Ode to Joy: Technique's lure of satiety, Nature's promise of sufficiency
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Abstract

Nature holds an intrinsic promise to humanity: the promise of sufficiency. However, sufficiency as experienced in nature comes with its share of difficulties, as it is not a perpetual state. The technical system seeks to "resolve" the discomfort associated with insufficiency by increasing predictability and reducing variation, thereby allowing humanity to attain a state of perpetual satiety. In a society increasingly dominated by technique, the striving that impels human creativity is diminished until it is finally seen as marginal or dangerous, rendered obsolete and ill-adapted by the advancement of technique towards an ever-increasing efficiency and rational organisation of all aspects of life. The relentless advance of technique comes at the price of our alienation from nature, and from ourselves. And despite technique's lure of enduring satiety, it has deprived us of the depth of experience that only nature can offer: our ability to attain joy.

Introduction

In *Le système technicien* (The Technical Système), Ellul first elucidates the contours of the overarching technical paradigm that has come to define nearly every aspect of modern human experience, then explores the implications for future human societies as the system continues to grow and in growing, becomes increasingly embedded in them, effacing previous social structures and ways of being. In this, illustrates Ellul, the technical system acts very much like a cancer[1], redirecting vital energy and resources in order to feed itself, unchecked by our bodies' otherwise vigorous defenses, masquerading as an intrinsic part of the very system it attacks.

Although a cancer may stealthily develop over a long latent period, eventually symptoms will appear, alerting the patient to the presence of an unwanted intruder in the system. What are these symptoms in our collective body? How do they manifest?

Some of the manifestations that we can observe today were already predicted by Ellul who, like an astute doctor, was attentive to preliminary signs and able to predict their development path. Others have appeared since the publication of *Le système technicien* in sometimes surprising ways: a global pandemic, and the manner in which it tested, and ultimately reinforced, the technical capacity for a systematized global response; the ubiquity of small interactive screen devices and the addictive, compulsory nature of the interactions they enable.

The increased incidence of the symptoms of technical growth (I deliberately use the word "growth" rather than "progress", as the latter denotes a positive forward impulsion whereas the former simply denotes an increase, neither good nor bad) and their increased severity raises cause for concern if not alarm to those who are attentive to such things. It is to you that this paper is addressed.

[1] "*The new penetrates the old, absorbs it, uses it but in so doing destroys (phagocyte) and disintegrates it, like a cancerous tissue proliferating into previous non-cancerous tissue*." (Le système technicien, p.56)

Thesis

This paper presents a comparative discussion of the notions of sufficiency and satiety, identifying them as promises of, respectively, the natural world and of the technical system.

In reading Ellul's elaborate and detailed exploration of the technical system and its impacts on human society, one is called to compare two distinct environments that have been host to human development since the dawn of our emergence: what we still (rather touchingly) call "*Nature*" and what Ellul terms "*the Technical System*".

Although Ellul does not provide a succinct definition of nature in *Le système technicien*, it can here be conceived as the ensemble of elements that constitute the natural environment of our planet Earth — whereby "natural" environment indicates *unaltered by humans*, although the definition may be stretched to admit certain low-tech environmental adaptations such as housing, rudimentary agriculture, etc.

In contrast, the technical system represents the ensemble of tools, mechanisms, machines, software and other techniques and devices (including AI), as well as the complementary managerial, bureaucratic, logistic and communication structures supporting them that, taken as a whole, form the complex technical system governing modern life.

As a totalizing, self-reinforcing system, the technical system is antithetical to Nature.

How do we experience this new environment? What is its effect on us? How are we to evaluate it, to judge it as either good or bad?

In order to gain a foothold or starting point from which to consider our response, we may examine the promise inherent in each system: what does it strive towards? What promise does it hold for humanity and other life?

I propose that Nature holds a promise of *sufficiency* which is in contrast, indeed in conflict, with technique's promise of satiety, that is: *constant fulfillment of need before it emerges as such.*

In a recent interview[2] Canadian film actor Keanu Reeves relates a conversation in which he describes to a young teenager the plot of The Matrix, a film she has not seen. As he lays out the main tenets of the plot, in which his character struggles to understand what's real and what's not in a dystopian world where an artificial intelligence has plunged humanity into a fictitious virtual reality, the girl stops him and asks: *Why? Who cares if it's real?*

Why indeed? The question seems increasingly difficult to answer as we adapt (faster than Ellul predicted we would) to increasing incursions of artificially generated interactions in our professional and personal lives.

The satiety promised by the technical system poses a real challenge to those who would grapple with differentiating real and unreal, biological and virtual processes and responses. The exercise that we undertake closely resembles the search to determine right and wrong

[2] You can view the interview here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9kIOsCnNvE

according to an ethical valuation rendered insignificant by the technical system[3]. For if indeed the technical system can deliver on its promise of satiety, we may justifiably ask *Who cares if it's real?*

The corpus of mythological and theological stories and traditions are filled with tales that serve as a warning against just this sort of flawed reasoning, ignorant of consequences. To accept the Faustian contract comes at a tremendous cost, something akin to bargaining one's soul: the technical system's promise of satiety comes at the expense of our ability to experience true joy.

Nature's promise

Nature promises sufficiency[4]. That is: to provide us with *enough* for the fulfillment of our needs. As biological creatures that evolved together with the rest of the living and non-living beings around us, we are assured that the conditions that cradled humanity from its emergence will continue to sustain us, to provide for our daily needs[5].

Embedded within the concept of sufficiency is want — ie, occasional insufficiency. Nature's sufficiency can be compared to what biologists refer to as natural balance. Both are transitory states. Balance is experienced in reality as a temporary state of equilibrium as natural systems pass from one state of imbalance to another. Likewise, sufficiency is marked by periods of insufficiency. For example, a season of rich harvests may be followed by a season of drought.

Because they are both transitory states, temporality is an important aspect of both sufficiency and equilibrium. Taking their measure at any given point in time is likely to give an inconclusive result. Sufficiency, like equilibrium, is only to be found over a given period, likely punctuated by periods of insufficiency.

Insufficiency is intolerable to technique, which seeks to create conditions that predictably maximize efficiency.

Humanity's "complex and fragile" interactions with Nature "patiently woven by Man" over eons were previously characterized by "poetry, magic, mythology, symbolism". This relationship echoed the richness and intricacy of Nature itself, with its complex interdependencies and unpredictable changes.

Technique tends to replace the "multifaceted, equivocal and unstable" conditions of humanity with unambiguous, stable and efficient ones. "*As a truly effective means, Technique imposed itself in lieu of poetic mediations*." (Ellul, p. 48)

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[3] See p.154 Le système technicien: "*Since technology does not tolerate any ethical judgment, this leads us to the third aspect: it does not tolerate being stopped for a moral reason. It goes without saying that applying judgments of good or bad to an operation deemed technically necessary is simply absurd*."

[4] I want to acknowledge here Ellul's faith as a devout Protestant. Because this is not a theological paper, I will not be making a theological argument; however, for Ellul, it might be more accurate to say : **Nature *as God's Creation* promises sufficiency.**

[5] This is strongly suggested in the Lord's Prayer, in which we ask: "*Give us this day our daily bread*". The repetition of day - daily suggests that we not fear for the future, nor try to accumulate goods as doing so would be a disavowal of the fulfillment of God's promise of sufficiency.

The technical system promises we need never want for anything**;** never experience the discomforts of unmet needs or indeed of unfulfilled desires. Insufficiency is a problem of the old world, of wanton nature. Technique holds the promise of a world where resources are not in themselves a concern, only the access to resources: how they are measured, exploited, channeled and in every way packaged and facilitated to meet our needs before we should ever feel the pangs of hunger, of thirst, or of all manner of desire. If only we can establish accurate data, and put in place the correct controls, insufficiency can be entirely overcome! It is, after all, a technical problem, is it not?

I pause here to remark that the aforementioned refers exclusively to the developed world; populations in developing countries are only too acutely acquainted with need and chronic insufficiency; their lot is the fallout or "externality" of a rapacious system that reproduces inequalities on a global scale while enforcing equality policies at home.

This faith in the ability of technique to facilitate our relationship to an unstable, unpredictable Nature is the basis of the many technocratic programmes and policies that propose to eradicate hunger, poverty, homelessness, and many other social ills by putting in place this or that technology: better irrigation systems, more targeted pesticide compounds, more efficient supply chain management, data collection, taxation programs and so on. "*I've been thinking a lot about how AI can reduce some of the world's worst inequities*," confides Bill Gates in a blog entry from March 2023[6].

So where does this leave us? First, by entirely neglecting the natural balance of the Earth, which includes, as stated above, the *temporal inevitability of imbalance and of insufficiency*, any further effort to increase the technical efficiency of production and delivery methods will only serve to place a greater strain on systems already stretched beyond their reasonable natural limits[7].

Second, by habituating populations to a state of constant plenitude, humanity's connection to the cyclical nature of life is eroded and our dependence on technical systems reinforced. On an individual level a dangerous expectation is set, one that can never be completely fulfilled – an expectation of satiety.

The finite nature of pleasure

Every mother knows that a baby cries when it wants to be fed. When we pause to explore this behaviour, it becomes clear that the baby *must* cry in order to be fed. The baby does not choose to cry – it first feels a pressing need, a need that is more than an inconvenience, one that is potentially a matter of survival. The need is felt as *a painful lack of that which is required to live*,

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[6] Gates, Bill. "A new era: The age of AI has begun" March 21, 2023. https://www.gatesnotes.com/The-Age-of-AI-Has-Begun

[7] In the 1972 report "The Limits to Growth" (referenced by Ellul in Chap. 4, The Problem of Acceleration) the authors predicted that resource depletion caused by increased population growth and economic activity would lead to sudden and catastrophic degrowth, and further warned that relying on technology to resolve the crisis would be quixotic (totally unrealistic).

namely, its mother's milk. The acutely felt lack is registered as pain, prompting the baby to cry out; a cry that is biologically designed to provoke its mother to react and to feed it.

Imagine now a baby that does not need to cry to be fed. It is fed exactly the correct amount at exactly the correct time, in anticipation of its need before the need is felt as such, and much before the threshold of the impulse to cry is reached. A wonderful proposal from the standpoint of technical efficiency! Indeed, why should we tolerate that a baby experiences discomfort? Is it not a tremendous achievement, a mark of progress that crying in babies be eradicated? And yet, is this not, somehow, a most clear and poignant illustration of a dystopian reality, one in which babies cease to cry for their mothers and are fed systematically instead? One can imagine a sleepless new-dad tech guru ensconced in a beanbag chair at this very moment, hatching an idea for a "smart feeding" app…[8]

Our lack of tolerance to pain in a technical society could be the subject of another paper. Here, I wish simply to touch upon our lack of tolerance to the *discomfort that is experienced as a lack of satiety.*

The baby crying to be fed provides a starting point for discussion as its behaviour has not been conditioned, nor is it the result of reasoned thought. It becomes less clear why an adult would choose to decline satiety when satiety is what is on offer.

Indeed, we are not equipped to make such counter-intuitive choices, particularly when we find ourselves not as masters of technique, but rather as its subjects. We are "in that place there" (*dans ce milieu-là),* the technical system with its abolition of limits, its boundless pleasures and entertainments, its unending news-and-commentary cycle, its fast-food and free delivery.

Yet in nature, the pleasure associated with satiety has an end: food is consumed; the fire dies down; sunset turns to dark night. We must wait, or work, or pray (and sometimes all three) in order to again find food, warmth, and light.

I argue that it is this finite characteristic of pleasure that is essential to our living well and to our living harmoniously with the rest of nature and within planetary boundaries. It is this finite characteristic that impels us to strive to overcome challenges, and this striving is itself an important means to self-realization[9].

It is this finite characteristic of pleasure that technique strives to overcome. As the system refines and perfects itself, we are increasingly unable to wean ourselves from the pleasures we have come to expect, the satiety that we crave and whose insufficiency has grown unbearable.

Finality

Ellul's dissertation on the technical system concludes with an analysis of the system's ultimate finality.

"There is no finality" blankly states Ellul, after exploring different hypotheses (happiness, economic growth, scientific advancement) which he ultimately dismisses as mere justifications.

[8] Upon conducting a very cursory Google search, I was able to discover that such apps already exist!

[9] cf. Freidrich Nietzsche "The Will to Power", 1888.

If there were a finality, it would be what is most often mistaken as the means rather than the end: consumption, for-profit production, and organisation (p. 274).

In the ensuing pages, Ellul explores elements that may constitute technique's medium-term objectives and more short-term goals. He eventually hits upon *well-being*, a feasible goal adopted in lieu of the loftier aspiration of happiness. Well-being is measurable as a series of distinct improvements to one's condition; these improvements constitute our adaptation to the technical system, palliating our sense of alienation. Well-being rests on the concept of *how one ought to be*, and can therefore be tweaked with diet, physical training, pharmaceuticals, etc. Happiness, despite being superficial and fleeting, remains a somewhat more intangible ambition than well-being, and is therefore abandoned as a system objective.

And yet, how is it, in our talk of sufficiency and insufficiency, of satiety and want, that we have neglected to go beyond the realm of needs and desires and to invoke that higher sphere towards which humanity has long aspired — neither happiness, nor well-being but that awesome, unifying force that expresses itself as joy?

The notion of joy is entirely omitted from *Le système technicien*, yet lingers as an unspoken human possibility. The deeper self-interrogation, the pit-of-the-stomach lurch, the yearning that remains although needs are satisfied: this is briefly alluded to, identified by Ellul as *anguish or panic*[10] (p. 306), instinctive human reactions to the exigencies of living within the technical system which may eventually prove the most effective key to resistance.

Joy proceeds from a similar place in the psyche and belongs to the same emotional realm as anguish, although the two are experienced very differently! Both are experiences of thrilling intensity as well as of sudden, acute insight into our Being.

Joy, like anguish, is never the result of satiety, which engenders more "comfortably numb" less disruptive emotional states. The sheer chaotic uncertainty of Nature, its formidableness, the striving and complex interactions it incites us to is far more fertile ground. *Joy is the emotional payoff when nature delivers on her promise of sufficiency.* When the rain finally comes; when the baby is born after hours of painful labour; when we live to fight another day.

The technical system's Achilles heel *is* its constant perfectibility, its limitlessness, its smooth flawlessness. In the end, we will seek out hardship although every effort is made to preserve us from it, to ensure neutrality, ease, safety, comfort, predictability. For only through hardship can we aspire to the elixir of existence, to Joy.

[10] There is a parallel to be drawn with Heidegger's notion of anxiety, which acts as an intensifying trigger enabling a person to suddenly perceive the truth of their Being in the most absolute sense.