that everybody can have more than the average. Even if technological innovation could produce ever more consumer goods, it could never meet insatiable human demands. So the problem comes home to human nature and justice.

I do not want to take any of the sting out of Barbour's challenge to us. I am all too prone to recognize my need and others' greed. I simply want to reiterate that, once human freedom is unloosed in the creation, need becomes an elastic term. And any major redefinition of need, in an age of ecological sensitivity, becomes an immense task of social reconstruction, not just an adjustment of personal taste.

CONTINUING CONFLICTS

I have selected for comment three issues from Barbour's rich menu: the relation of scientific technology to ethics, the consequent political problems, and the difficulty of defining human needs. My agreements with Ian are substantial, my differences subtle. I applaud his desire to redirect technology rather than simply cheer it or bewail it. I applaud also his characteristic way of dealing with conflicts: his effort to search out the validity of all positions in conflict and his desire to mediate the conflicts, not by splitting the difference, but by seeking a synthesis that preserves what is valid in each party's stance.

If we have a difference worth exploring, it may be—I am not entirely sure—that my world is a little more jumbled than Barbour's, with conflicts more intractable and problems more insoluble. I wonder whether the limitations of knowledge and the tragic elements in life should not be more insistently portrayed. Put theologically, it may be that the only solution to many problems is eschatological.

American society today includes a minority who simply don't fit into the system. They are mostly white but disproportionately black. The majority might like them to disappear. They are mostly unemployed, seemingly unemployable, and often homeless. Sometimes they just check out of the dominant society, sometimes they rebel against it. Yet they are inalienably human, sinners embodying grace. To what extent is our form of technology responsible? Nobody knows, exactly. Barbour and I have resisted Jacques Ellul's

overwhelming determinism. But I find Ellul more persuasive, more threatening, than I wish.

Both Barbour and I prefer pragmatic, exploratory investigations to doctrinaire assertions and actions. Yet neither of us espouses the easygoing pragmatism that sees social life as a progressive exercise in problem solving. We concur in recognizing that many social conflicts are really conflicts of power, that people in power usually prefer to maintain their position in an unjust world rather than accept a lesser status and power in a better world.

I suspect that Ian's early life in China, though he rarely mentions it, gave him a continuing sensitivity to the impermanence and vulnerability of our Western society in this age of technology. In my case, the battlefields of Europe during World War II gave me a jolting conviction that all social constructions are precarious. My later participation in the World Council of Churches' studies of "a just, participatory and sustainable society" required me to face people who see the technology of the great powers and their conventional pieties as a giant conspiracy to maintain their power at oppressive cost to the majority of the world.

Thus Ian and I frequently converge in our perceptions of the world. In conversation, we usually agree in our forebodings about the present course of history. Yet, strangely, each of us occasionally expresses surprise at the apparent cheerfulness in the published works of the other.

I can guess at the reason for that: People write about social problems with the hope of accomplishing something. If society seeks proximate solutions to ultimately insoluble problems, as Reinhold Niebuhr often said, we can work for solutions even though we know they are proximate. To express too many doubts and reservations is to sink in the slough of despair. Neither of us believes that purposive action is useless. We are not utopians, but neither are we futilitarians. So we make our efforts to redirect the vast human powers inherent in technology, even though we know the obstacles are great. Perhaps the classical way of putting this is to say that we are justified by faith, not works, but that faith without works is dead.

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