

Redeeming Technology Talk 2.1

Searching for Christian Values that could Redeem Technological Systems: Complications, Challenges, Commitments (With reference to the associated PowerPoint presentation)

Lauren F. Pfister

I. Complications

The approach I have taken is decisively oriented by an understanding of the nature of “technology” that does not define this term in relationship merely to machines or tools, but comprehends the phenomena related to the modern development of techno-science institutions historically, sociologically and philosophically. Having reviewed works by various key interpreters found in our assigned anthology, I assert [slide 4] that Jacques Ellul’s accounts have provided more insights and created less further problems than those promoted by Lewis Mumford (Article 32) and Martin Heidegger (Article 27). Ellul’s position is confirmed and enriched by Hans Jonas’ philosophical analysis of technological systems (Article 20) and Don Ihde’s insightful phenomenological explanation of various kinds of human-technology-world matrices (Article 46). My understanding of Ellul’s position (Articles 19 and 36) has been increased by his later accounts of the technological environment in *What I Believe* (1989), his published dialogues with Patrick Troude-Chastenet (1998), and Andrew Goddard’s overview of Ellul’s life and works (2002) [slide 16].

Also, my methodology [slide 5] is very Protestant in its bible-centered explorations, but also unprecedented (as far as I currently know, see Worksheets #1-#4). In this lecture I have not referred to other important traditions and works developed in the 20th and 21st centuries within the Roman Catholic social teachings or other works produced by notable Protestant intellectuals on these themes.

Of central importance in understanding the scope and moral non-neutrality of “technique” in Ellul’s work is his definition found on our anthology on p. 206: “Technique 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.” In this definition we can see Ellul’s emphasis on seeing the technological phenomena “wholistically” [slide 7], containing impacts on the values shaping human existence in every realm of activity, and privileging three dimensions of “techno-values”: “the fastest, the most impactful, the cheapest” [slide 8]. These values have dominated modern social life especially after WWII, so that those who grow up within this “technological environment” experience it many times as a “pseudo-natural” condition for all dimensions of their lives [slide 9].

II. Challenges

Ellul illustrates the non-neutrality of the technological environment by describing four ways our human lives are impacted by this new utilitarian-oriented condition and its attendant lifestyles [slide 9]. By the technological environment we are enabled to live in new ways that are immediate to us [the “pseudo-natural phenomenological experience] since it mediates

everything within our lifeworld, whether we intend it or not. At the same time, the environment “set us in danger,” because if we are unsophisticated, unaware, or make technical errors, it can not only threaten our existence, but can also be fatal to us. This was illustrated by four examples [slide 10], the most famous being the disaster caused by the vast radiation contamination that occurred after the accidental explosion of a nuclear plant in Chernobyl (in what is now Ukraine) in 1986. Problems related to how some military institutions have employed social scientists as counter-insurgency agents in Afghanistan was also another case in point. In recent discussions within an article about the “enhanced warrior” published in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, I pointed out that they have involved dieticians, medical research, computer experts and psychologists to make a soldier able to “bounce back” more quickly in the midst of war whenever they might be wounded, without any consideration of the impact on the life and meaning of the soldier herself or himself. These examples confirm that the scope of technological systems reaches into many unexpected realms within those military technological systems, and so further support Ellul’s claims in this regard.

From my own studies of Ellul’s life and works available in English, I pointed out three advantages and three disadvantages of his interpretive positions and practical activities based on his own convictions [slide 11]. Nevertheless, I have discerned from his writings and interviews as well as some secondary sources, some ways that Christian values that could redeem technological systems can be identified. This has not been done by Ellul himself or anyone else that I am aware of at this time. Taking up also some basic themes in biblical meditations, I have identified three different kinds of approaches that can be addressed through personal reflections, communal interactions, and professional involvements in our 21st century Hong Kong / Chinese contexts and lifestyles [slide 12].

III. Commitments

First of all, we need to have more self-conscious and humble reflections about the impact of the technological environment and the three techno-values on our basic Christian commitments [slide 13]. I have argued that the dominance of those techno-values not only neglects love of God, but would make it “useless” because it is not at all supportive of their superlative influences within our lives. Similarly, values such as “loving our neighbor as ourselves” involves sacrifices and long-term commitments that resist seeking the “fastest”, “cheapest” and “most impactful” styles of interrelationships. This is made explicit when we are encouraged to “love our enemies” (Matthew 5: 43-46), “to bless those who curse us” (Romans 12: 14), and to become peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). [See also Worksheet #2.]

Further practical transformations of our techno-savvy lifestyles should also be considered. “Techno-fasts”, “disconnectopia” experiments, and privileging face-to-face relationships over face-to-screen-through-screen-to-face interactions. Also, we should seek out professional institutions (such as the Pugwash Conferences for socially-responsible scientists) and NGOs that extend the kingdom of God in the midst of technological systems [slides 14-15, Worksheets #3 and #4].