James K. Feibleman. Technology and Reality. The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982.

James K. Feibleman's stature in American philosophy will not be determined one way or the other by this book, which is for the most part a restatement of a theme long familiar to his readers. In a word, Feibleman continues to maintain that man (his language, consistent with that of his generation, is persistently sexist) has needs and these needs are satisfied not only organically but artificially, through artifacts the most complex of which are institutions, and these taken collectively constitute a culture. The variation on this theme that the author proposes to justify its restatement is to point out its relevance to philosophy. He succeeds in this purpose only incidentally, because his paleoanthropological model just isn't subtle enough to capture the world we face today.

The theory that modern man evolved from proto-human origins as a result of tool-making is the basis for Feibleman's view of culture as the product of technology. That culture is thus related to technology he makes true by definition, since he defines technology as the production and use of artifacts [p. 4] and includes under artifacts tools and signs, e.g., language [p. 151]. He devotes about half the book to a kind of philosophy of nature and the rest to a philosophy of human nature, the overall thrust of which is to the effect that our understanding both of nature and of human nature presupposes an understanding of technology [p. 25]. But just below the surface of this supposedly objective survey of "material culture" lies a pervasive worry about the overall and ultimate value of technology.

Feibleman, in other words, like other philosophers who have sought to study technology in some unquestionably "objective" way, gets very much caught up -- inevitably, in my opinion -- in the troublesome question about the neutrality or non-neutrality of technology. Because he has not explicitly included this question on his agenda (the very title of the book is indicative of this), he doesn't really answer it in any straightforward manner. But he frequently bumps into it along the way. He reserves his greatest worry for weapons of war [pp. 133, 160, 188]. But he also sees in technology a tendency to encourage conformity [p. 86], recognizes that management decisions about the design of a technology can be of crucial importance [p. 159], and asserts that technology generates bureaucracy [p. 157] and increases the opportunity for political manipulation [p. 200].

Such observations are, of course, not unique to Feibleman. But given his starting point they are somewhat anomalous. For, in this work and in others before, he has attempted to trace the origin of all culture and the institutions thereof to organic needs. This stock-in-trade feature of Feibleman's philosophy is reiterated in Technology and Reality [Ch. VI]. But here need gives way to serendipity, and that is reason enough to worry about human perversity and the possibility of an end to it all. For, says Feibleman, once tools exist, they are used not because they are needed but just because they exist. "Motor cars," for instance, "are driven and guns fired only because they exist" [p. 133].

This, he says, is because artifacts set no limit to their own use. Even more, "(t)he very nature of artifacts encourages the mechanism of need-reduction to continue after the needs themselves have been reduced, and so one of the side-effects of artifacts is to reinforce excessive behavior" [ibid.].

This amounts to saying that the more artifacts there are in the world the more will artifacts be misused. And from this warning one might want to conclude that, according to Feibleman, we would all be better off with fewer artifacts around as occasions of perversity. But he recognizes well enough that progress turns yesterday's wonders into today's curiosities [see, e.g., p. 89]. So the problem perhaps has more to do with the quality than with the quantity of artifacts in the world. But Feibleman doesn't really speak to this.

Compared to this basic lacuna in Feibleman's argument, his occasional errors of fact are only disconcerting. Galileo did not invent the telescope [see p. 10], and it is not established that the earliest men were nomads [see p. 75]. A case could be made for saying that at least one philosopher, namely Marx, did develop a philosophy that "took the full measure of human practices" and took seriously "the design of artifacts" [see pp. 1 and 159]. Far more important is Feibleman's invitation to speculative philosophy to discover "what system of ideas would best serve as the foundations [sic] of culture . . . to better the conditions under which human lives are conducted" [p. 198]. No doubt he would not object to having his own system of ideas considered as an artifact entirely appropriate for the purpose.