

## Living soil anthropology and ethics: reading Jacques Ellul's interpretations of Genesis 1-3 as resistance to ecological plunder and devastation

The Bible's creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 have often been jettisoned to justify ecological plunder and devastation. Jacques Ellul's readings of these biblical texts critically and constructively resists such problematic interpretations and violent applications. In this essay, I examine the finer grains of Ellul's resistance to these damaging interpretations and applications to develop a theological anthropology and ethic of living soil from Ellul's readings of Genesis 2; an anthropology and ethic derived from Ellul's work that can cultivate a reckoning with creaturely existence in a creation made and sustained by a free and loving Creator, and generate constructive actions from this reckoning. In Ellul's own words, "[People are] the consciousness capable of loving in and for creation."<sup>1</sup> But what will it take for people to become conscious of this capability and exercise it in and for creation? Using Ellul's carefully articulated anthropology in *Théologie et Technique* and his interpretations of Genesis 2 in *La Genèse aujourd'hui*, this question will formulate an pluriform answer to this question. That being said, a provisional answer to this question can be offered here: a fulsome intra- and extra-biblical theological reading and ethical response to God's saying "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" in Genesis 3:19 can invigorate our senses of the ground from which we come and the ground to which we go, and how this ground can be whirled about by a Wind that turns static, dead dust into dynamic, living soil.

### A precarious symbiotic relationship

Ellul's knowledge of history and sociology prompts him to avoid definitive and comprehensive statements about what humans are and are not, but in *Théologie et Technique*, he identifies two mutually constitutive human traits that he says most historians, sociologists, and anthropologists agree are constant. First, he suggests humans are never perfectly adapted to the environments in which they exist; and second, humans always seek to adapt their surrounding environments.<sup>2</sup> "[The human] hand is, for squeezing and cutting, much less precise and effective than a lobster's claw," he writes, "[And the human] leg for running [is] much less exactly calculated than the leg of the leopard or that of the deer." However, "If [humans are] less perfect in [their] structure, [they are] versatile."<sup>3</sup> In other words, lobsters may be able to out squeeze and out cut, and leopards and the deer may be able to outrun, a human less adapted to their environment, but a *versatile* human can devise ways and develop means to adapt the environment to *outlast* the lobster, leopard, and deer. So, Ellul continues, if you "transport a cheetah to Greenland, it dies. [But] the human becomes [an] Eskimo. [If you] transport a polar bear to the Kalahari, it dies, [but] the human becomes San." Thus, "In their lack of perfect adaptation, which expresses an almost infinite adaptability, humans are never totally in tune with the environment in which they finds themselves."<sup>4</sup> Not only does what Ellul writes here mean it is unwise to transport animals to places other than the places they are discovered, it also means that humans typically disturb their surroundings as predatory parasites do in order to sustain their

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul, "The Relationship between Man and Creation in the Bible," *Theology and Technology*, eds. Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 39-55.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Théologie et Technique*, (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014) 129-130. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

existence.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, “Wherever [people] appear and, exactly within the limits of [their] means, they create a different, artificial order, which is situated in symbiosis with the natural order that sometimes [they] deeply disturb, sometimes [they] replace.”<sup>6</sup> Modern cities, Ellul points out, are an example of this kind of deep disturbance and replacement.<sup>7</sup> As cities parasitically feed on environments in order to sustain the lives of the people who construct and live in those places, the environments being fed upon becomes increasingly disturbed and replaced—and, as is becoming increasingly evident to people who are paying attention, there is a point when the feeding of the cities upon environments becomes unsustainable and life threatening for both the humans *and* the environments existing within this symbiotic relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Ellul formulates a precise account of the human that reveals a lot about his historical, sociological, and anthropological understanding of what it is to be human, though he does joke about being “anti-anthropology” at the start of the second chapter in *Théologie et Technique*. Still, after delivering the joke, he shows how humans are always situated in environments to which they are slightly maladapted, but inherently and holistically connected. In other words, his carefully articulated anthropology in *Théologie et Technique* places its fingers upon and cradles in its palms the precarious symbiotic relationship of humans to environments and environments to humans. Like the various kinds of bacteria in the human body, there are humans in the world who disturb the earthly body to cultivate health, and there are humans in the world who disturb the earthly body to perpetuate damage even if they are beholden to the illusion that their actions are cultivating health for humanity.

I do not want to rush to the development of an ethic—that will appear at the end of this essay. However, I will conclude this section by suggesting that Ellul’s work, as outlined here, can attune us to the fragility of our surroundings in ways that cultivate health, rather than perpetuate damage for humans and the environment. If we make a point of attentively and consistently observing this precarious symbiotic relationship in our everyday lives, whatever environments we happen to be embedded in, then an awareness of significant, mutual vulnerability that can generate mutual flourishing can emerge that will inspire us to be much more careful about what we do and do not disturb in to sustain life in our surroundings. Or, more simply and metaphorically, if we become more attentive to the songs of our surroundings we likely will be better in better positions to play the notes that move the music in beautiful rather than a devastating directions.

In the next section, I take Ellul’s anthropology into theological territory to uncover more illuminating insights about the precarious symbiotic relationship described in this section. There, I show how Ellul’s reading of Genesis 2:5-9 reveals just how deep the inherent, holistic relationship of humans to the environment, and the environment to humans goes; what this theological depth can offer in the way of a theological ethic for cultivating a reckoning with creaturely existence in a creation made and sustained by a free and loving Creator; and through such a reckoning, become able to generate health rather than damage in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See, for examples, “Cities and Climate Change,” *UNEP.org*, <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/resource-efficiency/what-we-do/cities/cities-and-climate-change>.

## Dry, dead dust or living, red earth?

Ellul is scrupulous about the significance of the name *Adam* (ʿādām) and the word *dust* (āphār) as he interprets Genesis 2 in *La Genèse aujourd'hui*. He insists Adam's name means *red earth/clay* rather than *dust/glebe*.<sup>9</sup> For Ellul, both interpretative trajectories stress Adam's, and by extension humanity's, "Belonging to the materiality of creation." However, he says, *dust/glebe* emphasizes "lightness" whereas *red earth/clay* emphasizes "heaviness at the bottom of the ground, of the earth itself."<sup>10</sup> I think Ellul favors the latter interpretation because it illumines more how humans are bound to the surface and the depths of creation because, as Genesis 2 depicts, we are drawn and fashioned from creation's surface and depths, thereby giving us a starting point for theological anthropology that is rich with the pluriform nutrients of soil, from its top to bottom. Further, I think Ellul stresses the latter reading because he wants to draw attention to the significant of a kind of soil that has more, not less, malleability, fecundity, and lifeblood.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, red earth/clay seems much more *of* and *from* the earth, symbolically and symbiotically tied to the earth, and thus ready for life on the earth, when compared to dry, gray, torrefied dust. That is to say, whereas the pre-Fall state of humanity inclines more towards fecund red earth, the post-Fall state of humanity inclines towards torrefied gray dust. As recorded in the post-Fall curse pronounced in Genesis 3:17-19,

And to the man [ʿādām] he said,  
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
'You shall not eat of it,'  
Cursed is the ground [ʿādāmāh] because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground [ʿādāmāh],  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust [āphār],  
and to dust [āphār] you shall return.

And in Genesis 4:9-15,

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground [ʿādāmāh]! And now you are cursed from the ground [ʿādāmāh], which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground [ʿādāmāh], it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Ellul, *La Genèse aujourd'hui*, Paris: Editions de L'AREFPPI, 1987, 114.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>11</sup> See *Strong's Hebrew* #120 and #6083.

be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth [<sup>ʾ</sup>*erets*].” Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil [<sup>ʾ</sup>*ādāmāh*], and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth [<sup>ʾ</sup>*erets*], and anyone who meets me may kill me.”

Reading these Genesis 4, 3, and 2 passages backwards and forwards reveals a devastating downward movement from intimate symbiotic and fecund connection with the earth to alienated enmity with the *entire* earth (signified by <sup>ʾ</sup>*erets* in the passage from Genesis 4). With Cain, the alienation and enmity covers the land from top to bottom, and it significantly effects the people who are trying to make a living on and from the land.<sup>12</sup> Or, more simply, the further we get from Genesis 2, the further we move away from the malleability, fecundity, and lifeblood that comes with “heaviness at the bottom of the ground, of the earth itself”; the closer we come to the “lightness” of dry, gray, torrefied dust.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, we often resent and damage soil in order to wrestle from it our food for living.

For exactly these reasons, it is theologically explicable why the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 have often been jettisoned to justify ecological plunder and devastation: when we look at creation in and beyond Genesis 1 and 2 from our post-Fall positioning in Genesis 3 and 4, we often project our postlapsarian, Canaanite alienation from and enmity with the land upon the creation that God graciously gave/gives us, and which we have exploited in the past and exploit in the present. Practically speaking, such readings and applications of the text mean that we often fight with and destroy the land in order to get what we think we need to live; and, often forget that, however troubled our post-Fall symbiotic connections with the land may be, we are nevertheless existentially dependent upon the land because the land upon which we stand, walk, labor, and rest literally made/makes us and broke/breaks us down because the Creator made it so that this was so before and after creation’s descent into arid gray dust.

In sum, from Genesis 1-4 and Ellul’s readings of these texts, we see a thick, powerful analogical and literal connection between the Creator, the human creature, all creatures, and all of creation—and what we do to the least of these, we do to ourselves, and to our Creator (cf. Matthew 24:40-45).<sup>14</sup>

### **Touching, probing, eating, breathing, and peacemaking *tov***

Returning to the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, we see another textual detail that inflates the theological, anthropological, and ethical significance of what I am trying to formulate here: Adam, and by extension all of humanity, is formed from red earth tilled from the surface and depths of

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<sup>12</sup> Strong’s Hebrew #776.

<sup>13</sup> Ellul, *La Genèse aujourd’hui*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Until writing this essay I have tended to read Jesus’ identification with the hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, and imprisoned person as mostly limited to identification with the people referenced. Now, I have been prompted to see that this identification extends to the *environment* in which the hungry, strange, naked, and imprisoned people are in. This, I think, ratchets up the analogical and actual symbiotic connections between the Creator, creatures, and creation that I am drawing out of Genesis 1-4 with help from Ellul. That is to say, the hungry, thirsty, named, and/or imprisoned person is *always in an environment* in which there are the absence, longing, and struggle for of food, water, clothing, and/or freedom of movement. Hence, Jesus identifies with the person *and* the environment, and so ought we to based on what he says in this passage.

creation's floor, but we intimately are animated by the breath of a close, caring, and loving God.<sup>15</sup> Genesis 2:7 reads, "Then the Lord God formed man [*âdâm*] from the dust [*âphâr*] of the ground [*âdâmâb*], and breathed [*nâphach*] into his nostrils the breath [*nâsham*] of life; and the man [*âdâm*] became a living being." In other words, without the breath of God entering into the nostrils of Adam and humanity made from earth, all we get and are is an immobile sculpture that is dead where we stand, sit, or lie down. Lively, free symbiotic communion"and mobility with God, creation, and creatures, then, really "is a question of the breath of God, it is exactly the same as the Spirit. But, to say it's a breath means something. First, it gives the idea of precariousness."<sup>16</sup> Though there is thick, intimate, life-bestowing communion with God, the human creature, and creation in these moments, there is also a profound fragility present Ellul observes, because the breath of life that comes from God "is breathed into you, and it does not belong. You have to expire it. [There is an] identification between spirit of God and breath. You cannot reserve. You can't have it in possession, it's a trade move. The breath that God gives is not something, it is a condition of the life that God gives us."<sup>17</sup> Or, just as God freely gives this red earth sculpture life by breathing the Spirit of God into Adam's nostrils, God can also freely take this enlivening breath and Spirit (cf. Job 1:21) from Adam. Thus, every inhalation and exhalation before and after the Fall is a reminder that "you are dust [*âphâr*], and to dust [*âphâr*] you shall return," (Genesis 3:19). Let every breath pulled in and pushed out, then, be breaths which remind us that we come from the ground and go to the ground, and so we depend on the ground and its Creation for existence (cf. Acts 17:24-28). For Ellul,

These texts are terribly realistic, it's Jewish realism, and then at the same time [there is] an extraordinarily deep image of the relationship with God[.] Effectively, you can never have anything[;] any more than *one has faith*, one does not have the spirit of God. The spirit of God comes, he inspires you, but you cannot keep him. And that is the meaning of this *Ruach* [*wind, breath, and spirit*].<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the pre- and post-Fall symbiosis of God, the human creature, all creatures, and of all of creation, creates a kind of precariousness that can only take us in the direction of one or two ways: *tov* (good that generates life) or *ra* (evil that generates death).<sup>19</sup> The wind of God's Spirit propels the creatures made from red earth towards *tov*. But how might a movement toward symbiotic *tov* with the Creator, human creatures, all creatures, and all creation practically generate on this side of the Fall, and pull us away from the *ra*'s desecration of this symbiosis? I think the beginnings of an answer are revealed in John 20:19-23 and Luke 24:36-43.

After the resurrection, Jesus Christ comes to the terrified disciples who are hiding in a locked up building because *ra* seems to outpacing *tov* after the crucifixion. First, when Jesus appears, he

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 115. I say Adam *and* all of humanity because, as Ellul points out, who/what is created in Genesis 1 and 2 "is called *Adam*, Adam of which we have made a proper name but which is a common name. In Hebrew, there is *ha-badama*, that is to say *Adam*, *the Adam*. It then indicates, this article indicates that it is not a question of a single man but of all humanity. You see, if Adam is a proper name, it means a man was created, that one, the only one, Adam who could have that name. If it is a common name, it is man in general, therefore humanity which is created in Adam."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Strong's Hebrew* #2896 and #7451.

pronounces “peace be with you” (John 20:19 and Luke 24:36). Though the disciples are initially “startled and terrified” (Luke 24:37) because they “thought that they were seeing a ghost” (Luke 24:36-37), Jesus makes peace in the fear-ridden environment when he says and does the following:

Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence (Luke 24:38-42).

Jumping to John, we also see that, after the disciples touch and probe the resurrected body of Jesus Christ,

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained,” (John 20:21-23).

I think such scriptural scenes re-enact the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. In doing so, they gift us with the promise of the re-creative breath of God’s Spirit for people who touch and probe the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, eat broiled fish with the resurrected Jesus Christ, and who are enveloped by and breathe in breath of the resurrected Jesus Christ who brings symbiotic peace and *tov* to us in the midst of the *ra’s* desecration. But where, really, can this touching, probing, eating, breathing, and peacemaking with the resurrected body of Jesus Christ happen—and what does this have to do with generating of *tov* rather than *ra* in creation? The answer is given in John 20:22-23, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” If we continue to retain sin and *ra’s* desecration, our symbiotic connection with creation and our Creator means that sin and *ra’s* desecration will extend to creation and our Creator; if we forgive the sins of any, however, then *tov* will abound with ourselves, other creators, and our Creator. The abundance begins with touching, probing, eating, breathing, and peacemaking with the resurrected body of Jesus Christ in churches that *get* this re-creative breath of God’s Spirit and participate in the re-generation of our symbiotic relationship with all creatures, all creation, and our Creator who comes to us in human form, the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ who comes into our midst and pronounces to those of us who are startled and terrified by sin and *ra’s* desecration of creation. Or, more simply, touching, probing, eating, breathing, and peacemaking with the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ fills us with the Spirit needed to generate *tov* in ourselves, creation, and our communion with God.