

Technological Agency and Dialectical Freedom

Dr. Erik Nordenhaug
Philosophy and Religious Studies Department
Georgia Southern University
Armstrong Campus
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I will not be trying to argue you into anything today, but merely offer an interpretation. This is, if successful, of course, a form of persuasion and perhaps the only form of persuasion commensurate with Ellul's own approach in *The Technological Society*. His method in *The Technological Society* is roughly to say: see this technique, see that one, see this other one, see the relation, see the network of relations, see the mesh of the net, see how it surrounds us, see the emerging totality.

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Seventy years ago, Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society* deeply offended 20th century democratic, nuclear-aware minds with a thought so unbearable that “We the people” can hardly say it. “We” can hardly say it because Ellul contends that “we” is really an “it”. Just where we would use that autonomous “We the people” deriving from the Enlightenment conviction that humanity has come of age, possesses the power to give itself a teleology, can shape its own destiny, Ellul affirms that the proper pronoun is not that misleading reassuring “we” but “it”. The “it” is a place-holder for the abstract noun “technique” and its various synonyms like “the technological phenomenon”, “the technological system” and “the technological society”. Just when we are at our most teleological in viewing the processes of history, just when we are most tempted to point to *our* arsenal of means as proof of human autonomy and *our* Promethean abilities to make history, just where we want to point most enthusiastically to *our* progress, through *our* science, *our* technology, *our* history, *our* constitutions and declarations of independence, just there is the “it”, massive, inert, yet all engulfing, a blind automatic causality, which, vampire-like acquires the very autonomy that modernity attributes to humanity. “We the people” becomes the great soothing prayer hiding from awareness the “It the system” that “forms a more perfect union.”

These quotes [referencing the projected slide of quotes] are some of Ellul's most challenging claims from *The Technological Society*. Ellul conforms his grammar to his vision: the collective noun "technique" is the subject of human action and verbs. Here and elsewhere, technique is variously said to "affirm", "tolerate," "judge," "decide," "demand," "create"-- in short, "to act" -- in precisely those ways in which "we" -- that Enlightenment "we" -- took ourselves to be tolerating, judging, deciding, demanding, creating, acting, as we made our history.

A frequent response to Ellul's language is to suppose he is simply anthropomorphizing technology and using a figure of speech all of which requires translation into more respectable sociological and philosophical categories. I no longer approach his words, in philosophical perspective, as a merely unsanitary happenstance of language, awaiting the antiseptic ministrations of the linguistic analyst to disinfect it for purposes of philosophical respectability. That approach would by its very nature destroy its datum. Ellul means to mean what he says. He means to use "it-language" where we want to use "we-language". That is the whole point. If we try to disinfect the language (by transforming what he is saying into pure sociological descriptions or other philosophical categories), will we not want to somehow assimilate it back into the "we-language" perspective where we are accustomed to speak of *our* institutions, *our* social decisions, *our* progress, *our* history? And Ellul wants to endow his "it" precisely with the characteristics and verbs of our "we". So how can we come to see that "we" is "it" if we demand as a condition of intelligibility that the "it" somehow resolve itself back into "we"?

The word "autonomous" means "independent", "self-sufficient", quite literally "self law-giving" or a "law unto itself." Ellul's comments about autonomy are sometimes expressed in the language of pure sociological analysis, where he is attempting a pure description of technique and its interrelations, its laws of development. But they are sometimes also expressed, as in these passages, quoted in a sort of ethical dialectic. For a long time, I made the mistake of reading Ellul

purely as a descriptive theorist, which assimilates his view far too closely to a sociological or historical determinism or worse, to an essentialism yielding a metaphysical determinism, which he wants to reject at other places in the *Technological Society* and many of his other writings. I now think Ellul's use of the word "autonomy" is primary in these and other dialectical appearances, where it contrasts and is in tension with human autonomy, and that the sociological analysis must be explicated in the light of this more primary usage. "Autonomy" is a dialectical word, a relational word, not a purely sociologically descriptive or essentialist word – it applies historically to this time, this place, this age and it is not intended to mark a cosmic reversal in the way of seeing subject and object, but only a historical one, applicable to today, but not two centuries ago. The "autonomy" of the "it", technique, is just as real, just as substantial, just as well-founded as the "autonomy" of the "we" of the modern mind and to acknowledge this requires a rethinking of what human autonomy means, what the "we" means. To express it differently, the technological phenomenon is the hybrid "we-it" phenomenon. No collective "we" in the world can express itself or hold together as a "we" without the technological mediation of the "it".

This approach immediately begs the question: Where is the "I" and the presumed agency of the individual in this "we-it" technological phenomenon? In Ellul's books, he addresses the "I", particularly as having moral agency and freedom, in almost all of his theological works (especially in *The Ethics of Freedom*). Consequently, any Ellulian discussion of the relation between the agency of the "I" and of the "we-it" technological phenomenon requires a dialectical discussion of his theology and sociology side-by-side.

Because discussing technological agency is unavoidably bound to notions of individual human agency, I will first contrast Ellul's and Peter Paul Verbeek's models for thinking about individual human autonomy in relation to technology autonomy. An emerging pattern or convergence from these two thinkers despite the epistemic chasm between a

postphenomenological empirically-grounded view and a theologically-related sociological description of a “totality” not empirically verifiable is worth noting.

Verbeek’s use of the phrase “technological mediation” as a substitute for the noun “technology” is his way of conforming grammar to his vision. “Technological mediation” is intended as a way of linguistically encouraging us to think of technology as the relation between human and technological artifact, not technology as an object nor technology as subject (which is how Verbeek critically reads Ellul’s descriptions of technology). And for better or worse, I too have my awkward way of conforming grammar to my vision as I have already demonstrated in my use of the “we-it” [we dash it relation].

Given Verbeek’s focus on human artifact-mediations, not systems or collectives, but “artifacts”, I associate his position with individual “I-it” relations. Verbeek’s postphenomenological method avoids the existence of any “we” that is not derived from the aggregate of empirically observable “I-it” artifact relations.

In Verbeek’s 2020 reflections on “Politicizing Postphenomenology” he attempts to address his “...‘friendly critics’ concerns of alleged ‘political deficits’” of the postphenomenological micro-level analysis of human-technology relations.¹ He acknowledges the importance of pushing postphenomenology toward analysis of the political, collective “we-it” relation though he proposes doing this by analyzing only micro-level technological mediations. “Unraveling the technological mediation of power at the micro-level of human technology interactions also reveals a political dimension of technology at the macro-level of society”.² In other words, the political “we-it” phenomenon he is willing to discuss is reducible to the aggregate of individual micro-level human-technology interactions with artifacts.³ If we simply add up all or many of micro-level technology mediation analyses, they will reveal political macro-level trends of society. This

approach resolves the Ellulian “we-it” phenomenon into an aggregate of the sum of “I-it” technological-artifact mediations.⁴

On the other hand, Verbeek still appeals to this “we” as if it were a force capable of guiding technological mediations of individuals and influencing their value frameworks [emphasis mine below]:

“Should **we** simply accept the fact that any technological design will inevitably influence people’s choices and behavior, or do **we** need to develop normative frameworks to deal with this technological power responsibly? Can **we** just leave the design of technology power to designers and engineers, or do **we** need democratic control? Should democratic **states** use technological design as an additional instrument to influence people’s behavior, complementary to legislation? Should democratic **states** empower citizens with technological literacy, to enable people to understand how the technologies they buy influence their lives, and to deal with this influence in critical ways?”⁵

Who is this apparently autonomous “we” that could “accept”, “develop”, “design”, “control” technology when elsewhere Verbeek affirms that an independent individual human autonomy is “naive”? In some instances, the “we” appears to point to design engineers, then to value framework designers, then to citizens or at least technologically literate citizens and finally the we refers to the state. Note the almost unobserved shift from the pronoun “we” in this passage to the “state”, an “it” which can “empower” and “enable”. The “we” and the “state” are place-holders that appeal to a power or force that is “outside” or at least capable of “outside influence” on the technological mediations they are expected to render judgment on. Despite this appeal to the “we”, Verbeek is quite clear, “...there is no opt-out, and no “outside” from which **we** could decide whether **we** want to use a technology or not. This mediated character of human freedom renders a one-sided focus on individual autonomy as naive”.⁶

Verbeek’s claim that “individual autonomy” is naive echoes numerous passages from Ellul’s *The Technological Society* where he attributes autonomy to technique, not the individual or the “we”. Remarkably, both thinkers also maintain that human freedom is not being lost by their

rethinking of human autonomy as naive. Verbeek writes, “This postphenomenological questioning of liberalism, therefore, does not imply the rejection of freedom....To the contrary, it rather aims to provide the conditions for freedom by recognizing the fundamental relational and mediated character of human existence”.⁷ Verbeek sounds as dialectical as Ellul here when suggesting the conditions for freedom occur by recognizing the necessity of technological mediation which no one can opt-out of. Seeing Ellul’s dialectic in Verbeek suggests the possibility of using the Verbeek’s postphenomenological language of “technological mediation” to elucidate Ellul. Regarding moral agency, Verbeek writes, “Rather than claiming that technologies have moral agency, the approach of technological mediation claims that moral agency is a hybrid affair, involving both humans and technologies”.⁸

Understanding moral agency (and freedom) in a world where all actions are mediated by technologies requires the surrender of individual human moral agency in order to see that moral agency is a “hybrid affair” where autonomy and responsibility are distributed in and over the relation between human and artifact. Moral agency and autonomy should neither be placed in the human or in the artifact. Verbeek appears to read Ellul (and these passages) as having pushed moral agency and autonomy all into a technology as personified subject (as I indicated above is a common mode of interpreting Ellul). There are many passages in Ellul’s texts that can reasonably be read this way. Nevertheless, once the centrality of Ellul’s dialectic between his sociological and theological works is recognized, I affirm Ellul also can be read relationally (as Verbeek’s approach affirms). Ellul also implicitly affirms moral agency and human autonomy is a “hybrid affair” though the question to both of them is: “affair” with whom? Or “affair” with what? Verbeek, empirically-grounded and artifact-bound, argues that agency and freedom are to be found in the affair between humans and technology. Ellul sociologically-grounded and theologically-unbound to the empirical verification requirement affirms that agency and freedom are to be found in the

relational affair between humans and God. For Ellul agency and freedom do not reside in the human or in God, but in the tense, dialectically mediated relation between the two. A postphenomenological empiricist and a theological-sociologist agree that agency, autonomy and freedom are to be found in the relations between -- not in objects by themselves, not in subjects by themselves, not in humans themselves, and not in technology itself.

Thinking about how Verbeek's arguments for the "morality of things" and Ellul's descriptions of the "autonomy of technique" both indicate a shifting of moral agency and autonomy away from being solely in the individual "I" and toward distributing that "responsibility" and "agency" across the relation between the "I" and the "it" is reminiscent of another ancient model describing a shift in human autonomy. Could "technological mediation" analysis help us understand idolatry in the Old Testament? Is the human-idol relationship the same or similar to Verbeek's "technological mediation"?⁹ An idol is a subject, not just an object, to those whose worship it (that is, to those who value mediating their relation to the world through "it") Furthermore, that empirically observed material artifact-idol is affirmed to have moral agency at least equal to, if not in greater than that of the individual "I" who greatly values the artifact-idol (which is both subject and object now). The idol-as-subject draws its life, agency, and autonomy from the continual relation of the human-subjects that worship and value it -- and from their willingness to objectify themselves before the artifact which is now a subject that acts as a mediating agent toward the world. Idolatry is relational insofar as agency and autonomy are distributed over the relation between the human valuers of the artifact and the artifact-become-subject. Depending on whether one values being in this idol-relation or not, two names for the artifact-idol emerge -- one name is used by those who trust it and are actively being mediated by it and another name is used by those who don't value being in that relation.

An idol can, of course, be seen as an inert hunk of stone (just an “it-object-artifact”), but not by its worshipers, who are mediated by it. Ellul’s “technique” and Verbeek’s “technological mediation” are in different ways describing the human-idol relation -- but the names “technology” or “technique” are not the names of the idol used by its worshipers and valuers. To call it “technique”, in Ellul’s sense, is to blaspheme against it, and the blasphemy is complete when we change the subject-term to a murky and inert object-word such as “technique” while keeping the human subject action verbs in the description of it.

What is the other name of the idol used by its worshipers, those who think of it as a subject capable of action? Its’ name is “we”. When considering the Ellulian dialectical relation of sociology and theology, there should be two names for the “technological phenomenon” one sociological and the other theological. *The Technological Society* is “The Idolizing of the ‘We’ ”. Ellul’s sociological description and Verbeek’s empirical analysis reveal that the collective abstract pronoun “we” resolves into a system of technological relations (the “it”). When we affirm “we”, collective humanity, as the source of autonomy for actions to solve all the problems of the world (scarcity, climate change, disease, hunger, tyranny), we affirm it. We love IT. When we affirm “it”, collective technique and technological systems, as a source of autonomous actions to solve all problems, we feel challenged, diminished and threatened as if the very thing one really idolized and valued were being attacked -- the idol of “we”-- the name used by the “it-worshipers” who are not aware they are “it-worshipers”.

Ellul believes, I think, that when we are prepared collectively no longer to say "we" in place of it, then the "it" will also vanish as an autonomous force. At that point the idol will cease to claim its human sacrifices, and will become what it is: inert. Technique is autonomous, then, just as long as humans suppose that they are. This is Ellul’s paradoxical freedom dialectic. Technique is our destiny just as long as we believe we have wrested control of our destiny. Our means will be

restored to us as means only when the hybrid "we-it" phenomenon that makes them more than that has been acknowledged.

Endnotes

1. Peter Paul Verbeek, "Chapter 9: Politicizing Postphenomenology" in *Reimagining Philosophy and Technology, Reinventing Ihde* (Spring International Publishing AG, 2020), 141.

2. Ibid., 144.

3. Olya Kudina and Peter Paul Verbeek, "Ethics From Within: Google Glass, the Collingridge Dilemma, and the Mediated Value of Privacy" in *Science, Technology & Human Values* (2019), Vol 44 (2), 291-314. This is an interesting postphenomenological "micro-level" analysis of how the artifact Google Glass (meaning wearable google glasses which have not yet reached mainstream cultural deployment) will alter values regarding privacy and alter the value frameworks that will be used to judge whether the Google glasses are valuable. Their stated goal was to produce empirically-grounded "well-informed value framework anticipations" that could be useful to designers and engineers. While it might sound like "value frameworks" imply the affirmation of a collective "we", Verbeek/Kudina explicitly add this disclaimer "The technological mediation approach does not provide generalizing predictions on the possible societal or normative impact of Google Glass..."(308). In other words, the approach intentionally avoids discussion of the societal impacts on the collective "we" because it is beyond the scope of what is empirically manageable by their postphenomenological approach.

4. In Verbeek's language, if enough "material hermetics" of human-technology artifact relations are added together, one moves toward what he calls "cultural hermeneutics" to achieve a macro-look at society.

5. Peter Paul Verbeek, "Chapter 9: Politicizing Postphenomenology" in *Reimagining Philosophy and Technology, Reinventing Ihde* (Spring International Publishing AG, 2020), 145 (emphasis added).

6. Ibid. (emphasis added).

7. Ibid., 146.

8. Ibid., 297.

9. Peter Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things* (Chicago UP, 2011). In Chapter 7, Verbeek includes a brief analysis of idolatry from the technological mediation approach.

What follows on next page is the single slide to be displayed during my presentation:

From Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1954 French/1964 English)

Technique elicits and conditions social, political, and economic change. It is the prime mover of all the rest, in spite of any appearance to the contrary and in spite of human pride, which pretends that man's philosophical theories are still determining influences and man's political regimes decisive factors in technical evolution. External necessities no longer determine technique. Technique's own internal necessities are determinative. Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special law as and its own determinations. (133)

The power and autonomy of technique are so well secured that it, in its turn, has become the judge of what is moral, the creator of a new morality....In any case, in respect to traditional morality, technique affirms itself as an independent power. (134)

Technique requires predictability and no less, exactness of prediction. It is necessary, then, that technique prevail over the human being....Technique must reduce man to a technical animal, the king of the slaves of technique. (138)

It is not a kind of neutral matter, with no direction, quality, or structure. It is a power with its own peculiar force. It refracts in its own specific sense the wills which make use of it and the ends proposed for it. Indeed, independently of the objectives that man pretends to assign to any given technical means, that means always conceals in itself a finality which cannot be evaded. And if there is a competition between this intrinsic finality and an extrinsic end proposed by man, it is always the intrinsic finality which carries the day. (141)

Technique never observes distinction between moral and immoral use. It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent technical morality. (97)