

**UNDERSTANDING TECHNIQUE :**  
**FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM IN THE WORK OF JACQUES ELLUL**

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## Abstract

The question which this paper considers is What is the nature and value of the thought of Jacques Ellul? The paper argues that Ellul may be considered to be a thinker whose work has meaning for the citizen of the modern world because it proposes a way of thinking about human nature which focuses on the balance between determinism and freedom. This position is taken in response to the general critical reading that Ellul is a pessimist and that his revolution is alternatively Utopian or simply socialist. Using existing Ellul scholarship and a close textual reading of Ellul's most widely read works, the paper argues essentially three things: Ellul's construct Technique is not a tyranny of machines but a way of imagining which is taken up by modern individuals; Ellul's revolution is an action which can not be willed but rather is experienced as a conversion; and, although this revolution can not be willed, it can be initiated through the experience of language. The paper essentially sides with an existing minority position on Ellul but seeks to strengthen this position and modify it slightly by examining two things which have not been heretofore examined: the role of Kierkegaard in Ellul's thought, and the way in which Ellul's specific works on solution illuminate his assumptions regarding the real lives of individuals. The paper concludes that while Ellul challenges the idea that individuals are autonomous centres of decision, he does allow some room for a particular sort of freedom, that is the freedom to be sympathetic.

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## Introduction

Jacques Ellul is a French thinker whose main argument is that modern society corrupts and alienates the individual by glorifying efficient material production and the acquisition of power and physical comfort over any consideration of the spiritual and moral questions of life. Technique is what Ellul calls the use of hyper rational concepts and technology, which he blames for modern alienation and the increasingly unnatural predicament of the modern urban individual. The description and analysis of Technique allows Ellul to reject the notions that there is anything fundamentally different between Marxist and capitalist systems of government or that the problems of the world can be ascribed to the evil actions of particular men.

A lay-theologian, historian and philosopher, Ellul produced over forty books and hundreds of articles from the nineteen thirties until his death at age eighty-two in 1994. His work comprises a comprehensive critique of modern western society from both a theological and a sociological perspective. The sheer amount of work he produced recommends him for scholarly attention, yet he has received little. He has been avoided because he appears to be a generalist. He is a historian as well as theologian and a sociologist and he disdains statistics and objectivity. His work has also been ignored because his arguments are total, and he seems to belong to no particular school, which are precisely the attributes that make him worthy of study. However radical his work seems, it is a deeply thought out attempt to come to terms with life in the modern world. Despite the relative lack of attention he has received, there has been some interest. One book of essays discussing his ideas and influence contains contributions from over sixty French

intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> In the early nineteen thirties he helped found *Esprit* with Emmanuel Mounier and he remained an engaged member of society, participating in the Popular Front of the late thirties, the Spanish civil war and the Resistance during World War II. For over twenty years, beginning in 1969, he was the editor of *Foi et Vie*, a leading Protestant review in France.<sup>2</sup> Upon reading *The Technical Society* Aldous Huxley stated that Ellul had achieved what he, Huxley, had wanted to do in *Brave New World*.<sup>3</sup>

Ellul is frequently seen as an intellectual pessimist who had little connection with his society and not much to contribute to a practical discussion of the problems of society. Ellul is generally perceived as arguing that the modern individual is robbed of a meaningful life by the tyranny of machines. He is seen as ignoring the benefits of modern technology and that humans control how and when techniques are used and not vice versa. His discussion of revolution is similarly either ignored because it seems to be vague and incomplete, or it is translated into a socialist political program. Ellul's pronouncements regarding the nature and role of language in modern society are called paranoid, and he is again accused of ignoring the individual's freedom and of casting modern society in an unnecessarily gloomy light.

This paper will address all of these areas with a view to illuminating some of Ellul's main underlying assumptions and correcting the existing interpretations of his work. Many of the arguments that I make have been made before by other critics of Ellul. This paper does not attempt to introduce a completely new reading of Ellul but rather to

<sup>1</sup>Etienne Dravasa, Claude Emeri, Pierre Jaubert, Albert Mabileau, and Jean-Louis Seurin, eds. *Religion, Societe et Politique : Melanges en Hommage - Jacques Ellul*. Paris : Presses Universitaire de France, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Darrel J. Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul : A Systematic Exposition*, Introd. by Gabriel Vahanian (Toronto, Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp 2-3.

<sup>3</sup>David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness : An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem : Leigh University Press, 1991.), p.29.

choose between the various positions that already exist in the literature and determine if a fuller understanding of Ellul's work can be reached. The paper generally agrees with the positions of David Lovekin, who is Ellul's most perceptive reader. The contribution of this paper is to show that Lovekin's position is supported from sources which he does not consider and to discuss elements of the lived experience of Technique which he does not address. Specifically the paper argues that Ellul has a particular notion of revolution which he conceives of as a thing which can not be willed or embarked upon by conscious decision. In addition this paper will show that Technique is clearly a result of the individual's will to power and that Ellul's work does offer some vision of a life free of Technique.

The first chapter offers a simple descriptive summary of Ellul's technological works. The reader will only be able to understand the arguments of the following chapters if s/he has a basic understanding of the content of Ellul's critique and the way in which he makes his arguments. The second chapter makes the argument that Ellul's 'Technique' must be understood not as a power exerted by machines over individuals but rather as the mental attitude held by people that machines and rational concepts serve their interests better than other types of action and thought. Technique, as a way of perceiving, can be equated with the will to power. Ellul also implies that the individual will does not operate the way that is commonly assumed but rather that the individual rarely achieves what s/he intends to achieve. He sees the problem with the individual will as a flaw in the way the modern individual imagines things. Thus the second chapter will establish that Technique is essentially a way of perceiving the world. We harm ourselves with Technique because it leads us to imagine the world in an overly simple way. It also leads us to believe that we can achieve whatever we like if only we try hard enough.



The third chapter will address Ellul's revolution and argue that it is often at least partially misconstrued. Where some critics see Ellul's revolution in essentially political terms, the structure of his arguments about politics shows that he can not accept any sort of political solution. Similarly, some argue that Ellul may be seen as a Utopian, but in fact, his work has a strong anti-Utopian slant. At the same time Ellul is no pessimist. He perceives his revolution not as a set of actions but as an awareness of the true nature of the world and an awareness that the individual can act to change his/her surroundings. This awareness can not be achieved through a decision or effort but rather occurs to individuals. The main point of this paper is that Ellul's concept of revolution reveals a notion of the individual will such that the individual can not decide to do whatever s/he likes but rather s/he is at least partially determined by the surrounding mental and physical environment. This conception of decision and action permeates all of Ellul's secular work and can therefore be used to explain how and in what way Technique controls the actions of the individual. Ellul's idea of revolution is interesting because it most fully illustrates the idea that the individual acts and changes often not through will but rather through a perceptual shift which simply happens. In arguing that Ellul's revolution can not be willed this paper seeks to demonstrate that there is a consistency between Ellul's description of technique and his description of revolution - namely he has a particular way of thinking about the way that the individual can decide to act.

The fourth and final chapter will examine Ellul's conception of language and its relationship to human volition in revolution. It will attempt to answer the question, if the revolution, and many meaningful actions, can not be willed, then what hope is there for the individual, how does one initiate the revolution? For Ellul, what an individual is told by others, or even says to him/herself, is often more meaningful in evoking action than what the individual actually experiences. The way in which the individual understands words

also implies a series of assumptions about the way that the world does and should work. Generally speaking, it is impossible to change these foundational metaphysical assumptions by argument because they establish the criteria by which all other arguments will be judged. However, for Ellul, an individual may experience a radical change in the way s/he perceives the world through the sympathetic effort to fully understand the words of another. This acquiring of the assumptions implicit in the words of another person constitutes the perceptual shift which can not be willed but which is required to act in a way contrary to Technique; to be a revolutionary.

In summary then I intend this paper to do several things regarding Ellul's work. Firstly, it responds to the existing literature on several points of content - namely regarding the nature of Technique and the nature of Ellul's revolution. But most importantly the paper will show that Ellul is consistent throughout his work in putting forward special notions of the individual will and the power of language as I have discussed above.

By clearing up these confusions regarding Ellul's basic concept of Technique, his use of language, and the nature of the revolution which he advocates, I hope to make his thought more accessible and useful to future readers. The historical value of doing this is two-fold. Firstly, Ellul is a thinker who was involved to a high degree in many of the significant events of his society. Though he has received relatively little attention in France, others have called him the grandfather of the anti-technological movement. This paper attempts to clarify his secular work and portray it as more optimistic, humanistic and potentially persuasive than is generally admitted. This paper also hopes to show that Ellul is not a strictly religious thinker who has little in common with modern sociologists but that his work demonstrates a concern with the same issues - language, determinism and freedom - that have concerned French intellectuals in the twentieth century. Most

importantly, this paper tries to establish that Ellul is putting forward a coherent theory of the way that human freedom operates in relation to social and perceptual determinisms. His work offers ways of thinking about revolution, the relationship between the individual and the objects in his/her society and the ways which cultural ideologies are created and conveyed. These are the elements of Ellul's work which are potentially of most interest to historians. Inasmuch as historians are always seeking to know what caused a certain event or exploring the relationship between societal circumstances and individual desires and perceptions, Ellul's offers a model which offers an interesting way of thinking about these issues. Historians frequently assign individual actions to some type of collective perception and speak of circumstances or ideas which limit or influence a given individual's actions or choices. Ellul is frequently called pessimistic because he does not acknowledge that the individual has complete freedom in regard to the actions and choices s/he makes. In implying a great deal about what causes the individual to act, and the potential for freedom despite societal pressures and perceptions of necessity, Ellul addresses issues of interest to all sociologists and historians who assume as a professional matter of course that actions issue not from radically independent individuals but from a mixture of individual responses and the assumptions and preferences which are present in external society.

Methodologically, I have drawn my arguments and assumptions from Ellul's most widely read and most general works. In most cases I have used his earliest works on a given topic. The *Technological Bluff* (1989) is used only because Technique is such a central notion for Ellul and to show that his arguments changed very little over the years. I have not read all of Ellul's works which number over forty books and eight hundred articles. To my knowledge, no complete bibliography of his work exists. Much of the material in his later books repeats the main arguments of earlier works with alterations to

encompass particular contemporary events or make new comparisons. As this paper is interested in the assumptions underlying his main arguments, I did not think it was necessary to read all of his work. This paper attempts not to interpret Ellul in the light of a previously unacknowledged or single key work but only to unearth, through close textual analysis, the main ideas that exist in his most important books. It is possible that I may have missed something, but all the reading that I have done suggests that Ellul never changed the basic ethical and sociological assumption of his work. Each of his works elaborates on a particular aspect of his comprehensive interpretation of the world, the basic assumptions of which are shared by all his works. Nor does this paper address the truth of any of Ellul's claims; it is an attempt to understand Ellul's work in a new way by arguing that his main ideas are somewhat different from what has generally been assumed.

Before beginning I would like to thank a number of people for their help and support. Firstly I must thank my family and friends who have had the unenviable task of listening to me pontificate about the same topic for two whole years. I must also acknowledge the help and support which I have been lucky enough to receive from professors Rod Day and Bob Koepke. I thank them first for allowing me to choose this no doubt odd seeming topic and write a paper which I still find interesting, two years after beginning it. Both were most generous with their time and attention and invaluable as critical readers. It is to them that the reader must be grateful if this paper presents a coherent argumentative chain and is more than a collection of interesting observations. Finally and most especially I thank my parents, Arthur and Maureen, for putting up with the extreme anxiety that this paper occasioned, with patience, generosity and love.

Thank you all.

## Chapter 1

### An Introduction to Ellul's Thought

Between 1954 and his death in 1994 the French philosopher Jacques Ellul produced over forty books. Three of those, *The Technological Society* (1954), *The Technological System* (1977) and *The Technological Bluff*, (1989) comprise a fascinating critique of modern society. Ellul's main argument is that the growth of technology, rationalism and materialism have created modern mass alienation, destroyed natural social institutions and contaminated or eliminated all competing ideologies and religions. Ellul's rigorous and single-minded analysis of the implications of this radical thesis lead the reader to question him and to want to add to and to clarify his discussions. In this short first chapter I wish to summarize the main arguments of Ellul's Technical works so that the reader will have a basic understanding of the questions and issues I will discuss later in the paper.

At the beginning of *The Technological Society*, Ellul makes it clear that his quarrel is not particularly with actual physical manifestations of technology. Machines, he argues, are only a symptom of a much deeper trend in western philosophy which he calls Technique, to differentiate it from specific technologies. Technique could be called "the mind-set of the machine." It is the tendency to emphasize the rational, to value efficiency over all things and to do things simply because one has the ability to do them (*TS*, 1-20).<sup>4</sup> Ellul argues throughout his three books that these traits lead modern man to produce heaps of useless goods while failing to solve the problems of starvation and the uneven

<sup>4</sup>Citations from Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*, are cited in the text with the abbreviation listed below

*TS*: Jacques Ellul *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

distribution of goods, to value the immediate process of production over any moral consideration of the "why" of production. This definition of Technique proposes that it is an outgrowth of man's tendency to see the world in a material way and to rationalize or view the world as an ordered and ultimately explicable place. By concentrating on the physical improvement of life. Technique, Ellul argues, causes spiritual decay and actually leads us to harm to our fellow human beings.

The hallmark of Technique is an emphasis on making all processes efficient. This quest leads to the belief that in all cases there is one best way to do a thing and that once this best way has been established, there is no need to vary it or even, ultimately, think about it. What Technique offers us is power and the prospect of further power. Because it allows us to do some things very easily - reduce physical effort in all areas of life, gather information, travel great distances, communicate with many people - we believe that it can solve some of the great questions of life. What Technique actually does, however, is make the use of Technique the only thing that matters in life. Rather than make the effort to have a genuine social life, I stay inside and sit in front of the television or computer because these things are superficially fascinating. I substitute the accumulation of goods for the achievement of real emotional, intellectual and spiritual happiness.

Non-technical processes are never repeated exactly and allow each individual to take into account the unique experiences and circumstances of each new day and situation (TS, 20-21, 66-67). In a non-technical activity the process is the most important thing, because the human actor must think and respond to circumstances at each moment. Thus the individual can and must inject his personality into any process. Technical processes assume that the goal is the only important thing and the process becomes depersonalized. The technical mind judges that any time spent on process is in fact wasted time. Ideally we would spend no time or energy doing "useless" things like travelling to a friend's house

to speak to him/her, or discovering for ourselves what the weather is like rather than listening for a weather report. Technique glorifies the future by minimizing all intervening processes, continually offering us the temptation to "think how good life will be after I experience x." (*TS*, 434)<sup>5</sup> Consequently we drive when we might walk, we watch television without real interest, and at work, we streamline every process without exploring whether or not we really need to. As a further result, while Technique promises us greater power, more free time and more opportunities to express our personalities, what it actually does is demand that our society be obsessed with forever changing processes, to become faster and easier, without ever questioning where these processes are leading or allowing individuals to enjoy and express themselves through these processes. As Ellul says, we never think about what we are doing with all the time we save, we want simply to save it.<sup>6</sup> The ultimate goals of life become abstract. Patrons of Technique, Ellul seems to say, have a subconscious belief that there is a pure life that each of us is meant to lead, if only we could get rid of all the dross of life, instead of realizing that the meaning of life is created by personal reactions to the difficult problems and necessary processes of life. Technique demands energy and attention from its users and offers the consolation that its users feel immediately powerful. It gives us the personal power to travel faster, communicate farther, cook easier, brush our teeth with less energy, thought, and mess. The result of being able to do all these things is that, as Ellul makes clear, we cease asking why we do these things and do them simply because we can,

<sup>5</sup>This idea, that "[happiness] is not an inner state but an act of consumption" is, like many in this chapter, stated and implied in various ways throughout Ellul's Technological works Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 259.

<sup>6</sup>Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, 258.

substituting these actions for the deeper satisfaction which they promise but can not provide.

Perhaps the most oft-discussed issue in Ellul's work is the relationship between means and ends. He argues, for example, that violence can never create an atmosphere of peace, that truly democratic politics can never be the result of a hierarchical party system and that true freedom can not flourish under an authoritarian or centralized state.<sup>7</sup> The refusal to separate means and ends is significant even for Ellul's revolutionary Christianity, which I will discuss at greater length later. A Christian is not to act according to a conscious Christian strategy, but simply to be in the world and demonstrate Christianity in each and every action. Where Technique, and the technical individual, assume that there is no connection between the means that are used to achieve a goal and the nature or quality of that goal, Ellul would have us realize that there is no separation between the methods we use and the things we achieve. In emphasizing being rather than doing, he argues that life is a continuous process rather than a series of achievements. Other analysts have recognized that this argument is Ellul's central point. In this paper I will push this argument to its logical conclusion and show how a refusal to separate ends and means can be used to explain almost every aspect of Ellul's thought. In his arguments regarding individual techniques, Ellul refuses to allow a separation between the intention of the individual using a technique, and the actual effect of that technique. The ethical quality of the way that we go about doing something will not be different from the ethical nature of the final product which we achieve. The implication of these arguments is that for Ellul the most important effects of techniques are intrinsic to the techniques themselves and

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<sup>7</sup>Ellul makes this point in several places but discusses it most fully in *The Political Illusion*, trans Konrad Kellen, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).



thusly outside the control of the individual using the technique.<sup>8</sup> Consequently Ellul can argue that while television may seek to educate, its real effect is to fascinate. The computer may seek to make workplaces more efficient, but it actually makes it more vulnerable to a simple mechanical failure. Ellul notes that because the technical individual perceives happiness as a definable state which can be reached by a particular act, say owning a stereo or getting more dollars per hour at work, the technical individual begins to focus not on being happy but on building a better stereo or getting more money at all costs. Rather than explore the connection between material wealth, the means, and actual happiness or spiritual contentment, the end, the technical society devotes all its energy to creating more material wealth. Thus, in a practical way, the means becomes the end, and ever more intermediate processes are created to achieve this new end which is at best only vaguely linked to the original end of contentment or comfort.

To explain how Technique results in a change in our perspective on the world, as a result of the contamination of ends through a change in means let us consider Ellul's discussion of the relationship of Technique to human curiosity and the practice of science.<sup>9</sup> Though Technique is at least as old as science, it has different goals. In many cases ancient techniques - from legal systems to early metallurgy - preceded the spirit of scientific enquiry which Ellul describes as curiosity and a willingness to experiment. Science in its pure form seeks to know something of the natural, to determine what would exist if the scientific observer were not present. Technique, on the other hand, is concerned with the desire to produce a result - to transform nature into something that can be used. The value of pure science is its power to observe, Technique is the power to

<sup>8</sup>Thus general style of argument has led Ellul to be seen as a pessimist who does not see that individuals have freedom. I will deal with this perception in the next two chapters.

<sup>9</sup>For a concise discussion of the relationship between science and technology, see Ellul, *Technological Society*, 7-10.

alter. It is valuable because it creates a stable process, which can be repeated endlessly and thoughtlessly in order to reach a set goal.

In the modern world, pure science is beyond the reach of even ardent amateurs. Technology is now necessary to carry out most scientific enquiries. This state of affairs may be attributed to the fact that the scientific endeavours that require simple instruments have all been thoroughly explored. Whatever the cause, the use of more and more complex and invasive machines pulls science farther and farther from the visible world, scientific discoveries are less and less accessible to the general public. At the highest level of inquiry the questions that are asked are limited, as much by the narrowing scope of the instruments as by the financial interests that must be considered to get the funding for experiments in the first place, to those of technology. As scientific experimentation and conclusion becomes more and more abstract, it makes less and less sense, and it is plainly increasingly difficult to concretely observe the world, thus the applied goal of the experiment becomes more and more important. Because the behaviour of subatomic particles is rather uninteresting when viewed without respect to its eventual application we begin by asking "How can we create a more flexible and durable sort of plastic?", rather than seeking merely to observe. Where the pure scientist can be seen as a fledgling moralist, seeking to understand how things are, and therefore should be, in nature, the technician imposes his predictive theoretical model and uses the natural to create a product.

Ellul's concern for the relationship between ends and means is further manifested in the idea which underlies all of his work that a fundamental fault of Technique is its improper consideration of consequences. All of his technical books can be read as pleas for us to consider the consequences of our actions. The problem with Technique is that, by its limited scope and tendency to consider things as mono-causal, it often ignores the

most important consequences of an action. If a large amount of water is required for an experimental farm, a river may be diverted without thought to the myriad of consequences to the surrounding flora and fauna. One could argue that Technique is not really guilty of disregarding consequences because the only meaningful scale to a technician is, for instance, the efficiency and profitability of the farm; however in many instances a technical enterprise may harm itself in one area by increasing efficiency in another, as the diversion of a river may change the soil quality and adversely effect the farm that the river is supposed to aid. In this way we may think that we are doing one thing, but we are often in fact doing another. We may think that our homes are very clean but perhaps the use of modern cleaning agents is actually resulting in the pollution and defoliation of far away natural areas. Thus, the means that we use influences the quality and content of what we achieve.

In addition to this failure to see the true consequences of actions, Technique creates a false split between process and result.<sup>10</sup> It is a cliché to say of a journey that getting there is half the fun, but in many endeavours the process is what defines the end result and to separate the two is consequently rather perverse. And yet this is precisely what many Techniques do: cars and planes remove the facts of temporal and spatial travel from journeys, microwave-ovens and super markets are only the most spectacular of modern innovations that try to make the basic acts of cooking and eating disappear. Television seeks to educate without the effort of imagination. An authoritative newscaster can deliver information but he can not develop the viewer's ability to think critically. Consequently, whether or not I can be educated through my television depends not on

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of the idealism of the Technical mind see Jacques Ellul, "Human Techniques," in *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1967), 319-427

how hard I concentrate, or on the content of the programming, but on the way I define 'educated.' Technique is primarily faulty because it considers every process as a series of still states when life is in fact fluid. Where Technique seeks to inscribe certain information, emotions and abilities on a static and blank individual, real experience teaches through the process of time spent and deeds done. By offering me the ability to travel extremely quickly without any physical or mental effort, or the exercise of any particular skill, the car offers me a false sense of power. It also changes the way I perceive travel and distances. Similarly I would feel cheapened if a pill, or even an overly simple training video, offered me the ability to be a professional hockey player, without the expenditure of a lot of time, effort and thought on my part. Yet this is the goal of all Technique, from machines to abstract mental systems. In the interests of efficiency technicians always try to reduce any process to its essential elements. Thus, Ellul calls Napoleon a genius in the field of military strategy while Hitler was merely a technician. The technique of Blitzkrieg made use of certain constant truths of human psychology and military hardware, while Napoleon reacted originally to each new situation.<sup>11</sup>

The reader may be tempted to ask, if Technique is so unnatural, then where did it come from, at what point did a healthy society make the fatal turn towards the myth of progress and rationality? All human societies have made use of Technique. One example that Ellul gives is the use of magic in the Middle Ages in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Magic was a technique that gave people the illusion of control over the unknown natural world, and in some cases over their human neighbours. One of the most attractive aspects of modern Technique is that it seems to be totally under human control. To the conscious rational

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of the way in which Technical activity destroys spontaneous activity, see Ellul, *Technological society*, 81-85.

<sup>12</sup>For the entire discussion of magic, see Ellul, *Technological Society*, 24-27.

mind Technique has no power to influence human morals, goals or society, except as the human directs it to do so. Thus Technique does not consciously engage the feeling of religious awe or mysterious ecstasy that the belief in magic entails (*TS*, 34). Technique provides an arguably more dangerous sense of clear-headed unlimited freedom. At the same time, modern Technique is not as limited as magic. Magic tolerated the existence of religion and early science as other systems for understanding the world; modern Technique, however, disallows alternative systems of thought and action. The energy needed to produce these things demands from an individual the faith that technology is the only road to a new improved life.

Throughout his books Ellul puts forward the idea that there is a natural human state and natural human proportions for everything. A certain amount of Technique is acceptable because it can still be controlled by the human personality and related to the natural world. But as the amount of technology in the modern world has increased, the nature of the technological enterprise itself has changed, leaving progressively less room for the individual to express him/herself (*TS*, 63). This observation - that the experience of a single sky-scraper is different from walking through a whole city of them or that systematizing one's view of politics while maintaining a mystical vision of God is quite different from rationalizing every aspect of one's life - is key to many of Ellul's points. The Technical point of view naturally resists the conclusion that quantity influences quality because such an idea is not objectively measurable and also because it demands that we observe the real effects of Technique, rather than remaining in the realm of imagined and easily explicable causes and effects. A technician thinks about the concrete physical needs and effects of one sky-scraper as though it functioned in a vacuum or in an ideal city-system whose inhabitants are not real people but merely quantities who will interact with the skyscraper in a set model way, providing  $x$  and needing  $y$ . Technique will always

create false limits of this sort and treat the world not as it exists but in measurable and quantifiable terms.

Technique disallows and eliminates non-technical activities because they can not be explained and justified by Technical standards. Technical activity offers us immediate gratification and the sensation of power, but spontaneous and unarticulated behaviour can offer us similarly pleasant sensations. However, spontaneous or emotional activity can not answer the questions or meet the standards of efficiency of Technical activity. Ellul uses examples of games or relationships which, as they are technicized, lose their meaning and become lifeless, even as they seem, because they have been ordered and systematized, to be more measurable and tangible and therefore more real. Systems seem to be better than spontaneous and unpredictable methods because they offer certainty and thus authority to those who use them. Technique is attractive because it is so much more certain than the spontaneous alternative. The difference between a technical activity and one which is not technical is not in the content of what is done but rather in the way in which it is done. For the Technical individual, satisfaction comes not from doing a particular thing but rather from doing anything in the right or approved way. People who read the newspaper can be sure of all having the same information but it will not be as meaningful as the experience of someone who actually goes through an event. Yet the newspaper offers the certainty of the printed word. An atechanical activity can not justify itself in rational language in the way that Technique does, by creating elaborate structures, both physical and mental, to support itself. Rational and Technical questions are always asked in ways that can only be answered by those who have embraced Technique. Consequently, although technique may be only a means, it determines the types of ways in which the individual may respond to and use it. Charts, multiple choice questions and statements of quantities do not react well to interpretations that come from an other than Technical

perspective. If, for example, a doctor, is paid only according to the number of patients he sees, then there will be no bonuses awarded for the doctor who takes the time to fully explain things or establish a personal relationship with a patient. Although such a billing system is only a way of measuring the cash value of the doctor it contains unstated assumptions about the nature of the doctor's duties and influences the way in which s/he behaves.

Although the discourse associated with machines and rational systems sometimes vaguely addresses these things, Technique does not concern issues of stress, the place of the individual in society, the sources of self-satisfaction and a host of other moral and spiritual issues. Technique has these large blind spots because its goals are already defined: greater production, more rapid and uniform processes, greater and more invasive physical power for the individual, the reduction of conscious effort (especially at work), the creation of an ordered, explainable and predictable life and the production of pleasant physical sensations. These goals are defined because they answer to a conception of the world, and of the individual's moral place in it, that the propaganda of technicians never fully articulates. According to the technical mind-set, society seems to be made up of individuals, rather than families or communities, with simple physical requirements and emotional needs which can be met by offering the individual the power to remove all physically difficult or time-consuming tasks from life. In this way the individual will be left free to express his/her personality in the expanding realm of leisure. But, Ellul argues, mostly by implication because he says that he does not want to preach, morality has been perverted by the Technical mind. Production and action are seen as values in themselves, the search for justice has been replaced by the maintenance of order, and what is normal, as measured by the standards of efficiency, is now considered to be what is right. Concern

for power transforms the human enterprise from one of expressing one's personality to one of doing everything in the right or normal way

There are examples of this phenomenon in the fields of psychology and sports. The use of some paradigms in psychiatric counselling reduce all patients to a set of shared human qualities and reduces unique human experiences to variations on established patterns. Less technical counselling might allow a more intuitive and personal connection between patient and counsellor. What is gained by the technical counsellor is the rationalized idea that s/he knows how to deal with every situation and every client. Technique thus destroys the real process of counselling which must be experienced for it to come to a successful conclusion. Technique has similarly transformed the area of leisure. In the area of recreational sports the pleasure ought to be in the process of competition, not in the winning or losing. But a technical mind will observe the rules of a game and try to find a simple technique which takes the chance and originality out of the game and assure victory. In games, techniques are allowed by the rules, which makes them difficult to argue against, but they seem to be a perversion of the spirit of the contest. These Techniques have the same falsity as those which promise to convey knowledge or skill overnight and without effort, they disregard the fact that the satisfaction of an achievement comes not from the moment of achievement but from the continued experience of training or practice or varied activity leading up to a moment of success. Technique allows us to imagine that there is nothing that we can not do simply by willing it. Yet we are perplexed when we find in life that states of being, whether it is a question of being in love or being skilled at a particular game, are not simple matters of decision and effort. A single moment of victory or love or strength, some sensation of power or emotion, dissociated from all that naturally goes with and before it, is unreal



I hope it is now evident that Jacques Ellul's work offers a complex and complete account of the impact of modernization as it has been experienced in developed countries in the twentieth century. His work argues that the modern individual confuses spiritual contentment and emotional health with the satisfaction of physical needs and the acquisition of material objects. He also challenges the idea that we can achieve whatever we like simply by trying hard enough, if we fail to consider how our achievements are strongly influenced, if not defined, by the means which we use to reach them. In discussing Technique, Ellul implies assumptions about the nature of human freedom, the personality, and the way that individuals choose and act. In the following chapter I will summarize the existing critical treatment of Ellul and argue that his work has been widely misread. Far from being a pessimist who argues that we are at the mercy of our machines, Ellul's work extols the power of the individual imagination. Technique is not a tyranny of machines but a particular way of imagining the world.

## Chapter 2

### What is Technique?

First time readers generally have one of several common reactions to Ellul's technological works. The books are daunting in the complexity and totality of their arguments. One is struck by the severe logic of Ellul's explanations and the feeling that there is no escape. A common reaction is to claim that Ellul is a pessimist because he does not recognize that human beings have freedom. It may be true, the argument goes, that we do do many things that are harmful to ourselves, but we always choose to do these things, so our salvation is really no more than a few conscious decisions away. For this reason, readers may claim that Ellul's emphasis on machines and logical structures is unfounded. He is wrong to argue that our mechanized society mechanizes us because he fails to see that we remain human centres of decision and freedom. This response to Ellul indicates a failure to and engage his arguments and to understand that he is actually putting forward an interesting conception of the human will. In trying to account for the widely held idea that the modern individual is free and also the contradictory objective appearance that s/he is not, Ellul's work can be seen as a discussion of the role of freedom and circumstances in action. While holding out the possibility of human freedom, his work puts forward a way of thinking about what causes individuals to act as they do, and the extent to which individual actions are determined. As a result, his work deserves consideration from historians, social scientists and any others who are interested in why things happen in society.

After establishing that even Ellul's most perceptive and sympathetic readers are confused as to exactly what Technique means, I will argue that Ellul is really discussing a mental environment and perspective which we create. Technique may be clearly equated

with a will to power. In this way he humanizes the notion of Technique and invalidates the argument that he is describing an unrealistic tyranny of machines. By placing human psychology in the centre of Ellul's universe where it belongs, the reader will see that the main point of Ellul's technical works is not that we are enslaved by machines and mental habits which are alien to us, but that Ellul is criticizing the way in which the citizen of the modern world imagines and conceives of his/her own will and power to make decisions. Ellul's Technical works constitute a strong critique of the way the individual will is assumed to work. As such, his work goes to a central issue of the disciplines of social science and discusses the questions as to what extent the individual is free and to what extent s/he is determined, and how this determination establishes itself and functions.

When discussing Ellul's work it is tempting to gloss over Technique and argue about its finer points as though one is sure what it is. However, there is widespread if subtle disagreement amongst Ellul's critics as to the exact definition of Technique. Most analysts simply repeat Ellul's own statements that Technique is autonomous and self-expanding, without exploring his more poetic descriptions or discussing what, if it has these qualities of autonomy and self-expansion, Technique actually is. Even an analyst such as Patrick Troude Chastenet, who wrote *Lire Ellul* in 1992 and was a colleague of Ellul's at Bordeaux university, is confused about the exact nature of Technique.<sup>1</sup> One of Ellul's most perceptive readers, David Lovekin, also devotes a chapter in his book *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness* to the disagreement among critics over the

<sup>1</sup>Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Lire Ellul : Introduction A L'Oeuvre Socio-Politique De La Jacques Ellul* (Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992), 78, writes that in Ellul's first book Technique was an autonomous force but in his second book, *Le System Technique* it became less anthropomorphic and less fantasmagorical. He continues that Technique sometimes seems contradictory : is it incarnated in technicians, or does it encompass more than technicians? Chastenet asks, can we distinguish the ideal technical system from its existence in real life? I believe that I can answer these questions.

exact nature of Technique.<sup>2</sup> Lovekin is primarily concerned with the formal philosophical nature of Technique, and accordingly he investigates Ellul's use of Hegel, the role of symbols in Ellul's argument and his use of the dialectic. He argues that Technique is a sick form of consciousness. While I agree that Ellul sees Technique as a type of consciousness, I will argue that he does not see it as a special sick consciousness but rather argues about the nature of consciousness in general. Further, where Lovekin sees Technique as sick because it can not make distinctions between the necessary and the trivial,<sup>3</sup> Ellul does give Technique some human attributes which he believes are objectively morally harmful. Most notably Technique is concerned with the use of power, which Ellul sees as categorically harmful. Thus while I agree with Lovekin's main contention, I intend to prove this argument in a different way and put it to a different use than does Lovekin. My argument with Lovekin is not that his conclusions are wrong but that he does not fully realize their implications for the living individual or express the way in which Technique understands the human.

Chastenet gives an admirable introduction to Ellul's secular works and acknowledges that Technique is something more than machines but he leaves the issue unsettled, arguing that, particularly in Ellul's early works, Technique is represented as an autonomous fantasmagorical force.<sup>4</sup> Other critics argue that Technique is abstract and too large a concept to have any real meaning.<sup>5</sup> Many commentators avoid the main thrust

<sup>2</sup>David Lovekin, "Ellul and the Critics," in *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1991), 29-64.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, particularly, pp. 98-105.

<sup>4</sup>Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, 78.

<sup>5</sup>Maurice Duverger, "Espe et les Techniques," *Le Monde*, 4 November 1954, attacks Ellul for not explaining Technique clearly, Victor Ferkiss in his review of *The Technological System*, by Jacques Ellul, *American Political Science Review* 75 (3): 740 (1981) argues that Technique is a useless concept because it encompasses too much, from

of Ellul's arguments by diminishing the importance of Technique or claiming that Technique is merely a symptom of another, more fundamental, element in society. Christopher Lasch writes that what Ellul is actually talking about is capitalism.<sup>6</sup> Popular commentators often argue as though Technique encompasses only machines and rational systems, which may be dissociated from the people who use them. This point of view allows them to refer to Technique as a mechanical phenomenon and to label Ellul as a paranoid pessimist.<sup>7</sup> Howard Falk is typical of popular commentators in his claim that Ellul is discussing the totality of social and mechanical techniques used in modern society.<sup>8</sup> This incorrect notion allows Falk to attack Ellul for making human individuals defenceless against the monster of Technique. Charles Silberman responds to Ellul with an article called "Is Technology Taking Over?"<sup>9</sup> The title indicates that Silberman fails to realize what Technique is not a phenomenon occurring outside of human individuals. Pierre Dubois writes of "techniques which produce social domination"<sup>10</sup> and Chastenet himself

the Kama Sutra to speed reading, Clifford G. Christians "Ellul on Solution: An Alternative But No Prophecy," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 162, says Technique is too abstract a notion.

<sup>6</sup>Christopher Lasch, "The Social Thought of Jacques Ellul," in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, ed. James Holloway (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 79.

<sup>7</sup>Ellul is called a pessimist by many writers, see for example, Jean Onimus, "L'Esperance Crispee," *Le Monde*, 8 February 1973; Jean-Marie Domenach "Sur un livre de Jacques Ellul. Diversite et limites des propagandes," *Le Monde*, 10 September, 1962; Thomas L. Thorson, review of *The Political Illusion* by Jacques Ellul, *Political Science Quarterly* LXXXIII (1): 117-8 (1968); Lewis Mumford, *Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 290-1.

<sup>8</sup>Howard Falk, review of *The Technological Society*, by Jacques Ellul, *Technology and Culture* 6 (Summer, 1965): 532.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Silberman, "Is Technology Taking Over," *The Myths of Automation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 97-114.

<sup>10</sup>Pierre Dubois, review of *Le Systeme Technicien*, by Jacques Ellul, *Sociologie du Travail* 79 (1): 92 (1979).

says of Ellul's vagueness regarding Technique that "the adversary is not clearly designated."<sup>11</sup> All of these statements focus on Technique as a distinguishable complex of means and machines which threaten to influence human behaviour or as an indistinguishable morass of other fundamental elements. The other common criticism of Ellul is to call him an exaggerator.<sup>12</sup> Samuel Florman, Alvin Toffler and Victor Ferkiss<sup>13</sup> all accuse Ellul of simply ignoring the greater freedom provided by technologies. These criticisms demonstrate a failure to see that Ellul is in fact arguing about the nature of human will and consequently fail to engage his arguments.

The fact that Ellul wrote his three explicitly Technological works across the whole span of his career means that there is likely to be variation in the way that Ellul himself uses the term 'Technique'. The first question which we must answer is whether Technique is a mechanical or physical fact or a mental or social attitude or perspective? The tendency on reading Ellul's works is to equate Technique with machinery, because Ellul himself frequently writes about mechanical and industrial techniques. He spends a great deal of time talking about the industrial system and especially about television and the car which he calls "the most perfect symbol of the Technical society" (*TB*, 372).<sup>14</sup> Given that

<sup>11</sup>Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, 79.

<sup>12</sup>Victor Ferkiss, *The Technological Man : The Myth and the Reality* (New York : George Brazillier Inc. , 1969), 87; Martin E. Marty, "Creative Misuses of Jacques Ellul" in *Jacques Ellul : Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago : University of illinois Press, 1981),9-12.

<sup>13</sup>Samuel Florman, "In Praise of Technology," *Harpers* (November 1975), 67, Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York : Random House, 1970), 233; Victor Ferkiss, *The Technological man : The Myth and the Reality* (New York : George Brazillier- Inc. ,1969), 27-28.

<sup>14</sup>Quotations from two of Jacques Ellul's works are cited in the text with the abbreviations listed below.

*TS* : Jacques Ellul, *Technological Society* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

*TB* : Jacques Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan : William B. Eerdmans Publishng Company, 1990).

Ellul himself spends so much time talking about the impact of certain techniques, how cars and computers force us into actions and deform our spiritual selves, it is easy to see how readers might think that Technique consists of the machines and rational systems which we use and thus see Technique as an external problem. Ellul's harshest critics take this line, arguing that Ellul is really describing a paranoid fantasy of a society run by machines. This is the criticism that is implicit in those who say "If this is true, why write the book?"<sup>15</sup> implying that if Ellul is right, there is nothing we can do because we are trapped by something utterly beyond our control. However Technique must also be seen as a mental environment or perspective which leads to specific actions. Thus Technique includes specific actions and uses of machinery, but it also encompasses the motivation behind these actions. Technique is not an attribute of machines conveyed to human beings, but rather it is a set of human behaviours which frequently, but not always, involve the use of machines.

In his introduction to *The Technological Society*, Ellul's translator John Wilkinson calls Technique "the ensemble of practices by which one uses available resources to achieve values" and claims that there is nothing human in it.<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson's definition explicitly rejects any connection between the human psyche and Technique. Definitions such as these allow the reader to focus on the external quality of Technique and to argue that Technique imposes itself on human individuals. It then becomes difficult to see why Technique is so attractive and pervasive.

TS: Jacques Ellul, *Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

<sup>15</sup>Pierre, Dubois, review of *Le Systeme Technicien*, by Jacques Ellul, *Sociologie du Travail* 79 (1): 92 (1979).

<sup>16</sup>John Wilkinson, Translator's introduction to *The Technological Society*, by Jacques Ellul (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), x.

That Ellul does consider Technique to be a difficult and wide ranging concept is shown by his comparison of the origin of Technique to the mysterious origin of life itself (*TS*, 23). Of the relationship between Technique and machines, Ellul writes "Technique is now almost entirely independent of the machine." However the machine is deeply symptomatic, or indicative of the technical, "it represents the ideal world toward which Technique strives" (*TS*, 4). From this statement we gather that Technique is some sort of ideology or view of the world. If Technique strives, then it contains some sense of what ought to be in the world, it is a set of expectations and wishes as well as a set of methods. "It constructs the kind of world the machine needs. ... It clarifies, arranges and rationalizes; it does in the domain of the abstract what the machine did in the domain of labour" (*TS*, 5). By ascribing these active qualities to Technique Ellul plays into the hands of his critics who argue that he overlooks the human factor and gives too much power to disembodied Technique, but his point is that Technique is a way of thinking, taken up by human beings. The abilities Ellul ascribes to Technique, to clarify, arrange and rationalize are primarily mental tasks centred on the act of perception. Ellul is clearly talking about a mental attitude which can not exist apart from the individuals who hold it.

Consider Ellul's example of the medieval swordsmith. From time immemorial the swordsmith observed tradition in the materials and form of the swords he made. "The swordsmith's choice of form was unconscious and spontaneous" (*TS*, 20). One day, however, the smith began to reason independently about what would be the most useful shape of the blade and to remove apparently useless ornamentation. According to Ellul it is only when the consciousness and judgement of the smith intervene in this way that the process becomes technical. Here, Ellul contradicts his earlier contention that Technique is nothing more than a method. It appears to be not only the method but also the choosing



and implementation of a method for a particular reason. Thus Technique is closely associated with a certain type of motivation.

It would seem that Ellul often considers Technique to be more even than an object, a method, or the motivation associated with that object or method. In *The Technological Bluff*, Ellul writes "[Technique] is like a key, like a substance underlying all problems and situations" (TB, 9) and calls Technique the new nature (TB, 14). Ellul's later work expands the notion of Technique so that it becomes both a mental and physical environment. With these statements Ellul implies that Technique is not even just an ideology associated with certain actions. If it underlies all problems and situations, like a new nature, then it is present even when no specific mental or physical event is occurring. While Ellul's claim that Technique has become a new nature lends itself to the idea that it is something external to human individuals, it is also possible to see that Technique has become our new physical environment only because it is already our new mental environment. Speaking of Technique Ellul writes "this encirclement or outflanking of people and society rests on profound bases (e.g. a change in rationality) and the suppression of moral judgement and the creation of a new ideology of science" (TB, 19). Each of these actions is a mental change which occurs in the mind of the individual and can not be imposed from the outside in a classically coercive way. Ellul's critics might respond that even if Technique is accepted as primarily a mental assumption, we remain helpless before a way of perceiving that can influence us so powerfully. Later in the paper, I will discuss the way in which even so basic a thing as the way we perceive the world might be changed. At the moment I want to establish only that Technique is primarily a human-centred mental phenomenon, "the consciousness of the mechanized world," (TS, 6) and not something which imposed on us from without.

Technique then is not something which operates apart from human individuals but is an attitude which at some level we accept and take on. Why then do we accept Technique? This is a question which Lovekin's analysis does not answer. Consideration of the personality traits which are indulged by Technique will result in a fuller understanding of the contrary lifestyle which Ellul's revolution requires. Ellul writes that what makes Technique appeal to us is "... the seductive discourse of techniques..." and adds that the technical world grows through "... the enticement of the individual into the permanent socio-technical discourse" (*TB*, 18-19). It is this "totally fictional" discourse "which incessantly surrounds and envelops us (*TB*, 123-4) ... [and] blocks access to an understanding of a technoconscience."<sup>17</sup> Thus we are not dealing with machines or systems of behaviour which force themselves upon individuals. Rather, the technical way of acting and thinking must appeal to some existing element of human nature. We must also note that, for Ellul, what is seductive about Technique is not just or even primarily the machines or the rational systems themselves but rather the way in which these things are discussed, and therefore imagined. Ellul's critics are wrong to discuss the effects of machines as if they were clearly visible. Ellul is always asking us, does the car provide freedom or cause unnecessary harm? He then asks why we are usually aware of only one of these effects. The central, but rarely noticed, issue in Ellul's work is the way in which we decide to act, and the role that imagination plays in these decisions. What we imagine to be real determines, to a large extent, how we act. Without the accompanying discourse, a machine ceases to be Technical, just as an existing practice, like that of the swordsmith, can be made Technical if it is imagined in a new way and put to a new use.

<sup>17</sup>D. Janicaud, *La Puissance du rationnel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) quoted in Jacques Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 123. Note that Ellul makes a point of not providing specific page numbers as he believes that books should be read in their entirety.

If it is the language surrounding Technical things which seduces individuals, then we must ask what desire does Technique appeal to? What quality does the technical discourse offer? Ellul makes it clear that the answer is power. Consider his description of the technician who says, "'Here is *the* solution. There is no other. You will have to adopt it'" Ellul continues, "They now add authority to competence. This is what makes them technocrats" (*TB*, 24). Technocrats thus offer the certainty of finding the one best solution to a problem. For Ellul, this certainty is the main, but not the only, type of power offered by Technique. In this argument I substantially agree with the thesis of C. George Benello who, in "Technique as a Mode of Understanding Modernity," writes that Technique demonstrates a will to power. However Benello casts his argument as an antidote to what he sees as Ellul's own vagueness.<sup>18</sup> He writes that Ellul's notion of Technique is abstract and difficult to explain, and he does not use much evidence from Ellul's own works to show that technique does really represent a will to power. I argue that Benello is right but also that Ellul makes this point quite clearly in his own writings. According to Benello's definition, the will to power is most clearly demonstrated by a will to dominate other individuals,<sup>19</sup> and this sort of will to power is not particularly represented by Technique. What is needed to understand how Ellul's writings clearly embrace the idea of a will to power is a sound definition of power. Showing that Technique is a discernible and unified thing will disarm the criticism of Ellul, made by Maurice Duverger, Victor Ferkiss, C. G. Christians<sup>20</sup> and others, that Technique is an

<sup>18</sup>George C. Benello, "Technique as a Mode of Understanding Modernity," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 91.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 102-105.

<sup>20</sup>See note 6 and Maurice Duverger claims of Ellul that "Il part d'une prise de position personnelle." Maurice Duverger, "Esopo et les Techniques," *Le Monde*, 4 November 1954.

abstract notion. It will also link Lovekin's external philosophic argument that Technique is harmful because it is a bad infinity, that is that it ascribes equal value to all events and things and so prevents meaningful action, and the actual lived experience of the individual. The will to power argument leaves motivation for Technical activity with the individual.

Although Ellul does not consistently emphasize the point that power is a central obsession of the Technical mind, he does make references to the link between Technique and power. What has prevented readers from noting the centrality of the will to power in Ellul's work is a failure to notice his particular and wide definition of power. That this notion is central to Ellul's work, and yet has been missed by most of his critics, may be accorded to the fact that Ellul repeatedly states that he does not want to preach about morals or the nature of man but rather simply to discuss what is demonstrably happening in contemporary society. But Ellul's work is strongly, if subtly, motivated by particular conceptions of human nature and moral behaviour. Thus, despite the fact that Ellul eschews straight forward moral pronouncements and arguments, the attentive and sympathetic reader can detect an implied moral scheme even in Ellul's secular Technical works. Speaking of the Technical system, Ellul argues "[p]ower is the objective and the justification" (*TB*, 157). "The stress is always on power. Power is a fine cat's head with fascinating eyes" (*TB*, 356). We gather from these statements that power is the object of the Technical system because there is something distracting and engrossing about power itself, regardless of what it is used for. Far from presenting a concept which is rendered ineffective by its vast scope, Ellul's Technical works critique and illustrate the modern will to power in three different variations. Firstly, Technique offers modern individuals the simplest sort of power, the pure physical ability to dominate nature and experience a feeling of control. "Motorcyclists take pleasure in their engines and the pleasure is doubled if they make the maximum noise" (*TB*, 75). Car accidents are often caused by

drivers intoxicated with power, (*TB*, 82) who no matter what their actual speed, "dream of going faster" (*TB*, 374). In this way, machines are attractive to us because they seem to be under our control and they allow us expand our personal power. According to Ellul's argument, we are simply attracted to objects which seem powerful. "Objects like television, computers, bikes and rockets acquire a fabulous dimension by reason of the sense of their power, their ubiquity, their domination, the unlimited access which they give, their secret" (*TB*, 121). This is the simplest level of Ellul's argument, at which Technique corresponds most completely to machines.

However Technique offers us another level of power which is more imaginative and less concrete. In addition to actually offering us the control, or at least the spectacle, of real physical power, Ellul's notion of Technique includes behaviours which are motivated by imagined physical power or concepts which can be measured, or imagined in a physical way. At this level Ellul argues "[t]echnical thinking sees the world in terms of power, of rates of growth, of GNP, of speed, of consumption" (*TB*, 92). Thus the world is conceived in material terms so that what is important is the human power to cause change. It is this sort of will to power which satisfies assembly line employees of huge corporations. The average worker who experiences a feeling of powerlessness on the assembly line will feel power when he learns that the plane he is building will travel at 700 miles per hour. "All his repressed power soars into flight in that figure. Every modern man expresses his will to power in records he has not established himself" (*TS*, 303). Thus although the worker does not experience physical power, he is able to conceive what he is doing in terms of the power he imagines himself to be creating.

Modern gadgets, such as the electric toothbrush, indulge the will to power under both of the previous descriptions. A gadget "represents much intelligence and considerable investment" and offers "a utility totally out of proportion to the considerable

investment that it involves" (*TB*, 262-3) Thus we experience pleasure not just from using it but also from being able to treat as a bauble something which was clearly hard to make

Finally, the most common kind of power which Technique provides is simple certainty Ellul provides many examples to show that the technical mind is always trying to find the one best way to do something and therefore to take all the uncertainty and variation out of that process Early in his first Technical work, Ellul asserted that "What characterizes technical action within a particular activity is the search for greater efficiency" (*TS*, 20), and he repeats the idea regularly throughout his later work While efficiency does provide power in a more traditional sense by allowing one to achieve a result with a smaller expenditure of energy, Ellul sees its primary value as a form of certainty He provides many examples to show that the Technical mind is efficient even when there is no need to be, or when the quest for efficiency is more harmful than the benefit received Thus the main reason for efficiency, in many cases, is that it provides a feeling of certainty or order because it is measurably the best way to do something Because "[e]fficiency itself is order" (*TB*, 300) Efficiency creates order because it "resolv[es] *in advance* all the problems that might possibly impede the functioning of an organization"<sup>21</sup> By solving problems in advance, Technique eliminates doubt and gives the technician power to justify his/her actions and move on to another problem By valuing efficiency and standardization above all, the technician ignores any unforeseen problems that might occur and thus creates a type of certainty

Another aspect of Technique which provides certainty is its rationality

"[Rationality] is reassuring, because we know what to expect from the rational" (*TB*, 160)

<sup>21</sup> Antoine Mas, *L'Introduction du machinisme dans le travail administratif. Ses aspects technique, économique et sociale*, (Paris: Dunod, 1949-51) quoted in Ellul, *Technological Society*, 11

Ellul continues that Technique has perversely transformed rationality into "a matter of projecting human power over the whole universe" (*TB*, 162) Note here that our will to power is demonstrated by a will to understand nature and the world Rationality allows us to understand the universe in a certain way and then to make use of it and control it Although rationality itself does not convey an ability to do anything directly, it is a way of understanding that, because it leads to material achievements, it is beyond questioning and "validates those who serve it" (*TB*, 102-104) Thus it is a power Similarly, Ellul argues that the role of predictive mechanisms is not so much to actually predict things, but rather through the illusion of prediction, to create certainty In *The Technological Bluff*, Ellul devotes part of a chapter to a discussion of predictive mechanisms in modern economic, agricultural and technological enterprises His argument is that many of these mechanisms are a waste of time and effort because they do not make accurate predictions But the forecasts are believed to be true and real action is taken according to them Thus, though forecasts fail regularly, they are used to create certainty and justify action (*TB*, 80)

For Ellul Technique also creates certainty and feelings of power in more intangible affairs, including religion and morals As a mental attitude which values a certain type of understanding and efficiency in all fields, Technique promises a spiritual world "of which [man] is potentially the master " The myth allows him to "control, explain, direct and justify his actions" (*TS*, 192) As additional proof that Ellul considers the abilities to explain and justify our actions to be powers which we crave, I cite Ellul's theological argument that dread, caused by uncertainty and separation from God, is experienced by all people For Ellul, this free floating anxiety of being alive and not knowing what one is alive for is a tension with "no origin, no cause, or end"<sup>22</sup> Ellul argues that the ordinary

<sup>22</sup>Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in A Perilous World*, trans Peter Heinegg (SanFrancisco Harper and Row, 1973), 3

human reaction to dread is the creation of a belief or certainty. Belief is a system which makes action possible, by justifying the action in advance. This certainty, which has been responsible for a great many atrocities,<sup>23</sup> is a power which we use to justify ourselves and our actions. In this way Technique can, by providing certainty, indulge the will to power without creating a classically totalitarian society of the sort imagined by Orwell.

The mental attitude which Ellul calls Technique can be seen to demonstrate and indulge a wide ranging but definite will to power which controls us only because we are seduced by our own desire for power. Ellul's work becomes a discussion of the will to power if we accept that the primary kind of power available to citizens of the Technical world is the certainty that their actions are materially effective and morally correct. Thus Technique is neither particularly vague and idiosyncratic, nor is it an alien mentality which is imposed on us from the outside.

In response to what Ellul perceives as the main assumption underpinning the Technical world view, he proposes that human will is not at all as efficacious as we believe it to be. He argues that the ideal of efficiency which Technique strives for can not be maintained "except by a will that is always steady and taut. Man does not by nature possess such a will" (*TS*, 320). This argument is illustrated by almost all of Ellul's technical examples. Consider his argument concerning the attempt by doctors and nutritionists from the first world to feed third world children by supplying them with milk. This attempt did not account for the fact that many people in the third world are allergic to milk (*TB*, 53). This is an example of a solution to a problem which is imagined without taking into account the real context of the problem. Although the will of the nutritionists was unquestionably to do good, the result was clearly harmful. Similarly Ellul argues that

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 23



a great deal of pollution has been caused by the fight against pollution (*TB*, 59) because of an inability to correctly perceive reality or to see that we can not always achieve what we want to achieve simply by trying harder and wanting to do good.

This is not to say that Ellul argues that we never succeed in doing what we will ourselves to do. When we do simple acts such as anything that we ourselves immediately physically achieve, like eating or communicating with a family member, we do what we want to do. It is only when we try to achieve things which can not be achieved directly, like emotional states, or when we try to cause an effect in a place far removed from our actual presence, in other words, when we engage in an activity which is in any way imaginary, that our will becomes complicated. For example if I tell myself that I am using a car simply to get from point A to point B then I am probably going to achieve what I will. If however I believe that in using the car I will engage in a safe voyage that will be a great deal easier and more relaxing than any other mode of transportation, Ellul argues that I may find that I can not achieve what I will.

Ellul's arguments are founded on the idea that reality actually operates in a way that is contradictory to imagined rationality. Thus he makes great use of some well known ideas, such as the law of diminishing returns (*TB*, 312-315), the notion that means and ends can not be separated and Engels' law that the quantity of a phenomenon effects its quality.<sup>24</sup> These ideas all lead to the argument that we can not do, and do not do, what we think or imagine we are doing. Some critics respond by arguing that if we only pay more attention to what we are doing, and have more good will, we can truly achieve what we desire.<sup>25</sup> Lovekin, with whom I agree when he argues that Technique is a faulty way

<sup>24</sup>John Wilkinson, Translator's introduction to *The Technological Society*, by Jacques Ellul (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), xv

<sup>25</sup>See note 12

of imagining, focuses too much on the role of machines in obscuring our vision of the world.<sup>26</sup> Where most of his illustrations deal with simple physical changes in perception caused by machines, Ellul's work makes it clear that what causes individuals to imagine incorrectly is not the use of machines but a belief in the efficacy of power and of the individual will. Ellul sees the ineffectiveness of the human will not as something which is particularly modern, although it is perhaps accentuated by machines, but as a universal feature of human nature.

The fact that Ellul believes that the human will is and has always been less than totally effective, and that one's intentions don't necessarily shine through, is illustrated by the fact that many of his Biblical examples parallel his Technical ones in that they demonstrate how people rarely achieve what they want through rational calculation.<sup>27</sup> He offers as examples the parables that when someone strikes me I should turn the other cheek or that when someone forces me to walk a mile with him I should walk another voluntarily. These examples argue against what seems to be the reasonable response, in dealing with oppression: Ellul sees these Biblical examples as arguing that the only way to escape or transform oppression is to submit to it. To strike out or to resist oppression directly is never finally successful because the experience of oppression is truly a perceived experience that I and my oppressor share. Ellul's point is that when I am violent with my oppressor in order to make myself free, I am trying to achieve what is really an emotional state with blunt physical means. In addition I am validating the means of my oppressor

<sup>26</sup>Lovekin, *Technique Discourse and Consciousness*. Livekin emphasizes effects of specific mechanical technologies throughout the book, for examples, p.87, 161.

<sup>27</sup>Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 45-46, 57, 200. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 100, oppression is not defeated by establishing power over the oppressor but by rejecting the nature of the relationship.

and, in the most important sense, embracing oppression rather than rejecting it. I imagine that I can make myself free by this action but the example of the world shows that violence begets violence, I can not will myself to escape the oppressive situation in this simple way. I become free not in the absence of physical oppression but in the understanding that freedom and oppression are internal states of being, demonstrated in my every moment and action, regardless of my objective situation.

This point, that what we desire can rarely be achieved if we perceive it as a simple goal, and that the most important aspects of life are not things that are consciously created, but rather are states of being, permeates Ellul's Technical works. He despises technical training manuals for sports or art or any other activity because they regiment and order what was formerly spontaneous and unconscious. The swordsmith can only achieve the height of beauty and usefulness in his swords if he does not directly think of achieving these things. Our wills fail because we consider only the final thing or state that we want to make or achieve. We forget that the process we use will influence the goal that we reach. We are like "[w]orshippers of technology [who] prefer not to dwell on this solution, but rather to leap nimbly across the dull and uninteresting intermediary period and land squarely in the golden age" (*TS*, 434). Thus we are wrong to believe that violence can achieve peace in any circumstance or that we can ever experience meaningful communication through a television screen. The essential element of Ellul's technical critique is a disbelief in the power of our idealized wills, and this disbelief does not deal with an exclusively modern occurrence but rather with a human tendency.

The flip side to Ellul's arguments that we almost never achieve precisely and only what we will and frequently do what we do not will is his insistence on strong causal arguments which his critics find unacceptable. The implication of the criticism that Ellul is a bleak pessimist is that he thinks that human beings are powerless against machines. I

argue, however, that because Ellul has a different view of what causes things than most of his critics, his language is generally not properly understood. Although he seems to be saying that we are powerless against machines, this is not exactly the case. Rather than demonstrating that he is a pessimist, Ellul's language demonstrates the fact that he has a different view of the nature of the human will than most of his readers. Thus Ellul's forceful language makes his point by conveying the notion that perhaps we can not do everything that we think we can do. If he does not believe that the human will can do all that we imagine it can do, he does not believe that this is reason to lose hope or that we are inevitably controlled by machines. Rather it demonstrates that he has a particular view of the way things are really caused. I will show later on in the paper that his arguments only appear to leave us in a dead end, and that in fact they do provide a solution.

To discuss one example, Ellul writes that computers cause unemployment (*TB*, 4). This is the sort of language that leads even sympathetic readers to claim that Ellul is exaggerating in order to make his point, but this is not exactly the case. Rather Ellul is putting forward a different way of thinking about the way things happen. He is not trying to shock us into a realization so that we become more vigilant and conscious of our use of computers. Rather he is implying a belief in a certain type of determinism, that is a certain way of thinking about why something happens which does not assume the human ability to consciously decide to do anything we like. He is trying to show us that regardless of our intentions, when we use computers, certain things will happen. "Earlier, productivity was linked to an increase in labour, but this is no longer true. An enterprise is now more productive and competitive the less it employs human labour" (*TB*, 4). Ellul is here making the point that the human users of computers can not control their effects. It is the nature of the computer, besides anything else that we consciously cause it do, to cause unemployment. In this way he argues against the notion, put forward by his critics, that if

only we thought and acted more judiciously, we could prevent all the negative aspects of Technique and enjoy all the benefits. For Ellul, this is a false representation of the power of human will. We imagine that we might make our machines and systems better, but the fact that we never do is proof that while we can imagine it, we can not really do it. This is the great trap of Technique. The technician imagines that it is possible to control, that is, to exercise will over all the effects of Technique. Yet this never happens in reality.

When he writes that computers cause unemployment, Ellul does not really mean that the machine independently causes anything. Rather the computer causes unemployment in the same way that the car causes us to see only what can be seen from the road, or that being dropped in a lake causes us to swim. "The computer brings a whole system with it" (*TB*, 9). Thus it is not, as Ellul's style of writing sometimes make it easy to think, that the machine influences the thought processes of the manager so that one day he decides to fire one of his workers. Rather, the computer alters the way business is done, by changing the way communication occurs and work is perceived, so that the manager inevitably must fire some of his workers if he wishes to maximize profits. In this way the computer causes unemployment but not in a classically active sense. We are determined not by our machines and rational plans but rather by our own way of imagining and describing the world which leads us to envision and use these techniques in the first place.

Commentators who refuse to accept Ellul's argument that the use of machines often entails inevitable moral results do so, I would argue, because they believe that anything which is a cause must be a conscious active agent - as a machine can not be. Critics would say of the computer example that it is still the human chief who makes the decision to fire an employee. While this is technically true it overlooks the nature of the modern economic system and the way in which decisions are made. If it is possible to fire

a person and still maintain productivity, this will be done because it increases profitability. Thus, what appears to be a decision is really not one. This example partially reveals a certain way of thinking about human will. The manager can not refuse to fire an employee in this circumstance because his understanding of his role and purpose in the company determines if not the specific action, at least the type of action he takes. He can not exercise a completely free will at every moment of the day. Ellul's simplest critics focus on the human aspects of decision making. At many points in our daily lives it is possible to make new decisions and alter the way that we live. But the vast majority of us never make these decisions, we act in accordance with our environment and conform to our own pasts and the actions of the majority of our fellows. Our environment includes our perceptions of the purpose and value of what we are doing, of the nature of the relationships between us and our fellow workers, and of the way in which the world works. Thus while independent decision is always a possibility which we imagine, we most frequently follow what appear to be the demands of our environment, that which we consider to be real. Ellul's point is that we most often live as though we had made decisions but without really having made them. But because his critics read his work without examining their own notions of will, few people understand that when Ellul says "computers cause unemployment" he is not actually saying that computers do a particular thing (which therefore might be controlled or eliminated) which causes unemployment. Rather he is saying that the presence of computers, as they are, creates a situation in which unemployment will increase. It is not a particular function of the computer to cause unemployment, it simply happens that computers carry with them unemployment. This sort of arguing and use of language requires a certain understanding of the way that things are caused. The reader must appreciate that Ellul does not think that specific actions and intentions cause things, rather he believes that ways of perceiving and being cause things.

Thus I may have the sincere conscious desire to prevent unemployment but if I use all the most modern techniques to make my business successful, and I share the basic assumptions of my society concerning productivity and success, I will not be able to avoid firing some workers. Our choices are neither completely free, nor completely determined. "The use we make of this equipment is not made by spiritual, ethical, autonomous beings, but by people within this universe. Thus this choice is as much the result of human choice as it is of Technical determination" (*TB*, 37).

Ellul's critics call him a pessimist because he does not see that technical ills can be solved by more concentrated efforts on the part of technicians. But this question of whether or not effort is what is needed, or even possible, is the central issue for Ellul. Rather than engage Ellul on his level, the critics are left in the somewhat curious position of arguing that surely Ellul can not be saying what he is saying. Because they assume the efficacy of individual will as it is conceived by a technical mind, Ellul's critics can not respond to his position which does not allow this assumption, and few if any have shown a willingness to investigate their own assumptions regarding human will.

The final argument that I will make in this chapter is that this flaw in the human ability to achieve what we want to achieve is caused not by anything outside us, but rather by some aspect of the way we imagine reality. As mentioned above, Ellul proposes a notion of the individual will, not shared by his critics, which he believes is true for all people, what makes this will ineffective is a tendency to privilege what we imagine to be true over what is actually true. Again I share this argument with David Lovekin who provides the example of the way in which a chainsaw breaks down because it can not respond to the otherness of a tree.<sup>28</sup> But where Lovekin's examples deal almost entirely

<sup>28</sup>David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (USA: Associated University Presses, 1991), 161.

with the way that machines often break down because they are not as well adapted to the natural world as their inventors imagined, I argue that Technique is faulty not only in the way that it conceives of external nature but most importantly in the way that it conceives of human nature and human capacities. Thus we take on a specific and incorrect way of thinking about ourselves

There can be little doubt that Ellul considers Technique to be a phenomenon which affects and concerns the individual imagination. "Technique is no more than a neutral bridge between reality and the abstract man" (*TS*, 131) "[It] is a screen between us and reality." Thus the individual is insulated from all the elements of the existing world, even from other people and the materials with which he works (*TS*, 325) "The technician's myth is simply *Man* - not you or I but an abstract entity. The technician intones: 'We strive for Man's happiness, we seek to create a Man of excellence'" (*TS*, 390). These statements argue that the technical mind prefers to consider concepts rather than realities and therefore ends by committing to actions which seem to cause one thing but frequently cause another. Ellul's critique of the technical imagination is succinctly contained in his question and answer which we might apply to all techniques: "Do robots make life easier? In principle they do but in practice they do not." (*TB*, 284)

For Ellul, these "idealistic image[s] of progress incarnate... engender, validate and render incontestable certain judgements, attitudes and choices" (*TB*, 324). We tend to feel that we can achieve whatever we can imagine and even to place imagination over reality. "The lofty discourse of technology tells us that speed is our access to paradise." We may know from personal experience that in the city it is faster to bike than to travel by car "[b]ut the weight and coherence of technological discourse prevent us from believing it." Similarly the car is justified less by the real power it gives us than by "...the great word... freedom." "When [we] drive [we] are no longer conscious of any limitations. Our



speed drops to five, even though it is 120 in our head" (*TB*, 374) Thus Technique, as it appeals to our will to power, appeals to our imaginations. We engage in technical activity because we believe that it increases our power and luxury, without acknowledging that very often it leads us to experience less power

It is clear from Ellul's other examples of the way that Technique appeals to my will to power that I am seduced by the incorrect way in which I imagine my own situation and abilities. For example, the worker on the assembly-line who is validated by the plane he is building is engaged in an imaginative fantasy that ignores the fact that his actual work experience is one of drudgery and subservience. Similarly, a technician who justifies his actions according to predictions overlooks the fact that those predictions are often wrong and imagines that what he is doing will be effective. The computer is representative of all techniques in that it "plays a role in the production of knowledge ... since, by its artistic and generally creative use, it is bound to have an impact on the culture, *to obstruct the perceptions* individuals and social groups have of themselves; in brief to expand profoundly on the imaginary."<sup>29</sup> This quote supports the argument that what Ellul is primarily concerned about when he discusses technique is a mental environment which encourages a harmful process of imagining reality.

A final demonstration that Ellul's technological works are in fact a discussion of the way in which our own will to power leads us to believe that we can achieve almost anything we can conceive of, and ignore what actually occurs, is given by the questions that he would have us ask of any new technique before it is adopted

<sup>29</sup>Pierre Levy, *Vers un 1984 informatique?* (1984), idem, *Les Presents de L'Univers informationnel* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985) quoted in Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, 134

What are the parallel effects, both socially and materially, of the general use of the invention? What are the social changes that are necessary to put it into use properly (the price to pay)? If it is really effective and enables us to remove an obstacle to material growth, what will be the new limit that the system will come up with in expansion? Should we prefer the constraints inherent in this limit to those that the invention is designed to overcome? (TB, 70)

This series of questions poses a particular way of thinking about the cause of social effects which does not place too much faith in the human will to do only what we want to do. Rather, Ellul is asking us to acknowledge that the things that we do have consequences, and involve aspects of society which are not immediately apparent to us. He is asking us to stop imagining that we can achieve whatever we like if we try hard enough and instead to take into account the real social context of our actions. He is asking us to fully and correctly imagine or experience the reality that we live in. In this argument Ellul almost exactly parallels Martin Heidegger, who opposes the modern notion of causality, which concerns only what one individual must do in order to achieve his immediate intention and satisfy himself, to the ancient Greek idea<sup>30</sup> which takes into account the social context and physical environment which shapes both the intention and its result. Ellul's questions, particularly the last one, reveal that he believes there can be "no progress without a shadow" (TB, 66). This lack of faith in progress, patent in all of Ellul's technological books, has never been squarely addressed by his critics. It entails a particular view of human purpose and state of mind which one can not will oneself to have. I will discuss both of these issues later in the paper.

This chapter has tried to situate Ellul's work in a way that both answers most of the common criticisms levelled at it and also allows me to expand further in the rest of the

<sup>30</sup>Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical Post Ethical Horizons of Modernity Post Modernity* (England: Polity Press, 1991), 94-95.

paper. In essential agreement with David Lovekin, but in opposition to almost all other analysts, I argue that Ellul's concept of Technique is a mental attitude or way of perception that is not forced on modern individuals but rather appeals to the will to power. An implication of this concept is that Ellul's work is founded on and demonstrates his belief that the human will is not to be trusted because we frequently wind up causing precisely the opposite of what we are trying to achieve. This paradoxical state of affairs is not seen by Ellul as a peculiar modern phenomenon but rather as an aspect of human nature. Finally, in exploring why our wills are so flawed I have argued that Ellul is concerned with the way we imagine reality and the manner in which these imaginings influence our actions. My goal here has been to show that the point of Ellul's work is not primarily to make an external criticism of one human society; Technique is not a necessarily modern phenomenon but rather a way of thinking which determines the sorts of action that we are able to imagine and therefore commit. In doing this I have shown the weakness of most criticisms of Ellul that focus on what they see as the extreme pessimism and machine-centred arguments of his work. I have tried to show that Ellul's work is more humanistic than it is generally considered. In the following chapters I will argue that Ellul's solution to our predicament is not what most other analysts claim it to be. The arguments of this chapter will allow me to show that Ellul is in fact arguing for a much more personal and complete revolution than is generally assumed and that he does so because he shares some basic assumptions with Kierkegaard. What I have established here regarding Ellul's view of the role of the individual will in decisions and actions will be key to my later arguments.

### Chapter 3

#### Escape from Technique

This chapter addresses the nature of Ellul's revolution and shows that Ellul's critics have failed to properly understand it. Despite the frequency with which Ellul mentions revolution, it is difficult to know exactly what he means by it. In his first book, *Presence of the Kingdom*, he refers to the necessity of being aware of the true reality, opening communication with others and being a true neighbour (PK, 120-132)<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he calls for Situationism and decentralization (all of AR). What is certain in the variety of

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Jacques Ellul's works are cited in the text with the abbreviations listed below

PK: Jacques Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, transl. Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1951.)

PI: Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1967)

TS: Jacques Ellul, *Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1967)

CNC: Jacques Ellul, *Critique of the New Commonplaces*, trans. Helen Weaver, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968)

AR: Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, trans. Patricia Wolf (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1971)

FPK: Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, transl. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press), 1972

PR: Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1972)

TSys: Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, transl. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980)

PH: Jacques Ellul, *La Parole Humilee*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981)

Pers: Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on his Life and Work*, Ed. William H. Vanderburg, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1981)

ISOS: Jacques Ellul, *In Season Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Transl. Kani K. Niles, (San Francisco: Harper&Row, 1982)

CCQJC: Jacques Ellul, *Ce Que Je Crois*, (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1987)

TB: Jacques Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990)

attributes that Ellul attaches to his revolution is that he conceives of it as a process which must result in a completely new way of life. This chapter seeks to show that his revolution really can not be discussed as a program and that this is a significant failing on the part of most of his critics. Later in the chapter it will become apparent that Ellul considers this revolution to be a much more personal and radical process than most analysts will allow. He sees it as a process or event which is similar to a religious conversion in that it involves a complete transformation of the individual which can not be directly willed by the individual. Ellul's writing about revolution demonstrates a particular concept of the will which animates all of his works. Specifically, Ellul emphasizes the idea that an individual can only commit an action which s/he first finds conceivable. Ellul thus implies that an individual's specific actions emanate from, and are partially determined by, a perception of reality, a significant change in the nature of these specific actions requires a prior change in the way that the individual sees the world. This concept underlies both Ellul's discussion of revolution and his technological works. It also explains why Ellul consistently refers to his revolution as impossible yet continues to call for it.

Inasmuch as all works of scholarly analysis and interpretation are attempts to translate unfamiliar new ideas into terms which the reader can understand, analysts of Ellul have misrepresented his work by failing to deal with the severe tone and occasionally radical content of Ellul's work. The simplest and most widely held gloss of Ellul is, as was discussed in the previous chapter, that he is an extreme pessimist whose work may offer a useful cautionary note about technology but is, on the whole, not worthy of deep study. The response that Ellul is a religious thinker whose work may have validity in the religious sphere but has little to offer to the secular academic is equally uninformative and misleading. Both these interpretations misrepresent Ellul's thought. Ellul's work only appears to be pessimistic and is in fact significantly optimistic in parts. Also, while he

frequently speaks of a Christian revolution, it is possible to discuss the elements of this revolution in a secular and specific way. Ellul's revolution offers an interesting theory of the links between perception, decision and action and emphasizes that we can only act in ways that our general perception of the world allows us to act.

The critics usually make one or both of two errors which indicate a failure to fully understand Ellul's arguments. Firstly, some writers misrepresent his work by writing that his ideas can be achieved by political reform which largely misses the point that his revolution is to be a personal and lived affair. The second failure, shared by most of his critics, is the assumption that the revolution is to be an enterprise which is achieved by the conscious individual will. But Ellul frequently indicates that he does not believe that the revolution can be achieved through conscious action, but rather that specific conscious actions result from the occurrence or completion of a revolution in the way the individual perceives things. To write about the revolution as though it is a series of willed actions overlooks an aspect of Ellul's work which explains the totality of his Technical critique and proposes an interesting model of the way argument functions and decision occurs.

The first task in answering Ellul's question about revolution - "What will these four syllables mean to the next man?"<sup>2</sup> - is to show why what has been generally said about Ellul's concept of revolution is false. The first widely held conception of critics who are sympathetic to Ellul is that his revolution can be essentially political. Because Ellul occasionally makes vague references to the possible rejuvenation of politics through the creation of independent groups that can mediate between individual citizens and the nation, analysts allow themselves to disregard his many statements to the effect that politics of any kind can never be effective in changing the nature of man or society.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, trans. Paricia Wolf (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), viii

Many analysts derive political principles from Ellul's rather vague statements regarding revolution. Darrel J Fasching ends his work, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul : A Systematic Exposition*, by equating the completion of Ellul's revolution with "the federalism upon which the United States is founded."<sup>3</sup> Patrick Troude Chastenet also associates Ellul's revolution with a political orientation which involves relatively little personal change or sacrifice. He writes that "[t]he problem of the State is at the heart of his reflections on revolution "<sup>4</sup> and throughout his work refers to the revolution as socialist in character.<sup>5</sup> Chastenet does acknowledge that Ellul often describes this revolution as practically impossible,<sup>6</sup> leaving the reader in a frustrated paradoxical position. However, Chastenet's solution to this dilemma is to claim that he sees a change from Ellul's technological pessimism in his book *Changer de Revolution*, written in 1982. Chastenet sees this book as unique among Ellul's books because it allows that the revolution may be accomplished with the help of Technique.<sup>7</sup> The problem with this scheme, as Chastenet admits, is that Ellul did not stop writing in 1982 and his subsequent books, most notably *The Technological Bluff*, written in 1989, are pessimistic about computers and re-emphasize the extreme difficulty of any prospective revolution.<sup>8</sup> Chastenet even accuses Ellul of emphasizing the difficulty of the revolution in his works after 1982 in order to preserve the integrity of his life's work.<sup>9</sup> He focuses on *Changer de*

<sup>3</sup>Darrell J Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul : A Systematic Exposition* (Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 188

<sup>4</sup>Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Lire Ellul : Introduction A L'Oeuvre Socio-Politique De La Jacques Ellul* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992), 93

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, 117, 170-174

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 129-133

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 167-170

<sup>8</sup>He writes, "En effet, [*The Technological Bluff*] ruine littéralement tous les espoirs d'émancipation fondés antérieurement sur l'informatique. *Ibid*, 177

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 174

*Revolution* and writes "The most problematic question that can be asked of Ellul's sociological works concerns the uncertain status of *Changer de Revolution*: simple parentheses or ultimate optimistic conclusion?"<sup>10</sup> Unable to satisfactorily answer this question, Chastenet refers to Ellul's theological optimism as an antidote to his apparent sociological pessimism. Thus Chastenet ends by describing Ellul's revolution in terms which contradict the logic and content of his extensive diagnostic work. While elements of *Changer de Revolution* do argue that technology might facilitate a revolution, Ellul is careful to always speak in the conditional. Computers could be used for revolutionary purposes but if this is to occur, a more fundamental change, which Ellul discusses throughout his other books, must happen first. Most of Ellul's statements on revolution support the notion that it must be a radically personal and non-traditional event. A more harmonious explanation of Ellul's work can be gained by exploring the statements of Ellul's main works on technique, revolution and language and showing that even within the secular works there is hope for a personal and non-traditional revolution.

Many critics assume that the main point of Ellul's book *The Political Illusion*, is to condemn large authoritarian states and impersonal bureaucratic machinery. Chastenet is the latest to argue that Ellul's main goal is to attack all modern states because he sees them all as totalitarian.<sup>11</sup> Ellul does make several statements indicating that the state is at the centre of evil in the modern world and the source of the greatest danger to the individual. He writes that "[t]he state is the most important reality of our day" and asserts that our political enslavement and alienation is more important than our personal, social or economic alienation (*PI*, 9-11). These statements have allowed critics to argue that his work is a critique of totalitarian states and that his innovation is that he calls all states

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, 182.

<sup>11</sup>Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, 93



totalitarian.<sup>12</sup> Ellul also advocates decentralization (*PI*, 174-5) but this must be seen as a result of the revolution and not as its substance

While Ellul does see the modern state as the single greatest threat to individual liberty, the most important aspect of his work is the argument that modern individuals crave this sort of state. It is not then that the state is an alien oppressive force, but rather that the needs of modern individuals for information, certainty and self-justification, lead them to create and accept these sorts of states. This point is anticipated by Lovekin who makes the correct assertion that Technical consciousness prohibits the use of any but Technical means. However, the basis of Lovekin's interpretation of Ellul's anti-political argument is that modern politics constitutes an inability to differentiate between what is necessary and what is ephemeral.<sup>13</sup> This is one of Ellul's points, but Lovekin does not address the fact that the desires of the individual for power are responsible for the individual's alienation. Ellul makes this point in *The Political Illusion* when he writes that the predominance of the state in society is an idea which has been "profoundly integrated into the depths of our consciousness. . . . In our current consciousness no other centre of decision in our social body can exist. To repeat: it is not just the fact of the state being at the centre of our lives that is crucial, but our spontaneous and personal acceptance of it as such" (*PI*, 12-13). Thus it is not just, or even primarily, the fact of the modern state that is important but it is our attitude towards it. "Political conflicts, political solutions, political problems, political forms are ultimate, not in themselves or by the nature of things but by

<sup>12</sup>John L. Stanley, "The Uncertain Hobbesian: Ellul's Dialogue with the Sovereign and the Tradition of French Politics," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 73.

<sup>13</sup>David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (USA: Associated University Presses, 1991), 137-139.

the glory that we attribute to them. ... We may say that the basis for this is the factual situation of the expanding state. That is true. But this state has no power except those recognized by its subjects ... it exists by our loyalties and our passions" (*PI*, 20).

Ellul also makes a series of statements that are directly and totally opposed to any political process. He writes that the politically active person is "bypassing the real problem and repressing it" (*TS*, 403) and that political freedom is not real freedom (*CNC*, 101). Ellul can not accept any sort of traditional politics because he can not accept any sort of moral compromise. This leads him to write "if you absolutely rule out dirty hands, don't you rule out politics? Granted! It has rarely been tried" (*CNC*, 48). Ellul's rejection of politics springs from his perception that in almost all previous revolutions, the methods of revolution have tainted the ends (*PK*, 35 and all of *AR*). Here the reader may see the political extension of Ellul's repeated criticism of Technical society, noted by many critics, that any end or goal is strongly influenced by the means used to achieve that goal. Traditional revolutions, which are changes in political forms, simply lead to "more prisons from which revolution must begin anew" (*AR*, 55) because "[political] revolution can not escape the transition to institutions and managerial control" (*AR*, 49). The prescriptions of his critics for anarchism and decentralization do not address the apparently inevitable corruption associated with power. They seem to agree with what Ellul calls "the absurd notion that 'changing life' [is] possible without 'changing men.'"

Ellul is much more strongly against political organization of any type than most of his critics will allow. He writes that revolution must act against the "*mounting ascendancy of groups over individuals*" (*AR*, 273). It must also fight the tendency of "individuals to control one another" (*AR*, 277). These statements make clear the basic moral nature of Ellul's objection to politics. Politics are harmful not as a result of a particular political system but because politicians who are nominally divided in their

exposition of different platforms, are more fundamentally united in their quest for power. This issue is not addressed by critics who argue for decentralization or anarchism. By shrinking the size of a political machine, its true character is not changed and as Ellul notes, even left wing parties are run in Machiavellian and vicious ways (*PI*, 89). It is not the political system which Ellul rejects but the tendency, most easily seen in political affairs, of individuals to seek power. "Society cannot be changed through political action," (*Pers*, 23) because it is not politics or even technology per se that Ellul despises but rather any form of authoritarian power. Consider Ellul's argument, if power replaces wealth, that Jesus attacked not just the wealthy but "*the one who has directed his energies toward the acquisition of wealth.*" Thus he attacked not an action but an attitude, which "subordinates being to having, even when one has nothing" (*CNC*, 189). Critics who equate Ellul's revolution with decentralization or indeed any political system are ignoring the fact that one can participate in any outward system without changing his/her inner feelings and expectations. It is this understanding that leads Ellul to write that his revolution does not necessarily involve "the rediscovery of local autonomies."

Given what most popular commentators have said about Ellul, namely that he is an embittered fatalist, the reader may not know what to make of Ellul's statement that "there is no more fundamental optimist than myself" (*CQJC*, 14-15). A number of elements in Ellul's work show that he is far from being a dogmatic pessimist. The first proof is the fact that Ellul produced as many books as he did. If there was no possibility to reverse the course of modern society, Ellul would not have urged his readers so passionately and repeatedly to awake from their slumber. There are also however, strong currents of optimism within Ellul's work. One of Ellul's primary arguments is that modern individuals tend to value as good whatever exists or seems to exist. We believe that what is is good, simply because it is. As a result of this tendency, Ellul writes, we have adapted ourselves

to ever harsher and more de-humanizing conditions simply because we believe that our survival requires it (*TS*, 320). The implication of this argument is that human beings are capable of great adaptation and change. If this is the case there is a slender hope, for individuals, according to Ellul's description, show a tremendous ability to transcend their circumstances, either good or bad, depending on what they imagine to be true. Ellul's use of Biblical examples illustrates this optimistic belief in the power of individuals to transform their circumstances. For example, the parable that if a robber demands your coat you should give him your cloak also demonstrates, for Ellul, the power of the apparent victim of such an event to transform his/her experience. Numerous Biblical stories of individuals who reject what they seem absolutely to need are causes for celebration as they reveal that human freedom exists only in response to a determinism. Ellul is an optimist because for a human being there is always an alternative to what appears to be necessity - it is simply usually not the alternative that we first think of. This optimism, which may even seem unreasonable, extends to and colours Ellul's sociological work. He writes :

"I would say, along with Marx, that as long as men believe things will resolve themselves, men will do nothing on their own. But when the situation appears to be absolutely dead-locked and tragic, then men will try and do something. That's how Marx described the capitalist revolution and the situation of the proletariat - as something absolutely tragic, without resolution. But he wrote this knowing as soon as the proletarian sees his situation as without resolution, he'll start to look for one. And he'll find it. Thus it is that I have written to describe things as they are and as they will continue to develop as long as man does nothing, as long as he does not intervene. In other words, if man rests passive in the face of technique, of the state, then these things will exist as I have described them. If man does decide to act, he doesn't have many possibilities for intervention, but some do continue to exist. And he can change the course of social evolution."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Jacques Ellul in a letter to David Menninger, quoted in David C. Menninger, "Marx in the Social Thought of Jacques Ellul," in *Jacques Ellul : Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford

While Ellul is an optimist in some senses, other critics are wrong to moderate the impression of Ellul's technical works and writes as Fasching does that Ellul's revolution is actually for technology or that we may change our lives without painful sacrifices. Ellul puts forward a particular view of human nature and his revolution consists not of political change but of significant and difficult personal changes.

To begin, Ellul clearly does not believe in progress.<sup>15</sup> His assertion that, "[w]e must get out of the standard (and unexplored) one-way street that starts with growth. That is necessity" (*AR*, 246) implies decreased efficiency, a lower standard of living, and an erosion and reduction of mass culture (*AR*, 281).

Ellul's revolution would also require a change in the way that we perceive our abilities. One of the first changes required is that "we must avoid the mistake of thinking that we are free. We show our freedom by recognizing our non-freedom" (*TB*, 411). This quote is not mystification but rather it illustrates Ellul's peculiar sense of optimism. He is optimistic that we can become fully human, and thus escape our alienation, if we realize that part of being human is recognizing that, contrary to a main tenet of the Technical ideology, we can not do whatever we like, we are limited in many ways. This realization would change the goal of life from one of achievement to one of simple self expression and discovery.

His revolutionary attitude requires that the individual accepts that s/he will always owe gratitude to God and to others (*CNC*, 290). This means accepting that we can not achieve whatever we like by ourselves. It entails acknowledging that we are

G Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 18-19  
<sup>15</sup>*CQJC*, 8; There can be (*TB*, 66) "no progress without a shadow," "We must give up believing that we can 'improve' the world, that we can at least make man better, if we can not make him happy" (*PK*, 17).

interconnected to others and that there are certain things which we can simply not achieve. Ellul's revolution is therefore in large part simply a recognition that we are human beings, not abstractions and there are certain things that we can not have. Namely, we can not have the sensation of complete independence. Ellul's description of revolution and of true human nature are intimately linked to his description of the ailments of modern society. He argues in his three technological works that Technique produces social isolation and validates the individual's fantasies of power. He shows however, that these dreams are not real, and that when we think we are achieving a result using Technique we are almost always not achieving it. Thus we must recognize that in truth there is very little that we can achieve without the help of our neighbours.

The attitude which Ellul encourages also entails a realization that political problems are by their nature insoluble. What is needed to achieve political justice is a recognition that justice is never perfect, an ability to anticipate what will be needed and finally an ability and a will to do what is not immediately required by circumstances (*PI*, 190). Here again Ellul is providing a solution to the specific problems outlined in his technical works. Where Technique responds only to the appearance of necessity, creating efficiency by adhering to what are perceived to be the immutable laws of nature and human nature, Ellul writes that a revolutionary change would consist of the ability to relativize our political problems and not take them so seriously. Further, we would demonstrate our human freedom by acting not according to necessity but rather by acting as we thought we should, in a moral way, in other words by being generous. These arguments illustrate that Ellul's revolution consists not of political or collective action but rather of a change in individual behaviour. He urges us to recognize that our power is not as great as we imagine it to be, that justice can never be completely reached and that we should be generous.

At an even simpler level Ellul reveals a conception if not of human nature then of the traits that constitute a fully fledged personality. He seems to assign revolutionary values to certain personality traits. Ellul values humour, (*FPK*, 210) generosity (*Tsys*, 312), imagination, spontaneity and play (*TB*, 16). These activities are valued because they are not dictated by circumstance, and in fact often occur in direct contradiction to what seems necessary. While we should be serious we frequently make jokes, and though we rationally have nothing to spare, we may nonetheless share what we have. In these actions Ellul finds the only meaningful display of freedom. Through these activities we become "*closer, more bound, more friendly, more trusting and more open*" (*FPK*, 191).

Similarly, as Ellul wants us to accept that our power is limited and certain ideals, like perfect justice and perfect harmony, are unattainable, he argues that the human personality is necessarily mysterious and irrational and that society should not view these things as undesirable (*TS*, 142).

The conclusions above regarding the personal nature of Ellul's revolution have not gone unnoticed by other critics; however, most other writers use these scattered statements regarding human nature to construct a collective and principled program which they call Ellul's revolutionary prescription. Chastenet focuses on the political nature of this revolution, while Fasching constructs a Utopian management ethic. These sympathetic critical assessments of Ellul amount to attempts to transform his arguments into political or sociological formulas which result in a moderation of the severity of his statements. Ellul's work addresses the individual first and does so in a way that proposes a vision of human nature which significantly limits our power and abilities. Ellul would have us first recognize that human abilities are limited and that many of our decisions are determined, and then encourage us to use our conscious will power to reject determinism where we find it.

The question "What does a particular revolution consist of?" may be answered in two separate ways. Firstly, one may ask what is the content of the revolution once it has been completed, or what are the external signs of the revolution. This is the way that most of Ellul's critics have dealt with the question, and the way in which Ellul himself deals with it in parts of his work. Above I have argued that the content of his revolution may be thought of in a more personal and simple way than is recognized by most of his critics. However, the idea that Ellul's revolution would result in a society concerned not with the attainment of power over nature and over individuals, but rather with the articulation of personal differences, may be what leads Fasching and Christians to link Ellul to Utopianism. In dealing with this interpretation of Ellul, I will turn to the main point of this paper which is not so much the content of the revolution as Ellul sees it but the process of the revolution. This is the second way that the question about revolution may be answered: "What is the process that the revolutionary undergoes that makes him into a revolutionary?" In answering this question I hope to correct some common misapprehensions of Ellul's revolutionary prescription, but also, more importantly, to reveal the concept of human action and decision which underlies all of Ellul's work.

The conclusion that Ellul's work is Utopian indicates an error in thinking which is typical of academics who fail to realize that there is a difference between knowing something in an intellectual way and knowing it in a real way, so that it permeates and influences one's actual life. One may look at Ellul's Biblical examples and argue that if one is able to transform the experience of oppression simply by surrendering to it, by turning the other cheek, this exercise becomes a simple, happy conscious decision. Similarly, an academic may write that the way to rejuvenate politics is to stop taking politics so seriously and to accept that political justice will never offer a complete resolution of any fundamental conflict. However, simply saying that this must be done does not make it so.



Ellul's revolution implies a concept of human nature which sees human power as limited and therefore implies an acceptance of suffering associated with anxiety and uncertainty. The voluntary acceptance of suffering or limitation does not necessarily reduce the pain of this experience just as an awareness that I can not truly escape coercion by responding to my oppressor in a violent way does not necessarily reduce the fear and trembling that are felt in the experience of being oppressed. To call Ellul Utopian ascribes to individuals the power to decide what they will feel, while Ellul's work strives to reject Utopianism by claiming that there are certain boundaries and problems in life which can not be avoided and must simply be lived through. The individual, according to Ellul's scheme may transcend his/her circumstances through meditation and work, but not through simple decision. It is this vision which allows Ellul to claim repeatedly and urgently that he is not a Utopian<sup>16</sup> and to write that he is "violently opposed to ... Utopia[s]" (*ISOS*, 198) which he calls "ruse[s] of the devil" (*Tsys*, 19). One of the general points of Ellul's whole work is that life must not be lived in an abstract way but that real problems must be solved as they actually exist, without recourse to what should or might be.

For Ellul reality corresponds to the Biblical reality, according to which man is not the master of his own fate, things are often not as they seem, and truth is no simple rational affair. This concept allows Ellul to discuss his revolution as the discovery of reality, that is masked by the illusions manufactured by Technical society. Ellul's revolution changes significantly if it is seen as a discovery of reality. Most importantly, the revolution becomes not a set of actions but an awareness that the world is a certain way. Thus there can be no program for this revolution. Discovery of a new reality will

<sup>16</sup>He writes "I seriously believe that I am not at all a Utopian" (*ISOS*, 219), *PK*, 122

not dictate a new set of actions, as many of Ellul's sympathetic readers try to describe, but may rather entail a new type of action.

Throughout his works Ellul offers explicit evidence that he considers there to be two levels of reality, the first which is created and obeyed by man, and the second which is more difficult to discern but more real, existing independent of the illusions and desires of individuals.<sup>17</sup> He also seems to argue that the revolutionary's task is to discern this reality and act accordingly. Ellul asserts that he is not fooled by words but "sees what is, like a block of stone" (*CQJC*, 8). He sees the Christian as a revolutionary who "is not confronted by the material forces of the world but by its spiritual reality" (*PK*, 7-8). "To be revolutionary," writes Ellul "is to judge the world by its present state, by actual facts, in the name of a truth which does not yet exist (but which is coming) - and it is to do so because we believe this truth to be more genuine and more real than the reality which surrounds us" (*PK*, 50-51). Ellul compares the revolutionary to a Chinese person living in France who "thinks in his own terms, in his own tradition, he has his own criterion of thought and judgement and of action; he is really a stranger and a foreigner" (*PK*, 45). This example makes clear the fact that Ellul's revolution comes down not to a different set of actions but rather a different perception of reality.

In addition to misconstruing the content of Ellul's revolution other critics have generally failed to appreciate the special nature of the process of Ellul's revolution. Specifically, Ellul conceives of his revolution as a process similar to religious conversion. The elements of this process are that it is a total spiritual transformation which can not be willed in any simple way. This argument is important because it allows Ellul's revolution

<sup>17</sup>*TB*, 71 Ellul calls his arguments "simply examples of the profounder reality that we are trying to trace," *FPK*, 176-177.

to be seen in a new way and it makes clear Ellul's conception of the way in which will, decision and action are linked. Specifically, all of Ellul's work demonstrates the assumption that we are not free to choose to do whatever we like but rather we can only act in certain ways according to assumptions which have been pushed upon us by society and our own long-learned habits. This notion of the nature of decision and action is present not only in Ellul's discussions of revolution but also in his Technical works. Most sympathetic analysts of Ellul at least note that Ellul writes about his revolution as though it can not be willed, however they generally proceed to note that it involves a certain series of actions, not seeing that these assertions are contradictory. Both David Lovekin and Clifford G. Christians, in his article "Ellul on Solution: An Alternative but no Solution," note that there are no means within Technique to change Technique, and in so doing anticipate the idea of incommensurability, but neither explicitly addresses this issue nor deals at any length with Ellul's notion writings on revolution.

Before continuing I must offer a note on the similarity of meaning that Ellul assigns to the words "Christian," and "revolutionary." Ellul is clearly and admittedly a Christian in all his works. But he expounds a Christianity which is not incommunicable or undefinable. The fact that a Christian is simply a person who has undergone the revolution of which he speaks is made clear by the interchangeable way in which Ellul refers to Christians and revolutionaries, particularly in his first book, *Presence of the Kingdom*. To be a Christian for Ellul consists of nothing other than to have the attitudes and perceptions which I have also discussed above. Thus, although my discussion of Ellul's revolution will contain occasional references to Christians and to religious actions, I would argue that Ellul's work explains this state and these actions well enough that they deserve consideration from secular analysts. The fact that he makes Christian references does not invalidate his

discussion of what constitutes a revolution and the role of human will in the revolutionary process.

In addition to the description of the revolution in essentially political terms, most commentators have assumed that Ellul's revolution is a matter of willing certain changes in one's life and committing certain acts. Chastenet's emphasis on political deeds shows that the particular way that Ellul conceives of the will does not concern him. Fasching too, has a simple view of what individuals are able to decide to do. His work is shot through with assertions that Ellul wants us to do certain things: "In Ellul's view the correct strategy is the development of an individual life-style which contradicts the way of life required by the confluence of these ... interlocking elements of the technological society,"<sup>18</sup> Thus Fasching sees Ellul's revolution as a decision or series of decisions which the individual is free to make. This interpretation is shared even by critics who are perceptive enough to see that Ellul's revolution can not be expressed in political terms. Lovekin writes that "Ellul continually berates Christians for not doing their homework ... and for not reading the Bible dialectically"<sup>19</sup> as though Christians could decide to do these things in a simple way. Clifford G. Christians notes that Ellul sees the revolution as impossible,<sup>20</sup> he goes on to say "Ellul is very careful here: our choices are always existential ones, since we determine their content freely at each new moment of decision."<sup>21</sup> He adds that Ellul is within the tradition that considers "a life of rectitude ... an achievement as singular as an artist's creation."<sup>22</sup> This statement gives the reader a hint as to the final conclusion that I will refute, namely the conclusion that Ellul is actually a Utopian. Christians' conclusion

<sup>18</sup>Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul*, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness*, 106.

<sup>20</sup>Christians, "Ellul on Solution: An Alternative but no Prophecy," 153, 157.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, 154.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, 152-153.

that Ellul is discussing a unique life which each individual must create implies that Ellul's vision for the future is potentially beatific. Fasching also concludes that Ellul's revolution may usher in a society where anything is possible and nothing is necessarily sacrificed.<sup>23</sup> Christians' assertion that we freely determine the content of our decisions fails to properly account for Ellul's explicit statements that the revolution is impossible and the logic of his technical arguments which imply that we are almost never free to determine the meaning of our actions or decisions. Similarly the idea that Ellul foresees a Utopian future in which the individual may pick and choose the elements of his/her life is inconsistent with Ellul's severe condemnation of the present state of affairs. These critics do not see that Ellul's notion of conversion implies a particular concept of the way that all action takes place and therefore privileges the way we imagine the world rather than our free decisions. In arguing that Ellul sees decision and action as issuing not from a free independent individual but rather from one who is unable to change the basic way in which s/he perceives the world, I hope to provide an interpretation that addresses "breaking out of technological tyranny - one of the weakest links in [Ellul's] argumentative chain"<sup>24</sup>

My main argument regarding Ellul's concept of revolution, that it is an event something like a religious conversion which can not be specifically willed but which happens to individuals, is borrowed from Jamie Ferreira's work, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith*. Ferreira's main point is that Kierkegaard's leap of faith, which is normally assumed to be an act of concentration by which one wills

<sup>23</sup>Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul*, 167-169, 184-5.

<sup>24</sup>Mitcham and Mackey, "Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society," (information incomplete) 119, in Clifford G. Christians, "Ellul on Solution: An Alternative but no Solution," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 164

oneself to become a Christian, can not be seen as a simple decision or act of will. Ferreira emphasizes Kierkegaard's own writings in which he discusses the leap of faith not as a simple action but as something which the individual prepares for and attempts but which also must happen to the individual so that he enters a new way of being. Ferreira also discusses the process of human decision and argues that Kierkegaard, in his idea of the leap of faith, demonstrates that he does not believe that people can make simple choices regarding what they believe but rather that these choices largely but not entirely, happen to us as a result of things which we can not control.

David Lovekin's work implies a related point. Lovekin argues that for Ellul to be a Christian is to have a dialectical consciousness of the world. Where the Technical mind sees the entire world as having only one meaning, which must be accepted as necessity,<sup>25</sup> the Christian is able to accept that there are different ways of seeing things. The individual with such a dialectical consciousness accepts that there are *others* in the world which s/he can not understand and which are fundamentally different in nature from him/her. Through conscious interaction with the other the Christian is able to perceive him/herself more fully and grow.<sup>26</sup> Lovekin argues that experience of these others allows the individual to see the world as it really is, not simply as s/he imagines it.<sup>27</sup> He adds that God as the Absolute Other is the only agent that can introduce otherness into Ellul's scheme. Dialogue with God then is what allows individuals to develop and change.<sup>28</sup> I essentially agree with Lovekin's argument, but Ferreira's question of Kierkegaard remains to be asked of Ellul: What can the individual do to enact the revolutionary leap to

<sup>25</sup>Lovekin, *Technique Discourse and Consciousness*, 171.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid*, 22-25 and throughout the book

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, Lovekin refers to the need for and nature of dialectical consciousness repeatedly, pp 89-116

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, 130

Christianity, or are things left completely up to God? Lovekin does not address this issue. I will show that Ellul's revolution is a change in the basic presuppositions of the individual, as Ferreira describes the leap of faith and that this concept does leave some small room for the free decision of the individual to embark on it. Also, while the achievement of dialectical consciousness is an important element in Ellul's revolution, it is not its totality. I have already discussed the personal behavioural qualities that are entailed in the revolution. Ellul also implies that his revolution involves being rather than acting or achieving. This change has not been explored by Ellul's other readers yet it is a key concept. Ellul's revolution must be seen as something similar to Kierkegaard's leap of faith, and his own writings demonstrate that Ellul shares Kierkegaard's understanding of the way in which it occurs. Where Ferreira focuses on the imagination as the agent which allows one to change one's assumptions, I will argue, in the next chapter, in substantial agreement with Lovekin, that Ellul sees language in this capacity.

The first question which must be answered is why can we make the initial assumption that a comparison of Kierkegaard and Ellul might be fruitful? Is there anything in Ellul's work which allows the reader to consider that Kierkegaard might be useful or relevant? Clearly there is a relationship between Ellul and Kierkegaard. Many writers agree that Kierkegaard is a significant influence on Ellul.<sup>29</sup> Ellul himself has

<sup>29</sup>Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, p. 74 and p. 187, David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1991), 52 calls Kierkegaard the major theological influence on Ellul; Gene Outka, "Discontinuity in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 177, 195; Daniel B. Clendenin *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* (USA: University Press of America, 1987), pp. ix, 17-18, 101, 125, 143; Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul*, p. ix-x writes that "It would be valuable to autopsy [Ellul's] work and critique his use of Kierkegaard or Barth in theology or Marx and Weber in sociology;" Vernard Eller has written a whole article on the subject: Vernard Eller, "Ellul

written "In relation to Barth himself I have always taken a critical distance. My relation to Kierkegaard is not comparable. Here I am only to listen."<sup>30</sup> In regards to his project for the modern world he writes "Kierkegaard, it seems to me, alone can show us how to start."<sup>31</sup> The amply demonstrated close intellectual relation of Ellul to Kierkegaard, and the fact that other writers have attempted to analyze Ellul's work in terms of the ideas of other writers,<sup>32</sup> allows me to make these arguments.

Ferreira makes two arguments which are of interest to me. The first is that Kierkegaard did not in fact understand his leap of faith to be a willed act but rather a partially active and partially passive action which occurred to individuals. The second argument regards language and I will deal with it in the next chapter. Ferreira argues that the leap of faith, if it occurs, is not a direct achievement of will but rather something which happens because of and through the imagination. The imagination, Ferreira writes, is what allows the individual to experience otherness.<sup>33</sup> The leap of faith is not the commission of certain actions but rather the belief that certain things are true.<sup>34</sup> We can no more will

and Kierkegaard: Closer than Brothers," in *Jacques Ellul : Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 1981), 52-66.

<sup>30</sup>Jacques Ellul, preface to *Ecoute Kierkegaard : Essai sur la Communication de la Parole*, ed. Nelly Villaneix, vol. 1 (Paris : cerf, 1979) p.iii, in Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness*

<sup>31</sup>Jacques Ellul, "Between Chaos and Paralysis," *Christian Century* 85 (190) : 747-50.

<sup>32</sup>Gene Outka makes a minor comparison of Ellul to Anti-Climacus in "Discontinuity in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul." in *Jacques Ellul : Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 1981), 195, Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness*, 68-70 argues that all of Ellul's work can be better understood if it is seen that he is strongly influenced by the fictional essay "On the Puppet Theatre" by Kleist.

<sup>33</sup>M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision : Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1991), 3-5.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*, 7



ourselves to believe the absurd than we can will ourselves to enjoy a certain taste. The leap is neither an act of will nor a fact of knowledge. Rather it is a passion, which means that it is both created by the individual but it also occurs to the individual.<sup>35</sup> For Ellul, as for Kierkegaard, when the leap or the revolution occurs, "I do but also something happens to me."<sup>36</sup> We may speculate that what this change involves is not a change not in the what of our actions but rather in the how. This conception of the leap implies several other ideas. Both Ellul and Kierkegaard, as presented by Ferreira, put forward the idea that most actions are committed without conscious decision, they are "decisions without effort."<sup>37</sup> Ellul also shares the assumption that rather than any specific action, the effort of attention is the essential phenomenon of will.<sup>38</sup> It is this effort, rather than any specific action, which enables us to undergo a gestalt shift in perception, and thusly to change the way that we live. Finally, and in summary I will attempt to show that Ellul's thinks of revolution, and in fact all meaningful decision, in the same way that Wittgenstein, quoted by Ferreira, conceives of religious belief: "It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference ... It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation. Instruction of a religious faith, therefore would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience."<sup>39</sup>

To begin with, Ellul offers considerable evidence that his revolution involves a complete and far reaching spiritual or mental change in the individual. He writes "[t]he problem is essentially spiritual. The economic orientation called *liberal interventionism*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*, 24.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*, 29.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, 98-103.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid*, 102.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, 141.

presupposes a spiritual revolution that has not yet even begun" (*TS*, 189). "We are faced with a choice that must be made on the personal level, but *at the same time* implies political and economic transformations." Political institutions and the human personality must be jointly examined. "All this presupposes a profound change in the citizen. ... What is needed is a conversion of the citizen, not to a certain political ideology, but at the much deeper level of his conception of life itself, his presuppositions, his myths" (*PI*, 234). From these statements it is clear that Ellul's notion of revolution requires a total or near total change in the intellectual and/or spiritual assumptions of the individual. Material revolution is beside the point because even if every injustice on earth were solved, nothing would have been achieved because, "[the revolution] lies elsewhere" (*AR*, 236). Without "a fundamental transformation of beliefs, of prejudices, and of presuppositions," (*ISOS*, 63) all the institutional changes in the world are just "vain efforts at justification" (*AR*, 236).

That Ellul conceives of his revolution, and indeed of all significant revolutions, to be not just a change in one part of the individual's assumptions but rather a total shift in a way of life is illustrated by his unwillingness to talk about a change in certain ideas and his emphasis on the whole selves and lives of individuals. In being revolutionary, he argues we do not create justice, we simply have "to manifest it. ... Likewise we have not to force ourselves, with great effort and intelligence, to bring peace upon the earth - we have ourselves to *be* peaceful" (*PK*, 80-81). Thus Ellul is arguing not that we have to commit certain actions but that we have to live in a certain way. To change the way one lives, below the level of one's conscious actions, implies that our total being must change. Ellul argues that changing our institutions is important but "this change can not come first" (*PK*, 84). The revolution is made up of the awareness "that what really matters in practice is 'to be' and not 'to act'" (*PK*, 90). He repeats himself "[t]he central problem which today

confronts a Christian is *not* to know how to act .... What matters is to *live* and not to act" (PK, 92). Asking himself how Christians are to be revolutionary, Ellul responds through "a style of life" (PK, 59) What matters is not our institutions but "ourselves" (PK, 80). A Christian is revolutionary not because s/he decides to do anything but rather because s/he simply is a sign of Christ, a stranger in the world and a nonconformist in all societies. The Christian is also one who loves and one who rejects his or her own perceived needs and yet, in rejecting his/her desires and putting his/her faith in God, discovers that s/he still survives.<sup>40</sup> I will deal with the specifics of these Christian attitudes shortly.

Given that Ellul conceives of his revolutionary Christianity as some type of complete and deep transformation in the individual's spiritual and intellectual understanding of the world and the assumption of the nebulous qualities discussed above, the question which we must now ask is how then do I go about making this revolution? What actions does Ellul believe I must commit in order to bring about this revolution? How precisely does one put one's faith in God? Ellul conceives of this revolution in such a way that two things are true about the role of action in his revolution. Firstly, his revolution may not necessarily require much action and secondly, and most importantly,

<sup>40</sup>That Christianity implies nonconformity, love and rejection of the wants of self are themes of many of Ellul's books. See *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 45-53 on the need to reject the needs of the self. Nonconformity is discussed in *The Ethics of Freedom*, p185-200. Love as contradictory discovery of freedom through surrender of freedom is discussed in *The Ethics of Freedom*, 200-205. All of these issues are repeatedly discussed in Ellul's theological works. See also PK, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World* transl. by Peter Heinegg. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983 and *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* transl. by C. Edward Hopkin. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969.

Ellul conceives of his revolution, and the human power to make decisions, in such a way that the revolution can not be willed.

To begin however, there are certain times when Ellul does write as though his revolution can be made or sparked through action. Perhaps the strongest connection between Ellul's revolution and action is to be found in his definition of freedom. As I have discussed above, for Ellul, freedom requires an exercise of human will against what seems to be necessary. "The worship of fact forces man to subordinate his will to the development of facts." Consequently a rejection of fact seems to entail the exercise of human will. He argues that "[r]evolution has always been the affirmation of a spiritual truth against the error of the moment." This affirmation is to be a supreme act of will in which the individual "pits himself against all the constraints and conventions which surround him" (*PK*, 39-40). From these statements it seems that Ellul's revolution consists of, and is to be made, simply by the human decision to make it. Still, Ellul's revolution requires that a certain condition be pre-existing if the revolution is to be made, namely that the individual becomes aware of the error of the moment, and it is this awareness that is impossible to create for ourselves. As a rejection of fact or an affirmation of spiritual truth, the revolution is essentially a mental or perceptive act and these affirmations and acts of will may be seen as the results, but not the essence, of the revolutionary transformation of which Ellul speaks.

Ellul seems to recognize the notion that there are different types of action and different types of willing when he writes that "the only possible focus" of revolution is "on the development of consciousness" (*AR*, 283). In this statement Ellul implicitly agrees with the argument that revolution does not consist of a series of willed actions. One may think about developing one's consciousness but it is not an experience that one can will or even a thing that one can begin doing in a clear way. If I am going to develop my

consciousness I do it not by a direct act but it is state of being that I approach indirectly through a series of indeterminate and intermediate acts. However Ellul then goes farther. He writes that consciousness is not enough, awareness must promote "voluntary acts based on conscious behaviour." He continues that "man must face the facts of Technological society and, in his private self, go beyond them. He must create values, therefore, not artificial values, but common ones that can be shared, and the values that he creates should not be the products of revolution : they should be the motive, the meaning and the source of it. ... His revolution will be motivated and oriented by the values he chooses" (*AR*, 291). Here is the crux of the problem with Ellul's writing on revolution and indeed with many notions of revolution. Where does it come from and what is it? I would argue that in the above quote, Ellul contradicts the main ideas of the majority of his work and also negates the qualities that make his work unique and interesting. In other places it is clear that the revolution is the choosing or discovery of the new values to which Ellul refers. Ellul goes to great lengths to show that this choice is a difficult, and usually impossible one. In addition, his notion of reality makes it clear that we are not so much

- free to choose or create whatever values we like as to cast aside our illusions and discover the way in which the world works. In the above quote revolution becomes a simple act of free and conscious choice, but the body of Ellul's technical works show how the modern environment, which is saturated with technical values, prevents exactly this choice. The above quote makes Ellul a simple existentialist who believes that individuals can choose to be whatever they like, despite the conclusions of his earlier works that this is precisely what people can not do. Here Ellul writes that the individual must create values and that these values are not the product of revolution but its source and motivation. But in other places he demonstrates that the individual can not create a motivation for him/herself. Perhaps for Ellul, the most we can do is attempt to recognize that our actions are not

... serving our motivations as we previously thought they were or that our motivations are not precisely what we thought they were. Later on the same page Ellul reaffirms the difficulty of willing the revolution. He writes "we must find a sovereign indisputable principle that is outside the existing structure but will enable us to confront it and to pierce its armour ..." (*AR*, 291). In this sentence Ellul implies in several ways that the revolution can not be a simple act of will or creation. Simply by saying "find" rather than "create", Ellul changes the revolution from something that depends entirely on the individual's will to something that must at least partly be given to the individual from the outside. We may will a search but we can not will a discovery. In addition, by noting that this revolutionary principle must come from outside the existing structure Ellul hints at the difficulty of the enterprise. Given his long and full description of the Technical ideology, which, remember, is "a key" underlying all modern perceptions, and as real to us as trees and rain were to the medieval man, we may fairly conclude that this statement implies that the search for a revolutionary principle is not something that we can will as we like.

There is perhaps one way of reconciling Ellul's apparently contradictory statements regarding whether or not the revolution happens to an individual or is caused and created by an individual. Ellul sometimes uses 'revolution' to refer to the change in perception which must occur to an individual before an individual can effectively act to change his/her life, and that sometimes he uses the word to refer to the actions that an individual may consciously commit after s/he has experienced the revolutionary change which allows him/her to reject necessity and express his/her personality. Ellul's concern for the personality and his statements regarding the role of generosity in a healthy democratic system imply that he does see a potential for human freedom, but his Technical works describe the way in which the philosophy or ideology of Technique determines how individuals will act. Perhaps his revolution consists of the awareness that the individual

need not be enslaved to perceived necessity. Thus Ellul would be using a deterministic scheme to describe how people are influenced or controlled by what they believe, at the same time that he hopes to impart the belief that the individual's wilful decisions can make a difference. As a Marxist and post-structuralist, Ellul argues that man is determined by his/her environment and beliefs, but as a Christian and optimist he is trying to instil the belief that the individual, even subject to his/her limited power, can make a difference by choosing to reject perceived necessity. That Ellul's revolution may be seen as such a two stage affair, requiring an awareness that must be given from the outside that my individual will can make a difference in the way that I perceive the world, is demonstrated by Ellul's statements regarding democracy. I will discuss this in more depth shortly, but Ellul writes that a truly democratic system would allow and require citizens and politicians to express their personalities in politics (*PI*, 93, 173-4, 202-3). These statements imply a belief in the ability of individuals to create realities simply through willed acts. However Ellul writes that any such democracy would have to be preceded by a shared agreement that none of the active parties would seek to tip the balance of the system. It is this sort of agreement which seems impossible to will. Either one perceives such an agreement as reasonable or not. Ellul's statement that things must appear absolutely deadlocked before men take responsibility for themselves, which I quoted earlier in this chapter, also implies this double barreled notion: In the ordinary run of life, we do not realize that we are free and that our actions might have a real impact on our situation, however, once things begin to look absolutely tragic, we often take up the idea that no matter how dire the circumstances, we can change our situation through our own effort. But what remains impossible to choose, until things become tragic, is this first awareness that I as an individual need not be a slave to perceived necessity and fact but can reject necessity, act wilfully but without certainty, and still emerge intact.

Thus, while one result of Ellul's revolution may be an awareness that the individual can shape and change society and reality through his/her own effort, the acquisition of this awareness should not be seen as an action or decision which one can simply decide to make. To see it in this way diminishes the difficulty that Ellul ascribes to the task, invalidates his descriptions of how Technique influences the ability to choose and ignores the fact that Ellul's work describes human action in a way that tries to balance the roles of social determinants and individual autonomy.

Just as Ellul's revolution does not necessarily imply any political action, it may not require any outward action at all. In other words, Ellul's revolution is primarily an event of the spirit or mind, which need not lead to action, and if it does there would not necessarily be any uniformity of action between two revolutionary individuals. Ellul writes "The [human being] is no longer called to 'achieve' anything" (*PK*, 82). Further attacking the necessity for a revolution of action, Ellul writes that to be a Christian "does not necessarily entail ... material or effective participation in the world." The Christian is to "be a sign." Ellul continues that "the fact that Christians *are*, in their lives, the 'salt of the earth' does far more for the world than any external action." Good works alone will have no meaning if the Christian is not a sign (*PK*, 9-12). It may be useful here to consider the difference that Ellul proposes between being and acting. Ellul's assertion that the Christian is to always be a nonconformist leads some critics to argue that he is simply a dangerous contrarian who would have Christians behave in harmful ways as long as they are not conforming. What this argument fails to realize is that Ellul calls for nonconformity only inasmuch as it is a rejection of power. Conformity offers the follower power through justification and so makes conformity a greater value than whatever action the individual is actually committing. The individual decides to conform for a particular reason which is not intrinsic to the action being committed. In calling for nonconformity Ellul is not



calling for sheer perversity but rather for people to follow their personalities instead of searching for certainty. It is in this way that Ellul's revolution may be experienced through being rather than acting. Being implies a refusal to make decisions for particular conscious reasons and in this way Ellul's revolution can be as a recognition of a particular idea of the human will. We can decide to be ourselves but we can not decide to be successful. In this way Ellul's revolution can be seen to put forward the same concept of human will as do his Technical works. He argues throughout his secular and religious works that we can not achieve everything that we think we can and that the actions that we commit without conscious decision reveal more about us than do our self-conceived decisions.

While Ellul's revolution need not entail action, he implies that it may result in action by arguing forcefully, and often, that the one main aspect of his revolution is awareness of the necessities that the world pushed on us and that we must reject. Ellul, as many other critics note, makes many references to the fact that "the first step in this quest, the first act of freedom, is to become aware of the necessity" (TS, xxxiii).<sup>41</sup> He even argues that the achievement of awareness is the revolution itself: "Genuine freedom can only be experienced in the end of delusion - in the act of realization itself" (PR, xvi). Thus revolution becomes a perceptual act or event. Ellul writes that this event consists of two things: the awareness of social injustice and, secondly, the "realization that society is not inviolate." Together, these changes represent and require, "a remarkable transformation of our mental imagery (AR, 109)" "To take note of the harm done by progress is to begin to question the every foundations of our society and to hasten the transition to a different model of social life. Contesting the automobile is going terribly far" (TB, 376).

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<sup>41</sup>This issue permeates Ellul's work: TB, 155, TS, xxx, PK, 60.

Throughout his work, Ellul both implies and directly states that this revolution is not something that we can will. In his first book Ellul ends his discussion of what we must do to make a revolution by saying that such an effort is superhuman and the task is in fact impossible (*PK*, 117). To achieve "this awareness as a whole is only possible under the illumination of the Holy Spirit. ... Nothing which this world suggests is of any use for this effort to "become aware"" (*PK*, 123). In another work he adds "[w]e need a freedom that is given to us from the outside. We need a freedom that can not come from us or from what we do" (*Pers*, 102). Lest these statements seem too religious in character, the reader must note that Ellul's position on the individual's helplessness remains constant throughout his sociological works. In *The Technological System* Ellul argues that because we are educated in a technological society, we can not question technology, "[m]an in our society has no intellectual, moral or spiritual reference point for judging and criticizing technology. ... If he thinks dialectically, technology is not one of the terms of this dialectics : it is the universe in which the dialectic operates" (*Tsys*, 318). In *Autopsy of Revolution*, he writes "the revival of conscious awareness is in itself a miracle" (*AR*, 293). Speaking about the deplorable state of affairs in the world, Ellul writes that "Primary responsibility for this rests not with man himself, but with the very condition of his life at all economic levels and for all professions" (*CNC*, 261). This statement may be read as an argument that the conditions of life must change before any change in individuals can take place, in other words that Ellul's revolution can be seen as a material program. But it is also possible that this sentence makes it clear that a revolution of actions is impossible because no individual, at any level, can escape his class or profession. What is needed then is a decisive fundamental action which may come from outside the individual. The essential problem for Ellul is this : to have true reform or revolution, we must change our basic assumptions, and in so doing, our actions. However, our existing assumptions serve

all of our needs of one type (physical and material) quite well. Given this, how will we ever be led to understand things in a different way? Ellul writes that "man can choose. But his choices will always bear upon secondary elements and never upon the overall phenomenon" (*Tsys*, 325). Because we live in a completely technical world, "no program of action can help us to discern and implement necessary revolution" (*AR*, 279). A revolution can not be willed simply because the individual's actions and even his/her sense of language "res[t] ultimately on anterior choices of a metaphysical character" (*PI*, 210). It is difficult if not impossible to change these metaphysical choices because these choices determine the criteria by which we make decisions.

Ellul also implies that he views his revolution as something which is not caused by individuals but rather acts upon them. "The revolution acts against each *member* of society, his behaviour and his beliefs. Acting at the same time against him and for him - to release him from his myths of money, of the nation, of work, of the state, or of socialism" (*AR*, 278). Here revolution appears to be a force from the outside and not particularly something which the individual does. Ellul's statement to Konrad Kellen regarding democracy: "To me this appears to demand a more genuine, more personally involved approach to democracy - which seems to me to be possible only by a re-formation of the democratic citizen, not by that of institutions," (*PI*, xi) also implies that this reformation can not be initiated by citizens but must, at least in part, happen to them.

Discussing revolution in general Ellul writes that it is caused not by a definable list of events or things (*AR*, 29) but rather "[T]he cause lives in some secret reflex of the human heart that contracts the entire organism into the momentous 'No' we have discussed" (*AR*, 24). An action which is both secretive and reflexive can certainly not be willed, it is a surprise to those it befalls. Ellul also states that the loss of values is key to revolution because it makes everything appear intolerable and absurd (*AR*, 30). Again,

there is no answer to the question of what it is that makes a situation appear tolerable one day and absurd the next. A loss of values is not something that we can create, we only feel it. Similarly, in comparing revolutionaries with mere rebels Ellul writes that unlike revolutionaries, rebels "do not see past their own terrain" (*AR*, 10). It would seem then that revolutionaries are able to see something new. However, by discussing this act in terms of sight, Ellul implies that it can not be willed. Individuals either have this perception of a possible future, or they do not. While they may be able to create a future for themselves they are not able to create their own anterior ability to imagine that future.

Finally, the idea that Ellul's revolution can not be willed is implied by a good number of Ellul's arguments and to reject this idea would make his work inconsistent and in places nonsensical. Ellul's argument about the conditions that would be needed to initiate a truly democratic system imply that some kind of intellectual or spiritual conversion is required. For politics to occur in a legitimate way, Ellul writes, the exercise of politics would have to be subject to common values (*PI*, 93). But how do we get common values prior to the exercise of democracy? Ellul's vision of a legitimate politics, which is carried out at a local level by well-informed participants in an atmosphere of open debate, presupposes a prior agreement that none of the constituent groups will attempt to tip the balance and pervert the process (*PI*, 173-4). Such a prior agreement and sense of balance can only be achieved by a transformation of attitudes toward the political process and not by any specific action within that process. Ellul's comments on the political process, such as his argument that the state will only retreat when faced with men organized independently of the state, lead Ellul's critics to see him as a vague anarchist and decentralizer. However Ellul continues: "But once organized, the citizen must possess a truly democratic attitude in order to depolitize and repolitize, this attitude can only be the result of his being freed of his illusions. The crucial change involved focuses not on

opinions and vocabulary but on behaviour." Here again it is possible to interpret this statement as an endorsement of certain actions, that is certain behaviours. But behaviour may also mean a life-style, issuing from an attitude and not a particular institutional action. Part of this attitude is an acceptance that opinions are unstable, that justice is really unattainable and that politics is therefore limited. A democratic attitude requires that no political action ever be carried to the point of life and death (*PI*, 202-203). We are again led to ask, how do we achieve this "truly democratic attitude?" These writings show that Ellul associates democracy not with a system of government but with a complete and unwilling change on the part of citizens.

That Ellul's revolution is unwilling is further proved by his description of the personal nature of the revolution. Rather than presenting new evidence here I simply ask the reader to cast his/her mind to the arguments I made above that the content of Ellul's revolution can be summed up not as a list of political actions but rather as a list of personal attributes including humour, playfulness, humility, pacifism and generosity. It is exceptionally difficult for a person to will himself to be different in any of these regards. I may be aware that I lack a sense of humour or that others perceive me as ungenerous. This perception may even seem to be true to me. But even if I realize these things about myself, it is still very difficult for me to change myself because these behaviors spring from largely unconscious and total perceptions of the world. If I were conscious of my every thought and action, I could change my personal qualities, but this is not the case. Similarly, an individual may act as though he were a different sort of person, but only for a short time. Seen in this way, Ellul's revolution becomes not a question of what we should do but rather how we should do it. Generosity, pacifism and playfulness are not things that we do, they are ways that we do other things. Thus in his reticence to discuss a revolutionary program and his insistence that the revolution is to be a personal and lived

affair, Ellul is implying that it is something which is impossible to will in the ordinary sense of the word. Consider Ellul's admonitions that the task of the revolutionary is to become aware of the true reality of the world. I may try to be aware and but I can not take actions that guarantee awareness. Similarly, by characterizing his revolution as a discovery of reality, Ellul makes it into something that we can wish for and sense but not something that we can do all by ourselves. To will oneself to search, or to meditate, allows the possibility of a discovery but in no way guarantees that the discovery will occur. A discovery is something which happens to us. Ellul's explicit statements and the implications of his arguments and discussions of the content of the revolution indicate that he does not see it as a thing which we can will. This conclusion supports the idea that one of Ellul's general assumptions, which is rarely noted, is that the individual's conscious will is not nearly as effective as many people, including most of Ellul's critics, think it is.

Having argued all this, there may yet be one sort of willed action which the technical individual may be able to attempt which might allow the occurrence of the revolution. This is the effort of sympathy. Consider the fact that for Ellul a Christian is one who loves. Ellul describes love as the truest expression of freedom because it involves the voluntary surrender of one's freedom to another person. This ability to surrender or become obedient, or at least to attempt these things, is key to Ellul's scheme. It is in this sense that Ellul shares Kierkegaard's notion that the only effort which a person can make is the effort of attention. Attention is equivalent to surrender in that it requires the attempt to understand the other person on his/her own terms.<sup>42</sup> Ellul's lover freely gives up his/her own standards and perceptions in order to take on those of the other.

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<sup>42</sup>Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 204-5.

This surrender and obedience are not specific decisions but general efforts involving many intermediate acts, like the development of consciousness discussed above.

Having seen that Ellul's describes a revolution which apparently can not be simply willed the reader may ask Why can it not be willed? Is there a single reason or concept which Ellul seems to put forward as the reason why his revolution can not be willed? I will show that Ellul does demonstrate that, although he rarely mentions it by name, he believes in the idea of incommensurability. Ferreira makes a great deal of this notion which, as I will use it, is essentially a recognition that two people whose basic, and usually only partially conscious, presuppositions about the nature of the world differ, can not understand each other, even if they nominally speak the same language. Lovekin's work too comes close to this idea in terms of the need for dialectical consciousness and awareness of the *other*, but does not explicitly discuss it or investigate the personal experience implied in this idea. Ferreira offers a good example of this phenomenon when he discusses the attempts of a teacher to convince a student who believes that the only reason to be honest is for material gain, to be honest for honesty's sake. If the student is consistent and complete in his belief, there is no way that the teacher can persuade him and still remain true to his (the teacher's own) understanding of the world. The assumptions of the teacher and the student are mutually exclusive and the difference between them is in first principles so that they can not be stated in another way or argued. What occurs between the student and teacher is not a disagreement or an argument but a complete failure to understand one another, a failure to even establish a common point from which an argument could begin. This is precisely what happens between Ellul and those critics who dismiss him as a pessimist. The idea that he is a pessimist is not founded on an argument with him or on a fair interpretation of his work, but rather on a failure to understand that Ellul attempts to demonstrate a concept of the human will which does not

assume that we can do whatever we imagine, and try to do, simply through direct will. The idea of incommensurability is important for Ellul because he argues throughout his work that Technique as an ideology is a set of assumptions which fails to understand other values. Technique is, or contains, a set of first principles which deal with the nature of man, the nature of the world, and definitions of good and evil. Ellul's critics seem to assume that the individual can do whatever s/he likes, regardless of what s/he has been told and shown in all aspects of his/her society, from the youngest age. Ellul is essentially responding that we are unable to commit actions which are incommensurable to the basic values and perceptions of our society. Consequently he urges the revolution at the same time that he calls it impossible.

The previous chapter argued that Technique is a set of first principles. It "is not just a practice, it also presupposes values" (*Pers*, 41). It necessitates a certain "a point of view" and has an "epistemological element" (*Pers*, 47-50). Thus Technique determines the way in which questions are asked and what is considered legitimate knowledge. Ellul writes that Technique can only comprehend the extension of the existing system, it can not "foresee anything new. ... It can not think in terms of a new paradigm, an unperfected event, a true invention, a social revolution" (*TB*, 92-93). What Ellul must mean here by "anything new" is any action or idea which is incommensurable with Technique. Ellul demonstrates his argument that we can not will anything we like, but that our imaginations, and in this way our actions, are shaped and limited by our society, when he writes that the use of machines modifies the whole society - "scales of values, processes of judgement, customs, manners." This society "constructed in the terms of the machine. ... without reference to the will or decision of man," (*CNC*, 228-229) actually does, for Ellul, transform people (*Pers*, 85). The individual's own need for certainty conspires with



the modern educational system so that the individual is moulded to see the world in a certain way and value certain abilities and faculties while repressing others.

This transformation makes us unable to commit actions which are incommensurable with Technical values, beliefs and perceptions. Ellul recognizes that we are unable to act against our basic assumptions once this transformation has occurred: "These commonplaces that express his ideologies are the visible waters of a flood that has already submerged his thinking, his reason, his capacity of judgement and inquiry. Poor fellow, arguing about his future when he is already drowning" (*CNC*, 14). There is also a good deal of evidence in his writings on solution that Ellul views his revolution as an incommensurable action. He repeatedly argues that Christian action must be of another kind (*Violence*, 148). The Christian imperative is to seek "*another way, another connection, another political significance, ... the Christian must not act in exactly the same way as everyone else*" (*FPK*, 145). Ellul makes similarly vague statements in regard to potential political solutions. He occasionally begins describing an alternative system, but always there seems to be a veil between the reader and the reality that Ellul describes. He is prevented by something from being too specific. He writes "[t]o ask a man to depolitize himself does not necessarily mean to lead him to a situation of apolitism or to invite him to occupy himself with other things. On the contrary, as the political problem is so essential, it means to lead man to look at the problem from another perspective" (*PI*, 202). A few pages later he adds "[w]e must therefore leave politics behind, *not* in order to abandon all interest in the *res publica*, i.e., collective social life, but, on the contrary, in order to achieve it by another route, to come to grips with it again in a different way, on a more real level, in a decisive contest" (*PI*, 221). With these statements, Ellul is trying to tell his readers to understand things differently. He can not put forward an explicit program, because without a change in perception, the program will be corrupted. Similarly, any

attempt to describe the program in language will be understood by readers in a technical society, in a technical way. Ellul's revolution may consist of nothing more than breaking out of the Technical paradigm. The evidence of such an escape would not be in explicit public actions but in a thousand small daily deeds that revealed not new ideas as such but a new way of being, seeing and thinking. As Ellul puts it, a revolutionary fails as soon as he is concerned with economic and social problems "*such as the world defines them, sees them and chooses to present them.*" The moment "Christians make it a habit to understand questions which the world has elaborated, they adopt at the same time a certain number of ideological positions, responses and doctrines which also originate in the world" (FPK, 49-50).

Ellul's religious work makes it clear that he sees the Bible as the source for just such a new perspective. The Bible does not consist of a series of discreet pronouncements that determine life but rather as a tremendously varied group of stories which establish a perspective but no program. In being a book of questions and initial metaphysical assumptions about the world which thwarts the quest for certainty at every turn, the Bible can create an alternative consciousness to Technique.

Ellul's revolution then does not consist of any set action but is rather a total conversion in the way the individual sees, understands and behaves in the world which the individual can not initiate on his/her own behalf. As a final proof that Ellul may perceive his revolution as a conversion experience, and indeed that he may generally view unwilled experiences as more significant in determining human action than any freely determined individual will, there is evidence that Ellul does believe that conversion experiences can actually occur. In discussion with Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange, Ellul agrees that he became who he is "through moments of intuition, through lightning revelations followed by a process of thought and development." Of his own religious conversion he writes "I

was converted - not by someone, nor can I say I converted myself" (*Pers*, 14). It was "a very brutal very sudden conversion." He adds that "Christianity or Jesus Christ, imposed himself on me" (*ISOS*, 3). That this action was unwilling and even unwanted is made clear by the fact that Ellul battled against the change in himself: "I fled. The struggle lasted for ten years" (*ISOS*, 14). Ellul offers further evidence that conversions may occur even in regard to seemingly secular matters. He writes of some kind of conversion experience that occurred when he was reading *Das Kapital*. He had "the sudden impression of a connection" (*ISOS*, 4). Reading Pascal's *Pensees*, "there again a phrase became true" (*ISOS*, 13). That Ellul may be advocating a type of conversion experience when he writes of his revolution being a discovery of a true reality is supported by his statements that "Marx was an astonishing discovery of the reality of this world" (*Pers*, 5) and that the Bible offered "a new world when I compared it with the realities of life and of my life and experience" (*Pers*, 14). If these conversions in Ellul's life were experienced as sudden perceptions of a new world, his urgent calls that we must become aware of the true reality of the world make his revolution appear to be a similar experience.

Finally however, the question remains, If I can not will this perceptual revolution then how am I to achieve or experience it? In my next chapter I will argue that the answer to this question lies in understanding yet another area of Ellul's work which has been scantily treated by the critics, namely his discussions of the nature of language.

## Chapter 4

### Language : Bridge from Technique to Revolution

Throughout all of his work Ellul displays a deep interest in language. In his first mature work he writes that Christians must discover a new language "which will give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe" (PK, 127).<sup>1</sup> Language is the key for Ellul because it is the medium of contact between individuals. We are to take words seriously and be aware of the exact meanings of the things that we say (FPK, 201-202). Remember too, that, as was discussed in chapter two, Technique is primarily a discourse, that is a

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Jacques Ellul's works are cited in the text with the abbreviations listed below.

PK : Jacques Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, transl. Olive Wyon (London : SCM Press, 1951).

PI : Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

TS : Jacques Ellul, *Technological Society* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

CNC : Jacques Ellul, *Critique of the New Commonplaces*, trans. Helen Weaver, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

AR : Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, trans. Patricia Wolf (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

FPK : Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, transl. C. Edward Hopkin (New York : Seabury Press), 1972.

PR : Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

TSys : Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, transl. Joachim Neugroschel (New York : Continuum, 1980).

PH : Jacques Ellul, *La Parole Humilee*, (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1981).

Pers : Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age : Jacques Ellul Speaks on his Life and Work*, Ed. William H. Vanderburg, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York : Seabury Press, 1981).

ISOS : Jacques Ellul, *In Season Out of Season : An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Transl. Kani K. Niles, (San Francisco : Harper&Row, 1982).

CCQJC : Jacques Ellul, *Ce Que Je Crois*, (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1987).

TB : Jacques Ellul, *Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan : William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

type of language and imagining which influences our perceptions of reality and evokes action. Despite the importance of language to Ellul's work, this issue has received little critical attention. Fasching merely gives a summary of Ellul's work on propaganda without discussing what his conclusions might imply about language as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Chastenet offers a good summary of Ellul's main book about language, *Propaganda*, noting that propaganda is really a condition of all language, but he focuses on the political uses of propaganda and does not explore the basic implication of Ellul's work which is that language creates individual reality and motivates action.<sup>3</sup> Other commentators have attempted to place Ellul's work within a communications framework but have done little besides show that he is worthy of analysis.<sup>4</sup> Christopher Lasch addresses Ellul's work on language but again only as it influences the political process. His implication is that propaganda is an aspect of society which is planned by corporations.<sup>5</sup> Lovekin explores Ellul's work on language more deeply but his work has a different emphasis than mine. Lovekin argues that Technical language is flawed in that it has ceased to be symbolic.<sup>6</sup> Where symbolic language points in at least two directions and functions through ambiguity, Technical words are understood in only one way. They have in effect become signs. A result of this is that language ceases to engender freedom by allowing multiple meanings for one word. Although I share many of his conclusions regarding Ellul's

<sup>2</sup>Darrell J. Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul : A Systematic Exposition* (Toronto : The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 57.

<sup>3</sup>Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Lire Ellul : Introduction A L'Oeuvre Socio-Politique De La Jacques Ellul* (Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992), 93.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Real, "Mass Communication and Propaganda in Technological Societies," in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, ed. James Holloway (Michigan : Eerdmans, 1970), 43-53.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Lasch, "The Social Thought of Jacques Ellul" in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, ed. James Holloway (Michigan : Eerdmans, 1970), 67-87.

<sup>6</sup>David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness*, 114.

conception of language,<sup>7</sup> he does not explore the connection between language and Ellul's conception of action as I intend to.

In this chapter I will respond to this existing critical work by attempting to establish a few basic points regarding Ellul's conception of language. By arguing that Ellul clearly sees the power of language I will support the argument that Technique is not a real but rather a psychological phenomenon and the idea that a main assumption of Ellul's work is that we act not as utterly free agents but rather that our actions are defined and motivated by the way in which we understand the world. Inasmuch as we understand the world in an involuntary and linguistic way, the language we use has a strong influence on the actions we commit. Through this argument, the reader will hopefully understand that Ellul's work is not based on an irrational fear of technology but rather on a certain vision of the way and extent to which human actions are determined. In offering a theory of the way in which decisions both come about and are made, Ellul's work is potentially valuable to historians and social scientists.

Ellul clearly views language as an important motivator of action. We tend to act according to what we believe is true and we tend to believe what is transmitted to us by language. After establishing that Ellul's conclusions about the nature and power of propaganda apply to most communication in the modern world, I will show that Ellul seems to agree with one of Ferreira's arguments, which he borrows from Richard Rorty, that language is persuasive not through argument but through re-description.<sup>8</sup> The point

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 189-220 for his discussion of language.

<sup>8</sup>M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision : Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1991), 60, 76-81. The argument is made most fully in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Soidarity* NewYork, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

of this argument will be to show that Ellul conceives of language such that it both constructs paradigms and can cause paradigm shift. What do I mean by this? Firstly, for Ellul, language can construct a paradigm that influences action by allowing and encouraging certain types of action while disallowing other sorts of action by preventing us from thinking in those other terms. Language can do this because we understand not only the explicit content of what a person says but also the implications of the way in which it is said and its relationship to the person's actions. Thus language conveys to us not only a specific imperative or message but also a sense of the way that the world is ordered. This is why Ellul does not believe that arguing with the technical mind set is effective. For Ellul, language is not a tool but rather it is an unconscious demonstration of a state of being. What is most important about Technical language is not whatever specific argument is contained in a sentence, but rather the notion contained in all Technical language that reasons for acting can be consciously abstracted from the world as a whole and decisions made on the basis of these reasons. What Ellul wants to do is change the way we understand our words. This can be done more effectively through redescription than through argument. Because language operates this way - conveying not only the explicit message, but also the way in which the words are understood - language and conversation may allow us to shift our basic presuppositions about the world and so experience a revolution. If Ellul's revolution consists of an escape from the Technical paradigm, language can facilitate this escape because, for Ellul, just as the language of an individual conveys an impression of the way in which she views the world, conversation with another person, or the reading of a text, may motivate a conversion experience if I realize that the other person is using the same words that I am using, but using them in a different way. The consistency of another's language may show me how the other person sees the world in a different way than I do and also allow me to share that understanding.

Ellul describes this perceptual shift in language similar to that which he uses to describe his revolution. Finally, by way of concluding this paper, I will show that Ellul's own work demonstrates some of these conclusions. Specifically, his work is not argumentative but descriptive and is clearly trying to motivate the paradigm shift that constitutes the revolution he discusses.

That Ellul believes that language can command action and in so doing deeply influence the life of the individual is shown by many statements and arguments. For Ellul, language creates understanding of reality to the degree that we often privilege what we hear or say over what actually happens to us. We interpret the non-verbal world in a verbal way by assigning a word based meaning to all that we do and see. The presence of media of all sorts in the modern world and the fact that many modern professions require the use of knowledge which is not experienced but merely received through the linguistic reports of others, allows Ellul to argue that language actually constructs a large part of the reality of many modern citizens. Ellul's belief in the power of language is first reflected by the fact that he has written three books exclusively on the topic of language, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, *Propaganda* and *The Humiliation of the Word*. In *A Critique of the New Commonplaces* he writes "[t]he commonplace always contains an imperative to action, an indication of attitude, and consequently it really does alter something - a simple thing called man" (CNC, 252). In his argument that an illiterate person is one who can not be governed, Ellul casts language as an agent of control (CNC, 258). "More extensive transmission of knowledge re-inforces the adhesion of everybody to the same norms and values" (TB, 109). The very fact that he wrote a book which attacks modern society by attacking the things that people say, indicates that Ellul gives language a constructive power.



Ellul's argument that language creates reality is founded on his notion that most people act according to what they are told simply because we tend to believe that "*What is* is vastly superior to *What is not!*" (CNC, 204). A fact justifies all manner of action because it offers a guarantee of existence, permanence and objectivity. We tend to behave according to what we believe are the rules and realities of the world. Thus just as we don't expect to fly, we are taught that the world is hostile place, that the individual must look out for himself and that work is usually grinding. Facts disqualify debate and uncertainty and offer us the illusory ability to live according to what really is. The interesting thing about facts is that, as Ellul says, they are almost always at least partially imaginary.

Ellul's discussion of political facts applies to all facts and makes clear the central role that language plays in their creation. Facts "[are] verbal knowledge conveyed by many intermediaries." A fact which is true but receives no attention "ceases to exist even as a fact, whatever its importance may be." Public opinion, which motivates action, "[takes] shape only when [we] read in the papers the *translation into words* of the fact that has taken place." Nowadays a *fact* is what has been translated into words or images (PI, 98-99). "The public knows only appearances, and appearances, through public opinion are transformed into political facts." As a result of this Ellul is led to ask himself whether the cure for this political illusion would be a good and complete source of information. He answers with a resounding No (PI, 103-106). Information too is not neutral. It has "the sense of giving form. It shapes conduct." Even information which does not concern an individual has an effect. "These data invade my imagination and subconscious. They constitute a mental panorama in which I have to situate myself. ... Information leads to obligatory consumption in the same way as suburban living leads to the obligatory use of the automobile" (TB, 327-331). Thus the way we are informed

creates a reality for us and leads us to act in certain ways. "The formation of such responses is precisely what the promulgation of information creates in individuals who have only limited personal contact with social reality. Through information, the individual is placed in a context and learns to understand the reality of his own situation with respect to society as a whole. This will entice him into social and political action." (*PR*, 114)

The reader may ask, how precisely does Ellul think that language can create a reality? He writes that merely saying something can invoke its presence and compensate for its absence. "I say it and repeat it, it therefore exists. ... It is true that man's words exist and in a way we are satisfied with just that." Ellul is of course not arguing that words create an actual presence but that they seem to (*PI*, 5). His argument that "the obvious external sign of the decadence of classical democracy is the impotence of the politicians in their own use of words," only makes sense if words have an inherent active and creative power (*TB*, 24).

By arguing that we live a good deal of our lives in a reality that we do not experience but rather imagine in terms of what we have heard or read or even said ourselves, Ellul gives tremendous power to those with the ability to communicate. If individuals tend to glorify what is simply because it is, then people will act on a completely false report, if they believe it to be true. Not coincidentally, technical culture often asks individuals to do things or believe things on the basis of what they are told, that is, things which they do not directly experience. In this way, Ellul is arguing that the individual psychic universe is at least partly fictitious, and is made up of beliefs and interpretations which are not based on observation of reality. Consequently, language as a medium of both communication and imagination becomes a central aspect of the phenomenon of Technique. Those with the power to communicate can cause real action in response to the images, no matter how imaginary, which they create (*CNC*, 202-204 for this discussion).

After such a strong condemnation of modern communication, the reader may ask, Does Ellul have anything to say about healthy communication? He does, and it is in these prescriptions that the reader may see not only an answer to some criticisms of Ellul, but also a potential source of his revolution. Just as language can establish a sort of determinism that prevents the individual from acting in unimaginable ways, Ellul also argues that the experience of the language of others can allow the individual to escape the determinism of "what is" and see the world in a new way. Because Ellul sees true communication, that is communication which is made face to face and does not concern the achievement of an objective goal, as revelatory of the whole person, communication can enable an individual to see things from a different perspective and, in this way, experience a conversion.

Ellul offers many hints as to what he considers healthy communication in the specific things that he condemns. Writing about language in the technical world he argues that the technical thinker sees all issues as algebraic (*TB*, 143). This argument gives us a hint that what he desires is a rebirth of the subjective. It also implies that Ellul sees a true language not just as conveying the concrete meaning of the words, but as an ambiguous process which reveals and conveys a good deal more than the simple content of the message. Lovekin, with whom I share a basic interpretation of Ellul's conception of healthy language, makes this point by writing that real words lead in at least two directions - simultaneously towards the speaker and the listener. When one speaks, one communicates not just by what one is saying but also by the way in which it is said and by the shades of meaning in all words. Technical language, or propaganda, is different from real language in that it seeks only to inform, to be directly psychologically manipulative without engaging conscious discussion. It is non-contradictory, where ordinary language conveys meaning in a mysterious and often logically contradictory way. Thus while Ellul

sees that with propaganda, "there is action but no interaction," (*PR*, 203) the task of any one who really wants to communicate is not to speak about man but to him (*PK*, 114). In these arguments Ellul opposes real communication to perfunctory communication which seeks only to convey a particular piece of information. This argument implies that for Ellul real communication can only be communication of difference, of things which can not be objectively stated. When we communicate, the important thing that we convey is not what we say but the way we say it, which implies the way in which we see the world.

Ellul might even seem to be putting forward a new idea of truth. Truth is not made up of specific ideas that we can agree on but of the selves which we express. That Ellul does see communication and truth in this way is illustrated by several of his arguments. In discussing life before the eighteenth century, Ellul argues that books in this age were not meant to be consulted but rather read entirely, "to be meditated upon." A book was "...the author's entire self, as a personal expression of his very being... [and t]his applies to every other field of endeavour until the eighteenth century." Life was more "a question of personal exchange than of taking an objective position" (*TS*, 40-41). That Ellul sees himself participating in this sort of communications is demonstrated by his warnings that his own books are not to be consulted but rather to be read right through, and his concomitant refusal to provide indexes. This argument about books in the eighteenth century illustrates a few things about Ellul. Firstly, it supports the argument that his revolution may consist not of necessary institutional change but of a vision according to which the point of life is not to achieve things or establish order but simply to express oneself. Ellul's argument also demonstrates his concept of meaningful communication. The value of his books is not just, or even primarily, in the arguments and facts which they provide but rather in the complete impression of Ellul's personality which makes the things he says seem persuasive and true. His arguments are persuasive

not because of their objectivity but because the completeness and consistency with which Ellul presents them makes it obvious that there is at least one existing individual, Ellul himself, who actually tries to live according to these ideas.

Ellul's argument that it is not linguistic propositions but human beings themselves that can be considered to be true, and therefore examples of reality, grows naturally out of his conception of language.<sup>9</sup> Language is a special form of communication because it depends for its meaning on what is not said. The complex relationship between exactly what is said and what is not said enriches language and gives it meaning. Language functions because it is never objective but always subjective. Because the most important aspect of language is that it conveys different understandings of being, it does not consciously engage the need for proof or evidence. If I am speaking truthfully about myself, I do not make arguments, rather my words simply flow in the way that seems most truthful to me. It is in this way that a speaker may be led to surprise him/herself. Similarly if I am making arguments that I don't actually believe in, this usually becomes apparent because of inconsistencies in the way that I argue. Language is always spoken by an individual to another individual and it is these two people who construct the meaning of what is said. Language then is not a thing to be analyzed but a largely unconscious creation which is inseparable from the two people speaking. Ellul goes so far as to say "It is the whole of one person that speaks and the whole of another that understands." These statements indicate that Ellul has a particular notion of truth and of the purpose of communication. Language does not refer to a reality outside of individuals. It can only refer to reality as it is perceived by individuals and in this way to those individuals. Truth

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<sup>9</sup>This idea, that truth is a person rather than a proposition is supported by arguments in many books. See his discussion of the fact that "All things are lawful" in *Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 186-189, 191.

is not a thing but a person. Each person, in perceiving reality in a different way; understands a different truth (*CQJC*, 39-42).

Ellul thus argues that language is to be valued not for its simple content but for the way in which the totality of a message reveals the essential nature of the speaker. As a conclusion to this paper I will argue that Ellul's theory of language demonstrates that he sees language as an entry point into the revolutionary experience which I discussed in the previous chapter. Here again I am agreeing with Lovekin who considers the process by which language creates mental freedom.<sup>10</sup> My point of difference with Lovekin is to emphasize that dialogue does not consist of language alone and to argue that it is explicit in Ellul's work that language creates something like a conversion experience. Language does not create freedom simply because the same situation can be referred to by different words but because the combination of words and actions revealed in each individual person reveals new ways of being.

Ellul's revolution can not be willed in any simple sense because it requires behaviour which is incommensurable and therefore to some degree inconceivable. Ellul gives language both the power to construct paradigms and to transcend or change them. In so doing, Ellul demonstrably gives language not only the ability to evoke specific action, but more importantly he argues that the language we use leads us to act in certain general ways and not in others. In other words, Ellul sees language as establishing conditions for action. Thus language both determines actions and can allow an individual to escape from a particular way of seeing the world and, in perceiving the world according to a new pattern, act in a new way.

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<sup>10</sup>Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness*, particularly p. 212-220.

Ellul's entire argument (*PR*, 75-80) that integration propaganda is more effective than agitation propaganda demonstrates that his work is founded on the assumption that the decisive point in an individual's action is not at the level of their conscious will but rather in the way that they see and understand the world. Agitation propaganda is an irregular occurrence and is consciously directed at a specific action. Electoral ads are a good example of agitation propaganda in that they are self-consciously argumentative and seek to encourage not a change in world view or lifestyle but one simple action. Integration propaganda influences the individual's assumptions and motivates action but does not do so directly. Integration propaganda is not argumentative or imperative but rather it is descriptive. Many critics object to Ellul's characterization of integration propaganda because it appears then that all words in the modern world are propagandistic. Rather than objecting to this idea, we may see that it demonstrates Ellul's notion that language is a largely unconscious and specifically unwillable action. Ellul gives movies which glorify a certain version of the American way of life as an example of integration propaganda. The goal of this propaganda is not to cause certain immediate action, just as the main point of a movie may not be the glorification of America, but nonetheless the movie does gently put forward a certain way of viewing the world. It is subtle, repetitive, long term and without a conscious goal. In privileging this sort of propaganda over the much simpler and easier to detect agitation propaganda, Ellul is demonstrating his belief that language can influence and even determine action, not by blatantly calling for a single action but rather by describing the world in a certain way and thus promoting certain types of action.

The fact that Ellul writes that if advertising is to be successful, "[it] must not be argumentative," illustrates the nature of the assumption shared between Ellul and Kierkegaard and elucidated by Rorty. Language and argument are not successful to the

degree that they appeal to my sense of reason and consciously engage my intellect and will, but rather to the degree that they "implant in [me] a certain conception of life" (*TS*, 406). Here Ellul is reiterating the idea that we are motivated to act not by what we independently decide but by what we believe to be true, which in the present is determined by the beliefs that have satisfied our needs and desires in the past. Language then influences us because it describes the world in a certain way. The repeated use of a word in a particular sense, or to refer to only one thing, means that language can implant a certain way of thinking about reality and thus promote certain types of action while making other actions difficult to conceive of. The corollary of this concept of language is that our way of speaking always reveals our hidden subconscious assumptions. Just as Technical action reveals a belief in the individual's ability to imaginatively analyze the world, Technical language, which argues, reveals a belief in the need for proof that one's actions are justified.

Ellul's point that language is an expression of being that reveals metaphysical assumptions which encourage certain types of action and discourages others, is further illustrated by his discussion of the Biblical commandments. Most people understand the commandments as imperative prohibitions which threaten punishment if they are broken. Ellul rejects this interpretation, not least because it seems to put forward an idealized moral code according to which certain specific deeds require certain punishments. The common understanding of the commandments comes from a pre-existing assumption that the individual will is paramount. From this understanding the commandments function as evidence that the individual should decide to live in a certain way. Ellul responds that the commandments are descriptive, "a point of view". They do not warn us against certain actions but rather establish a series of conditions, or anterior metaphysical assumptions, under which the life of a true Christian is lived. The commandment "is not a restrictive



negative constraint, but a promise of a new life, full of liberty and joy." Thus the commandments do not command us that we should not kill, rather they describe the fact that we do not, and shall not in future, kill. As descriptions, and not orders or laws which must be enforced, they pertain to what Ellul sees as reality. Thus the punishment for breaking a commandment becomes not something which society must enforce because it is right but rather something that will occur, because the commandment is a description of reality. A murderer will not necessarily be punished under a societal code which must be consciously enacted, rather s/he has simply, by his/her action, established that this treatment of him/herself is not unthinkable. Thus "if you deny life, life will be denied to you." (*PH*, 68-69).

We must also note that language alone may not be enough to begin a revolutionary experience. Language alone is what the inhabitants of the Technical society get everyday from a variety of media outlets. This propaganda is a false language because it has no context. It is not, as most of Ellul's other critics argue, that information is decontextualized for a particular reason but rather that the situation is simply inherent in modern society. For Ellul, the primary way to gain context and a true understanding of language is to speak face to face to my interlocutor and to observe the relationship between the actions and the words of the other individual. For speech to be effective and understood it must be given its specificity through an action to which it refers. This is the situation in which Ellul believes language can have power because it demonstrates, rather than arguing, the point of view of the speaker. Similarly Ellul must allow some place for action in his revolution. Recall that he says Christians are not to act but to be. Being implies action which is unselfconscious in that it is not for any particular reason or purpose. To act in a Technical way is to act for a reason, to self consciously choose

certain steps to achieve a particular goal. In this way technical action is like an argument which presents itself while being is equivalent to a description or demonstration of a truth. Ellul equates speech with being and argument with the decision to take an action. Ellul's revolution can be equally seen as an attempt to change the way the individual sees the world and as an attempt to make the individual cease acting (for something) and start being (for him/herself).

The corollary of these assertions is that the language that the individual uses, and the way in which s/he perceives it, determines what sorts of actions s/he will commit. Just as the conversations I have had and the various actions I have seen associated with different words influences the way I understand words, what I say to myself establishes the mental world in which I act. While the more common way in which the commandments are perceived privileges the individual's ability to decide to break them or not and thus creates the possibility of breaking them, Ellul's perception makes them much more difficult to break and also displays his assumption that we can only commit acts which we first assume we are able to commit. For Ellul, the commandments establish a way of thinking which is not arguable but which establishes the way in which he judges all other arguments. His book *Critique of the New Commonplaces*, addresses what he sees as the foundational statements of the modern secular psyche, statements which, since they are initial judgements about reality, cannot be argued. Ellul's method in the book is not to explicitly argue against them but rather to describe what they mean or imply and in this way to allow his readers to see that the commonplaces offer faulty descriptions of reality.

Ellul's discussion of the commandments illustrates his assumptions that language has power not because it is argumentative but rather because it seems to describe reality. Ellul's discussion of the difficulty of changing someone's political convictions further supports this argument. Ellul writes that "knowledge of a fact comes down to a question

of faith." Events are seen as complementary proof of previously held beliefs. In this statement Ellul demonstrates that he believes that specific arguments are not effective. Rather, people can only have their minds changed by a new description of reality. By comparing knowledge to a question of faith, Ellul calls to mind the fact that faith can be gained or lost not by an act of will but through a process of conversion. He continues: "But the informed man's beliefs are fruits of an anterior proposition which creates the prejudices that make people accept or reject information." When a mental pattern exists, "facts are put into their places accordingly and can not by themselves change anything" (*PI*, 111-112). Thus an individual must be willing to have his perceptions changed, that is, to have experienced some dissatisfaction with the current way in which he perceives the world, in order to hear language in such a way that it can be truly persuasive. If I strongly believe in a commonplace or cliché, no argument or statement of fact will be able to convince me that this explanation of the world is wrong.

For Ellul, we do not change our opinions because our opponent convinces us that he is right, but rather because we suddenly accept all of his terms. We trade our key to understanding for his. We escape from our previous way of thinking, which determined our actions, to a new way of thinking, which causes us to act in a new way. That Ellul does think in this way is proved by his argument that the Technical way of seeing can absorb any new phenomenon. No new intention or event, or argument, can threaten the technical way of being if I think of everything in a Technical way. Thus the impotence of the ordinary idea of revolution. What is needed is a sudden change in the way in which things are seen and valued. After such a change, the Technical way of thinking would itself cease to be persuasive. An argument remains ineffective until we see and agree with the basic assumptions behind it. Language is the medium through which this conversion is accomplished because the contemplation of a sentence, which contains and implies a

representation of reality, which at first makes no sense to us, may lead us to imagine the world in such a way that the sentence makes sense. In this way our view of the world is transformed. For example let us take one of Ellul's many assertions that Technique is autonomous and self-expanding. Even sympathetic critics tend to see these statements as exaggerations designed to stir us from our slumber. More hostile readers see in them evidence that Ellul is a gloomy pessimist who ignores the obvious facts of human freedom. But what Ellul really means is that, given the facts, as he perceives them, that people accept what is and generally have a positive attitude towards technology, technique actually is functionally autonomous. Machines do not control us, but, within the modern secular mindset there is nothing which opposes the continued development of Technique. Because we accept rationality both as a goal and a method, rational procedures grow according to their own logic and in this way are autonomous. In addition, individuals are not free to voluntarily change the way they feel about technology but rather are determined by their understanding of the words which are used to describe and implement techniques. A full understanding of Ellul's statement that Technique is autonomous requires an understanding of the other metaphysical assumptions that would need to be made for this statement to be true. Critics who call Ellul either an exaggerator or a pessimist are responding to the statement according to their own understanding of the word 'autonomous' and their own assumptions about human nature. They are also demonstrating their assumption that language persuades through the presentation of evidence. Ellul's work does not offer evidence because his point is that rational proof can not make individuals see that rational proof is not particularly effective in convincing individuals to act in truly new ways. If the assertion that technique is autonomous suddenly seems to be a true phrase, where it was not earlier, this is because the reader has

accepted the arguments about the way the world works which are implied in it, but which are not explicit in the sentence.

If the way in which we understand language sometimes prevents us from fully understanding the arguments of those who hold different metaphysical assumptions than we do, how can language influence us to see the world in a new way? How can language, which determines the way we act by establishing how we see the world, allow us to change the way we see things and experience or commit what Ellul would call a revolutionary decision? There can be little doubt that Ellul sees the act of communication, particularly of speaking, as a revolutionary activity that gives freedom. Ellul writes that speech is not only more relevant and decisive than action, but it also automatically put the speaker in a free position and bestows, "the gift of liberty" (*PH*, 73). Because language is paradoxical and by nature subversive, speech has importance as a revolutionary act (*PH*, 28-29). The ability of language to refer to something which apparently can not exist, for example the fact that it is possible to say "the paper is red and the paper is blue," is potentially revolutionary because it shows the reader that it is possible to think in new terms. Still, the reader may ask, does Ellul think that language may lead to conversion or revolution? and if so how? What remains to be discovered is precisely how the individual's experience of language leads to a change in perception.

The conversion experiences that Ellul experienced in his life were caused by the contemplation of language. His experiences of perceiving "a new world" occurred, as discussed in the last chapter, upon reading the Bible, Marx and Pascal. Regarding the Bible, Ellul writes "a sentence leaped out at me." The sentence was 'I will make you fishers of men.' "This phrase haunted me for years before I had any idea what it could mean." He continues "Why does a phrase become true? I don't believe that it corresponded to some unconscious desire. And it doesn't happen only with phrases from

the Bible. I have sometimes been captured by a line of poetry or by an expression from a novel. There is a mysterious incident. Suddenly a phrase becomes a personal utterance. It penetrates your life" (*ISOS*, 3-4). Here Ellul is talking about a conversion experience. It is clear that such an experience concerns perception and a change in perception which is caused by the experience of the language of another person.

For example, Ellul focuses on Saint Paul's assertion: "You are saved by grace, therefore work for your salvation by your works" (*Per* 8-9). This apparently contradictory statement argues that two things are simultaneously true. Being saved is not a state which is achieved once and for all or given to an individual, it is something which must be lived. Thus because we are saved we must live as though we are saved. But this action is not something which we must concentrate on doing, since we are saved, we do work for our salvation. Ellul's understanding of this statement reveals his notion of the way in which the human will works. Grace, like Ellul's reality, is not so much a given or contained fact as it is a pre-existing condition of all the parts of life. More importantly for the current discussion, Ellul's discussion of this line of the Bible reveals something of the way that he understands the power of language. The argument that Paul's assertion is contradictory implies a certain way of thinking about the world, namely that life is a series of static achievements, that after an action has been committed once, it creates a state of being which lasts for the whole life of the individual. If we are or have something, we should not have to work to be that something. Ellul's understanding of the sentence implies a different vision of life, namely that life consists not of set individual actions but of a state of being which is created and demonstrated in every action. The fact that this sentence may at first be incomprehensible is what gives it the power to cause a complete change of perception on the part of the reader. Although Paul's assertion does not explicitly argue anything about the nature of existence, if I want to understand it, I may be

forced to change the way I think about existence as a whole. I may initially not understand the sentence. If I reach a point at which it becomes comprehensible, this is because a significant shift has occurred in the way that I perceive the world. But I did not will this change in my perceptions; I only puzzled about the meaning of the sentence and tried to imagine what would have to be true for those words to make sense.

Ellul gives this power to language in general:

The conversation is understood and the instant of comprehension appears as a veritable illumination. It is not the addition of fragments, nor the slow and torturous path of a successive process. It is the light of understanding which appears clearly as I grasp the whole discourse of the other. All leads to this surprising point apart from which the maze has no exit. In an instant the process becomes clear, argumentation ceases to be rhetoric. The communication of intelligence is made in a surprising moment which some have compared to a vision. I have really "seen" what the other is saying. It is only in this instant that we understand each other. It is not really a vision but an illumination and we see the distance between us. I acquire for myself the discourse of the other and I experience a total satisfaction, intellectual and otherwise, that I have understood and have been understood. (*PH* 25-26)

Here Ellul describes the experience of suddenly grasping the language of another person in terms which are similar to the way he sometimes describes his revolution. Ellul's conversational revelation is an instantaneous experience which leads us not to accept the argument of the other person but rather to see the world as s/he sees it and in this process to understand the words s/he use in precisely the sense that s/he uses them. Inasmuch as Ellul's revolution consists of an unwilled change in the way that the individual perceives the world, Ellul's description of what can happen in conversation with another seems to be this revolutionary experience. The conversational experience is unwilled and it is a total appropriation of the other's terms. As the argument ceases to be just rhetoric, the person being spoken to "sees" what the other person is saying just as Ellul urges us to become aware of the true reality. Without this experience, Ellul seems to imply that conversation

can not lead to anything productive, it remains a maze, just as it is impossible to break out of the ideology of Technique without help from the outside.

The reader may then ask, if it is experience of the words of another person which allows us to see the structures of our own thought and escape them and thus commit actions which previously had been prevented by the nature of our thoughts and assumptions, how does this occur? What is the quality of words that they sometimes provoke new insights? Ellul's argument, which I have discussed above, that language conveys its meaning not just from the objective content of the words but from the complete impression of the person speaking, including the exact placement and emphasis of the words and the awareness of what is not said as well as what is said, gives a hint as to the answer to this question. Ellul's argument is that a person's language reveals the essential nature of the speaker. What reveals this nature is again not the speaker's individual words but rather the totality of the message. Ellul's theory implies that one can detect a lie not from a flat false statement but from inconsistencies in the statement that make it seem unbelievable. This is the way in which Ellul says propaganda lies. The facts are true, the interpretation is false. It is however difficult to tell when propaganda is lying because it is never attached to a single person or event. It is disembodied language. For Ellul the meaning of any statement or even individual word in a statement is revealed by the totality of the message. This facet of language is what makes it capable of provoking a dramatic shift in understanding. For example, in any discussion, my friend and I use the same language, but in a long discussion of a particular concept or repeated use of the same word in different contexts may allow me to suspect that my friend does not understand a particular word in the same way that I do. Thus, although we may speak the same language, I may be puzzled by the way in which s/he speaks, or the sense that s/he seems to ascribe to certain words. In these circumstances, I argue, the individual may puzzle



over a phrase which seems incomprehensible, just as Ellul, or for that matter Martin Luther, did before their respective conversions. The urge to understand a particular use of a word may lead to a complete change in the way that language and the world are perceived. Thus it is the fact that words gain their specific meaning from a context that enables attentive individuals to see how incongruous use of words can indicate a significant difference in the world views of the speakers. Language is unique in being shared, in that two separate individuals using the same language understand each other, but simultaneously, each individual has a particular and largely incommunicable sense of each word. Thus language allows communication between two different people, without erasing their difference. Ellul's description of communication and his awareness that understanding happens in a flash demonstrate that his work supports these ideas.

Consider the critical response that Ellul is a pessimist and his own assertion that he is an optimist. As I discussed earlier in the paper, to understand that Ellul is an optimist, requires that one share his notions of freedom and human nature just as a critic's use of the word pessimist implies a great deal about his/her assumptions about these same issues.

Without a shift in understanding, Ellul's claim to be an optimist seems like a lie or sheer perversity. It is the effort to understand what Ellul must believe to be true, if he sincerely believes he is an optimist, that may provoke a significant change in the way the reader understands the world. Just as our ability to experience astonishment allows us to experience revolution, (TB, 412) Ellul writes, "dialogue implies that the speakers surprise each other" (PH, 20). To understand another person requires some minimal ability to see things from another point of view, that is to change one's mental environment (PH, 23).

But what is also required, yet this has rarely been noted, is the effort of sympathy. It is not enough simply to talk to another person, or to use words rather than images, as

Lovekin says<sup>11</sup>, but rather, I must listen to the other. Even when the Technical individual is silent, his/her mind is filled with pre-judgements that determine how new sensory data will be understood. Perhaps Ellul's Christian, who simply is rather than doing or acting, is one who can listen. Being seems to imply a refusal to live for reasons. Ferreira argues that surrender is key to Kierkegaard's conception of the leap.<sup>12</sup> It may also be true that Ellul's descriptions of the revolutionary need to become aware and to reject the things of society are nothing more than the call to surrender. Consider that if Technique is consciousness, rejecting it implies rejecting all the standards and judgements that it imposes. Similarly, awareness may not be achieved through the effort of informing oneself, as many of Ellul's critics assume, but rather by ceasing to concentrate on learning, as all learning is tainted by Technique. Concentration implies focusing one's analytic powers on something. What Ferreira calls the effort of attention, and Ellul calls contemplation, may be the effort not to focus one's powers but rather to reject one's analytic power and experience the consciousness of another. An empty state might enable such a person to truly listen sympathetically to another. Only this ability to listen, which implies a surrender or rejection of one's own perceptual structures and in this way is similar to Ellul's notion of love, can allow a real perceptual shift to take place.

One of Ellul's most insistent claims is that he is not arguing anything or preaching about what should be but that he is only describing what is (*TS*, xvii). That he makes such a point of saying this supports the argument that one of the main assumptions of his work is that description is a more effective agent of change than argument. Ellul does not argue things in the sense that he does not say that others have been wrong in ascribing a

<sup>11</sup>David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness* The title of his final chapter, p189-220, is "The Word and the Image "

<sup>12</sup>Ferreira, *Transforming Will*, 89.

particular event to a particular cause and then showing that another cause is indeed responsible. Rather he asserts that what is happening in modern society is much different from what is said to be occurring. In returning to the example of the automobile, he states that cars do not provide freedom but rather they cause social isolation and also kill thousands of people each year. He is able to present a precise number of people who were killed in a particular year. Even here his style is descriptive rather than argumentative. Consider his statements that "[t]he car is an engine of death. Everywhere it passes it kills. ... The car does not kill because it kills every day" (*TB*, 375). These statements are descriptive and not argumentative. Ellul is not particularly trying to get the reader to agree with him and leap up and destroy his/her car. Rather he is trying to get the reader to see the car in a new way, and then to act in as s/he sees fit. Ellul's goal with this type of writing is not to cause a specific action that would indicate that we accept his argument but rather to make the individual think about his/her relationship with the car and the degree of control that s/he may have over all of her imagined actions. Similarly, when Ellul asserts that it is wrong to call car accidents "accidents" because they happen regularly and usually at known times and places, his goal is not necessarily to get us to act to reduce car accidents but to change the way we think of these occurrences, to describe them differently to ourselves. He is also seeking to allow us to redefine our words. Ellul's statements that the car is an engine of death may cause Ellul's critics to see him as a pessimist or as one who over-estimates the power of the car, but this is missing the point. Ellul's particular description is meant to make us think generally about human nature and the limits of individual ability. His statements are thus not arguments but descriptions which imply assumptions and arguments about the world.

Consider also Ellul's use of metaphor. Arguing that a rich and established society will not necessarily have a more vibrant culture than a struggling poor society, Ellul writes

"[Y]ou know very well that the mature man can only rehash discoveries of his youth, explain the ideas of his youth and perfect the synthesis of leaner times. Surely it is not with the rise of his standard of living that the spiritual or the cultural come to him; on the contrary, it is then that they disappear" (*CNC*, 188). He also writes that a politician who sings the praises of democracy is like an unrequited lover, writing poetry to his beloved. All the talk about democracy only indicates that it does not really exist, just as the lover talks about his beloved only as long as he is separated from her. These statements are not arguments but unfounded comparisons. Ellul proves neither why a society is like a man nor why an older man is different than a younger one. He simply says that it is so. The appeal is not to the reader's intellectual or analytical faculties but rather to his/her imagination. A metaphor functions not by comparing one aspect of one thing to another and then proceeding to another point of comparison but rather by comparing one complete object to another complete object. One either sees the point of the metaphor or does not. In using metaphor, which is essentially descriptive, in that it says A is B, invites a change in perception which is more complete than the change proffered by argument. A metaphor contains many compressed arguments. One may argue and prove that a rich society is less cultured than a poor one in many ways but to simply say that a society is like an individual invites, and in fact forces the reader to make his/her own comparisons and in this way invites a large scale change in the way the reader understands things.

Those critics who see Ellul's revolution as consisting of decentralization and ecological conservatism read his work as an argument that these processes serve established goals of material progress and democracy better than do existing processes. However, Ellul's revolution does not consist of these actions but rather of a perceptual change. Ellul is incapable of arguing that we should change certain processes to reach already established goals because his revolution implies the choice of new goals and a

change in the way that we achieve them. Ellul's work does not seek to define the best way of achieving democracy as it is envisioned by existing liberals and conservatives, but rather to re-define democracy. His project requires that he redefine concepts, like freedom and democracy, and one does not redefine these concepts by argument but rather by describing them in new ways. When I argue I assume that my words are understood and my point is to change whatever it is I am talking about. Ellul wants us to redefine our words and ideas. Thus he does not argue but rather applies a new vocabulary or trope to a known situation; he describes the modern world in his way. That Ellul sees things in this way is shown by his arguments regarding communists and capitalists. For Ellul, there is nothing important to choose between these two camps because both use rational techniques to achieve a material sort of progress. Because Ellul is concerned with the individual's moral and ethical being his first task is not to argue between the positions of two groups whom he sees as essentially in agreement, but rather to re-describe progress in spiritual terms. For example, Ellul describes freedom not as the freedom to choose vanilla or chocolate ice cream but rather as awareness of one's individual ability to reject what one seems to need. This is not an argument which is susceptible to proof but rather a different way of describing freedom.

Thus Ellul's own writing style is consistent with many of his explicit conclusions about language. The claims that he is a pessimist, or that his arguments are overly personal and not founded on rational argument and fact, display his assumption that language persuades not by argument but by description; that is, a reader is convinced not by the explicit content of a statement but by the complete impression delivered by the consistency of the statement. Thus rather than calling for a qualitative revolution, he expresses this idea by writing that revolution is impossible yet it must occur. This causes the reader to think more and opens the possibility of actually experiencing a qualitative

revolution in perception. Those who call him a pessimist fail to understand his perception of freedom and the role of independent will in individual action, while those who argue that his work is devoid of rational evidence deny or fail to see his particular notion of truth. Because Ellul's work is concerned with a redefinition of these terms, the response that he does not account for what his critics view as individual freedom and objective truth, is not appropriate. His refusal to argue also acknowledges the fact that his revolution is not made up of a program of actions but rather of a new way of being, which entails a new way of understanding words. The same reason that some of Ellul's critics find him suffocating and bleak, which is the implications of calling him an incorrigible pessimist, is what makes him persuasive in that he rejects all the premises of the materialist society. Namely, he does not argue with the reader in an explicit or open way but rather seeks to show that he is right by showing that his terms and ideas can be used to effectively discuss a wide variety of issues. In this way, Ellul's writing is his revolutionary task. His work presents an opportunity for the reader to change the way in which s/he sees the world, as he or she could not do alone.

This chapter has argued that Ellul ascribes to language the power to influence, and even create, what we imagine is true and in this way to motivate action. Just as language expresses the entire personality of the speaker, it is possible to argue that for Ellul, the linguistic propositions which form the basis of one's outlook actually constitute the individual. As a result, a change in the way that one understands the world, which can occur through the contemplation of language, can actually change the individual. It is this change in the individual that Ellul's revolution requires. Ellul writes that "[R]evolutionary organization must present a unitary criticism of society - that is a criticism that does not compromise with any branch of power anywhere, an unrelenting criticism of every aspect of alienated social existence" (*AR*, 261) In its totality and severity this is precisely what

Ellul's work has provided. His assertion that "I was always searching for motivations that could lead people to make revolutionary decisions," (*ISOS*, 85) implies several conclusions. Firstly it implies that committing a revolutionary act is no simple act of free decision but rather that individuals can act only as they are motivated. Similarly, it supports the contention that Ellul's work is primarily descriptive. Ellul's argument that we only act in accordance with the way we perceive the world indicates that if we are to be motivated by anything it is the way in which we perceive the world. The revolutionary task becomes then to see the world in a way that demands new action. Ellul's work calls for this action by presenting a new way of seeing the world and thus trying to motivate us. Finally, Ellul's work demonstrates his essential agreement with Wittgenstein: revolution, like religion does not consist firstly of action or argumentation but rather of "a passionate commitment to a system of reference ... passionately seizing hold of this interpretation. Instruction of a religious faith, therefore would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 141.

## Conclusion

In these four chapters I have tried to ascertain if any of the existing disagreements in the interpretation of the thought of Jacques Ellul can be solved by a more comprehensive consideration of his work. In so doing I have come to the conclusion that most of Ellul's sociological and religious analysts do not understand him because they do not see that the meaningful arguments that Ellul makes are not at the level of his conclusions. His purpose is not to tell us that we should commit certain definable actions. Rather he is arguing that the modern world demonstrates that there is something flawed in the way the modern way of being apprehends the world. Thus his work argues that individuals are controlled not by their own perceptions of what they can do but rather by the way their own perceptions are structured.

In these arguments I am largely in agreement with David Lovekin who writes that Technique is a way of consciousness and that the only way to escape it is to expose oneself to Otherness, a goal which can most easily be achieved through language. In proving with different textual evidence some of the basic points which Lovekin both assumes and proves, I have attempted to support a position which is in a small minority in Ellul scholarship. What I add to Lovekin's work is a discussion of how Ellul's philosophical position, namely that Christianity consists of the acquisition of dialectical consciousness, is to be lived and does involve certain behaviours and value judgements. Specifically, Ellul sees his revolution as a rejection of power and the attempt to simply be, rather than to succeed. In addition while Lovekin addresses the conceptual nature of Technical consciousness he does not address the alternative concept of human nature which Ellul puts forward. Exploring Ellul's concept of the human will makes it clear that



most critics are wrong to perceive his revolution as a simple political program and clarifies Ellul's arguments regarding the way language establishes conditions for action.

Where most critics argue that Technique is a tyranny of machines, Ellul's work demonstrates that he is really talking about a way of thinking which machines only exemplify. Similarly most critics argue that Ellul's revolution consists of some sort of identifiable program of actions. His work makes it clear that his revolution is better characterized as an awareness or transformation in perception which can not be willed in a simple way. Finally, Ellul's critics generally do not understand the role of language in either his technical works or his works on solution. Language, as an entry point into the imagination, is one of the main pillars both of Technical society and of the revolutionary experience.

Ellul's books are of interest and use to the historian on several levels. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that he personally participated in and experienced most of the major political events and intellectual trends of France in the twentieth century. His arguments and examples are drawn from actual events. His work tries to account for the events of the thirties, World War II, the Algerian crisis and the rise of De Gaulle in the peculiar political system of post-war France and the crisis of 1968. More widely, Ellul bases his arguments on demonstrable evidence from an ever more industrialized and technologized France. Sociologically and historically, his contribution lies in his ability to see a continuity in events from the thirties to the nineties where most other commentators have seen a France divided between political factions and economic classes. The wide scope of Ellul's arguments should not obscure the fact that his work is based on particular facts and events.

Ellul's work is also of interest to historians because it explicitly deals with issues of methodological interest to historians. For example, he writes a great deal about

revolution. His conclusion that a revolution is not simply a political change, or conscious action on the part of a class, but a change in the way the revolutionary individual perceives the world, goes to the heart of a perplexing issue. A revolution is therefore not an intellectual change but a change in what the individual understands and even intuitively feels to be real. Certainly these conclusions are not unique, but they offer a potential answer to the persistent question: What is it that causes a revolution at a particular time in a particular society?

Ellul's work is also useful to historians because he not only argues for a different understanding of language but also demonstrates, in his work, how this style of argument and language functions. In putting forward the idea that the truth is not a proposition but a person, Ellul is in the deconstructionist camp. He seems to share with the deconstructionists the idea that when individuals act they act not according to any existing independent reality in the world but rather according to their beliefs which are generally expressed in language. In many instances, his technical critique consists of contrasting the discourse of the technical world with what he argues actually happens. This process allows him to discuss how the technical individual understands words, and consequently perceives reality and acts. By focusing on the individual's ability to hear what is implied by a message and ascertain meaning through inconsistencies in the words of another, Ellul holds out the hope that the individual may be able to break the perceptual boundaries of his/her own understanding. He also shares problems with the deconstructionist, witness his argument that it is impossible to create an ethics and his contradictory attempt to do so anyway. But perhaps most importantly, Ellul provides a model of how to write according to deconstructionist principles. Ellul's work constantly proposes new definitions for words and new ways of thinking about the literary/historical effort as a whole. The incomprehension that many readers display on reading Ellul demonstrates that he is

actively putting forward a new way of understanding many words and concepts. A sympathetic reading of his discussions of truth, freedom, revolution and impossibility demonstrate how the consistency of his message can cause the reader to change the way in which he perceives language and the world. Thus Ellul's work demonstrates, rather than simply arguing for, the truth of the deconstructionist claim that reality is in large part a result of the way that we understand language. The result of this demonstration for the historian is the realization that rational argument may not always be the most persuasive form of discourse. New concepts can not always be described with existing words. At times, the historians task must be to redefine words, and in so doing, redefine concepts and relationships. Ellul's work is then valuable not only because he discusses subjects such as revolution, truth and freedom, but also because his method offers a new way of thinking about the linguistic persuasive task of the historian.

I hope that I have shown that Ellul's work is both worthy of study and widely misread. I have tried to explain it in a way that makes it both more consistent and more useful than is usually assumed. By useful, I mean that it might now be possible to place Ellul in the wider community of modern French thinkers where he belongs. Ellul's own stated disdain for the most widely read French critics of the twentieth century, including Sartre, Foucault and Derrida has perhaps encouraged his own analysts to consider him as an isolated thinker whose roots are almost exclusively religious. This is a false representation of Ellul's work and an indication that even secular existentialists are concerned with issues that can easily be seen as religious. His fascination with the effects of technology and the exact role of language in decision and action indicate that he has a great deal more in common with other secular French theorists than is generally acknowledged.

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