

# METHEXIS | MEΘΕΞΙΣ

REDISCOVERING THE ANCIENT AND CATHOLIC APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY

BY  
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# 1 Motivation

The modern (western) world works predominantly on enlightenment principles. That individuals exist as atomic without any sort of rooting in their pasts that gives them values on which to stand. That morality can and ought to be continuously rediscovered, rather than passed down. That 'innovation' and 'scientific thinking' consistently leads in a profitable path.

These ideas are not rooted in charity and humility, the cornerstones of true wisdom. Rather they are rooted in a presumption that what (we think) we know now is the best- the tip of the spear, the 'cutting edge'. One needs only a cursory glance at history and the decline of civilizations to realise this is nowhere near a guarantee, and that true wisdom is hard to come by. I think even a number of enlightenment thinkers, such as the influential John Locke, understood this. One cannot read the works of Locke without still seeing a great deal of ancient wisdom that hadn't yet shaken off- indeed many regard him to be quite inconsistent because of this, and consistency is key within an enlightened thinker's framework.

In the present age there is a longing to rediscover this discarded Western heritage, which is at its core a Christian one. When one comprehends that the true underlying value of a society is its moral nature, and that its development of technology reflects and reinforces it, one can see with clear and fresh eyes first that ancient civilizations had virtue, then appreciate their understanding of virtue, and finally to take this eternally valid paradigm and apply it to ancient life.

As Leo XIII writes in *Rerum Novarum*,

From contemplation of this divine Model [of Jesus Christ], it is more easy to understand that the true worth and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue.

[para. 24]

If human society is to be healed now, in no other way can it be healed save by a return to Christian life and Christian institutions. When a society is perishing, the wholesome advice to give to those who would restore it is to call it to the principles from which it sprang; for the purpose and perfection of an association is to aim at and to attain that for which it is formed, and its efforts should be put in motion and inspired by the end and object which originally gave it being. Hence, to fall away from its primal constitution implies disease; to go back to it, recovery.

[para. 27]

## 2 Metaphysics

### 2.1 The Aim of Economics (οἰκονέμομαι) is the Household (οἶκος)

"Economics" comes from the greek word "οἰκονέμομαι" which means "household management". And even in this, the household still has an aim: for the benefit of its members both materially and spiritually. The essential difference between managing a household and managing oneself is the *social* aspect of it.

### 2.2 Relationship is Reality

## 3 Principles

### 3.1 Subsidiarity

Neither must it be supposed that the solicitude of the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests. Her desire is that the poor, for example, should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and better their condition in life; and for this she makes a strong endeavor.

[para. 28, *Rerum Novarum*]

Even in this, Leo XIII uses very nuanced language. It would be one thing to say "the poor should not be wretched". It is another to say that the "poor should rise above poverty... and better their condition.". It is quite clear that the betterment of their condition is not to be imposed upon them externally (even if it is their desire) but is to be derived from their own works.

## 3.2 Non-alienation

## 3.3 Soul and Body

There are two main heresies as regards the relationship between soul and body: one is to accept the body, and to reject the soul. This is *materialism*- all that matters (or even, is) is the material realm we can experience with our five senses. Over the past century or more, this heresy has gained significant traction, and is the basis of many influential ideologies, most notably Communism. The word itself has a negative connotation in our society, associated with accumulation of goods, but this is not quite broad enough- accumulation of mere sensory experiences- another form of hedonism: this too is materialist.

The other heresy in our time is not as prevalent, although in the early centuries A.D. was quite the rage, is the *gnostic* heresy: that material things are flawed, evil, or are in some sense inauthentic or a distraction.

The orthodox Christian understanding has always been one of dualism: there exists both a spiritual realm and a physical realm- they interplay, and both are important places not to be neglected. The field of *Theology of the Body* has borne great fruit towards understanding that the soul and body are not doomed to conflict.

# 4 Projects

## 4.1 META-STEM

Many might be familiar with the modern acronym of "STEM" (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). In some regards, this is a useful collection of loosely related disciplines. In other regards, drawing a line about these and packaging them together suggests that these fields have more to do with each other than they do with arts or philosophy. In practice, this is of course folly- many engineers pull loosely from these other disciplines while working closely with graphic design artists. Are 'social sciences' sciences? Aren't they better connected to theology, morality, and ethics?

There's been a movement to "put the arts in STEM" and turn the acronym to STEAM.

While this is, in some regards, a noble effort and perhaps a slight remedy to the underlying metaphysical mindset (as Dotstoevsky quoth, "Beauty will save the world"), it is still too shortsighted.

I'd propose a new acronym, or a prefix: META-STEM. The META standing for Manual labor, Ethics, Theology, and Arts.

If your stomach churns at the word "Theology" you could replace it with "Teleology". These are, essentially, the same thing: the study of the divine is the study of our end goals.

## 4.2 Proliferation of Manufacturing Technologies

The essential problem that must be wrestled with is this: the short-run monetary costs of utilizing distributed, ethical manufacturing will always be higher than centralized, unethical manufacturing.

## 4.3 A Survey of Teachings

### 4.3.1 E.F. Schumacher's Small is Beautiful

E.F. Schumacher, author of *Small Is Beautiful*, was statistician, economist, a dedicated atheist, but converted to Catholicism. He also helped found the Intermediate Technology Development Group which today operates as Practical Action. Charles Fager writes:

... one of the most frequently cited sections [of *Small is Beautiful*], "Buddhist Economics", almost made it appear as if he were deeply involved in Eastern religions. But wasn't this section, I inquired, really more informed by the Catholic writings and thinkers he mentioned so frequently elsewhere in the book - the papal encyclicals, Newman, Gilson and, above all, Thomas Aquinas?

Indeed, Schumacher even admits immediately before the iconic section, "The choice of Buddhism for this purpose is purely incidental; the teachings of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism could have been used just as well." [p. 52]

Schumacher emphasizes that the Christian message is a very profound and quite specific one rather than some vague feel-good notion which could manifest in a broad variety of teachings.

I found that in England almost any old nonsense was being written and passed off as Christianity, even by bishops. And so I finally decided that the Catholic tradition was the one where I felt most at home, and where the essentials of Christianity were best preserved.

Schumacher is quite adamant that Catholicism must be a *social* affair, that it must manifest in community and continuity. Dr. John Coleman, professor of religion and society at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, stated,

By this I mean the stream of Catholic thought that build on Thomistic principles, as particularly reapplied in the work of Jacques Maritain. Its adherents stressed that human institutions ought to be manageable in size, respectful of the human scale, and sanely run so that they did not damage the people involved in them.

Coleman continues:

The problem with social Catholicism, is that it has been mainly enunciated rather than acted upon.

The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give man a chance to utilise and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his ego-centredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence.

[p.54-55]

The craftsman himself can always, if allowed to, draw the delicate distinction between the machine and the tool. The carpet loom is a tool, a contrivance for holding warp threads at a stretch for the pile to be woven round them by the craftsmen's fingers; but the power loom is a machine, and its significance as a destroyer of culture lies in the fact that it does the essentially human part of the work.

- Ananda Coomaraswamy [p.55]

This sounds good at first- but there is something amiss about this. I don't think drawing a perfect line is important, but understanding the principle at play- and how the line might not be between material goods- is. CNC Mills and 3D printers, for example, certainly can be either a *tool* or *machine*. If they are employed to pump out parts en masse, they are a *machine* to those tending them. If they are used by a designer to make their designs manifest (some of which would not be feasible with the use of manual machines), they are most certainly a *tool* as the human aspect of design is still in play. The step from one-off to mass production- from an expression of creativity to brainless toil- this is what can turn a *tool* into a *machine*.

The very start of Buddhist economic planning would be a planning for full employment, and the primary purpose of this would in fact be employment for everyone who needs an "outside" job: it would not be the maximisation of employment nor the maximisation of production. Women, on the whole, do not need an "outside" job, and the large-scale employment of women in offices or factories would be considered a sign of serious economic failure. In particular, to let mothers of young children work in factories while the children run wild would be as uneconomic in the eyes of a Buddhist economist as the employment of a skilled worker as a soldier in the eyes of a modern economist.

This phrase about women may sound misogynist (bear in mind, this work was written in 1973). But the underlying sentiment is anything but. Schumacher has claimed women to be the most skilled labor of all and that their utilization in a factory environment is downright inefficient- no, insulting, to women, children, and society.

To the true-libertarian-types out there, Schumacher makes it clear:

While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation... For the modern economist this is very difficult to understand. He is used to measuring the "standard of living" by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is "better off" than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption.

[p.57]

From the point of view of Buddhist economics, therefore, production from local resources for local needs is the most rational way of economic life, while dependence on imports from afar and the consequent need for produce for export to unknown and distant peoples is highly uneconomic and justifiable only in exceptional cases and on a small scale.

[p.59]

Is it not true that the great prosperity of Germany became possible only through this unification? All the same, the German-speaking Swiss and the German-speaking Austrians, who did not join, did just as well economically, and if we make a list of all the most prosperous countries in the world, we find that most of them are very small; whereas a list of all the biggest countries in the world shows most of them to be very poor indeed.

[p.64]

there always appears to be a need for at least two things simultaneously, which on the face of it, seem to be incompatible and to exclude one another. We always need both freedom and order. We need the freedom of lots and lots of small, autonomous units, and, at the same time, the orderliness of large-scale, possibly global, unity and coordination. When it comes to action, we obviously need small units, because action is a highly personal affair, and one cannot be in touch with more than a very limited number of persons at any one time. But when it comes to the world of ideas, to principles or to ethics, to the indivisibility of peace and also of ecology, we need to recognise the unity of mankind and base our actions upon this recognition.

[p.65]

A highly developed transport and communications system has one immensely powerful effect: it makes people footloose. Millions of people start moving about, deserting the rural areas and the smaller towns to follow the city lights, to go to the big city, causing a pathological growth. Take the country in which all this is perhaps most exemplified - the United States... They freely talk about the polarisation of the population of the United States into three immense megalopolitan areas: [Boston to Washington, Chicago, and San Francisco to San Diego]; the rest of the country being left practically empty; deserted provincial towns, and the land cultivated with vast tractors, combine harvesters, and immense amounts of chemicals. If this is somebody's conception of the future of the United States, it is hardly a future worth having.

[p.68]

Again the date of this publishing proves prophetic: in the US, Far Western states are the fastest growing - in particular, Nevada and Idaho, while California and most of the eastern seaboard stagnates in growth, and Illinois and New York continue to shed population. This trend predates the Coronavirus pandemic and many of these more populous states' lockdown policies. The reasons cited by many are a sense of urban crowding and decreased quality of life with a vague notion that reconnection to nature and community is better served by a more rural, or at least suburban, lifestyle.

If so much reliance is today being placed in the power of education to enable ordinary people to cope with the problems thrown up by scientific and technological progress, then there must be something more to education than Lord Snow suggests [that all men must be educated in technical matters]. Science and engineering produce "know-how"; but "know-how" is nothing by itself; it is a means without an end, a mere potentiality, an unfinished sentence. "Know-how" is no more a culture than a piano is music. Can education help us to finish the sentence, to turn the potentiality into a reality to the benefit of man? To do so, the task of education would be, first and foremost, the transmission of ideas of value, of what to do with our lives. There is no doubt also the need to transmit know-how but this must take second place, for it is obviously somewhat foolhardy to put great powers into the hands of people without making sure that they have a reasonable idea of what to do with them.

[p.81-82]

It's worth noting that these words were written in 1977, and Snow said the Russians were doing much better than the Western world and will have a clear edge. We know how that turned out.

When people ask for education, they normally mean something more than mere training, something more than mere knowledge of facts, and something more than mere diversion. Maybe they cannot themselves formulate precisely what they are looking for; but I think that what they are looking for is ideas that would make the world, and their whole lives, intelligible to them. When a thing is intelligible, you have a sense of participation; when a thing is unintelligible you have a sense of estrangement.

[p.84]

This text is not aimed at pontificating or producing particularly new profound ideas. The aim of this text is to grapple with the existing ideas and begin putting them into practice.

## **4.4 Principles**

When we consider principles, we must consider the various stages that a technology goes through: development, proliferation, usage, and obsolescence. For a given technology, its particular units may go through these phases at different rates- some being thrown out before new regions receive the technology.

### **4.4.1 Subsidiarity**

### **4.4.2 Keeping Humanity in the Picture**

## **4.5 A Survey of the Modern Condition**

## **4.6 Projects**