

The Ellul Forum

for the Critique of Technological Civilization

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The Ethics of Jacques Ellul

About This Issue

by David W. Gill, Guest Editor

This issue of *The Ellul Forum* is about Jacques Ellul's ethics. Ellul has written often enough, and especially in *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (ET: Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), that morality (and ethics—he does not make any consistent distinction between the terms) is "of the order of the fall" and "of the order of necessity." In terms of his biblical theology, human morality and ethics are our replacement for the living guidance of God intended in the creation. Separated and alienated from God, who is the Good, we fill the vacuum not just with idols but with morality.

All too commonly, Ellul argues, Christian morality and ethics has been shaped by the morality and ethics of the world—even if expressed with pious religious language. A Christian ethic is, thus, impossible, if by "ethic" we mean what commonly goes by that term (a set of moral values, rules, principles, virtues, etc., which defines what is good and right). Having then swept away all systems of ethics, Ellul wishes to raise anew the most basic question of a Christian ethic: how ought we to live out our relationship to God in a world antagonistic to his character and purposes?

In his programmatic early work *The Presence of the Kingdom* (ET: Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951; the following quotations are from pp. 20-22), Ellul says "the problem that confronts us is that of the Christian ethic". This ethic "has nothing in common with what is generally called 'morality,' and still less with the Christian 'virtues' in the traditional sense . . . It is never a series of rules, or principles, or slogans . . ." But a valid Christian ethic will show us how our "direct relation with the act of God in Jesus Christ" can take "concrete form and become a vital element in daily life." Such an ethic is necessary as "a guide, an indication given to faith, a real assistance to the brethren." It is possible to define "the ethical demands of God" in terms of "its outline, and its conditions, and study some of its elements for purposes of illustration." There are, after all, "consequences of faith which can be objectively indicated."

The status of Ellul's Christian ethic is clear: it is temporary in that "it needs to be continually revised, re-examined, and re-shaped by the combined effort of the Church as a whole." It is *indicative* rather than imperative in that it assists but does not resolve or replace the living "fight of faith, which every Christian must wage." It is apologetic in that its purpose is not to justify our behavior but to lead those who observe us to see through and beyond our actions to Jesus Christ and to glorify God.

Ellul's plan was to elaborate such a Christian ethic in relation to the Pauline virtues of faith, hope, and love. He published *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (ET: New York: Seabury, 1973), *Living Faith* (ET: San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), and several essays on love to lay the foundation. *The Ethics of Freedom* (ET: Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) outlined a Christian ethic corresponding to hope. *The Ethics of Holiness* (still unpublished in French or English) will outline a Christian ethic corresponding to faith. An "ethics of relationship" was never written but was going to be an outline of a Christian ethic corresponding to love.

For one who can be quoted as saying that a Christian ethic is "impossible," Ellul has produced a surprisingly voluminous ethical corpus. And yet for someone who wrote that a valid Christian ethic will be a "real assistance to the brethren," Ellul has frustrated a lot of his readers by leaving them as uncertain as ever about how to act in faith, hope, and love in the presence of particular quandaries. In my own view,

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Book Reviews

Thinking Through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy. by Carl Mitcham. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Reviewed by Pieter Tijmes

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Carl Mitcham has remained faithful to the idea he formed as an undergraduate in the 1960s: the distinguishing characteristic of our time is technology. This idea has become his continuing philosophical concern and has inspired him to a unremitting exploration of philosophical issues associated with technology. In a certain sense this book is a conclusion of Mitcham's daily pursuits of interpreting technology so far. This recapitulation has become a very interesting introduction to the philosophy of technology.

Probably nobody is so well informed about the literature on this field of philosophy as Carl Mitcham. In this book he delivers with amazing clarity a survey of the philosophical options, his control of which can be concluded from the many shrewd comparisons and fruitful suggestions. He is an ecumenical thinker: nobody is refused and everybody is accepted. He who has made a contribution gets the appropriate place in relation to the others. In short, in characteristic and well chosen wording and rewording Carl Mitcham presents the thinkers of technology. In doing this he puts great stress on the acoustic space he presupposes in his readers, so that his compromise between treating the selected authors exhaustively and concisely becomes acceptable. Sometimes a host of authors is dropped on a page, but the indications are sufficient for the reader to select his favorites, so that I can personally very well live with his compromises.

This does not change the fact that the book is a philosophical meal too big for dinner guest with a small appetite. The result is that Mitcham's book is a very helpful introduction to the philosophy of technology, though not suited for beginners. It refers often to the books themselves and draws the reader's attention to uncultivated areas. This outcome may be a new start for the readers.

Carl Mitcham does not develop a philosophy of technology of his own. His contribution consists in giving a key to deal with the daily growing literature on philosophy of technology. In the first part of the book Carl Mitcham gives a survey of the historical traditions in the philosophy of technology, in the second part his aim is to highlight conceptual distinctions and issues. These two cross-sections -- historical and analytical -- amount to the pleasant fact that some authors may get double notice. With regard to each cross-section Carl Mitcham has a sorting machine at his disposal. To cover the recorded history of technology he makes an interesting distinction between two approaches to technology: On the one hand we find the approach of engineers and technologists whereas on the other hand we see the approach of scholars in the humanities.

Mitcham begins in chapter 1 with the engineers approach to technology. Special attention is dedicated to a cortege of German engineers/philosophers, from Ernst Kapp (technology as organ projection) to Friedrich Dessauer (technology as encounter with the Kantian thing in itself) about whom Carl Mitcham writes with love. From outside of Germany Gilbert Simondon, Hendrik Rissen and Egbert Schuurman, Juan David Bacca and Mario Bunge, among others, are paid a visit. In the second chapter Carl Mitcham focuses his attention on humanities oriented approaches to philosophy of technology -- which circumscribes as the attempt of religion, poetry and philosophy to bring "non" or "trans"-technological perspectives to bear on interpreting the meaning of technology. He concentrates on four representatives of the romantic tradition, who make, in his opinion, a strong case for the humanities: Lewis Mumford, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul. These portraits are nice, intriguing, learned and sympathetic respectively.

In the third chapter he comes back to the difference between the engineering and humanities approaches to the philosophy of technol-

ogy and gives them a clearer circumscription. Engineering philosophy of technology is even baptized a **technological philosophy**, because it is one that uses technological criteria and paradigms to question and judge other aspects of human affairs, and thus deepens or extends technological consciousness. Humanities or hermeneutic philosophy of technology seeks by contrast insight into the meaning of technology -- its relation to the transtechnical: art and literature, ethics and politics, religion. It typically deals with nontechnical aspects of the human world and considers how technology may (or may not) fit in or correspond to them. At the same time Carl Mitcham undermines, in a certain sense intentionally, the clear distinction between these two traditions by focusing attention upon the border-traffic between them. In this scope he discusses two attempts to reconcile the differences, one emerging within the engineering community (Society of German Engineers) and another within the philosophical community in the US (John Dewey and Don Ihde). In this context the author also explores the rich Marxist heritage.

In chapter IV he shows a new approach and formulates core issues in the philosophy of technology. With reference to relevant literature the author outlines a spectrum of issues ranging from the conceptual and epistemological through the ethical and political to the religious and metaphysical. Chapter V is the most 'technical' chapter in the book. In it Greek thinking on *techne* is explored as an example of premodern history.

In the second part of the book the analytical cross-section is dealt with. This part is probably closer to the daily experience of the engineer who may consider the first part of the book interesting but without much concrete relevance to his engineering praxis. It is obvious that in each discourse on technology the meaning of it is different. The engineer's usage of the term technology is rather restrictive, but on the tip of the tongue of, for example, Ellul or Heidegger the word 'technology' is extended to a degree where it no longer corresponds to the commonplace interpretation within the domain of the engineering praxis.

In this second part Carl Mitcham discusses philosophy from four different angles. His analytical cross-section is a provisional framework for analysis -- 'definite enough to provide some guidance and open enough to allow for adjustments and the possibility of winding up with new ideas' -- that considers technology respectively as object, as knowledge, as activity, and as volition. Technology as object can be distinguished according to types of objects-utilities, tools, machines - (chapter VII), technology as knowledge according to types of knowledge - maxims, rules, theories - (chapter VIII), technology as activity according to types of activities - making, designing, maintaining, using - (chapter IX), and finally technology as volition according to types of volition - active will, receptive will - (chapter X). These chapters -- in particular the ones on artifacts (chapter IX) -- are very stimulating due to the surprising way many viewpoints of heterogeneous origin are brought together.

From the two mentioned traditions of philosophy -- engineering and humanities philosophy of technology -- Carl Mitcham concludes that studies of philosophy and technology are needed. Therefore, he makes a passionate plea for pluralistic philosophy and technology studies. This synthetic point of view represents his effort to think about technology philosophically, in a way that does not exclude engineering discourse. Thinking through technology is in this way more than an critical introduction, it mirrors a philosophical concern that wants to reflect on technology in order to engage engineering practice and take it seriously. Carl Mitcham meets his own philosophical concern.