

The Power of Technique and The Ethics of Non-Power

JACQUES ELLUL

The problem of ethics and technique may be stated as follows: "in its concrete applications, technology raises a certain number of moral problems to which a solution must be sought." Euthanasia, non-human language, artificial life-support systems, psychological and genetic experimentation and research are cases in point. This is the traditional way of posing the problem, but it is no longer satisfactory today, for it serves to maintain a certain double status quo, by suggesting:

- 1) that our world has not changed, it has simply acquired technology, which must be treated as a separate issue; and
- 2) that the moral code has not changed either.

Ethics is thus split into a general system, on the one hand, and its application in specific instances on the other: euthanasia and abortion, for example, to which ethical principles that are deemed permanent, the product of a stable society, are applied. I believe, on the contrary, that a profound upheaval has taken place.

Instead of being merely a concrete element incorporated in a certain number of objects, technique can be abstract, and furthermore, instead of being a secondary factor which has been integrated into a stable civilization, technique has become the determining factor in all the problems which we face. Technique has likewise become a generalized mediation, so that it is no longer possible for us to form relationships of

any kind without its intervening between us and our environment. Indeed technique itself has become an environment, replacing the natural one—witness the increasing numbers of people who live in cities where everything is either the product of technology or part of a technological process.

Technique proceeds in a causal, never in a goal-oriented fashion. It advances as a result of pre-existing techniques, which combine to facilitate a step forward, that is all. And this technological nexus is characteristically ambivalent. Because the solution of one problem by technological means immediately raises a multitude of others, which result directly from those very means, it is impossible to say whether technique produces good or evil effects. It does both, simultaneously. We are confronted with a system in the strict sense of the word, what I will call the "technological system," hence ethical issues may only be considered relative to the system as a whole, and not to specific instances. Because of the systemic nature of technique, it cannot be neutral. Hence, to claim that, for example, "technique is simply a knife. You can use it to cut up bread, or your neighbor, it is simply a question of use" is quite mistaken. The difference in power between a space-rocket and a knife makes a qualitative difference between the two inevitable.

Once we realize that technique is not a mere instrument of our will, a tool which we can use according to whim, our conviction that man remains in control is undermined. As soon as one asks "who controls?" it becomes apparent that although I may control my tape-recorder, or my television, for example, by not using them, not even the technician himself (who is inevitably a specialist) controls the entire technological system. As to the nature of the man who is believed to be in control, he is not, contrary to popular belief, the same as in the age of Pericles: he has already been molded by technology. As a result, the time-honored moral positions have become completely outdated. It no longer makes sense to attempt to distinguish between personal and social ethics. For a long time, the proposed solution to this dilemma was the famous theory of *adiaphora*, in other words (for the benefit of non-technicians in ethics), questions which concerned neither good nor evil, neutral questions: the delight of theologians. There were, so the argument went, problems of good and evil, and in between, issues which were neither good nor bad, hence there *was* no ethical problem. The reality, however, is the insidious ethics of adaptation, which rests on the notion that since technique is a fact, we should adapt ourselves to it. Consequently, anything that hinders technique ought to be eliminated, and thus adaptation itself becomes a moral criterion.

The development of technique has thus resulted in a new morality, technological morality, which has two characteristics:

- 1) it is behavioral (in other words, only correct practice, not intentions or motivations, counts), and
- 2) it rules out the problematics of traditional morality (the morality of ambiguity is unacceptable in the technological world).

Technique itself has become a virtue and (paralleling the scientific community's attempt to found a morality on scientific integrity) proposes the values of normalcy, efficiency, industriousness, professional ethics, and devotion to collective projects as values. In each case, everything is subordinated to efficiency, in other words, geared towards adaptation. Hence technological morality consists in allowing technique free play, and if traditional values are invoked, it is usually for another reason than to justify the primacy of technique (B.F. Skinner's well-known work is entirely representative of the morality of the technological era, which rules out not only traditional values, but certain modes of behavior as well. Thus, within technological morality, laziness is clearly unacceptable, waste is scandalous, and playing is merely for children). If, however, one seeks a common denominator for the value system proposed by technique and the behavior which it demands, it becomes clear that the real issue is power. All technique is a function of power, and even if we focus on specific cases or hypotheses, we realize that it is always because man has the power to do almost anything that fragmentary problems arise. That power, however, is not man's, it remains extrinsic to him. It is exclusively concerned with means and it is the excessiveness of these means which is ultimately the cause of the crisis in our civilization and in our system of ethics. Whereas the latter was originally formulated for men without technical resources (hence every problem was one of *direct* control and intention), now it is a question of resources and power.

At the level of power, the first essential factor is the established fact that there is a contradiction between power and values. Every increase in power ends in a challenge to, or a defeat of values (this is a pragmatic proposition). But if values are called into question, no conceivable limits, no benchmarks by which conduct may be evaluated, remain: man becomes incapable of exercising judgment, since his judgment depends on values. The only remaining rule is that "everything that can be done, ought to be done." Power always implies a plus, an "in addition to"; in order to pose, accept, and respect limits, some commonly accepted values are necessary.

But the problem of power is not simply the result of a certain will to power. Power is not autonomous. It exists today only as a result of means, it is inscribed in a world of means. Ends and means can no longer be separated—they are interdependent, defined by each other—but it is

always technique which supplies the means, whose power and thrust dominate the entire field of contemporary thought and life. Thus, if we want to assess accurately the problems of ethics today and guide the direction of research in ethics, it must be in the context of this growth of power and this universe of means. Here we must take our stand and not, as many are currently prone to do, in a universe of hypothetical ends. (The passion for utopias represents precisely the evasion of our current problems; we look very far ahead, contemplating the year 2050 when all of them have been solved. I, however, am concerned with the period between 1980 and 2000; this is the important moment, and it is not a utopian one.)

In this technological society, we must also seek an ethics, which would play the traditional role of ethics, that of preserving man's control over life, providing, for example, the possibility of the development of society and personal relationships. Hence, if we continue to accept this dual orientation of ethics, one crucial direction which research in contemporary ethics should take would concern technique, without, however, being anti-technique. For we cannot claim to be anti-technique, we are deeply implicated in it and cannot be otherwise.

The ethics I have in mind would have four characteristics: it would be an ethics of non-power, freedom, conflict, and transgression. This is not an original idea of mine; most current research on technique points in this direction, as, for example, when Bernard de Jouvenel speaks of amenity, Ivan Illich of conviviality, Georges Friedmann of wisdom, Jean Fourastié of necessity and personal discipline, not to mention Denis de Rougemont and Jean-Pierre Domenach. It is, in every case, a question of some form of reduction of power: that man accept *not* to do all that he is capable of doing. The logic of technique, on the other hand, demands that whatever can be done *must* be done. Yet when I speak of the ethics of non-power, I do not mean impotence. Non-power does not mean giving something up, but choosing *not* to do something, being capable of doing something and deciding against it. Nor, by the same token, is it fatalism. It is an ethic which operates at every level, including the level of personal behavior in everyday life (adopting an attitude of non-power, for example, when one is driving a car or when one has a transistor radio which is too loud for the neighbors). It involves a permanent decision which is not only personal but also institutional, because it challenges manipulation and automatic growth; it is both a refusal of competition and the institution of a new, non-competitive pedagogy. The ethics of non-power has the effect of calling into question such events as the Olympic Games, automobile racing, and so on, but it is also highly relevant to scientific research. What is at stake is a vital principle (I simplify here to make a point) of setting limits: given that the almost unlimited means at our disposal permit

almost unlimited action, *we must choose, a priori, non-intervention each time there is uncertainty about the global and long-term effects of whatever actions are to be undertaken.* This ethics, this opting for non-power is fundamental, and it is possible (it would be futile to formulate an ideal ethics which no one could practice) because it is linked with meaning. Our experience with the power of technique has led us to discover the absence of meaning. Uncertainty as to whether life means anything is the sickness of modern man, and the rediscovery of meaning is conditional upon the choice of non-power.

This new ethics would also be an ethics of freedom. Powerful means do not necessarily insure freedom; on the contrary, technique has come to represent both necessity and fate for modern man, and thus, the effort to recover our ethical identity is the equivalent of resuming the fight for freedom. Not that I believe man is free; I insist, on the contrary, that man is determined, and has always been, but that man claims to be free, wishes to be free, affirms his freedom, and fights for it. This process has had three stages. Initially man was heavily determined by the forces of nature, from whose bonds he struggled successfully to free himself, winning, with the aid of technique, a high degree of independence. But at the point where man began to conquer nature, he found himself heavily determined by society, and his response to social determination was revolution. Now it is technique which determines man, but surely the technological system is no stronger or more dangerous than nature was for prehistoric man. Whereas prehistoric man discovered that useful tool—technique—for the development of a value system and a symbolic order, ethics is also a useful instrument for achieving liberation, but it must be carefully chosen. In other words, we must decide (and the decision carries with it grave consequences) that it is not technique which frees us but rather it is from technique that we must free ourselves. Our experience in this context is similar to that of the youth of every generation, who long for freedom, but do not quite know who their adversaries are. To fight against a well-defined enemy, such as Hitler, is comparatively easy. Now we are threatened by obscure and diffuse powers and are fighting in the dark against unfamiliar forces which we have not been able to analyze. Adopting an analytical perspective on the technological system should help to dispel that darkness.

Since the principles of non-power and freedom necessarily create conflict and tension, the ethics I propose would also include the principle of conflict. It is a matter of re-introducing conflict and play, of making holes in a social fabric which technique would wish to remain seamless. Technique is unifying and totalizing, whereas a group of people can exist only in conflict and negotiation. The moment a perfectly homogeneous group of people is achieved, we no longer exist, either collectively or

individually. Thus conflict is a fundamental ethical value (clearly we have come a long way from traditional morality).

Finally, this ethics should be one of transgression and profanation. But here we must be prudent, because there must be no mistake about what should be transgressed. Today everybody transgresses sexual taboos, drug laws, and so on, but these transgressions are meaningless and do not in any way constitute a challenge to the constraints of society. Such a challenge can only be posed by transgressing the constraints imposed by technique, in other words, what is real. This can only be achieved by demythologizing and desacralizing technique, in spite of the blind faith we all place in it. Especially, I believe, we must destroy the illusion of progress, the illusion that technique leads us from one achievement to another, the deep-rooted illusion that the material and the spiritual coincide. We tend to think that technique liberates us from the mundane, from material needs, so that we become free-floating pure spirits. But alas, technique, while it liberates us from one thing deprives us of something else at the same time, and that something else is usually of the spiritual order.

Every artist knows that he must overcome resistance; if technique overcomes the resistance of his materials for him, he can no longer conceive of anything. In order to create, I need to meet a resistance which technique ought not to deprive me of. I am neither liberated nor dematerialized by technique. In other words, technique ought to be reduced to producing merely useful objects, which *function*. When a new technique becomes available to me, although I may not understand it, I like it to work. It is useful, no more. But does such usefulness warrant the sacrifices which are demanded from us? That is finally the question we must face. It is this transgression of the technological ideology that we have absorbed, which allows for the establishment of new limits, such as those sought by Ilich.

In conclusion, I should like to say that what I propose is neither trivial, retrograde nor destructive of technique, it is simply an attempt to deal with a new environment which we do not know very well. It is a matter of reaffirming ourselves as subjects, and I believe that insofar as we speak, we are still subjects. Neither this reaffirmation nor the raising of ethics as an issue is opposed either to man or society, but is directed towards keeping both alive. That is the task of ethics: a task to which, understandably, time-honored values are no longer quite equal. Such values are, however, irreplaceable, because there are no substitutes for freedom and dignity, and there I will rest my case.

Translated by Mary Lydon
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee