

Théologie et Technique: Pour une éthique de la non-puissance

by Jacques Ellul

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Review Notes by Carl Mitcham

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Somewhat unexpectedly Jacques Ellul's *Théologie et Technique: Pour une éthique de la non-puissance* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014) was featured on a display table at the Librairie Mollat in Bordeaux when I walked in. Ellul at least has some popularity in his home town.

What follows is simply a brief note calling attention to this new publication, posthumously edited and prepared for publication by Ellul's son Yves with the assistance of his wife Danielle and Jean Ellul's wife Sivorn and Ellul scholar Frédéric Rognon. In the preface, Yves Ellul describes the previously unpublished manuscript as "generally dated to the year 1975." Some passages were previously published as articles during Ellul's lifetime. "There remains a 'body' of six chapters unique to this manuscript and a plan for the book as a whole."

At the same time, the book admittedly has a "rough, unfinished character: the intended plan is not fully respected [and] many repetitions, sometimes with small variations in viewpoint, give a clumsy character to the published text" (p. 7). Despite such weaknesses, "this book [is] both stimulating and challenging [and provides some perspective on] the evolution of mentalities over the last forty years, both in sociology and in theology" (p. 8).

Here in summary are the six core chapters (and their lengths) with brief comments:

1. The Challenges of Theological Production in a Technical Society (23 pages)

It is noted that the chapter and section titles here "have been proposed by the [Ellul] family." (The same is true in multiple other instances in the book). The three sections comment on traditional attitudes of theology toward technology (referencing especially the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Emmanuel Mounier); diverse responses to technology with theological implications (such as the Club of Rome and Lewis Mumford); and a reflection on "Technique and

transcendence.”

2. Situating Theological Reflection on Technique (49 pages)

Three sections deal with “humans, nature, and the artificial”; “Technique according to the Bible”; and “the status of theology in the technical society.” The second section was previously published in *Foi et Vie* (1960); an English translation was included in Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote, eds., *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis* (1984). [See also Ellul’s “The Relationship between Man and Creation in the Bible” in Mitcham and Grote.]

3. Limits (56 pages)

This longest chapter and deals with what Ellul clearly sees as a fundamental issue. To quote from Ellul’s own first paragraphs:

Fundamental question: Can human beings do everything or are they limited?

The question needs to be expanded:

— "Everything" means anything, indifferently, or the maximum possible?

— "Can" means what is possible or what is permitted?

— Are some domains forbidden? Forbidden because humans cannot get in (although science and Technique argue “not get in yet but tomorrow ...”) or forbidden because there is an absolute bar, impassable, established by God.

— Is the limit fixed by humans, in which case they may move it, or is from nature (in which case it is neutral), or is it from God? (p. 179)

Subsequent sections deal nature and creation, and the Judaism and Christianity as negation of limits.

4. Technique and Eschatology (25 pages)

Includes comments on the thought of Hans Jonas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean Ladrière, and others.

5. Ethical Mediation (46 pages)

6. Ethical Extensions (46 pages)

Chapters five and six revisit issues dealt with at length in Ellul’s more extended works on ethics (such as *To Will and To Do* [French 1964] and *On Freedom, Love and Power*, compiled, edited, and translated by Willem Vanderburg [2008]), but this time especially focused on relationships between ethics and Technique.

These six chapters are further complemented with five “Preliminary Works,” the first three of which have previously appeared in print. The first, “Intermezzo instinctive and unscientific” (10 pages) is an

engagement with the thought of René Girard. The second is another commentary on the situation of theology in the technical society (14 pages). The third is titled “Search for an Ethics in a technical society” (18 pages). This is followed by a bibliographical essay on theology and Technique (13 pages). The final fifth preliminary work is on “The Theological Status of Technique according to Gabriel Vahanian” (17 pages).

Finally the volume is further enhanced by Rognon’s 17-page introduction placing this book in the larger context of Ellul’s work. Rognon has added as well a useful bibliography.

The volume is clearly an important addition to Ellul’s body of work and one that deserves translation.