Jacob Marques-Rollison
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!!! *INCOMPLETE DRAFT – Final Version pending!!!*

Technological Morality vs. The Ethics of Freedom

I.   Preliminary Comments

Good afternoon. What an honor and a pleasure to have been with you all these last several days to discuss Ellul's book *The Technological Society*. (**If nobody has said it:** It is worth recalling that Aldous Huxley, author of the globally influential dystopian novel *Brave New World*, said that Ellul's book "really made the case" he tried to make, and suggested it would become "one of the twentieth century's most authentic documents of social criticism".)[1] Ever since the first time Ellul's work gripped me 15 years ago, just several miles west of here at Wheaton College, I have been in continual and increasingly nuanced dialogue with his thought.

My presentation has a modest goal: first, to comment on what Ellul was doing, in all of his work and in the book which concerns us; and second, in light of these comments, to offer suggestions for how to read him. In particular, I will try to paint the picture of Ellul's ethical thinking in broad strokes, but to do so accurately. In that respect, I am not trying to do anything particularly original or revolutionary here. The most original thing I will do is read you several passages from Ellul's writings which have not been translated into English. If you, my listeners, leave with a more balanced understanding of how Ellul's work communicates, I will consider my goal achieved. With that in mind, I have two preliminary comments about approaching Ellul's thought which I have gleaned from these years of study, before I get to my main topic.

First, I would emphasize that Ellul's work is a *communicative address*. I mean that everything in his writings—history, sociology, theology, ethics, etc.—all these *genres* are situated within an address to the reader. Their ultimate value does not come from how many big universities or famous people take them seriously, but from their status as words spoken by one human to another. That means they have a sort of universal communicative intent: anyone can read them and feel addressed or targeted by them; anyone can respond to them by taking them seriously and questioning themselves. We might say that Ellul's project is ultimately rhetorical, if we take rhetoric not as a technique for winning arguments, but in the sense of a human spoken word, with all the most incarnate and even spiritual dimensions that speech involves. But this universally communicative aspect is double edged. If on the one hand it addresses anyone with ears to hear, on the other, it challenges them to do a lot of intellectual labor. Ellul saw himself as addressing the educated layperson. But our levels of education vary, and few have such a synthetic mind capable of commanding such broad swathes of historical and

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[1] Cf. Wilkinson, "The Divine Persuasion," in *Introducing Jacques Ellul,* 168.

linguistic knowledge as Ellul. His work challenges academics because they are not used to being addressed, and it challenges the average layperson today because they are not used to such heavy intellectual lifting. A careful approach to Ellul should highlight the challenge to both sides: that is, it should take care that the academic actually *hears* Ellul's work as an address, but also to spur the layperson to undertake the work necessary to get what Ellul is saying.

My second and more brief preliminary comment is that in my estimation, Ellul's work is like a puzzle. To really understand a piece of the puzzle, you must see how it fits into the whole picture. But in the case of Ellul's corpus, to acquire a decent image of that big picture requires an obscene amount of reading and time. Things conspicuously absent from one book might receive a chapter or even a book-length treatment elsewhere. The only corrective is to keep going, to take the dialogue further.

In the reception of this perhaps the most influential of Ellul's sociological works, we can see both this communicative aspect and this synthetic aspect of Ellul's whole project in play, in both positive and negative ways. When *The Technological Society* landed in the United States in the mid-sixties, it was surprisingly difficult to treat it as a piece of social analysis because the *communicative* aspect hit its readers like a rhetorical ton of bricks. Two of Ellul's careful readers from the American south, James Holloway and Will Campbell wrote that "Ellul speaks to our guts and to our heads."[2] And if Ellul's goal was an address that would ultimately *liberate* his readers by making them aware, an unbalanced reading of Ellul sometimes led to the opposite outcome: some readers felt paralyzed. John Wilkinson, the Berkley, California academic who translated *The Technological Society* into English, said that (quote) "Ellul's book had acted more like an infectious disease than as a serious social critique. The participants…simply couldn't get beyond it. Something like the hypnotic power of the fabled basilisk."[3] Or, even worse than such paralysis, without the fine-tuning afforded by a broad *synthetic* reading of Ellul's works, this "hypnotic" power sometimes led readers to pursue ethically deplorable actions. Witness the case of its most infamous reader, the Harvard-educated mathematical prodigy who was utterly convinced by the *Technological Society's* arguments, yet who then embarked on the domestic mail-bomb campaign which earned him recognition as the United States' biggest case of domestic terrorism before 9/11. I am of course referring to Ted Kaczynski, the 'Unabomber.' While his narrow reading of Ellul certainly wasn't the *only* force at work, a sampling of almost any of Ellul's theology books would have counterweighted the rhetorical force at work in *The Technological Society*, challenging in advance any justification Kaczynski might have had for his violent actions.

With these comments in the background, I am now better positioned to present my paper. Following a suggestion by David Gill, I thought it would be good to round out the conference by placing the argument of *The Technological Society* in dialectical tension with that which it sought to

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[2] Holloway and Campbell, in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, 12.
[3] Wilkinson, "The Divine Persuasion", in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, 171.

inspire: namely, an *Ethics of Freedom*. To retake the title of the 2012 Chicago-area conference of the IJES, I suggest that hearing Ellul as a *prophet in the technological wilderness* is still the most robust way to take him seriously. Now the word "prophet" simply does not fit into most of our categories, but purposely pushes back on them and reframes them. Ellul sought not merely to analyze, but to exhort; not only to expound, but to interrogate; and not simply to write history, but to encourage a different future. The label of 'prophet' rigorously captures these exhortative, communicative, and temporal dimensions. It also provocatively indicates the source of the hope driving Ellul's theology, which is the self-giving and liberating presence of the God of love who revealed himself in Jesus-Christ. Finally, reading Ellul as a prophet invites the reader into continually renewed dialogue with this God, a dialogue which transcends all technique.

Having now finished my preliminary comments, onto my main topic.

II.   *Ellul's Original Plan for* The Technological Society

It is important to remember that this book, *The Technological Society,* was not originally intended to be published in the form which we have received it. In an exchange of letters with Didier Nordon written at the end of his life, Ellul gives us a rare glimpse of his original intention. I will read you a long citation in which Ellul boils his whole project down to one question. This question involved two poles in tension, the foundation for the architecture of his sociological-theological investigations. He writes:

"I certainly conceived of my books as a whole. Fundamentally, my big question was: does knowledge of historical and sociological "facts" put in question the faith in Revelation that I received, and reciprocally, how can this faith made present respond to certain problems of modern man and society? In other words, I decided to undertake a *critique* of the world in which I lived, on the basis of the Truth in which I believed. But reciprocally, did this deepened knowledge of this society, of western modern man, of modern thought, allow for a critique of this Truth? Does this truth hold fast in the face of science, technique, and philosophy—and also, amidst of the events of our time? This was my question, and the reason I researched and wrote. I wrote less for others than to clarify both the gravity of this Revelation and the meaning which appeared to me in this world where I lived. What elucidates this project rather well was the first of my books, which was never published as I had written it. I am referring to *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* [*The Technological Society*]. The work which I produced was twice as long as what was ultimately published. More than a thousand pages! And unpublishable, since the author was a nobody! My book was conceived thus: one chapter of sociological analysis of technique (I have often explained elsewhere the choice of technique as a topic)—and a chapter of theology or ethics (we might say: of "systematic theology"), which was intended to form a counterpart. And between this pair and the following pair (another chapter of sociological analysis and one of systematic theology), a literary "interlude." No publisher was interested, and finally [the

publisher] Colin accepted to publish the "sociological" chapters. The others were bundled together and constituted the three volumes of *Éthique de la liberté* [*The Ethics of Freedom*]. As for the "interludes," they were published in part as articles in various journals..."[4]

If we take this original intention seriously, we can see a few things. First, recalling Frédéric Rognon's talk, we can see just how faithful Ellul was to Soren Kierkegaard in the architecture of his work: for both authors, we really have to read everything to understand almost anything properly, and if we only read one part, we misunderstand it because we only get one moment of a larger movement. Second, we understand just how seriously Ellul meant the idea that his sixty-some books were conceived as one giant project, and must be understood together. But third, and most importantly for me today, we see that *The Technological Society* is only understood correctly when placed in tension with *The Ethics of Freedom*. Again, Frédéric Rognon's paper reminded us of this already and sketched this out for us. Rognon showed us how for Ellul, technique manifests an order of necessity to which humanity belongs today; it names the way things are heading unless we do something to change it. *The Technological Society* paints the picture of just how demanding such change would be. *Ethics of Freedom*, on the other hand, is an invitation—to Christians and non-Christians alike—to discover freedom beyond all technique through hope, and proposes that hope in God through Jesus Christ as a superlatively liberating force.

Now that we have seen how *The Technological Society* and *The Ethics of Freedom* must be held in tension with one another, I'd like to unpack a bit more the contrast Ellul lays out between "technical morality," or morality which conforms to technique, and an ethics of freedom.

III.   *"Morality" vs. "Ethics*

We should pay attention to that difference in terminology: technical *morality*, versus an *ethics* of freedom. Why not use the same term in both cases, like "technical morality vs. morality of freedom," or "technical ethics vs. ethics of freedom?"

In Ellul's usage, these two terms, "morality" and "ethics," mean very different things, and he even opposes them to one another. He discusses the difference between them in two main places: first, in his introduction to Christian ethics, *To Will & To Do*, and second, in the manuscript of his *Ethics of Holiness.* (This second text will be published posthumously in French for the first time this coming fall; there are flyers about this on the table outside. As a sidenote, the publication of this massive volume should remind us all that a full understanding of Ellul's ethical project is still to come; it is not behind us but before us). To draw out the contrast between morality and ethics, I will note three things about morality from *To Will & To Do*, before examining a long citation from the *Ethics of Holiness*.

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[4] Ellul & Nordon, *L'homme à lui-même : correspondance*, 26-27

In *To Will & To Do*, first, Ellul notes how 'morality' is essentially a group phenomenon. For whatever else it might also involve, moral behavior demonstrates a relation to a given group. Disobeying a group's morality demonstrates independence from the group and puts the group in question, while obeying a group's morality demonstrates either belonging to the group (for an insider) or a will to respect the integrity of the group (for an outsider). Second, morality expresses this group's approach to questions of good and evil. In Ellul's sociological approach, the good is not an absolute principle transcending societies and cultures; instead, Ellul is focusing on the apprehension of good and evil by a given group at a given time. And third, whether consciously or unconsciously, a group's morality acts as a *justification* for being the way they are. Ellul is particularly critical of how morality allows people and groups to justify themselves instead of putting themselves in question. Ellul's theology in this volume uses the protestant doctrine of justification in Christ alone to ruthlessly stifle this moral function. This does not mean that morality is always constraining, or restrictive, or wrong, or anything like that. But for Ellul, 'ethics' is something wider and broader. Ethics takes morality into account, but cannot be reduced to it.

In *Ethics of Holiness*, Ellul summarizes the things I have just described, before drawing a sharp contrast with ethics. Allow me another long citation, this time from *Ethics of Holiness*.

"Certainly, we must first differentiate—and I would even say oppose—ethics and morality, which are not at all the same thing. Morality is an ensemble of precepts or rules, formulated more or less clearly, often with a purely pragmatic origin... it is... a practice which we assimilate to the good by way of the group's justification of itself. Morality lays down the "you must" and the "you must not" according to the social body; it is justifying and "edifying" in the banal sense (and not the evangelical sense), which is to say that it leads to certificates of good conduct and makes a model of the virtuous man. Morality situates good and evil, vice and virtue, at the level of normal opinion. But it is formulated into a body of clearly conceived rules and imperatives. Ethics is exactly the opposite... It is not a knowledge of the rules of good and evil, since precisely, the autonomous determination of good and evil is sin itself... if we examine all the ethical orientations from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles, we see a proclamation (coming from God) of a being of man. It is the orientation of a way to be pursued, but it is a path which is neither readymade nor clearly marked or signposted (which would still be morality!), but a path which is made bit by bit, carved out as we walk, in accordance with our desire to live (here, to live according to the will of God) and (here) according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Ethics is thus the contrary of readymade rules; it is a lived freedom which is not constructed ahead of time; it is not a category of human nature, but a continuously renewed creation...It is a call, a proclamation, a signpost, the search for a conviction; it puts our back against the wall; it is exhortation, but also a surgical operation destroying morality and having, pharisaism and laxism, self-satisfaction and suicidal nihilism. It is the opposite of a well-made philosophical fabrication, systematic and structured, which would cover the whole range of 'moral questions.' Thus,

ethics obliges us to point the finger at ourselves, while morality is the means for hiding, masking ourselves, disappearing behind rules and precepts." And, skipping ahead a bit: "Certainly, ethics implies a way of speaking. It must be spoken, but not as a system and in precepts, but rather as an interrogation."

With that quote in the background, we can see that by describing a technical *morality*, Ellul is applying his theses regarding *technique* to questions of human relation to right and wrong and behavior. In human behavior defined by technique, the freedom and unpredictability of *ethics* is already far too inefficient to be enframed in a technical system; ethics must be reduced to morality so that technique can progress unhindered. The self-justification available to humanity in any morality takes on a new aspect once the character of this morality becomes *technical*: morality restricts the operation of the human word, cutting off any deep self-questioning, whether individual or social. As such, morality becomes essentially a justification for the way things are—and in a technological society, a justification for technique as the driving force of that society's development. Ellul's *ethical* interrogation thus seeks to restore the humiliated human word, to liberate its ability to put everything in question, including ourselves. He calls us to open our ears and eyes, to listen and look, in our bodies, and with whatever designation we apply to that other part of humanity which is irreducible to material—whether mind, or spirit, or soul, etc.—in the time and place where we live. Finally, morality serves as a reference point for Christian ethics, to be taken into account as a matter of communication. At different times, the Christian *Ethics of Freedom* will both obey and disobey, respect and transgress, this technical *morality*.

Now that we understand more clearly what is at stake in these two terms, let's move on more specifically to *technical* morality and the ethics *of freedom*.

IV.   *Technical Morality vs. The Ethics of Freedom*

It would be foolhardy to try to summarize what Ellul has to say about these two topics in my remaining time. I will just offer a few lines of what seems most pertinent to me today.

A chapter in *To Will & To Do* vol. I titled "Technical Morality" concisely schematizes morality in the technological society. I encourage all of you to read this chapter. I think it describes the society in which we live today with prophetic relevance. It is written some sixty years ago, in dialogue with currents of philosophy which are now outmoded, yet reads as if written today. I will cite what I consider the briefest summary of the chapter:

"The morality that currently exists in our society...is composed of two rather different elements: one part is a leftover from the Christian morality produced in the Middle Ages which was transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, emphasizing individual virtues and oriented toward charity; the other part is a technical morality, emphasizing collective virtues and oriented toward work... we are

witnessing the formation of a new morality, purely technical, in which the elements of the Christian morality contained in bourgeois morality are progressively being eliminated. This technical morality is not yet complete; its constitution is currently in progress, but it is assuredly the morality of tomorrow."[5]

This description encapsulates, on the one hand, the origins of much of western morality in a moral derivation of Judeo-Christian descent. Today this inheritance is discussed under various headings such as "Judeo-Christian values," "Biblical principles for human flourishing," etc. Whether or not these moral derivations are legitimate and good is a different question; here, Ellul notes only that these moral elements were like pieces taken from a Judeo-Christian whole. On the other hand, it includes the fact that the meaning of these values changes entirely once they are detached from the context of their origin. And after being churned through the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, the remnants of these values are not negligeable, but they really are a remnant or a scrap of something from a wholly different society. The new, technological society in formation is in the midst of constituting its own morality and progressively eliminating this old one.

Several characteristics of the new morality described by Ellul seem particularly relevant to me. First, "normal" replaces "moral." Children grow up wanting to be normal, not to be good; conformity to a standard model becomes a morally desirable element and requirement. By the same token, we are critical not so much of *immoral* behavior, but of *deviant* behavior, which deviates from an accepted norm. Second, this new morality values *success*; a thing is good because it works or because it succeeds. Success is proof of goodness. Third, technical morality is concerned with *behavior*. Things like motive, motivation, inward contemplation, individual reasons, etc., are all seen as add-ons; what matters is behavior which conforms. Or, in some cases, behavior is left free to individual decision— but only where it no longer matters very much or is no longer taken seriously. Many times, we can do whatever we want precisely because nobody is worried that it will change anything important. Not only in its content, but also in its form, morality is defined by technique. This is a morality of conformity, of function, of efficiency, of productivity.

Still working on the rest…

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[5] Ellul, *To Will & To Do* vol. I, 172-173.