

Ellul on Ethics: A Philosophical-Theological Critique

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1. Introduction

Few topics would be of greater relevance in our day than the 2024 conference theme – “Jacques Ellul and the 21st-Century Technological Society.” Surely, Ellul’s influence in this regard is singular, and therefore to be both celebrated and re-discovered in the third decade of the 21st century.

My own introduction to Jacques Ellul’s work occurred during the final stages of graduate school, at which time I stumbled upon *The Humiliation of the Word*. I had been studying philosophical hermeneutics at the time and thus was struck by the near prophetic insights of Ellul’s cultural critique – insights that one does not often find in standard Christian thinking. *Humiliation* is a remarkable blend of sociological, linguistic, and theological perception combined with cultural criticism. Examining human communication as an expression of God’s likeness and arguing that our speech and use of language are foundational in our ability to seek and advance divine truth, Ellul insisted that speech (“the word”) has been devalued and “humiliated” by images; here he shares the burden of Neil Postman (1985), namely, the triumph of the image. We do well to recall, as I have been forced to do in this presentation, that Ellul was responding to the ever-present totalitarian threat; hence its “prophetic” character and its contemporary application – in our day perhaps more than ever.

2. Ethics in Ellul’s Work: The Conundrum

Ellul’s Two Trilogies

My own view is that our conference theme, given the importance, complexity, and scope of technology, cries out for a partner-theme, ethics, about which Ellul had much to say. As it turns out, he authored not one but two trilogies – on technology and on ethics. The first, consisting of *The Technological Society*, *The Technological System*, and *The Technological Bluff*, is well known to many, and hence worthy of constant reexamination because of its timelessness and relevance. The second trilogy, however, receives comparatively little examination and for this reason needs some probing. This afternoon, then, I’d like to review two of the works in Ellul’s ethics trilogy, *To Will and to Do* and *The Theological Foundation of Law*, for it is in these two works that we observe the theological and ethical assumptions that govern Ellul’s thinking.

The Two Trilogies in Contrast

At the outset of our discussion, one particular element of Ellul’s work is striking, and thus needs stating before we consider his trilogy on ethics. Utterly remarkable, at least to me, is the fact that *any* discussion of ethics or morality is absent in the technology trilogy. On my initial reading of these three works for which he is perhaps best known, I thought that I had simply missed or passed over his ethical analysis of technology. I then sat down to re-read each of the three, and behold, came to the realization that this was *not* the case; rather, the reader discovers the absence of *any* discussion of ethics and morality in the trilogy. Neither in *The Technological Society*,

nor in *The Technological System*, nor in *The Technological Bluff* does one find either a chapter or even a subheading devoted to the theme of ethics. And in two of the three volumes, not one word on ethics or morality is to be found. In *The Technological Society*, out of 449 pages, there are three places where, briefly or in passing, the word “moral” or “morality” appears. In the first instance, Ellul writes that technique “refuses to tolerate moral judgments” and that technique “never observes the distinction between moral and immoral”; in the second, he observes that technique becomes “creator” and “judge” of a “new morality”; and in the third, some 300 pages into the volume, he identifies morality as one of four elements that might restrain technique – the other three being public opinion, economics, and the power of the state.¹

The absence of any discussion of ethics or morality in the technology trilogy, then, is the first thing that strikes the reader – at least this reader. A second feature, to which most of my presentation is devoted, concerns Ellul’s adamant – and I do mean *adamant* – rejection of natural-law thinking in his understanding of ethics. This stubborn resistance is bountifully on display in two of the ethical trilogy’s three volumes: *To Will and to Do* and *The Theological Foundations of Law*, to which I shall now turn, offering a summary of each volume.

3. Essential Features of Ellul’s Ethical Framework

*To Will & To Do*²

According to the volume’s foreword, *To Will and to Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* represents Ellul’s “major treatise on Christian ethics,” utilizing an approach to ethical reasoning that is “dogmatically Christocentric.”³ At the outset, Ellul confesses to be neither a theologian nor a philosopher.⁴ This acknowledgement is both praiseworthy and necessary, given the fact that in his training the author is a lawyer and in practice he is foremost a sociologist and cultural critic. Immediately following this acknowledgment, Ellul states, “I shall take care not to give a definition of ethics.”⁵ Such a statement strikes the reader as a bit strange, even jarring, given (a) Ellul’s training in law, (b) his publishing of an ethical trilogy, and (c) his profession as a Christian.

Much like the theologian Karl Barth, Ellul in his work stresses the radical break between God’s revelation and human reason. This accent on the strict antithesis or opposition between revelation and reason is perhaps best explained by the era in which both Barth and Ellul lived. Both men in their day found themselves fighting against the tyranny and compromising influence of the totalitarian spirit, both inside the Church and in wider society. Ellul, it will be remembered, was dismissed from his professorial duties in 1940 by the Vichy (puppet) government, while Barth played a lead role in crafting the Barmen Declaration (1934), a declaration by the “confessing church” to counter the challenges of Nazism and those in the Church who saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism. The break between revelation and reason, however, placed Ellul at odds not only with Catholic thought, but also, it

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (trans. John Wilkinson; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 97, 134, and 301-2.

² Eng. translation, 1969; French original, 1964.

³ Jacques Ellul, *To Will & To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (trans. C. Edward Hopkin; Philadelphia and Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), vii. Ellul understood this work to be an “introduction to ethics.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

needs to be acknowledged, with both the thinking of the magisterial Protestant reformers – Ellul considered himself part of the Reformed Protestant tradition – and with the historic Christian tradition.⁶

Knowledge of the good, Ellul begins, depends on divine revelation and the “will of God.” Outside of direct revelation by God, no knowledge of any good can exist; any “natural knowledge” of what is good, he insists, is impossible. “Adam had no knowledge of the good [or evil],” Ellul states; “Prior to that moment [of the fall] there is no moral conscience.”⁷ Human beings live in a “moral universe” only “*since* the fall.”⁸ Accordingly, Ellul believes, all human morality is understood and constructed in human beings’ separation from God due to the fall. Therefore, because of the fall, any attempts at morality stand in opposition to God. “In scripture, there is no possible knowledge of the good apart from a living and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”⁹ There is no “normative ethics of the good,” Ellul insists, only an “ethics of grace”; the two are polar “opposites.”¹⁰ With the following rather remarkable statement, Ellul concludes: “The requirements which Jesus places before us are not justified by any ethical reasoning. They are not *moral* decisions.”¹¹ As evidence thereof he notes that “the word ethic never occurs in the New Testament.”¹² Even more remarkably, the reader is told that “what man should do and should not do is *not* described for him by the ten commandments or the Sermon on the Mount.”¹³

Ellul thus rejects the classical position of Thomas Aquinas and that of the broader Christian moral tradition, namely, that some knowledge of the good comes through conscience and reason. At bottom, Ellul is committed to the view that any knowledge of good and evil through reason and our senses is a denial of grace.

But what about human design? What is the nature of “the image of God” in the human person, and how is it mirrored in a biblical theology of creation? Ellul declares himself “sure” that the *imago Dei* in each person – “whatever that is”¹⁴ – “cannot be composed of moral conscience.”¹⁵ While in *To Will & To Do* Ellul side-steps the nature of “the image of God” in the human person (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6) and what this likeness means, elsewhere he asserts categorically: “Nowhere [in the Bible] do we see a human nature affirmed there,” and “It is a mistake to say that this image [of God] is a nature for man.”¹⁶ There is “nature,” yes, but it is a “natural order” of, say, biology, Ellul insists; there is no “natural morality.”¹⁷ Creation and nature, he reasons, are “perfectly antithetical”; the Bible “does not know the idea of nature.”¹⁸ So, for example, the language of duty – when people use the words “you ought” – is described by Ellul as “an

⁶ One gets the strong impression, not only in Ellul’s more theological writing but his sociological and cultural critiques, that Barth, Karl Marx, and Søren Kierkegaard are the three thinkers who most influence and shape his thought. This becomes clear, if for no other reason, from the number of times these three are cited. Ellul held Barth to be the most important theologian of his time.

⁷ Ellul, *To Will*, 6, 14.

⁸ Ibid., 79 (emphasis mine).

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 221 (emphasis his).

¹² Ibid., 299, n. 1.

¹³ Ibid., 222 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Ellul side-steps.

¹⁵ Ellul, *To Will*, 43.

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, “Nature, Technique and Artificiality,” *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 3 (1980): 266-67.

¹⁷ Ellul, *To Will*, 45.

¹⁸ Ellul, “Nature, Technique and Artificiality,” 283.

artificial obligation” and “not at all biblical”; “We do not find it anywhere in the Bible.”¹⁹ Hence, there is no “natural law,” no intuition of a basic moral law, that informs human beings of a minimum knowledge of good and evil, as the Church (mistakenly, he believes) has taught through the centuries. Ellul rejects the traditional Christian natural-law understanding of St. Paul’s statement in Romans 2:14-15 wherein the apostle speaks of the moral law “written on the heart,” whether for the Jew or the Gentile.²⁰ Ellul insists – against the plain meaning of the text²¹ – that the apostle is here referring to “the law of justification” (that is, grace and faith).²²

An important distinction in Ellul’s thought expressed throughout *To Will & To Do* needs some comment. Ellul distinguishes between “morality” and “God’s revelation” or “God’s will.” His reasoning here is that “moral values” are not “stable,” “universal,” or “objective.” “Nowhere,” Ellul insists, “does the Bible mention these [moral] values or their creation.”²³ For this reason, then, no “good” can become “a common standard between Christians and non-Christians,” and if this were so, he reasons, there would be no need for Christianity or grace.²⁴ Therefore, for the Christian there are said to be two moralities – the world’s “morality” and a Christian morality; but no agreement can exist between the two. This supposition of opposition or rigid dichotomy is crucial to Ellul’s ethical thinking. Whether theoretically or practically, the bottom line is that there are no universal and shared aspects of morality in the created order.²⁵

What troubles Ellul the cultural critic, and properly so, is the development and emergence of a newer “morality of tomorrow” – a “technological morality” which becomes a value in and of itself. Temporal values such as cultural normalcy, efficiency and success, alas, replace moral principle. There is a sense in which these qualities themselves become ultimate, as Ellul’s technological trilogy so masterfully argues.²⁶

On the one hand, as he moves toward the conclusion of *To Will & To Do*, Ellul argues for “the impossibility of a Christian ethic.”²⁷ He writes: “The biblical concept of the good as the will of God immediately prohibits us from formulating an ethic.” At no time can man of himself “grasp the good,” since the will of God, with the need for grace, “escapes him.”²⁸ Here Ellul interjects what for him is a guiding presupposition: he rejects the Church’s attempt throughout history – *all* of history – to teach or erect a “Christian morality”; divine revelation via the Holy Spirit and grace alone, he insists, gives us knowledge of God, and of the good. “Morality, whether Christian or not, necessarily collides with God’s decision brought to pass in Jesus Christ.”²⁹ Here again we encounter the web of underlying assumptions that shape Ellul’s ethical thinking. There is no “natural theology,” no “natural morality,” no knowledge of good or evil apart from direct divine revelation. For this reason then, he writes, we need not study the Christian ethic of Augustine, Ambrose, Calvin, Luther or others.³⁰ The Church’s attempts through the ages to teach and establish a “Christian morality” – for example,

¹⁹ Ibid., 268.

²⁰ Ellul refers to Rom. 2:14-15, somewhat mockingly, as “the celebrated text” (ibid., 47).

²¹ He thereby misses Paul’s point, namely, that all are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

²² Ellul, *To Will*, 49.

²³ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ Ibid., 118-26.

²⁶ Ibid. 193.

²⁷ See in this regard Chapter 12, “The Impossibility of a Christian Ethic.”

²⁸ Ibid., 202-3.

²⁹ Ibid., 224.

³⁰ Ibid., 225.

by teaching natural-law moral reasoning, whereby God uses both creation (i.e., external revelation) and conscience (i.e., internal revelation) – are at best misguided and at worst “heretical.”³¹ Ellul is adamant: “The requirements which Jesus places before us are not justified by any ethical reasoning. They are not *moral* decisions.”³² “The Christian life is not morality.”³³ In fact, Ellul can declare, “Christianity is an antimorality.”³⁴

On the other hand, despite the “impossibility” of a Christian ethic, Ellul argues in the book’s concluding chapter for “the necessity for a Christian ethic.” This, he says, is because the Church is placed in the world and will embody a particular morality – consciously or not and for better or for worse. Here the reader is confronted with a conclusion that seems to contradict Ellul’s logic up to this point. As Christians, in Ellul’s view, we cannot escape the need for a relatively “Christian” ethic, even when it is supposedly impossible to teach and establish.³⁵

*The Theological Foundation of Law*³⁶

While *To Will & To Do* might be viewed by some as his “major treatise” on ethics, *The Theological Foundation of Law* may well be the most significant, given several factors – among these: Ellul earned a doctorate in law, and he then taught law until he was fired for his views on Nazism in Vichy, France. But yet another factor, i.e., the preoccupation with politics and the sociology of law in his writings, invites us to scrutinize his understanding of law, and in particular, his firm rejection of natural law moral reasoning.

Ellul believes natural law to be “a problem . . . raised for about 2500 years,” yet one that “has never really been solved.”³⁷ He acknowledges something of a natural law revival going on in his day, particularly with Christian proponents. What’s more, he recognizes the need to ground justice in something more than mere idealism on the one hand and materialism on the other. However, he rejects natural law as “an effort at reconciliation” that is located “*beyond* the tragic separation created by revelation and grace.”³⁸ Reason and natural theology, he insists, are attempts “to escape from the radical necessity of receiving revelation.”³⁹ The relationship between human beings and law is broken, due to the fall; it “cannot be renewed by a philosophical or juridical theory.”⁴⁰ On this matter, Ellul is adamant: “The desire to create a universally binding law on the basis of the law of God or even . . . the Gospel is undeniably heretical.”⁴¹

³¹ See in this regard Chapter 13, “Historic Formulation of Christian Moralities.”

³² Ellul, *To Will*, 221.

³³ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁴ Elsewhere Ellul states that “revealed truth is antimoral” (224). Similarly, in *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 238, Ellul writes: “Morality is incompatible with freedom. It is a new bondage”; it is “enslaving.”

³⁵ Here Ellul seems to be paying homage to the “impossible possibility” that was formulated by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a contemporary. Niebuhr used this phrase to express the tension between the transcendent and the historical, between the ideal and the real. Niebuhr in the end rejected the shallow pacifism of his liberal Protestant brethren in the 1930s – a pacifism to which Ellul held. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1935), 97-123, esp. 108-9.

³⁶ Eng. translation, 1960; French original, 1946.

³⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (trans. Marguerite Wieser; New York: Seabury, 1960), 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-11. Recall, again, that Ellul, like Barth, has the tyranny of Nazi Germany in the back of his mind.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Law in Scripture, according to Ellul, concerns only divine righteousness and justice; “the scriptures do not know of law in the proper sense of the term.”⁴² Jesus Christ became the needed righteousness and justice – i.e., our justification.⁴³ “It is illusory,” he contends, “to believe that our terrestrial law depends on natural law,” for “natural law is really nothing but a human way to which God’s way can be neither compared nor assimilated.” And if natural law exists independently, then it stands in opposition to God.⁴⁴ God’s law “must be revealed law” and hence “cannot be natural law.”⁴⁵ Take the matter of justice, for example: “Man has no natural knowledge whatsoever of justice,” Ellul argues, for justice “is made known to man only in the revelation of the covenant [of Jesus Christ].”⁴⁶ Law, Ellul concludes, is “entirely christocentric.”⁴⁷ As it concerns the problem of justice, including legal justice, Ellul affirms “the absolute centrality of the person of Jesus Christ: “the foundation of human law resides in Him, the realization of human law is accomplished by Him, [and] the qualification of human law is given by Him.”⁴⁸ What is not discussed – or even entertained – by Ellul is the nature of justice in the Old Testament as stipulated by law for Israel, the covenant people. As to the very purpose of the Ten Commandments, to cite but one example which Christ affirms repeatedly, Ellul is unable to say. In any case, the verdict is pronounced: natural law “does not provide any meeting ground for Christians and non-Christians.”⁴⁹ One can only conclude that, for Ellul, the non-Christian is incapable of any intuition toward justice or moral reality; nor can anyone other than the Christian work for “human rights.”

As already noted, Ellul is critical of the Church – even Calvin, in whose Reformed tradition Ellul stands⁵⁰ – in her attempts to affirm and teach natural law reasoning. To believe that the natural law was created by God, making it a part of nature (and part of creation) “betrays a serious error,” as Ellul sees it.⁵¹ “Nowhere in biblical revelation is there any mention made of this law,” he insists. “There can therefore be no original juridical principle.”⁵² And where a Christian interpretation of natural law appears, it is “an adulteration of God’s word by discoveries of human reason.”⁵³

4. Ellul on Ethics: An Evaluation

A General Assessment

My own evaluation of Ellul’s writings leads me to elicit both high praise and a measure of repudiation. As noted at the outset and as this conference demonstrates, there is a timeless quality to Ellul’s cultural criticism, which is penetrating and persuasive. For this, and certainly his technology trilogy, he deserves unceasing praise. At the same time, I must agree with one thoughtful reader who noted that some parts of

⁴² Ibid., 45.

⁴³ Ibid., 37, 41-45.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 68-69.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁵¹ Ibid., 64.

⁵² Ibid., 64-65.

⁵³ Ibid., 65.

Ellul's work are "unhelpful, unnecessarily abrasive, and perhaps better left without rediscovering."⁵⁴ Certainly not all, but a fair amount of the material in Ellul's ethics trilogy needs adjustment – and in some instances, severe adjustment.

Perhaps because of his deep criticisms of the Church historically, Ellul was something of an outlier in the Reformed Church. When he does mention the magisterial Reformers, even Calvin, he is usually critical of them. He is convinced that he need not operate under the assumptions of the fathers of the Church. This wariness – if not outright rejection – of Christian tradition does not serve him well when Ellul works with the biblical text, does theology, and more importantly, reasons ethically. Part of the "safeguard" for those who work in the Christian tradition is that this very tradition helps guide – and protect – them from false assumptions and erroneous applications. The "historic Christian tradition" and the "Christian moral tradition" are so named not because all voices find historic agreement therein, rather because they serve to demarcate what is authentically Christian and what is not. They establish boundaries. Because Ellul has a low view of this tradition, very often he steps outside of the boundaries of the Christian tradition which he claims to represent. To illustrate: against Ellul, Jesus affirmed "the law and the prophets" both.⁵⁵ The prophets were "prophetic" only to the extent that they were in continuity with the moral law and covenantal demands that were placed upon Israel from the beginning. In addition, contra Ellul, the Christian faith *is* about morality; what we do, not what we profess, is decisive⁵⁶ – for this life and for eternity.⁵⁷ And not least, the natural law *is* central to Christianity and is contained in the *entire* the Judeo-Christian tradition, Ellul's frequent repudiations notwithstanding, precisely because it in fact *does* serve as a bridge between Christians and non-Christians. Natural law thinking is not merely a "Catholic thing." As suggested earlier, the magisterial Protestant reformers – *all* of them – affirmed the natural law. Although they disagreed mightily on other theological matters, they were united with Roman Catholics on natural law ethics.⁵⁸

Specific Questions Raised by Ellul's Theological and Ethical Framework

One factor that is central to Ellul's theological and ethical understanding is his view of creation and the fall. His understanding of the fall is so radical, so extreme, that it is even more extreme than that of the Protestant reformers, for whom it was theologically decisive, given their renewed understanding of justification.⁵⁹ Reading Ellul, one can only conclude that virtually *nothing* is left of the image of God in the human person; he writes: "whatever it is of the *imago Dei* which survives, that cannot in any case be the moral sense."⁶⁰ Therefore, no one can have any knowledge of God, of the good, or of

⁵⁴ Jacob Marques Rollison, "Re-discovering the Ethics of Jacques Ellul: Four Texts on Freedom," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35, 3 (2022): 641.

⁵⁵ Matt. 5:17; 22:40.

⁵⁶ This is the very purpose of Jesus' warning "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord,' will enter . . ." (Matt. 7:21-23).

⁵⁷ Judgment, according to the witness of Scripture, is based on works – so, for example, Eccl. 3:17; 12:14; 2 Cor. 5:10; cf. James 2:24.

⁵⁸ Hereon see J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2008), esp. chapter 4 ("Natural Law and the Protestant Prejudice").

⁵⁹ Here I stand in agreement with J.M. van Hook, "The Politics of Man, the Politics of God, and the Politics of Freedom," in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 137.

⁶⁰ Ellul, *To Will*, 42.

what human behavior “ought” to be done. But Christian theology historically has taught that while the *imago Dei* is tarnished, to be sure, it is not obliterated or eliminated. The implication of this truth is that law, morality, politics, and governing authorities are not merely products of the fall; rather, they too are provisions of grace. In this regard, Ellul is right to question human motive, human endeavor, and human morality, and he is certainly correct to criticize how Christians and the Church historically have viewed politics and their relationship to the state. He is wrong, however, to minimize or reject the fact that God the Almighty, the Lord of the nations, works through *human agency*.⁶¹ This, after all, is what gives the vocation of public office and governmental service its nobility.

Another very basic assumption that undergirds Ellul’s thinking surfaces continually throughout his ethical writings. It is the belief that Christianity, with its accent on revelation and grace, is to be accepted on terms that are internal to it, not on evidence that is external to human beings. Take, for example, the created order. It is the position of historic Christian theology that both general and external revelation, both the cosmos and the human conscience, bear witness to the reality of God. This is the explicit teaching of St. Paul in Romans 1 and 2. Because of both the universe’s wondrous design and the law written on the human heart – that is, both external and internal evidence – all human beings, Paul insists, are “without excuse” as it concerns God’s self-revelation.⁶² For this reason, it is a false dichotomy to pit “nature” or creation against grace, as Ellul repeatedly does. Such represents neither the biblical witness nor the teaching of historic Christian theology. As it is, grace renews or completes nature; it is not its denial, negation or elimination.⁶³

This relationship and interaction of nature and grace has important implications, then, for justice, for the common good, and for the interaction of Christians and non-Christians in the public arena, contra Ellul, who refuses to undergird his account of morality with a proper doctrine of creation.⁶⁴ Right and wrong, justice and injustice, good and evil are moral values possessing an *intrinsic* character. This is to say, some things are not wrong or evil only (or simply) because we become aware that God condemns them; rather, they are wrong or evil for intrinsic reasons. God forbids certain human acts because they are inherently wrong; hence, there exists a relationship between Christian faith and working for morality in society. And for this reason natural law thinking is vital, serving as a bridge between Christian and non-Christian groups in a culture.⁶⁵ With Thomas Aquinas, we understand the natural law, at its most basic level as this: good is to be done and evil is to be avoided.⁶⁶ No one does *not* believe that

⁶¹ The apostle Paul is not denying the reality of the fall or unjust manifestations of political power in Romans 13, but he is arguing that all authority is given by God and that the secular authorities are ordained to reward the good and punish evil (Ro. 13:1-4).

⁶² Rom. 1:20.

⁶³ Historically, both Catholics and Protestants have affirmed this position; it is by no means merely a Catholic view.

⁶⁴ See in this regard Gene Outka, “Discontinuity in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul,” in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 177-228, esp. 186-88.

⁶⁵ Elsewhere, in his work *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 156-57, Ellul is caught in a related – and rather bald -- contradiction, where he states that prohibitions against violence should not be demanded of unknowing unbelievers. An extraordinary (and almost nonsensical) conclusion follows: “*If violence is unleashed anywhere at all, the Christians are always to blame*” (156, emphasis present).

⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II Q. 94.2.

justice and injustice do not exist.⁶⁷ This intuition is none other than evidence of the natural law, based on our fundamental design as the “image” of God. To deny or reject the natural law is to cut oneself off at the knees.

Here a related theological problem in Ellul’s thinking needs further clarification. It is his tendency to view human nature as a composite of two polarities – the worldly and the transcendent – with *no mediation whatsoever* between the two. Utter opposition and discontinuity are presupposed. But grace, properly viewed, is mediated in a variety of ways, and as we have argued those media may be external as well as internal, which is why the natural law doctrine has been a constitutive part of the Christian moral tradition. For this reason, then, Ellul cannot ground human efforts in *justice* – only in “freedom” and “love,” which as such remain ambiguous and disconnected from the *imago Dei* and creation orders.⁶⁸

In the end, Ellul argues that any ethical attitudes or actions by non-believers seem to stand in opposition to Christian ethics. But a genuine “Christian ethic” must speak with universal normativity; it cannot be isolated from the rest of the world or exist in some dualistic vacuum.⁶⁹ At bottom, then, Ellul is caught in the contradiction of his unbending position, acknowledging on the one hand that ethics in society is “impossible” yet, on the other hand, that it is “useful,” even “necessary.”

Ultimately, one of the notable – if not *most* notable – features of Ellul’s theological-ethical framework is the erection of false dichotomies – for example, nature versus grace, faith versus reason, New Testament versus Old Testament action by God, creation versus redemption, grace versus ethics, the “good” versus God’s self-revelation, morality versus justification, and the *imago Dei* versus human nature. One wonders whether, in his passion to tear away the debris of cultural, sociological or legal idolatry, Ellul does not in fact deny or reject some of the very theological and ethical tools that are necessary for the Christian apologist.

5. Concluding Reflections: Putting Ellul’s Antipathy toward Natural Law in Perspective

If we recall that Ellul was writing in the aftermath of Nazi perversions and atrocities, with “nature” being used to justify the abominable and justice disappearing because the state had usurped its authority and created its own laws, we can perhaps sympathize with Ellul and gain some insight into his bias against natural law thinking. Moreover, for Ellul, in a technological society law tends to become the instrument for breeding not morality but tyranny, as history seems to show. At most, in such a society there are no universal and enduring moral values or laws, only those that are relative, “situational,” and producing uniformity.

But the creation orders, as we have already suggested, are not abolished by the fall; they have not been rescinded. The very Genesis creation narrative itself is in fact “value”-laden.⁷⁰ The repeated language of “it is good” to describe each stage of creation’s development in Genesis 1 (for example, in 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, and 1:25) is highly instructive. All of creation is subject to – and mirroring – God’s law. All of life is value-

⁶⁷ Of course, where people draw the moral line, as it were, differs, but this is not my argument.

⁶⁸ Outka, “Discontinuity,” 191-92, is perceptive in identifying this feature of Ellul’s ethical thinking.

⁶⁹ So, correctly, Outka, *ibid.*, 213.

⁷⁰ Arthur F. Holmes, in “A Philosophical Critique of Ellul on Natural Law,” in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 240-42, deftly critiques Ellul’s deficient understanding of creation.

laden and consequential. Human beings establish goals and purpose, they endure and persevere, they work for justice and the common good. And human labor itself, we discover, has intrinsic value and dignity.⁷¹ Why? Because we are created in God's likeness, God's image. We imitate God. He works and we work; He creates and we co-create, participating with Him in the cultivation, renewal, and advancement of the culture of which we are a part. Freedom, then, which is so important to Ellul, can be described as the active, purposeful, and ethical pursuit of the good, for which we as human beings are created. The point needing emphasis is that natural law is part of the *orders of creation*. It may be defined as the revelation of God's moral will and character that is internal and external in its confirmation.

Contrary to the argument set forth in Ellul's *The Theological Foundation of Law*, the natural law is both normative and knowable, based on both the biblical witness and Christian history. To insist that it is "normative" and "knowable" is to acknowledge its metaphysical or transcendent (and thus universal) as well as rational or connatural character as part of the Creator's self-revelation through the created order.⁷² To insist that it is "knowable" is to acknowledge that there are truths which we "can't not know."⁷³ It is to acknowledge that basic moral principles – for example, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you" or "Do good and avoid doing evil" – are not only right for all people but at some level known to all.⁷⁴ It is in this light that Thomas Aquinas taught that the natural law is a mirror of eternal law, which is to say, God's very essence and nature. If this is true, then it is both fitting and necessary to argue that natural law should be the foundation of human law.

Finally, a cautionary word is needed. Those who affirm natural law thinking do not view reason as autonomous; such is the impression which Ellul leaves with the reader. Rather, they argue that human beings intuit moral reality to a certain extent, but that intuition or sense stands in need of fuller revelation. Ellul is right to be wary of reason unbounded; he is wrong to set reason and revelation in opposition.

Because Ellul is adamant that scripture gives no witness to the natural law, it is fitting to conclude with evidence to the contrary. That evidence is found throughout the Old and New Testaments, often implicitly and on occasion explicitly. *Inter alia* it informs the following biblical narratives and citations:

- The creation narrative, including the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1)
- The description of the Noachic covenant described, including the *imago Dei* (in Genesis 9)
- The giving of the law and the Ten Commandments (outlined in Exodus and Deuteronomy)
- The description of the perfect "law of the Lord" in the Psalms
- The profile of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs

⁷¹ Not incidentally, in his *Reason for Being: a Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (1990), Ellul devotes considerable attention to the issue of human labor and argues precisely the opposite of what the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches. He writes: "In the long run, work is not worth it . . . work has no meaning or value . . . It provides no justification for living . . . Work has meaning only through what it produces in the final analysis . . . Work is a necessity. It is no virtue [or] good . . . It holds no value" (93, 95-96).

⁷² I am drawing here from Jacques Maritain, *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory & Practice*, ed. William Sweet (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 19-20. When Maritain speaks of the natural law as "connatural," he is describing knowledge that comes to the human being by way of intuition or inclination.

⁷³ So J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

- A “wisdom” description of the eternal that is implanted in the human heart in (Ecclesiastes 3)
- Jesus’ affirmation of the creation narrative (Matthew 19 and Mark 10)
- Jesus warning not to set aside the law (Matthew 5)
- Jesus’ affirmation of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19 and Luke 18)
- Jesus’ mention of “the law and the prophets” (Matthew 5 and 22)
- The “Golden Rule” (Matthew 7, Luke 6, Romans 13, James 2)
- The Great Commandment (Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 10)
- The illustration of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10)
- The Apostle Paul’s work in Lystra (Acts 14)
- The apostle Paul’s work in Athens at the Areopagus (Acts 17)
- The apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans 1 and 2
- The frequent injunctions in New Testament letters against sexual immorality
- Divine ordination of the political authorities for praise and punishment in Romans 13
- Mention of the law by the apostle Paul as good, holy, just, spiritual and abiding (Romans 7)
- Christ as the goal (*telos*) of the law (Romans 10)⁷⁵

In summary, we may thus conclude that natural law assists us theologically, ethically, exegetically, historically, environmentally, culturally, and apologetically.

⁷⁵ Historically, Christian theology has distinguished between three types of law – ceremonial, juridical, and moral. The New Testament makes it clear that while two of these three were specific to Israel of old in the former covenant, the latter – the moral law – is abiding, thus constituting the heart of “Christian ethics.”