Automation and Social Inevitability

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ENGINEERS and religious liberals have at least one point of view in common. They share a certain framework — problem-solving and economic in its orientation—which they both employ to guide their understanding of such large social trends as automation. When they attempt to think through the basic changes in social functioning that such trends imply, their attention is directed primarily to assessments of alternative plans of action and estimates of outcomes. They canvass the dangers and possibilities of such changes, and then try to develop ways to minimize the dangers and maximize the benefits: What are the probable effects, and what can be done to exploit these for our purposes? Surely this kind of effort is just what rational people ought to do, and have often done, with considerable success. Many evils have been avoided, others mitigated, and many goods realized, by such foresight. But, while we quite properly concern ourselves with these predictions and proposals (and then with the often painful task of communicating what has been foreseen to those who are in power and able to take preparatory action) we sometimes overlook, or minimize, the degree to which many aspects of the social trends and changes going on around us are beyond our control. It is of course natural that attention should most often be concentrated upon what is to be done; fatalism and pessimism are useless sentimentalities for anybody who is both rational and concerned. Still, we do seem to fall into a frame of mind which allows us to presume that consciously planned exertions of human will can alter almost anything; that almost nothing in human affairs is beyond our capacity to influence, re-direct, or control. Our present national concern with automation is a case in point. There are, of course, many things we **can** do about it. It would be foolish to suggest any sort of resignation or even pessimism about our opportunities to direct automation so as to make it more nearly serve human ends. There **are**, however, aspects of inevitability in the trend toward automation, and it appears that religion, especially liberal religion, has no very well defined nor profoundly based stand to take toward such inevitability, in the case of automation or any other social trend. As a consequence, many of the corrosive effects of the experience of unalterable social change find no mediation nor response from the area men might most reasonably expect to offer it. It is the aim of this paper first to make social inevitability seem a bit more plausible, and then to suggest, very tentatively, some sources from our tradition that might provide guidance.

Our grasp of the fact of social inevitability, as well as some of its chief sources, may perhaps best be achieved if we consider a few cases, each of them chosen to represent a type. (1) Each of us is, most of the time, fairly confident about many of his own overt responses to future situations, at least within a rather wide range of foreseeable possibilities. We are pretty sure that we will manage to produce the appropriate behavior at a meeting next month, a football game next season, or a trip abroad next year. A bit of reflection, however, usually suffices to remind most of us that there **are** areas of our own behavior about which we are much less confident, especially if any emotional reaction is involved. How would we react if robbed, wounded in our self-esteem in the presence of friends, insultingly interrupted in the midst of a speech, or bequeathed a million dol-

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lars by an unkown relative? Our uncertainty in these circumstances is based in part on their novelty, for most of us. But more fundamentally, it arises out of our recognition that many of our attitudes and feelings are beyond our control, in the sense that we cannot produce or eliminate them at will. Many of us have had the unpleasant experience of hearing ourselves say something that even as we say it we wish were unsaid. In the same way, we have been painfully aware of the intrusion of a ridiculous, or unworthy feeling into some personal encounter: we grow petulant, angry, embarrassed or expansive at the very same time heartily regretting the whole direction the exchange is taking. Knowing that at least sometimes our feelings control our behavior, we are then less secure about the predictability of behavior, too. These kinds of feelings can no doubt be explained and understood, but that is not the point here. It is rather the fact that some of the situations we get into, and some of the behaviors we exhibit, are beyond our power to plan for, direct or control.

(2) A second type of case: Let us imagine some newly-independent under-developed nation, enthusiastically planning its moves toward prosperity. For a number of reasons, the planners accept as axiomatic the principle that education is an essential element in development. They therefore survey the population statistics, personnel resources and capital, and make their plans. In so doing, they are choosing, as rationally as possible, the most efficient means to increase the literacy rate and general cultural sophistication of their people. Presented with a similar problem, planners from any other society would proceed in substantially similar ways. Given the ends to be accomplished, certain kinds of means are generally known to be necessary, and the planners set out a scheme designed to provide these means and organize them into an effective whole. Reasoning something like the following directs the planning: development has usually been tied to agricultural reform and industrial expansion, in the past. Workers in industry or modern agriculture must have at least an eighth grade education in order to follow directions, understand advice and other written communications, and make the computations involved in measuring and keeping records. We have X many school-age children, and expect Y many more in the next decade, so we need to build and staff Z many elementary schools.

Let us suppose further that these plans are set in motion; that schools are built and staffed, and more children graduated. But now a curious effect begins to be noticed. The children trained in the schools leave their villages and crowd into the few urban areas of the country, where there is not enough work of the type they expect to find (i.e., white collar work) and as frustration builds up in the city masses, agriculture declines in the rural areas, because the newly educated youth do not stay and produce more and better crops. Imports of commodities formerly produced internally increase, the budget gets further and further out of balance, welfare expenditures are reduced, inflation increases, and, let us suppose, a military coup finally replaces the government and its planners.

Now clearly, this last, not altogether fanciful, result is far from what the planners planned for when they set about raising the literacy rate. What happened, probably, was that the type of education offered was modeled on the European forms that had been offered by the colonial power previously in control of the country. Included tacitly in this type of education were the presumptions that anything 'native' is inferior to anything European; that education allows one to move into the middle class and live in the style pictured by movies and affected by the colonial administrators; and most especially, that education frees one from

having ever again to work with his hands. Here we have a case of carefully made decisions which, though rationally laid out, and successful, have other, **unintended** consequences. It is easy to sympathize with the disgruntled planners: from their standpoint, they chose, deliberately and with much careful forethought, a reasonable plan of action. They decided to improve the educational level of their people, certainly a laudable and realistic and sound procedure. They did **not** choose to unfit the youth of the country for the development tasks that most needed doing; they did not choose to insinuate a lot of European myths about the joys of middle class life into the minds of their youth; and they did not choose to promote expectations whose frustration could be exploited by a military demogogue for his own purposes. Had they been presented with such consequences, they would certainly not have chosen them. But they were not aware of these other results, and now find themselves in the grip of a set of forces that once set in motion are very difficult to reverse or modify.

In this sort of case, lack of control—inevitability—arises not from compulsion but from failure to anticipate all the consequences of some action or policy. We may feel that many of the consequences in this imaginary example **should** have been anticipated; but given the real world as it was known and conceptualized by the people involved, this seems unlikely. In any case, all of us are necessarily ignorant of many of the future consequences of much that we do, and when these consequences materialize, we are then in a very poor position to change a trend already well established.

(3) As a final example, let us jump to a much wider and more far-reaching kind of social process. In order to suggest the breadth of the process at work, let us select three widely separated individuals. First, consider some dedicated fighter in the period of internal reform of the Church around 1500. He earnestly seeks to abolish some of the more venial and ignoble practices in his Church, but, as we now see, his efforts contributed to the overthrow of its authority, a result he did not at all desire. But beneath that more obvious effect, we can also see that the reformer was abetting the coming of the industrial revolution and the secularization of all life, since, by removing the control of Rome, he also removed the then prevalent idea that there was a moral law which set the value of work and the amount of interest money could earn, what parts of a man's time could be sold, and so on. Removing the non-economic, that is, "spiritual," control over economic activity facilitated the trend toward putting a computable, money price on everything; a result the reformer surely would not have approved had he had the choice. Centuries later, in the guise of a Christian Socialist, he may in fact have tried to reverse the very trend he helped set in motion.

Consider secondly a merchant of a hundred or so years after the Reformation. He understands his wealth as a sort of loan from God, and conceives his duty to be the stewardship of this loan, so that at the end of his life he may return it, so to speak, in better condition than he received it. The result of this attitude was, of course, that all his life long he tried to increase the size of his wealth while deploring at the same time the notion that money was something to be spent in the pursuit of the good life—arts, culture, travel, and so on. This too, though quite unintended by our solid merchant, contributed to the industrial revolution and the economizing of all of life. The idea that people made money in order to live gave way to the idea that people lived in order to make money, and as a corollary, that both society and government must, as their primary concern, honor and facilitate the men and means by which wealth was accumulated.

Let us consider thirdly some dedicated and serious physical education teacher interested in today's problem of recreation in the new age of leisure. He feels, rightly, that people do not use their recreation time for real recreation, and so he undertakes technical studies to remedy this defect. The notion that he is thus turning what was supposed to be "sacred" or leisure time into a commodity would horrify him, since that seems just the reverse of his purpose; but he too is abetting the industrial revolution, for he too is, in fact, applying technology and economic planning to a hitherto uneconomized area of life. Before the industrial revolution, the aim of making recreation more **efficient** would have been a contradiction in terms; leisure is (or was) the sort of thing that could not **be** economized. Now we may look forward to the dreary prospect of someone **working** at making us have a good time, using all the techniques and skills of any other engineer seeking to maximize output of some pre-assigned and measurable product. Only a very few areas of life still remain free of economizing trends: there is as yet no generally agreed upon market value for child-bearing, but most people could compute the value of their leisure time pretty well.

In this last example, we see three instances of a major, long-term social trend which, it seems to many, moves on with only minor deviations from century to century. It moves under its own laws quite without regard to the culture, political system, economic system or geography of the societies into which it is introduced. The inevitability in this kind of large social trend lies not so much in psychological compulsion, or ignorance of unintended consequences, as in the logic, or systematic interrelationship, of basic facts of social interaction. Millions of people in many parts of the world and in many stages of cultural or political development simply do find that certain goals become important to them (for differing reasons) and their efforts to achieve these goals bring certain consequences in their train. Whether the country is feudal, communist, or capitalist, these same economizing results occur, and though some of their side effects may be dealt with, nothing much can be done about the major trend. Automation, as the most recently noted and most disturbing factor in this trend is just as inevitable in its coming as the earlier phases were. We may hope to ameliorate the more unpleasant side effects of this feature of the industrial revolution just as some more advanced countries have done with earlier cases, and we may also hope to turn automation toward the service of men, again as some more advanced countries seem to have turned the earlier effects of industrial revolution generally to the service of men. But whether, or how rapidly, we will **have** automation and its chief side effects is beyond our control.

One major effect of automation will be to increase alienation, because more people will be able to experience inexorable social change in a smaller time and with less social or psychological preparation for it than ever before. In past times, people have filled the churches and temples during periods of plague, drouth, earthquake and barbarian invasion, and these cataclysms, if nothing else, kept religion alert to its role in such matters. Now, in the West, we are free of many of these kinds of scourges; it appears that the more subtle, but perhaps more dangerous, threats will be social in origin: subtle, because lacking in easily observable symptoms, and dangerous because undercutting the very relationships which normally sustain and direct our responses to external threats. The responses religion may offer to these new kinds of challenge must be rethought, then, partly because rapid and inevitable social change is relatively new.

The traditional and conventional posture in the face of the inevitable

has been some variant of the slogan, "God sees to it that all things work for good; God's will be done; blessed be the name of the Lord." We need not debate here whether this doctrine in its literal reading is satisfactory. The conception of a grand and benevolent puppeteer who orders affairs so that every earthquake, every revolution, every murder, works always toward the best is too insulting for thoughtful men of orthodox convictions, even, and certainly is inadequate for an intelligently grounded world-view. Such a conception makes pointless such action as we **are** able to take, and trivializes the achievements and sacrifices we honor most. It blunts sensitivity to the need for remedies, and provides an easy excuse for those too indolent or corrupt to support reform and change. It discourages the exercise of intelligent study, or foresight, and makes tragedy nonsense.

The posture of the practical man, though perhaps useful in particular problems, is also of little general help in forming any kind of rationale. It may indeed be wise for the alcoholic and the politician not to waste effort or spirit in worry about what they cannot alter, and to concentrate attention on what **is** plastic to their efforts. But they are men with special and peculiar problems, and reflective thought—or meditation or brooding—probably is dangerous for both. It is difficult to imagine any advantage to be gained, in any case, if religious leaders offered as the position of their church on questions of major social import simply the advice not to worry too much about what cannot be altered. **Of course** we should not worry too much, if that means either that we become so absorbed in the purely abstract elements of the problem, or that we become so incapacitated by emotional stress, that we neglect or abort concrete opportunities for planning or action. But the issue before us is what kind of **rationale** can be offered in the face of large social upheavals. Bits of advice and proverbs are not what is wanted here.

The Greeks, of course, had already grappled with this, as with most other, problems, and there are interesting similarities between the instances of fate they discussed, and the examples of inevitability presented above. It is important to notice, and it may answer one possible objection, that the Greeks' conception of fate seems not to be opposed to or in contradiction with the idea of free human choice. Fate is a movement of events as a result of, or at least, along side of, free choice. The existence of fate does not rule out either the possibility or the importance of choice. Oedipus freely chose to leave the city of his foster parents, and **thereby** put himself on the road to meet and kill his father. Orestes freely decides that he ought to avenge the murder of his father, and so on. Thus we cannot develop a reasonable posture toward the inevitable by resigning ourselves to some kind of general determinism, where we say that after all we have no choice about anything. For the Greeks, and for the cases discussed earlier in this paper, the inevitable comes about within the context of free choices. Indeed, where social inevitability is concerned, free choices are essential elements in the development of the overall trend, and we can see, with hind-sight, that other choices would have led to other results. The reformation man decided, doubtless with much anguish and deliberation, to defend the faith; the development planners chose, after elaborate rational scrutiny, to increase their country's literacy level; the man who is making a fool of himself chose to participate in the encounter in which he is doing just that.

The Greeks also offer us the best beginning point for an answer, or rather a position to take, for our problem. Whether one accepts the suggestions that follow or not, however, is not as important as that one realizes the existence of the problem. About

the need for a myth or popular rationale capable of grounding our reactions to increasing awareness of social inevitabilities there seems to be little room for argument; about the nature and effectiveness of particular candidates for the job there must be much more hesitation and uncertainty. What follows then is extremely tentative, both in its statement, and in the confidence of its capacity for development into a genuinely popular ideology capable of reversing alienation and the other ills foreseen.

The posture offered by the Greeks rests, it seems, on two contrasting but closely related creations of the Greeks: science on the one hand, and tragedy and comedy on the other. Plato says, too, that men are mere puppets of the gods, but, he says, there is one of the puppets' strings which the puppet can pull himself and thus cooperate with God in improving the show. This string is pulled when the puppet exercises his intelligence in honest and creative ways. By judicious tugs, now and then, the puppet may exert some force on the direction or style of the performance he is being compelled by the puppeteer to play. Success in this effort depends upon clear understanding of himself and the world, as well as commitment to virtue. Our continued effort to understand the forces at work in nature, and especially in society, is then the best way to inform ourselves about the kinds of pulls to make on the string.

Plato and the tragic playwrights also say that a man shows himself to himself and others as a rational, human being when he persists in doing what he believes to be wise or best, even in the face of failure or destruction. The tragic hero is the man who, by exercising some human excellence in unfavorable circumstances, suffers for his behavior. A tragic play thus encourages and ennobles its audience because it shows them what men really can be, and as a result, the audience is heartened, not just consoled or mollified. On the other hand, the comic playwrights show us that it is possible to refresh the spirit by laughing at caricatures of our own high aspirations and inept failures The anti-hero is also an image for each of us, except that here it is our inadequacies and foibles that are shown. But by letting us laugh at these reversed ideals, the playwright reconciles us to ourselves at the same time that, by indirection, we acknowledge the ideal itself. These arts seem, then, to supply one part of the demand for a posture in the face of the inevitable: our spirits are both assuaged by comedy, and heartened or ennobled by tragedy. The other aspect of the general position was supplied by recognition of the importance of intelligence, our most distinctively human attribute, now most systematically evident in science, natural and social. Our continual effort to understand pulls the string, and when nevertheless we fail, we gain psychic distance on our failure through comedy and tragedy.