
Do "We" Play God?: The Problem of "We" in Technological Society

Wha-Chul Son
Handong University, South Korea

Whenever we hear about new technological breakthroughs, they are often described to be "our" or "human" achievement. Therefore, the story continues, "we" will live in such and such future society. Even when one worries about the negative consequences of a new technology, like in the case of the "playing God" arguments, the "we, the human" stance does not change. "We" have made something terrible, which will lead us to undesirable problems.

In his famous *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul said exactly the opposite. According to him, modern technology became autonomous following the principle of efficiency. According to him, it is not "we, the human" that make the final decision in the process of technological development. Technology itself, in the name of efficiency, drives the endless technological enterprise further. If technological development is autonomous, then human beings are not.

In this presentation, I will argue that the examination of who "we" are in our contemporary technological society sheds new lights into the discourse on technology. First, I will claim that the "we, the human" in the discourse on technology is largely misleading. This will lead to the second point that an effort is needed to recover the place for "we" in the process of technological development.

1. The Myth of Technology

Since Thales, it has been the main task of philosophy to overcome myth. As a matter of fact, all academic effort since has been the grandeur project of fighting ungrounded belief. Modern science and technology are the most outstanding result of this project, which Max Weber described as "disenchantment."

A myth is a description of reality which does not represent the reality fully. It is convincing enough to many people but without careful examination of facts. When a society is under influence of a certain myth, then it can even change the reality, as reality is partly constructed by people who live in the myth. Therefore, overcoming myth is not just unveiling reality but to change it. In other words, the transition from myth involves presenting alternative worldview which is more rational and consistent.

While most myths from the ancient time have been denied through human history, one must remember that human beings have the interesting habit of creating a new myth. That is why philosophy continues, despite its long antagonism against myth. It is not surprising, therefore, that modern science and technology themselves came to have the character of myth. The unprecedented success of modern science and technology in understanding and manipulating nature and human beings has led to mythical trust or fear of them.¹

The myth of technology consists of two not-so-consistent, if not contradictory, ideas: namely that (i) “we, the human” are the maker and master of technology; and that (ii) technology will develop further regardless of any counter forces. I consider them to be myths, because they do not have firm grounds while widely spread among people.

1) Do “We” Play God?

While the modern conviction of human rationality and subjectivity is not appreciated as much as before, the idea of “we, the human” stays firm in the discourse on technology. “We, the human” is commonly considered to be the subject and master of technological innovations and their outcomes. This common idea is not completely groundless. The improvement of general human well-being since the Industrial Revolution is given as the evidence. Modern technology has caused many changes in human health, safety, and welfare, shown by factors such as the average life expectancy, child mortality rate, food production, transportation, education, etc. However, the benefit gained by technological progress does not justify the validity of “we, the human” discourse itself.

As aforementioned, Ellul’s argument of autonomous technology questions whether human beings are really in control of technological development. His claim was criticized by many to be pessimistic and technophobic, but the criticism is largely based on a misunderstanding. Ellul did not mean that technology itself function as an agent, but human beings, as individuals or as a group, do not have a choice in technological decision making procedure. According to him, it is the efficiency principle that dominates those decisions. Human beings have no freedom to stop technological progress when they want, which ultimately shows the autonomy of technology.

This line of thought leads to the concern about technologies that seem to surpass a certain boundary. The so-called “playing God” argument is a representative notion representing such worries. Mainly regarding bio-engineering, many raise the question whether it is not “playing God” to manipulate human DNAs or clone human beings. While some welcome the new stage of human capacity, others warn that very radical measures are needed to control those technologies that are already available. A similar concern is raised concerning the development of the so-called killer robots. “Playing God” critique, however, still stands in the line of “we, the human” idea. As far as one seeks a way out from the current situation, it is clear that one has the hope to regain the human

1. One might consider this as the root of the philosophy of technology, one of youngest sub-disciplines of philosophy. Philosophy of technology critically analyzes the validity of the trust and fear on the one hand and tries to provide a more balanced view on technology on the other hand.

control over technological development, however slim it might be.

A simpler counter-argument against "we, the human" discourse is that it is not "we, the human" who develop and use new technologies, but some people. Only a few people have access to various technologies and even fewer to the decision making process. The belief that "we, the human has developed such and such technology" is true very partially, at best. It is a metaphorical expression, rather than a description of the real. "We" don't play God. Some do. From this perspective, the responsibility to fix the undesirable situation, if it is ever possible, should be placed on those few who have real control over technological progress.

2) Eternal and Inevitable Progress

The second element of the myth of technology is somewhat contradictory to the first. Namely, many take it for granted that technological progress will continue forever and the trend is irresistible. Technology will progress, whether we want or not. Here the "we" appears again, but in a very humble manner. Technological progress is considered as something like the weather change. As one does not try to alter tomorrow's weather but to prepare oneself, people take the progress of technology and its direction for granted. In consequence, future technologies and their social influences are forecasted and people are advised to prepare or adjust to the coming future. The possibility of designing the future is not an option.

Probably this is more powerful and innocent myth than the belief in human control over technology. Some would say that this is not a myth, but reality. Technological progress is continuing at this very moment driven by irresistible market force and those who fail to prepare or adjust to the new trend are considered to be losers.

In my opinion, however, the inevitability of technological progress is a typical myth that constructs our reality. It is a self-enforcing myth which becomes true and real by believing in it. The myth itself is nullifying the fact that it is always humans who create technology. It is ironical that technology, the human enterprise to overcome the natural power, is being considered to be another kind of natural force.

2. The Myth of Technology in the Posthuman Era

The myth of technology expands even further, as the technological progress in our time is taking a new path. This new trend is described in different ways such as playing God, the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution, AI or posthuman. These are concepts that refer to the different features of science and technology since the end of the 20th century when compared with the previous era. Technologies such as AI, CRISPR gene scissors, big data, robot technology seem to pursue the manipulation of nature and man in an unprecedented scale and degree. As they control the power and market these technologies and relevant decisions influence the lives of all other people. Technological possibility, even when it is not widely available, changes the context of everybody's

life. Worse, some people are objectified or consumed as a part of a big technological system without knowing the fact.

The promoters of posthumanism seem to agree with the inevitability of technological progress. When compared with Ellul, they take the same position with the opposite attitude. While Ellul finds that it is problematic that human beings have lost the mastery over technology, posthumanists welcome the inevitability of technological progress. It is an irony that, because they accept the progress as something given, then the autonomy of technology in Ellul's sense is completed.

As a matter of fact, posthumanism does not directly oppose the myth of technology in terms of human mastery of technological development. It is a meaningless issue to them because the distinction between human and non-human has been blurred. This has to do with the fact that the posthumanists take a different path concerning the first element of the myth. Namely, by raising questions about the very nature of human beings, the so-called posthumanism theories introduce variations into the issue of "we, the human." They take the possibility of radical change in human nature seriously. Human beings can overcome natural limitations that have been the given conditions of all human enterprises. The human mind could be downloaded and transferred. The human body will be enhanced without limit. Eventually, we might not be evil, we might not die. At the same time, new beings will come into the boundary of human beings. The distinction between human beings and AI robots will be minimized. In consequence, the definition of "we, the human" will be fundamentally changed.

3. Overcoming the Myth of Technology

1) The Relationship between Technology and Human Beings

The discourses on posthuman reveal us the extreme possibility of the future technology and, thus, the challenge posed by the common myth of technology. The prospect of the near future reveals the fact that there are only two options: either (i) to give up the human mastery over technology and to accept the inevitability of technological progress; or (ii) to claim the human mastery over technology and to deny the inevitability of technological progress.

The rational choice is apparently the second. The first option is contradictory in the sense that it only permits us to live along the tide of our time. The questions and reflection on our time and technology, as this paper attempts to do, presuppose the possibility of human mastery over technology. Even if the new definition of human nature is the outcome of technological progress in the future, the progress itself is still at the hands of present human beings. Human beings are supposed to choose whether to pursue progress and, if they want, which direction it should take. In this sense, Ellul's notion of autonomous technology should not be taken as the description of unchangeable fact, but as a warning. Though being rather skeptical, it is evident that Ellul wished for the human mastery over technology. If human beings can have mastery over technology in the real sense, then the one does not need to worry about autonomous technology. This goes well with

Ellul's argument that the only freedom in current technological society is to say no. As far as the possibility of saying no to technological development remains available to human beings, there is still a chance to claim the true mastery over technology.

Why does, then, the "we, the humans" discourse of our time seem to cause no problem with the belief in the inevitability of technological progress? Here comes the distortive character of myth. The current form of "we, the humans" idea hinders one from identifying oneself as the relevant agent of technological development. While knowing nothing about the context and process of given technological development, people occupied by "we, the people" idea do not bother the division between those who own technologies and who do not. As far as those technologies are "ours," one does not need to worry about it. Thus the irony that "we, the human" willingly take the passive attitude towards the new technological progress. This explains why the twofold myth can co-exist in spite of their contradictory nature.

2) The Influence of Technology on Human Beings

One of the valuable insights that posthuman theories provided is that the new development in technology forces us to rethink about human nature. AI makes us think about the nature of human intelligence. The prejudice and misunderstanding concerning women and people of different colors are exposed when the same robot can have a different outlook. Even the distinction between human and non-human becomes blurred, according to posthuman theorists.

This fundamental and urgent challenge, however, is difficult to be addressed when one considers oneself as the subject of technological progress. As far as being trapped in that idea of "we, the human," one would underestimate the influence of technology on human beings. The age-old assumption of technology being a neutral instrument do not pay enough attention to the fundamental changes that technology brought about in human culture.

Therefore, it is crucial to raise the question concerning who and what "we, the human" really is and on what the desirable state of human beings is. If one acknowledges the fact that human beings and the contexts of their lives are influenced by technology to the core, the philosophical reflection on the ideal condition of human beings is necessary. The fast development of technology requires more research and contemplation in humanities. Instead of trying to get ready for the coming change, we should be determined to direct the change. Human beings cannot be defined only as the subject of technological development. "We, the human" is not self-apparent any more in this era and requires discussion that will lead to a consensus.

4. Toward a Desirable Future

How could we still keep the mastery over technological development in its real sense? Where should be the topos of human beings in the technological society? How could we free ourselves from the dominant myths of our time?

1) Reality Check

First, we need to use more concrete language in describing and analyzing our technological society. Technologies do not develop in a vacuum. Often we think as if technological progress is a pure and neutral process independent of any context. We all know, however, that it is not true. Technological development is entangled with the concrete market system, political concerns, cultural preference, and various power games. Therefore, it is important to address the real subject or agent of technological progress and the actual power relationship among relevant parties. This is becoming ever more significant in our contemporary high-tech society, as fewer and fewer dominate the progress. The meaningless technology forecasts rampant these days are to be avoided. They should not be consumed as a justification for pursuing an uncertain future, but examined in terms of the cost and effect of expected technologies.

2) Democratization of Technology

Apart from the analyzing the reality and pondering upon the desirable status of human beings, one needs to get away from the mythical form of “we, the people” and transform it into a state in which “we, the people” have real control over technology. If technology is rescued from the few who dominate it, then the human mastery over technology would become more certain and the notion of autonomous technology would be refuted accordingly.

The democratization of technology does not need to be a whole change in our economic or political system related to technology. The first step would be the recognition that technology changes the context and nature of our life, world and, eventually, ourselves. The next step would be to visualize a picture of a good society. What are the features of society that I wish to live? As a matter of fact, this question has been asked throughout years in the political realm. Now we need to ask the same question concerning technology.

Conclusion

In order to pursue a desirable future for the human being, it is necessary to democratize the current form of technological progress. Less economic desire and more political consent are required in the area of cutting-edge technologies. It is not important in itself whether we will have a cloned baby, but it is vital whether we, the people, will have some say in the process of the decision-making process concerning how, when, why to develop and use such technology. “We” will experience a better future, only if the “we” becomes more realistic concerning who “we” are in the contemporary technological society. This is where humanities meet the cutting edge technologies of our era in a most concrete, practical, and urgent manner. If we fail to engage in this effort, the human future will be something that has nothing to do with our desire. It would not be a problem, of course, because we will be something else by then.