

Jacques Ellul

42. The Ethics of Nonpower

To the question of joining morality to power, Jacques Ellul, professor of the history of law at the University of Bordeaux, expressed again his criticism of modern society first published in his influential book *The Technological Society*. There he claimed that the old distinction between means and ends no longer has validity, and that "technique," formerly regarded as a means, has itself become an end. Our lives and thoughts are completely dominated by the power and scope of present-day "technique."

To develop an ethics for a technical society, Ellul postulated a new system of "nonpower ethics," whereby man would agree to set limits to his use of technique. Other characteristics of the new ethical system would be freedom (by liberating man from the slavery of technique, so that he is free to choose nontechnical elements); conflicts and tensions (as opposed to the conformity and unity imposed by technique); and transgression (against the regimen, leading to alienation, required by technique). Ellul thus called for a new ethics that would repudiate completely the role of technique in modern society.

However, while conceptualizing the new ethics that must be attained, Ellul suggests no mechanism for arriving at this goal, except for the absolute rejection of the current society dominated by technique. He simply states that there must be research on this new ethics.

(It should be noted, as Robert K. Merton has pointed out in his foreword to Ellul's *The Technological Society*, that Ellul uses the word technique to embrace more than machine technology. "Technique refers to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result.")

This chapter was translated from the French by Nada K. Levy.

Technique itself has become a value. Technical progress appears to the average Western person as the guarantee of the future good and happiness, and technology assures him of the necessity of the kind of behavior favorable to this progress. Technique carries our hopes (thanks to technical progress, cancer will be conquered). Here it gives life a meaning. And the usual attitude, whenever there appear to be drawbacks in the use of technique, consists in declaring that it is not technique that is to be blamed, but rather man, who does not know how to use it. This means, by implication, that it is man who produces evil and that technique therefore stands for good. It is a desirable value and worth man's sacrificing himself for it (the martyrs of science).

A complete system of values is built on this premise—Georges Fourastié (*La Morale Prospective*) and Gabriel Monod (*Le Hasard et la Nécessité*) tried to show how science might imply a certain virtue on the part of man and how, on the basis of this virtue, henceforth scientifically founded (since it is on itself that science is based), the whole of ethics can be rebuilt. This virtue is that of intellectual honesty. But as far as technique is concerned, there is no systematic intellectual structure of a scale of values. What does exist is spontaneous creation, which corresponds to the working of the system. Normalcy, efficiency, success, work, professional conscience, devotion to collective work—these are the principal values of the technical ethics on the basis of which all conduct is judged in our society.

All these values converge in the one direction of man's total adaptation to machines, instruments, and procedures on the one hand, and to his technical environment on the other. This adaptation, obtained by various psychological techniques, plays its part as far as attitudes in production, in consumption, and toward technical organisms are concerned. Socially non-adapted man is the exact counterpart of the old "immoral" man in traditional society. The only good perspective that is open and being extolled is that of adaptation; for example, the couple "man-machine," or the creation of the Kybert (cybernetic mechanism).

Society, though, continues to assert traditional morals. For Karen Horney this is the cause of the "neurotic personality of

our time," i.e., the antagonism between the principles, values, and morals expounded to children and the actual conduct demanded of the adult, who thus finds himself in a state of contradiction. As Ivan Illich has pointed out (in *Tools for Conviviality* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969]), "The Churches are preaching humility, charity, poverty, while financing programs of industrial development. The Socialists have become unscrupulous defenders of industrial monopoly." This fundamental discordance, though, tends to become obliterated by the creation of technical morality.

Technical morality tends to devalue other kinds of behavior (games, waste, laziness), other values, and other virtues (humor, faithfulness, goodness, etc.). It drives back into the spheres of futility and ineffectiveness that which might give meaning to human life. It does not tolerate any other meaning than itself. It is totalitarian and exclusive. It never has been formulated, though, in this authoritarian way, for it is not systematic. This at least is our impression, since technical morality was not formulated by a philosopher or moralist. It is effectively formulated, though, not as a set of morals, but as the imperative of behavior for a whole body of technologists (worshippers of technology such as B. F. Skinner and others).

Under these circumstances one cannot consider a conciliation, one cannot "split the difference" between the two morals. Morals based on the behavior required by technique are dominant. Those who mean to support another ethical direction are forced to enter into conflict, not directly with technique, but rather with the ideology of technique, with technical beliefs and morals.

The totality of problems raised by technique eventually may be summed up as a matter of power. It is because man is able to do practically everything that problems come up such as, for example, the exhaustion of world resources or exponential demographic growth or the boundlessly murderous character of wars. Each one of these problems of fact presents a purely technical as well as an ethical aspect. This is typical of all these difficulties we are so well acquainted with.

But power itself has a dual character. First of all, it is extrinsic. It is not part of man; it is not embodied in him. It is a power

that rests in the new human environment. Second, it concerns the means only; it is the excessiveness of means that eventually precipitates the crisis.

Ethical thought therefore must be situated on the level of access to power. What we have here, though, is the first basic factor, i.e., the contradiction between power and values. Any increase of power is always paid for by the questioning, the regression, or the surrender of values. Of course, this proposition cannot be demonstrated objectively and scientifically. Its nature is pragmatic and experimental. When a state accepts judicial limitations and a constitutional framework where values are laid down, it is because it either is not very powerful or agrees not to be so, or because it agrees not to use all the power it might use. When a state becomes in effect all-powerful, values are no longer respected. It is an utter illusion to maintain that power can be made to serve values and that with the increase of power values will be defended better. This is completely idealistic and unrealistic. The increase of power, in fact, does away with values.

But if there are no longer any values that are widely believed and accepted, there are henceforth neither limits nor guideposts. The result of the destruction of values is, first, that man becomes incapable of effectively judging and appraising his actions. At this point the rule that imposes itself comes to be: "All that can be done must be done." Why not resort to torture or the concentration camp? There exists no predetermined limit whatsoever. Power implies an "Always more"—"Always further and beyond." At what moment must one stop? One encounters no internal limit, no objective limit. What is involved, every time, is just one more step. This is the permanent simultaneous escalation of power and of demoralization. And since the previous step has been taken, why not this one? In order to judge one's actions, to impose limits and a meaning, one also needs a body of values that is irrefutable and irrefragable. If one agrees with the ideology of power one must of course proclaim firmly at the same time that ethical problems no longer exist, and even that ethics no longer exist and that man is no longer in need of them. But we also must know what we are doing. Specifically, the question must be asked whether man

will be satisfied when nothing at all has meaning anymore and when nothing can serve to give meaning to what one is doing.

And this research on ethics then may refer only to the nature of means. We may put aside the "end-means" problems, since more and more thinkers seem to be agreed that it is impossible to dissociate the two at the present time. There no longer exist good ends that may be reached by just any means. The end is already contained in the means that technique puts at our disposal. Evil means thoroughly corrupt all ends, however excellent they be. The power and the scope of present technical means completely dominate the sphere of our thought and life, and leave no space for extratechnical means. It is in this context that we have to state the ethical problem and to search for an adequate way of behavior.

As a function of the preceding pronouncements, one might state that ethics for a technical society must be of such a nature that they can be only nonpower ethics, ethics of freedom, of conflicts, and of transgression. Before expanding on these points, though, it seems important to recall that many authors are heading in this direction, even though they are expressing themselves in different terms. Where Bertrand de Jouvenel asks that modern man practice amenity, looking first of all for what will suit one's neighbor (*Arcadie*), Georges Friedmann speaks of wisdom (*La Sagesse et la Puissance*), Ivan Illich of conviviality (*La Convivialité*), and Georges Fourastié of personal discipline—which, unfortunately, he finds only in the scientific mentality (*La Morale Prospective*). In each case it is a matter of reducing power, of discovering what is essential for man to live in this universe; and in each case, what is involved is a moral quality that requires not making full use of all the means at one's disposal. Man is called upon to grow in the moral sense while appraising his means. After so much criticism of Bergson and the "additional soul," many are returning to it, on condition, though, of understanding it well.

These ethics of nonpower: the heart of the matter is of course that man will agree not to do all he is capable of. But there is no longer any progress, there are no values, reasons, no divine law that might be opposed from the outside. One therefore has to attack from the inside and assert the impossibility of living

together, and probably even of living at all, if the ethics of nonpower are not put into practice. This is the basic option. As long as man is motivated by the spirit of power and the acquisition of power, nothing is possible. What would be called for is a systematic and voluntary search for nonpower. (This of course does not mean the acceptance of fate, passivity, etc.—although it is not this danger that is threatening us!)

These ethics of nonpower extend to all levels of human action and can be clearly and specifically indicated: in the *nonuse* of technical means (not to try to overtake others, not to be the first, not to drive one's car to the maximum of its power, not to have one's transistor radio howl, etc.) as well as in the avoidance of certain institutions. Those that tend to develop power by basing social organization on competition are to be rejected. The matter must be addressed in arenas ranging from certain pedagogical methods through the Olympic Games to the economic system of free competition. In every one of these cases, it is efficiency that has had to be proved, thereby cultivating power in the technical system and devaluating all morals. In the very field of scientific research the ethics of nonpower (for example, what Illich calls "radical research") have to establish criteria allowing one to set the nuisance threshold of a tool, and to invent tools optimizing the amenity of life. The ethics of nonpower must be practiced in politics as well (penalization of the powerful, protection of the weak and of those exploited a priori, etc.).

Nonpower ethics imply the setting of limits. Here we should refer to Illich's remarkable analysis distinguishing between thresholds (imposed by necessity in order to go on surviving) and limits (the borders a human group sets itself, distinguishing between what must be done and must not be done). The setting of limits always is constitutive of society and culture. No human group can exist as such if no limits are set, whatever these may be (absolute regimentation as well as the complete absence of regimentation, for example). The setting of limits (which correspond to what formerly was "sacred") is the specific characteristic of freedom. When man learned to be free he became capable of limiting himself.

It is evident that these characteristics of nonpower ethics con-

stitute the basic roots, leaving wide open the question of the possibility of the "how" of this conversion to nonpower.

The second aspect of this system of ethics for a technical society is that of freedom. Power over means assures man of no freedom whatsoever. There is no freedom for man in a technical society (though I am perfectly familiar with all the discourses about freedom from primary wants, from danger, from illness, from natural environment; of freedom of choice, of consumption, of movement, etc.). The freedoms just mentioned are but superficial. Fundamentally, man is alienated within the technical system that substituted technical fatality for the former fatality of nature.

Man is increasingly called upon to liberate himself from that which constrains and determines him. But where he formerly was determined by natural factors (and he used science and technique to liberate himself from these), he now is alienated by the very means of his earlier liberation. Liberation can occur only to the extent that one aims at the present factors of alienation, on the one hand, and is able, on the other hand, either to reject them, to use them, or to divert them. Technique as a system nowadays represents for man the world of necessity he finds himself in, and it claims it spares him the ethical problem itself because it is situated outside the field of choices and ethical positions. We have shown that in the present state no mastery seems to be possible over the technical system. Liberation, then, only can be brought about by rejecting it, or by driving it back into an even-narrower sphere.

But here we find ourselves back in the sphere of nonpower ethics, since we stated that it will be by the setting of limits that freedom will be practiced. If, on the other hand, choice is the ethical situation *par excellence*, and if it is in and by choice that freedom expresses itself, the basic choice before us is indeed one concerned with the increase or decrease of power. In comparison, all freedom to choose the color of one's car or the make of one's computer is perfectly vain and superficial!

The ethics of nonpower and freedom create tensions and conflicts. Here we are witnessing an essential characteristic of ethics in a technical society: Technique tends to promote conformity and unity. This doing away with conflicts is presented as a vir-

tue. But it is known that human groups where tensions and conflicts have disappeared are groups suffering from a kind of sclerosis, losing their ability to change, to resist aggression, and to evolve.

Here we are facing a basic question, viz., the substitution of technical progress (with its uniform and linear mode) for the earlier kind of human progress (which always was made by way of conflict). Technical progress, though, is disastrous for the human group as such, because the effect of sclerosis (or still entropy) necessarily continues to make itself felt.

If we want human groups to go on existing and man to have a specific way of acting freely in a human environment, we have to call on the ethics of conflict and we have to call into question the universality of the huge units and huge organizations produced by and necessary for technical progress. The element of conflict is a survival value for the whole of humanity.

What is referred to here is of course a negotiated, controlled form of conflict, not one that aims at the destruction of the group. Nor is it nihilistic; rather it is the result of calculated tensions within human groups so that they cannot close up or shut themselves off and regard themselves as having reached their goals (any society that considers itself fulfilled in this sense is dead), but will instead regain the aptitude to evolve by themselves, without depending upon technique.

Finally (though we do not presume to exhaust here the contents of this type of ethics), another characteristic of ethics in a technical society would be transgression. This may seem to contradict the notion of the ethics of limitation that are the expression of freedom. Not at all—for what is involved here is not the transgressing of limits that do not yet exist (so as to enter the sphere of that which is limitless), but the transgression of rules and limits produced by technique, which entails alienation.

It is essential not to be mistaken about the direction of this transgression. When we refer to this nowadays, what we have in mind first of all are the principles and the taboos of thirteenth-century society. To enter the sphere of the limitless byway of the use of drugs, the transgression of sexual taboos, the transgression of traditional family relationships, of paternal or marital authority, of politeness or honesty, does not constitute

an act of genuine transgression, for it means going precisely in the direction of technique. Eroticism, for example, pretends to be transgressing that which technique has already shaken, and sometimes destroyed. Any enterprise of destruction of so-called taboos actually is the mere translation of technical reality.

Transgression must address itself to reality. This reality is technique itself. It therefore will take the form either of destruction of the myth of technique, or of challenging the imperatives of action based on technique, or of questioning the conditions imposed on man and the group in order that technique may develop.

Transgression against technique will consist in destroying man's belief in it and in reducing technique to nothing but the production of aleatory and insignificant objects. It therefore will imply the search for an external meaning in the name of which transgression takes place and which, by this very act, does away with the very significance of technique.