

**Ellul's Ethics of Non-Power
in a Digital World of Technique and Productivity**

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After two decades of breathless enthusiasm over all things digital, we increasingly admit to how depleted and exhausted we feel from chronically trying to keep up with the demands of our digital dictates. When relentless digital noise and hurry have come to characterize our days, it is not surprising that concerns about anxiety, burnout, addiction, and loneliness are on the rise. So habituated to being on the jump to respond to notifications and emails, to consuming podcasts and videos whenever and wherever, we are precariously becoming a people unfamiliar with what it is to have a moment to inhabit or a space to be still. The constant accessibility of information, communication, entertainment and engagement is too difficult to say “no” to—it is like living in a world where the sun never goes down. We can always be “doing” something, all the time, everywhere. This is the reality that Ellul foresaw seventy years ago in his classic text, *The Technological Society*. This paper explores how the cage-like imperatives of “technique” are evident in today’s digital world and considers contemplative religious practices of silence and solitude as possible models of Ellul’s ethics of non-power in action.

Permanent Connectivity

One of the most taken-for-granted features of our contemporary lives is the normalization of permanent connectivity. In today’s digital world, we are “connected” not merely when we are online or looking at our screens. For even when our devices are not in our hands or within sight, our consciousness has become thoroughly trained in the habits of mind and spirit formed by an unceasing awareness of how life is constantly “being lived elsewhere.”¹ Our bodies are in one place, engaged in one activity, but our consciousness is partially devoted to the reality of something else, someone else, anything else calling for our attention. Rather than a discrete behavior or activity, being permanently connected is now a particular way of being human.

¹ Dalton Conley, *Elsewhere, U.S.A.: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms and Economic Anxiety* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

Permanent connectivity has become increasingly unavoidable because of three factors in our digital ecology. First, our digital devices are mobile and therefore inescapably ubiquitous. Carried in our pockets, in our bags, strapped on our wrists, digital devices are our constant companion. Studies show that significant percentages of Americans are almost constantly online now, whittling away our days with micro-moments of screentime.² Second, our digital technologies are social—meaning they are embedded in how we carry out our responsibilities and our relationships. Our capacity to tend to our devices are no longer a separate realm of our lives; they are increasingly bound up in how we conduct our family lives, our friendships, our schooling, our work lives. Therefore, the social expectations and obligations that characterize those areas of our life now carry over into being digitally available and immediately responsive to any digital notification. We have come to feel that being on our devices is necessary to being a good parent, good friend, good colleague, good employee, good leader. Third, layer on the fact that our current digital media and services deliver content that is infinitely novel. There are always new algorithmically-curated posts, videos, messages to check and consume.

What results when we mix infinitely novelty with the mobile and the social is a psychological cocktail of pleasures, anxieties and felt expectations. The expectation to be perpetually trafficking in emails, social media, messaging, tweets, and videos is now the way to demonstrate our worth, our competence, and even our care. And yet, more and more people—even our young people—realize that this type of existence is unsustainable in the long run. We feel “stuck” in our permanent connectivity and don’t know how to live otherwise.

Many are quick to blame social media or smartphones for the plight we feel deep in our bones. However, to only lay our grievances at the feet of “machines” or “technology” is to be blind to the ways in which so many of our technologies and accompanying practices—including the felt need for permanent connectivity--only make sense because these imperatives are rooted in a

² Andrew Perrin and Sarah Atske. “Almost three-in-ten US adults say they are ‘almost constantly’ online.” Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/03/26/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-say-they-are-almost-constantly-online/> on March 26, 2021.

longstanding culture of productivity and history of industrialization. Jacques Ellul's notion of "technique" helps to clarify this distinction by asserting that technology is not only an artifact (e.g., smartphone) or a structural system (e.g., embedded in and mediating how we experience communication and reality), but also an instrumentalizing orientation towards human beings, the natural world, and reality. Like our contemporary notion of "productivity," under the moral order of "technique," efficiency of means is of highest priority and meaning. Efficiency of means is the form of power that matters most and becomes the benchmark of success and worth.

In this way, Ellul's argument belongs to a rich and wide tradition of social theorists who have been concerned with how the power of rationality and the tenets of industrialization expand beyond the boundaries of commerce and become the dominant guide and measure of every aspect of our lives, reducing us to mere means to given ends—usually market-driven ones. He echoes Max Weber's fear that the entirety of our human existence becomes subsumed by "the iron cage of rationality."

Today, we can see this iron cage most clearly in the culture of productivity that drives our society's devotion to life hacks, zero inboxes, multi-tasking and maximum optimization.³ We have come to believe that commitment and passion are signaled by one's willingness to optimize one's productivity, and live as if productivity were the ultimate good. In fact, we are digitally equipped with 24/7 access to information and communications in ways that make it much easier to believe that we can and *should* to be productive all the time—not only in our work lives, but in every aspect of our lives. As such, the horizon of possible lives hasn't widened, it has actually narrowed as limitations of time and space have dissolved away and to *not* be productive is felt to be wasteful, lazy, even disobedient. As Ellul presciently wrote:

"The machine tends not only to create a new human environment, but also to modify man's very essence... He has been liberated little by little from physical constraints, but he is all the more the slave of abstract ones."⁴

³ Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018).

⁴ Ellul, 325.

When we willingly apply and enforce upon our own lives the systems of control and regulation found in industrialization, we *internalize* them and *become* like machines. Ellul understood that “technique transforms everything it touches into a machine” and the externality of “machine”-technique was paired with the interiority of “human”-technique so that we become eager to be seamlessly “integrated” with technique in one’s sense of being.⁵

As our lives become more and more driven by efficiency, we feel acutely how this modality is unsustainable. Ellul sensed the discontent when he lamented,

“The anxiety aroused in man by the turbulence of the machine is soothed by the consoling hum of a unified society.... when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. It is no longer face to face with man but is integrated with him, and it progressively absorbs him.”⁶

Indeed, we may be wildly productive today, but are sleepless and unhappy. In our attempts to glide effortlessly along the friction-free surfaces that our digital technologies lay before us, we can’t actually keep up and we are exhausted, overwhelmed and anxious. Ironically, we turn to productivity apps, sleep apps and meditation apps to address our needs. Indeed, the “technological society” is so all-encompassing that we only know how to combat the negative consequences of technique with more technique.

Absorbed by technique, we are coached in adapting to a digital world of machines. It is what inures us to the precarious possibilities of artificial intelligence. It is what makes us tolerant of the disinformation and propaganda that calls itself “the news” these days. In these ways, Ellul’s concept of “technique” puts a finger on how the formative effects of our digitally saturated world goes far beyond the immediate or manifest functions of our digital devices and social media platform. Instead, the formative effects are expansive—both broad and penetrating – in ways that result in minimizing and blotting out our capacity to retain other essential values of our personhood.⁷ It renders unnoticeable and invisible the negative and

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 4.

⁶ Ellul, 6.

⁷ Ellul, 413.

even insidious effects of technique. We use our digital technologies to soothe and numb us from the anxieties of social comparison, from the need to master the flow of digital content, to stay in touch and attend to all the relationships and responsibilities that we now have the capacity to address because former constraints like time and space are no longer. Technique exacts the wound and insists on being our salve as well.

Ethics of Non-Power in Digital World

While Ellul's *The Technological Society* sought to awaken readers to the colonizing nature of technique with diagnosis, his later writings prescribed an ethics of non-power as a possible form of resistance to technique. He argued that, in a world where the 'efficiency of means' drives all of our goals, "values" dissolve away as benchmarks for evaluating action, so that "the only remaining rule is that 'everything that can be done, ought to be done.'" As such, Ellul concludes: "It becomes clear that the real issue is power. All technique is a function of power."⁸ If the core problem lies in how our unlimited capacity for power functions to eliminate other essential values of personhood, Ellul argues that the necessary response is choosing to *not* exercise such power. Far from passivity or weakness, non-power is a choice, a subversive, even offensive, act in a world otherwise defined by technological morality. Ultimately, Ellul believes: "We must decide...that it is not technique which frees us, but rather it is from technique that we must free ourselves."⁹

To examine the dynamics and parameters at work in the practice of choosing to *not* exercise one's power, let us consider the contemplative religious practices of silence and solitude as possible acts of transgressive non-power. On the surface, these spiritual disciplines of old seem like appropriate forms of resistance against the digital world of social media and the business of attention economy that undergirds it all. In a digital ecology that demands permanent connectivity with others and requires communicative utterances in order to prove and sustain one's existence, choosing solitude and silence is equal to non-existence, death. For a young

⁸ Jacques Ellul, "The Power of Technique and The Ethics of Non-Power" in Kathleen Woodward, ed. *The Myths of Information*. (Indiana University Press, 1983), 244.

⁹ Ellul, "Technique and The Ethics of Non-Power," 246.

person whose world is circumscribed by social media platforms and online memes, what havoc would be wrought if they choose not to respond to a DM or post a picture on BReal? In a digital world where we now have the power to deliver utterances into the world at all times and to anyone, to be ‘with’ people at all times, any effort to choose *not* to do so—to choose times of solitude and periods of silence—appears transgressive and abnormal. And yet, such actions may be the very practices that are necessary for cultivating the interior fortitude of developing and strengthening the independent thought and voice needed in order to live liberated from technique itself.

We already see the apparent efficacy of these contemplative practices in the adoption of mainstream Zen Buddhism into the work cultures of Silicon Valley where mindfulness is championed to sustain worker creativity and well-being. Furthermore, industry gurus and technologists are well known for gathering annually in the desert for the Burning Man Festival, leaving behind the grind of their startups and corporate tech giants to cut losses and achieve union with others and nature. While these “spiritual” practices appear to serve as antidotes to the “technologizing” effects of the industry, Ellul’s stance on technique shows how these apparent forms of resistance easily devolve into technique itself. For example, Carolyn Chen’s analysis of Silicon Valley’s corporate maternalism compelling demonstrates how religion and spirituality is instrumentalized for the sake of corporate ends.¹⁰ And, arguably, the escapism and primal self-expression celebrated at Burning Man are often attempts at achieving a particular state of consciousness through the “magical” technique of drugs, arts, and collective effervescence.¹¹ As such, while these “spiritual technologies” may intend to address whatever friction, dissonance, or alienation felt from the professional immersion in the Ground Zero of the digital industry, they actually reveal how technique has coopted religion and spirituality as well.

¹⁰ Chen, Carolyn. *Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹¹ Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

In contrast, liberation from technique might actually be found in the ancient desert spirituality of Christianity. Notably, the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers did not withdraw from mainstream society in order to seek rest or “peace” away from the din and noise of ordinary life.¹² While they did mean to live “contra mundum” (against the world, in particular, the Roman Empire and its pagan ways), their desert spirituality was one understood as entering (not exiting) a fierce struggle of dying to self as a path to union with the divine. Unlike the contemporary mythos of self-actualizing desert spirituality that dominates the modern Western imagination, the ancient desert abbas and ammas were engaged in strict forms of ascetism and vows of poverty that strove to live in absolute dependence on God. They were not engaged in conventional technologies of the self or modes of moral or spiritual self-improvement. Rather they understood themselves to be cultivating a genuine freedom that arises only from confronting the very limitations of human personhood in relation to the divine.

The significant challenge of importing a premodern desert spirituality into a twenty-first century world that is so thoroughly constituted by technique is figuring out how to prevent one’s spiritual aspirations from simply being “made in the image of” productivity and subjected to the reigning logic of technique. Here, theologian Robert Barron’s conception of one’s posture towards the spiritual life might prove helpful. He writes, “it is only through a suspension of our grasping and a deep relaxation of the spirit in trust” that one can begin engaging in the journey towards transformation.¹³ What Barron prescribes here is essentially an ethic of non-power in the interior cultivation of a spiritual life. It is to not grab for power, but to relax. It is to let go and cede control and manipulation. This is the difference between the desert spirituality of the ancient Christian fathers and mothers, and the desert spirituality of Silicon Valley. The difference is in de-centering the self from the spiritual project and realizing that “Our lives, in the end, are not about us, but about a power beyond us....God is ...insisting that ...knowledge [of good and evil] comes, not through grasping but through being grasped.”¹⁴

¹² Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

¹³ Robert Barron, *And Now I See . . . : A Theology of Transformation* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1998), 45.

¹⁴ Barron, 45.

The key to Barron's non-grasping is the understanding that the ultimate locus of power is not in the self, but in somewhere else, someone else: the divine presence. This non-grasping directly attacks what Ellul points out as the true nature of technique—the fact that technique ultimately leads to deprivation:

“We tend to think that technique liberates us from the mundane, from material needs, so that we become free-floating pure spirits. But alas, technique, while it liberates us from one thing deprives us of something else at the same time, and that something else is usually of the spiritual order.”¹⁵

Here we see that technique deprives us of the freedom and beauty of experiencing self-forgetfulness and non-possessiveness. This is both appealing and mysterious to those who feel exhausted by the ceaseless self-reflexivity of modernity and the perpetual awareness of oneself on the Internet.

Whatever the countervailing praxis or narrative of liberation may be—that is, whatever “values” one determines to be worth living for—maybe it is time for the development of new communities of “desert fathers and mothers” who are oriented towards life as a daily struggle against the very human desires to control, manipulate, and to grasp for the “magic” of technique. Perhaps a new kind of spiritual asceticism can emerge which re-defines vows of poverty, chastity and the disciplines of silence and solitude in relation to the digital. These vows would be costly in their resistance to the reigning technological morality, but would be an investment of hope and faith that there are indeed values—something meaningful and precious beyond ourselves and the efficiency of means that is worth giving our lives over to and experiencing to the end of our days.

¹⁵ Ellul, “Technique and The Ethics of Non-Power,” 247.