

A 8. CAN IMPROVED TECHNOLOGY SOLVE OUR PROBLEMS ?

Consider inflation as an example

The short answer is no for most problems, though for some it may help, and for others it is the problem. When the experts agree on what would be a desirable outcome if the problem was solved and the general public consensus supports them, then we have what can properly be called a technical problem. It is just a matter of finding out how to get to the agreed end or objective. Better technology might be the answer or part of it. But most of our economic and social problems are not technical problems. The problem is that there is no general agreement among experts and the public on what would be the proper objective and end at which to aim. It often involves at least a partial conflict on the values held. Even if the end is agreed upon, the problem is that it must be achieved without sacrificing certain values, according to some people, and for other people not sacrificing different values. The problem may be that some sacrifice of some related values seems impossible. Then we have a social problem not a technical one.

INFLATION. Why is it considered to be a problem? Because it hurts some people. If we agree that that is unfortunate and should be prevented if there is a way to prevent it, inflation becomes a technical problem. The solution even seems to be easy: Freeze prices, Make it illegal for anyone or business to raise its prices, provide a penalty, and enforce the law. That could end inflation. As a matter of fact we know that it is not quite that easy--that there are ways of evading price freeze laws. So called "black markets develop" because someone gains thereby, and people are willing to patronize the black market to get goods that otherwise may become scarce. But that is not all there is to it. Indeed very few economists support price freezes for another reason. Market economies have continuously changing demand patterns, technologies, and product availabilities, so continuously changing relative prices. Some prices have to rise & others fall relatively. A price freeze prevents some necessary price changes as some resource availabilities decline.

There are indeed other ways to try to restrain inflationary pressures, but all of them, like price freezes, hurt somebody. So whether we try to end inflation or whether we let it continue, someone gets hurt. The question is which hurts fewer people & particularly fewer people who can least easily bear the hurt--inflation or anti-inflation policies. This makes inflation policy an ethical problem rather than a technical problem.

Other problems can be analyzed similarly to see if parts of the problems are technical or all are properly called social problems. Better technology helps some environmental problems & not others. Better technology makes war even worse & does nothing to prevent it.

