

Searching for Christian Values that could
Redeem
Technological Systems:
Complications, Challenges,
Commitments

for the
“Redeeming Technology” Seminar

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2 December 2017

Prolegomenon

- My own motivations and method of preparation
- Exploring a wide-variety of themes within our Anthology / Reader
- Realizing the distinctive effort of the content of this lecture

General Outline for this Lecture

- I. Basic Conceptual and Methodological Complications
- II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s work (1963)
- III. Moving toward a Self-Conscious Adoption of Christian Values that could Redeem Technological Systems
- IV. Framing and Forming Christian Commitments in response to the Technological System(s) / Environment

I. Basic Conceptual and Methodological Complications

- A. What is the Focus of our Discussion on the Technological side?
 1. Inconsistencies in the use of key terms within the Anthology's articles that occur regularly also in other literature
 2. Are we discussing "tools", "techniques", "skills", "technology", "sciences and technologies", "technique", "the technical system / environment"?
- B. Why I have found Jacques Ellul's conceptions of "the technological system" and "the technological environment" most helpful
 1. Underscoring the non-neutrality of our technical systems
 2. Ellul's position (Art. #19 and 36) in relationship to Mumford (Art. 32), Heidegger (Art. 27), Jonas (Art. 20) and Ihde (Art. 46)
 3. A pragmatic standard of assessment: answering more questions without leaving more new unanswered / troublesome questions

I. Basic Conceptual and Methodological Complications (cont.)

C. Selective Sources for Christian Values

1. Bible passages?

2. 20th and 21st century Christian monographs and papal bulls?

3. Focusing on the Gospels and Pauline Epistles

4. Choosing not to refer to the modern “social teachings” of the
Roman Catholic church

D. Implications of Making these Conceptual and Methodological Choices

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work

- A. Ellul’s “Definition” of “Technique”

(citing Scharff and Dusek, eds., Anthology, p. 206, upper left column)

“[T]echnique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity. Its characteristics are new; the technique of the present has no common measure with that of the past.”

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

1. “Technique” is not equivalent to “tools” or “technology”
2. Later, Ellul described these phenomena as “the technological system” (1980) or “the technological environment” (1989)
3. Technique consists of “the totality of methods” related to “every field of human activity”
 - (a) note its wholistic emphasis (and its conceptual challenges)
 - (b) its focus is on “human activities” and not “machines”
 - (c) it is concerned with “methods” and so is interested in understanding daily practices and their utility in modern lifestyles

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

4. Technique is “rationally arrived at and having [seeking] absolute efficiency”

(a) emphasizing the rational processes igniting post WWII technological innovations, troubles and developments

(b) “absolute efficiency” is ideally conceived, involving the “**three techno-values**” (LFP neologism):

-- the **fastest**

-- the **most impactful** (having the greatest impact)

-- the **cheapest**

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

B. Complications and Challenges in Addressing Technological Systems / the Technological Environment

1. Contemporary human beings tend to adjust to the technological environment as something “pseudo-natural” (spontaneous, taken-for-granted)
2. Contemporary academic sciences and technological institutions are regularly (depending on the country and the political context) connected to military institutions for research funding and consultation, but in recent scholarship it has been revealed that this realm of “non-neutral cultural orientation” also involves academics in the sociological and humanities-oriented research
3. Ellul characterizes “**the technological environment**” in four ways (Ellul, *What I Believe*, 1989, pp. 133-134)
 - It enables us to live.
 - It sets us in danger.
 - It is immediate to us.
 - It mediates everything within our lifeworld.

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

3. Four examples to illustrate Ellul’s claims about the characteristic features of the technological environment

- (a) 84 year old grandmother’s death in the USA after returning from shopping in her automobile
- (b) the efforts and unintended consequences of a KMB Bus driver in Sham Shui Po in October 2017 to avoid a taxi that suddenly stopped in front of him
- (c) a tragic experience of a university co-ed in Kowloon Tong during her morning jog
- (d) the classic case of the explosion and subsequent loss of life and environmental degradation of the Chernobyl nuclear energy plant

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

C. **Advantages** and **Problems** with Ellul’s own approach in answering

these technological challenges

1. **Advantages**

- (a) A determined Christian intellectual who foresaw the evils of the Nazi regime and participated in the French Resistance by being an informant and helping refugees (Jewish and others) escape from the European continent
- (b) Was involved in the post-WWII local governing council for the area of Bordeaux
- (c) Wrote as a specialist in European legal traditions, but became a recognized theological writer and technological theoretician

2. **Problems**

- (a) Adopting theological marginal positions in some cases
- (b) Writing major sociological descriptions of technological systems that tend to be strongly pessimistic and presented in tones that can be read deterministically
- (c) Acting from political values that privilege local democratic governance, but distrust larger political systems

II. Exploring the Account of “Technique” in Jacques Ellul’s Work (cont.)

D. Ellul’s promotion of certain approaches to the technological system(s) / environment

1. Developing self-consciousness that can lead to patterns of resistance to blindly following the three key techno-values
2. Creating, choosing, and promoting personal, familial, and other forms of alternative value systems that will challenge the unquestioned dominance of techno-values
3. Promoting the creation of institutions that can embody humane values that are de-emphasized or neglected because of the pervasive impact of techno-values

III. Moving toward a Self-Conscious Adoption of Christian Values that could Redeem Technological Systems

- A. Reconsidering the three key Techno-Values in relationship to the Rules Jesus Christ called “the Greatest Commandment” and “the Second Commandment” (Matthew 22: 37-39)
- B. Reconsidering the three key Techno-Values in relationship to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 3-12)
- C. Reconsidering the three key Techno-Values in relationship to the “Fruit / Harvest” of Virtues promoted by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23)

[See Worksheet #2]

IV. Framing and Forming Christian Commitments in response to the Technological System(s) / Environment

A. Learning from Creative Precedents for the Glory of God

1. Acts of Resistance

(a) “Techno-fasts” and their conditions

(b) “Disconnectopia” (Nicholas Carr, *The Great Switch* (2010), family experiment with limiting internet intrusiveness)

2. Creative Rules of Christian Engagement

(a) Privileging face-to-face neighborliness over online connections

(b) Setting up conditions for vital family and community relationships that will not be disturbed or distorted by intrusive technological distractions

3. Setting up Alternative Christian Institutions to counter the negative impacts of the technological environment

IV. Framing and Forming Christian Commitments in response to the Technological System(s) / Environment (cont.)

B. Continuing to Reflect on and Create Awareness and Activities that Expand Circles of Christian Influences

1. Think and act not only on God's will within your own personal and familial contexts, but also in your church community, your neighborhood, and in socio-political as well as economic settings (such as ministries to the poor and refugees, involvement in opposing human trafficking, and the annual Pugwash Conferences)
2. Start communicating about these concerns with fellow Christians, and pray for the Holy Spirit to ignite new ideas that will flow into institutional realizations due to corporate creativity seeking to realize our Trinitarian Lord's will.

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