Technology and the Further Humiliation of the Word

by David Lovekin

Abstract: I continue to read Ellul philosophically without worrying about whether he is a philosopher or not. As David Gill has mentioned to me, he is what a philosopher should be. I continue to track his attack on the symbol by technique, which claims to be rational and all-encompassing. Technique is indeed a form of rationality in denial of what makes rationality possible—the imagination and the capacity to make and to learn from the symbol—the word and the Word—out of the encounter with otherness. Technique is a denial of otherness in a bad infinity that is clearly observed in the proliferation of clichés and in an advanced form of disregard for the true or the real in a discourse rooted in nothing but itself, in what Henry Frankfurt has termed “bullshit.”

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The question of technology as the accumulation of gadgets and tools perhaps considered as the outgrowth of science and as culminating in the machines of the industrial revolution, avoids a serious question: how did tools and machines and the societies that used them become obsessed with absolute efficiency and with the reduction of means to a mathematics-like exactness?¹ Technology currently determines scientific advance; machines—use itself—are made regardless of the usefulness that became independent of cultural values. Cultural values, instead, seem determined by the advances of technique. Jacques Ellul, in his 1954 La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle broke with the tradition of seeing technology as present in every culture in any historical moment, in conflating it merely with material advance, and understood it as a specific mentality culminating around 1750, as a technical intention (une intention technique).² His social and theological analyses came together with the understanding that this intention privileged the image over the word, the concept over the process, and a reconfigured profane that became the new sacred; technique, in Ellul’s sense, issued a return to a mythical dimension that belied technology’s origins in reason and conceptual analysis. The technological order signaled a return to a sacred order. This return raises an essential mystery, which I do not pretend to solve but only to authenticate.

The mystery is confounded by the marvelous enlightenment claims of reason and the understanding that would enable progress and peace. We may invoke Spinoza’s sensibility: do not hate or despise but understand. For him geometrical truths provided the most proximate relation to God’s mind and body of which our minds and bodies were expressions. Thus, the otherness between ourselves and the Other disappeared in Spinoza’s rational faith but reappeared as reason proved insufficient. Reason could

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balance equations but also produce weapons of mass destruction to effect a *jihad* or a preemptive military strike. Flying planes into the twin towers, burning Jews, and bombing abortion clinics, technologically planned and executed, were, nonetheless, faith-based initiatives.

Nonetheless, the enlightenment faith in reason continues, typically finding fault with the non-scientific. In a *New York Times* best seller, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Sam Harris applies philosophical and neuroscientific skills to the problems of faith operating without the leash of reason. He claims, “Nothing is more sacred than the facts.” To his credit, he is no naïve realist who believes in the truly objective not subjectively known. Knowing involves consciousness, which mostly takes place with the duality of subject standing in relation to its object, although the “I” is never purely found; but he adds, “. . . it actually disappears when looked for in a rigorous way.” He does not explain for whom this disappearance would take place. Again undeterred, the self struggles with the various objects and contexts to discover and quantify the true, although the work would be hard. With this work, faith is brought to task. He states, “Where we have reasons for what we believe, we have no need of faith; where we have no reasons, we have lost our connections to the world and to one another.”

Reason occupies a privileged place, which should raise questions. Are facts the new Sacred? Would this be held *a priori*? Is it a fact that facts are sacred? Would reason be able to deter the suicide bomber? If so, we should drop copies of *The Critique of Pure Reason* instead of smart bombs. Kant, however, required a qualified reason, tied to the categories and to the sensuous forms of intuition. Understanding forms of consciousness, I contend, involves more than an examination of reason, with which consciousness is often conflated.

A critique of reason requires a critique of culture. Since Descartes it has become the pattern to identify being with thinking and thinking with reason and rational reflection. Staying to this path would have excluded Descartes’ own powerful personae, the Mauvais Génie, or the Evil Genius, which enabled Descartes to imagine the possibility that nothing made sense, which, in turn, led to his first clear and distinct idea—that the I appeared every time he thought/doubted. The I, however, did more than doubt as the history of philosophy after Descartes attempted to explain. The Cartesian philosophy as method was everywhere applied, as Ellul noted, going beyond philosophical bounds, showing that technique was and is indeed a mentality, a Cartesian mentality infinitely applied and mandated.

In his discussion of the historical and sociological dimensions of technique, Ellul does more than history and sociology. Techniques appeared in primitive societies as magic in which, prior to technique, “Everything is of a piece . . . nothing can be meddled with [or] . . . modified without threat to the whole structure of beliefs and activities.” The world of the primitive was not without logic and understanding although it was devoid of the assumptions required for technique. Following anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan, “… technique is a cloak for man, a kind of cosmic vestment. In his conflict with matter, in his struggle to survive, man interposes an intermediary agency between himself and his environment . . .” With this agency humanity has protection and defense but also the ability to assimilate and transform.

Ellul offers similar words about the nature of the symbol: “Without mediating symbols, [humanity] . . . would invariably be destroyed by raw physical contact alone. The ‘other’ is always the enemy, the menace. The ‘other represents an invasion of the personal world, unless, or until, the relationship is normalized through symbolization. (. . .) to speak the same language is to recognize the ‘other’ has
entered into the common interpretive universe . . .”10 With this separation of subject and object in an imaginative act an “other world” is created.11

Thus, otherness and the imagination jump start this creation which takes place in and with language that is at first magical and religious, simultaneously. The wholeness of the world and its transcendent powers that kept technique in check were challenged. Greek rationality, Roman Law, and Christianity were further weights and balances placed on technique that had to be transformed12 The world and the transcendent were still “Others.” Tools and incantations extended human desire and understanding but Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Justice, and God’s Word kept them in place. A long period of technical development, a growing population, the invention of economy—money became the medium of exchange and hence a world ordering symbol—and an apparent leveling of traditional social hierarchies helped technical intention and rationality to flower.13 Technical mentality was more than mental and required otherness to work against to produce the technical phenomenon.

Human history is littered with technical operations that were means to accomplish ends, often characterized by tools extending from the body and the cultures from which they are variously adapted and that were equated with the techniques produced by reason. With the advent of technical consciousness, Ellul insists, “It is no longer the best relative means which counts . . . . The choice is less and less a subject one among several means . . . . It is really a question of finding the best means in the absolute sense, on the basis of numerical calculation.”14 The product was the technical phenomenon, the embodiments of technical consciousness initially appearing as symbolic expressions. The otherness of the body and the world upon which and in which it operated was transformed by consciousness and framed conceptually. Technological culture could then be understood as concepts objectified as natural objects were conceptualized. Qualitative otherness becomes quantitative.

Ellul’s notion of technological rationality is crucial in identifying technology in its social order as an altered symbolism. In the following quote I add in brackets a clause that was left out in Wilkinson’s translation:

In technique, whatever its aspect of the domain in which it is applied, a rational process is present which tends to bring mechanics to bear on all that is spontaneous or irrational. This rationality, best exemplified in systematization, division of labor, creation of standards, production norms, and the like, involves two distinct phases: first, the use of “discourse” in every operation [under the two aspects this term can take (on the one hand, the intervention of intentional reflection, and, on the other hand, the intervention of means from one term to the other.)]; this excludes spontaneity and personal creativity. Second, there is the reduction of method to its logical dimension alone. Every intervention of technique is, in effect, a reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means, and instruments to the schema of logic.15 Technical reason requires discourse and method reduced to the schemas of logic. Logic would demand adherence to the principle of identity and non-contradiction. For something to be it must be what it is and not what it is not.

Bodies and other natural objects are often what they are not without the rational gaze. Descartes’ burning candle, both gaseous and solid, both liquid and fire, became “extension” with his second clear and distinct idea; extension was what all physical bodies were in essence as a fact for science, although extension was
an abstraction for other eyes, for those trying to read from it. Extension is the object in concept, an identity eschewing difference. It has meaning in scientific and technical discourse. This concept is an identity eschewing all difference.

The logic of technique as Ellul explains in his characterology is to reduce all objects and processes to these essentials, with the resulting irony that this perfection is never fully achieved, by definition. Soap is never fully soap, why grocery aisles are crammed with it; the object is never beautiful enough, useful enough, efficient enough. Absolute efficiency is the goal of the process perpetually unfulfilled. This is the opposite of the physicists’ “efficiency” where a minimum of effort produces a maximum of effect. The result is what I have termed a series of bad infinities—the efficient becomes either not this one or not any of them; the former is an endless finitude, while the latter is an empty class. Here, the label or the image becomes the real thing in an attempt to cancel endless finitude or a bloodless category. Recall that “Coke,” not the drink, is the real thing. A consciousness examines each process, each object, seeking absolute efficiency it makes the technical phenomenon automatically in a geometric rather than arithmetic growth. No limitations are allowed; what can be done will be done, a mantra known to all cultures, a true universal. Oddly this process becomes unconscious; the object made is no longer known as made. The distinction between the subject and object collapses. Few remember that whipped cream used to come from cows. From Latin we can learn that “fact” comes from “factum,” which means “made,” something done or performed. We have forgotten this meaning and have reduced facts to truth, to a sacred. Like technical phenomena, they seem to pop directly from Zeus’s head. The subject collapses into the object and technical autonomy reigns. Reason has disappeared, with no otherness to confront and to mediate, and so has the symbol.

The language of the ancients, the language of myth, biblical language, comes alive in the symbol and metaphor; myths, for Ellul, are not false stories but instead aim at the true: “When I use the word (myth) I mean this: the addition of the theological significance to a fact which in itself . . . has no such obvious meaning. Its role is therefore to make a fact “meaningful,” to show it up as bearing the revelation of God . . . .” God as the Wholly Other resists a mere presence in an image but appears only in the word that suggests his Word. Further, “myth is born of the revealed Word of God, but because it is figurative, it has no visible image. As the highest expression of the word, it reaches the edge and very limit of the expressive, the ineffable, and the unspeakable . . . .” For example, Ellul notes: “The city is ‘iyōr or else ‘iyr re’em. Now this word has several meanings. It is not only the city, but also the Watching Angel, the Vengeance and Terror. A strange association of ideas.” In the figurative identities are created with important differences, opposed meanings that are meaningful when they are put together. The city had not only material power but spiritual power, which was apprehended in this metaphorical grasp of the imagination in the face of the other.

Ellul reminds: “We forget all too easily that imagination is the basic characteristic of intelligence, so that a society in which people lose their capacity to conjure up symbols also loses its inventiveness and its ability to act.” The imagination is embodied speech, he notes, from which I conclude that as the body disappears in technique so it disappears in its bodily expression in metaphors and symbols. One could say that reason as language has its birth in myth and in the force of the imagination where the meaningful first appears as an image or presence that is at the same time more than it appears; in this way the image provides a path for the fact to become the sacred that give birth to religion, art, philosophy, and science,
but which must also be transcended in meaning that goes beyond the moment. When technique becomes the sacred the other forms of knowing have no power. This presence of the technical sacred produces a loss of meaning, which may be why myth and primitive religions gain cultural weight. Ellul insists in this respect that true Christianity is not a religion but is an opposition to meanings that claim to be imminently absolute—a condition held only by God.

Ellul states that two forms of language exist in every state: the language of hearing and the language of seeing. Language begins in the act of pointing to, or seeing what is in the space of the present, in the certainty of the image that inhabits the realm of the real (le Réel). This image is certain. It bears no contradiction. It is what it is. The word, a puff of wind at least, is the domain that surrounds. A strange sound produces anxious eyes. The word is ambiguous, a moment of mystery and intrigue and reaches for the True (le Vrai).

"The image is nonparadoxical, since it is always in conformity with the doxa (opinion). [. . .] Only the word troubles the water." And further, “Thus visual reality is non-contradictory. You can say that a piece of paper is both red and blue. But you cannot see it as both red and blue at the same time.” The philosophical laws of thought, Ellul notes, are visually based; Plato’s eide related to eidelon are cases in point, but as Plato insisted, their ordinary ties to the visual had to be broken. The Eide were seen only in a noetic reach that was not all owed by technical reason. Reason is confined strictly to the image that loses its purchase, ironically, as its presence as image dissipates.

In the absence of the word and the symbol clichés abound. The cliché is the machine in its new suit. The word inhabits history and place; the image does not. The history of the word cliché is forgotten. According to the OED cliché appeared in 1832 and referred to a stereotype block, a printer’s cast or “dab.” It began in a visual dimension, but the word was also a variant of cliquer, meaning “to click,” likely referring to the sound of the lead pieces as they were struck. This auditory dimension is lost in its modern sense, which is no longer the metaphor that was suggested. A worn out expression was left and the truth behind the word abandoned. The cliché appears to be the language of politics and the media and so it is, the fuel of propaganda, but the bad news is not over.

Henry Frankfurt in On Bullshit claims that lying and misrepresentation are out of fashion. Politicians and pundits may in fact lie but the lie is not the issue. Truth or falsity are no longer concerns. Lying or telling the truth are both permitted as long as a favorable impression is achieved. The bullshitter wants to be believed and those susceptible want to believe regardless of the actual truth. Recently Rick Santorum claimed that the elderly in Holland had to wear bracelets to keep from being euthanized. Of course, there were no facts to back this up, and I doubt there was any concern for the truth of the statement. Romney made a statement that was challenged, and he allowed that he didn’t recall what he said, but he was sure he would stand by it. I am certain that bullshit transcends party line. Nonetheless, Ellul was close to this with his view of current aesthetics where “n’importe quoi” held sway. Whatever! The appeals sometimes made to facts may in fact be bullshit.

Ellul would conclude that life cannot be conducted in the realm of the image that has no history, no place. Truth requires both, which in turn require memory and the imagination. Clichés and bullshit have neither, and I believe this is a fact. Place no longer has place. This is why Ellul finds the commonplace of the common place so important, why the notion of a true that surrounds is worth the reach; even reason comes to a halt in views that have no need or use for argument.


6 *TS*, 43.

7 *TS*, 23. He clearly states that the full history of technique was yet to be written.


12 *TS*, 27-38.

13 Ellul sums the sociological components of the 1750 breakout of technique, which, together with technical intention in *TS*, 38-60.


15 *TS*, 78-79; *La Technique*, 73-73.

16 See my discussion of this in *TDC*, 98-105.

17 I have summarized Ch. II of *TS*. For my extended discussion of this “characterology” see my *TDC*, ch. 5.

18 *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 18, n. 3, hereinafter cited as *City*. Also note: “God speaks. Myth is born from this word, but rarely is it heard directly and never conveyed just as it is received, because humans cannot speak God’s words. Myth is the analogy that enables us to grasp the meaning of what God has said. As discourse constructed to paraphrase the revelation, it is a metaphor that should lead the listener beyond what he has heard.” See *Humiliation*, 106.


20 *City*, 9.

21 *Humiliation*, 257.

22 *Humiliation*, 43.


26 *Ibid*.

