

## A Moral Theology of Technological Failure

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I MOVED TO THE United Kingdom about a decade ago. When I first moved, as can be imagined, I noticed many different things between my native USA and the UK. Despite speaking the same language, many words and phrases were different. Elevators are called *lifts*, pants are called *trousers*, and a car trunk is a *boot*. One of the most frustrating adjustments I needed to make concerned customer service, and the difference in expected household convenience and comfort. It took three months to get Internet hardware installed in our flat (our apartment), several more months to get a bank account, and I noticed that dishwashers and clothes dryers were a rarity. Things just took longer to get done and required more manual effort.

Whenever I would describe these differences to either my British friends or my American family back home I would recount how these differences in cultural practices expressed different cultural values. The British are very eco-conscious (I've been reprov'd on more than one occasion for putting too much water in the kettle because it takes more energy to boil the excess water I won't use) and have a great love of nature (besides crosswords, gardening and walks in the countryside are beloved pastimes and celebrated as markers of Britishness). They tend to be thrifty and value past generations and traditions. Institutions like the National Trust actively seek to protect the British heritage and identity through preserving old buildings and estates. People live in homes that can sometimes be centuries old (my last house was built in 1542) and,

rather than tearing them down as might be the general custom in the USA, are often retrofitted generation after generation.

Traveling home to the USA many times during the past decade, I'm consistently reminded how comfortable life can be in contradistinction. Central heating can be found in the coldest of climates and one often doesn't need to face the chilly elements walking from one's car in the parking structure to the central shopping mall. Substitute central heating for air conditioning if you are in an oppressively hot climate. Houses tend to be brand new and the walls are free of out-of-use wires from previous occupants (they clutter most British homes). Such bespeaks the American valuation of comfort and efficiency. Indeed, it is this last value, efficiency, which has growing significance for our modern technological age and is the linchpin to a moral theology of technological failure. Simply put, and what I will be arguing for here, technological failure can be morally and personally constructive when a society, such as ours, places efficiency as the supreme good to be pursued. In fact, stated more seriously, we cannot lead Christ-honoring lives that exemplify his virtues unless we challenge and dethrone efficiency as the highest end of society and our individual pursuits.

### **Jacques Ellul and Efficiency as the Highest Value in Our Technological Society**

Jacques Ellul is one who has thought deeply about the impact technology has made on present society, our valorizing of efficiency because of it, and what this means for the Christian faith. But Ellul's trenchant insights and criticisms regarding the technological society aren't primarily levelled at just the proliferation of mechanical objects that make our lives easier, they are just the material instantiations of a much larger force on society. Indeed, Ellul is most concerned with what is termed *technique* in French. *Technique* for Ellul is defined as the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Ellul comments on how the technological society is obsessed with the methods, means, and processes in society and how this focus is, in turn, transforming that society. So, *technique* can be applied to the ordering of governments to yield technocratic rule. It can be applied to the economy to streamline

1. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv.

production systems and generate more capital or it can be applied to human psychological health and yield various therapeutic techniques (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy or psychoanalytic therapy). None of these has technological apparatuses as its object because *technique* is about processes and the analysis of them.

It is easy to see, then, how efficiency relates to Ellul's characterization of the technological society. Let me explain. One of the characterizing features of *technique* in present society is its relation to rationality. When Ellul speaks of the rationalizing nature of *technique* he means that the processes themselves are transformed from illogical and spontaneous means to reflective and fine-tuned ones because of an explicit rational analysis of the processes. Ellul says this is most visible today in our "systemization, division of labor, creation of standards, production norms and the like."<sup>2</sup> Essentially, whereas a given domain might have had several different processes equally utilized in the past (e.g., perhaps different methods of fixing soles on to shoes was used), the rational character of modern *technique* does not allow for multiple means because one will be more logical than the others and will fare better than the others. Ellul says, "The choice is less and less a subjective one among several means which are potentially applicable. It is really a question of finding the best means in the absolute sense, on the basis of numerical calculation."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when the processes are inspected, scrutinized, and refined using the measure of rational reflection, only the most efficient means remains. Human creativity and choice, therefore, have little to contribute to the overall development of technology and other systems. The hunt for the best means possible requires no creativity because unnecessary components of the process are abolished and deemed inappropriate.

Even more grave for present society is that this search for the most efficient means tends towards universalization in society. As new technologies are created and integrated into existing technological infrastructure, new areas of human activity are rationalized that have never been before. When Ellul speaks of the universalizing character of *technique*, he means that no area remains unchanged by its totalizing and rationalizing force. Why does the application of rationality necessarily lead to such propagation? First, inefficient means have no possibility of surviving against efficient ones in the marketplace of means. In a kind of

2. Ibid., 79.

3. Ibid., 21.

survival of the fittest scenario, only the most efficient will remain. Indeed as one commentator has claimed, “The entrance of technique into a non-technical milieu forces its transformation into a technical one, since efficiency renders all less efficient means obsolete.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, Ellul also states that, second, humanity provides no resistance to the momentum technique has generated because we have been swept away by the technical revolution; we are bedazzled by it and have given up our freedom:

On the other hand, all people in our time are so passionate about technology, so utterly shaped by it, so assured of its superiority, so engulfed in the technological environment, that they are all, without exception, oriented toward technological progress, all working toward it, no matter what their trade, each individual seeking the best way to use his instrument or perfect a method, a device etc.<sup>5</sup>

Ellul was writing this in the mid-twentieth century. Observing people line up in front of the Apple Store hours if not days before the new iPhone is released, Ellul might encourage us to ask now: How much more visible is our technological passion today than it was decades ago? And how much more difficult is it today to break from the exceeding technological pace in present society for fear of being left behind? We want things faster and done with less effort: the very definition of efficiency.<sup>6</sup> We live in a society where efficiency is the supreme virtue.

### **Diagnosis of a Society Concerned With Maximizing Efficient Means Rather than Pursuing Human-Affirming Ends**

What is the problem with a society and people that elevate efficiency to the highest goal of society and individual lives? As so many have claimed: it is dehumanizing. Those in a technological society that solely focus on maximizing efficient means are in serious danger of losing sight of the true virtuous ends of a society and life. As David Lewin argues, “on the one hand technology presents pure ends to us by way of the interface,

4. Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul*, 17.

5. Ellul, *The Technological System*, 209.

6. For a more sustained treatment of Ellul’s treatment of efficiency see Son, “Are We Still Pursuing Efficiency?” For an excellent treatment of how efficiency still figures prominently in contemporary society, owing to the force of technology, see chapter 7 of Alexander, *The Mantra of Efficiency*.

while on the other hand technology continually improves efficiency for efficiency's sake, thereby displacing the end for which efficiency strives."<sup>7</sup> When the final goals of a life or society are reoriented around the search for the best means, true ends are eclipsed and all kinds of moral issues arise because of disordered values.

An extreme example is visible in the testimony of Rudolf Höss, the Nazi commandant of Auschwitz, at the Nuremberg trials in 1946. What is horrifying in Höss's testimony and remarked on by trial psychologists is the cold, calm, and collected nature of his description of "processing" Jews in the concentration camp. What is so striking in reading his testimony is the excessive technical detail he gives to the court regarding the actual process of genocide at Auschwitz; how the "processing of so many bodies" was an incredibly technical task. Indeed, here is the leader of one of the most horrendous concentration camps at the center of one of the most egregious crimes against humanity the world has ever seen, and most of his testimony is made up of lists and technical production details. The expected remorseful disposition is instead replaced by a technocrat who worries about making the "process" more efficient. There is no feeling, there is just the work at hand that needs to be made more efficient.<sup>8</sup> Of course this liminal case is an extreme example of the consequences of focusing so intently on efficiency that is the product of our technological society. In spite of its severity, it does help throw into relief just how dangerous such radical obsession with efficiency can be when it loses sight of proper ends, when it becomes the paramount end for any domain of life.

In fact, it is precisely the elevation of the technological system in society, what others have called the mass society, over the human individual that has been criticized by so many critics and scholars the last two centuries. One of the most trenchant and long-lasting criticisms comes from existentialism. As Paul Tillich has argued, existentialism "rebels in the name of personality against the depersonalizing forces of technical society."<sup>9</sup> Tillich goes on to outline how critics as diverse as Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche, in their own way, fight for the dignity and common core experience of humanity in the face of debilitating technical forces. Kierkegaard addresses the single individual and claims "the crowd is untruth." Marx seeks to outline how the class system underlies the de-

7. Lewin, *Technology and the Philosophy of Religion*, 113.

8. Read more in Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary*; Höss, *Death Dealer*.

9. Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, 123.

bilitating production system that all are slave to and how to emancipate the people in it for the sake of the individuals themselves. For Nietzsche, “man becomes . . . a cog in the all-embracing machine of production and consumption” and robs each individual of the “creative power of life.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than seeking liberation through the “leap of faith” as Kierkegaard argued, or through social dialectics following Marx, Nietzsche turned to the “depth of personal life itself.”<sup>11</sup> These critics, and many more like them, have sought to return to the human being its dignity that has been seriously eroded by the technological society. In spite of often diverging views, these critics invite us to ask: what are these technical means for (and indeed the study of the means) but to help human beings flourish? When human beings are functionalized and not treated as an end in themselves, this is the very definition of dehumanization. A society that elevates too highly efficiency is in danger of such dehumanization.

Of course, much more could be said that diagnoses the maladies that arise with a technological society that neglects humanistic values as its ultimate goal. One is worth highlighting, in particular, because it occurs so frequently amongst critics of technology in society and relates to faith and religion. Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Erich Fromm, and Martin Heidegger all note, in some way, that modern technology in present society has stunted robust spirituality in its individual members. Marcel refers to this as a “broken world”<sup>12</sup> where “the spirit of technology” has “become detrimental to the flowering of humanity” and works “adversely against the aspiration of the person toward its fulfillment in being.”<sup>13</sup> What is most at stake for Marcel is that human beings lose their sense of orientation to transcendence and spirituality because of the “mass society.” For Marcel, human fulfillment and deep inner spirituality are seriously in danger today. Fromm similarly diagnoses humanity and even suggests that only a shared common spirituality, with holistic humanistic aims and sensibilities, will be able to combat the destruction of psychological and spiritual health wrought by our technological society.<sup>14</sup> Tillich also warns that the “thingification” of persons and mass society reduce the human center of ultimate purpose and, hence, spirituality. In the process,

10. Ibid., 127.

11. Ibid., 128.

12. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, 18–56.

13. Gendreau, “Gabriel Marcel’s Personalist Ontological Approach to Technology,” 233. Also see chapter 3 of Marcel, *Man against Mass Society*.

14. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, 48–64, 137ff.

the very kernel of humanity and its dignity is degraded.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Martin Heidegger contends that the present technological condition seriously limits our relation to the world and that we are in danger of losing sight of our relation to Being itself and, hence, are alienated from ourselves and everything around us.<sup>16</sup>

All of these figures recognize that technology has vast repercussions for humanity's inner spiritual life and indeed a deep connection with the rest of the world. We might say that the obsession with efficient means takes so much of our attention that it therefore distracts us from much more affirming, deep values and activities. The greatest vice in a technological society is boredom—the most inefficient use of attention. Yet, the avenue to a deep inner life begins with waiting, boredom's brother, and attending to things in a non-instrumental way. Indeed, technological life and keeping up with the exceeding pace it demands keeps us from lingering on those very important, but difficult, existential and spiritual issues and questions that are critical to a meaningful life. Questions like: Am I really making a difference? Am I doing the right thing? What is this all for? These kinds of issues resist quantification and because we don't live our lives under the weight of them we will never be fulfilled. We trade long-lasting fulfillment for immediate payoff. Being animated by modern technological efficiency keeps us from true shalom.

### **Breaking the Spell with Heidegger and Reordering Our Values with Augustine**

If lauding efficiency to this degree has had such dramatic effects on ourselves and society, what is to be done and how might this all relate to the theme of this book on theological appropriations of failure? On the face of it, failure of any kind would seem to be detrimental to any form of human activity and to humanity's flourishing. Indeed, specifically technological failure can lead to great suffering and even death. More and more we entrust our lives to technology and the engineers that design them, whether riding in an elevator in a skyscraper or traveling over a bridge. Hence, we are more at risk today when they fail and this is to be lamented. Technological failure is a serious matter. However, the failure I am talking about is a failure of the very ethos of a technological society

15. Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation*, 118–21.

16. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

that has championed efficiency as the highest goal. Can the failure of certain kinds of technology be constructive, particularly when they fail at being efficient? I think they can because an inefficient, failed technology awakens us to the relation we have with that technology and to our task and environment. It causes us to assess our purposes and aims.

Heidegger is instructive here. In Heidegger's magnum opus, *Being and Time*, he describes a basic and central activity of any human being (*Dasein*): tool use. Specifically, he focuses on the relation the human being has to a particular tool, a hammer, during the process of use. Essentially, when one is engaged in hammering the hammer recedes into the background. It is not consciously being used as a thing that requires direct and abstract reflection. In a way, Heidegger points to how objective descriptions of the subject (human being) and object (hammer) are abstractions from the actual phenomenological tool use. Instead, the carpenter has no explicit awareness of the hammer as an object, nor the environment in which he works: the environment, tool, and person are caught up in one common action and relation. Now Heidegger goes on to explain why this matters for his existential analytic of *Dasein* but, for our purposes, what is most interesting is how the failure of the hammer awakens the carpenter to explicit awareness of the tool, environment, and purpose or intended aim for hammering. As Heidegger says: "But when an assignment has been disturbed—when something is unusable for some purpose—then the assignment becomes explicit . . . we catch sight of the 'towards-this' itself, and along with it everything connected with the work—the whole 'workshop' . . ." <sup>17</sup> The failure of the tool awakens the individual from being caught up in their action and illuminates the network of relations they have, including their intended aim. The flow of the efficient action is interrupted by a tool not performing efficiently and this causes one to assess one's ends.

Heidegger's phenomenological account of technological failure can be expanded upon. For, the effect of technological failure, assessment of one's ends, has vast implications for the moral life. Heidegger surely means here that the tool user is made aware of their intended aims with just the present action and the particular piece of technology. However, once functionalist actions move to reflective teleological value-laden discourse, regardless of whether it begins with just the present technological action, we are then in the domain of moral deliberation: why pursue this

17. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 105 [I.3.75].



goal instead of another? Why pursue a functional action rather than an artistic one, or rather than a spiritual one? Indeed, breaking free from the flow of efficient means we are then awakened to the fact that we aren't just *homo faber*, "man the maker," but are so much more: *homo aestheticus*, *homo religiosus*, and *homo spiritualis*.

If Heidegger helps us to break out of the technological circle to focus again on "ends" and "purposes," then Augustine helps us to recognize that anything but *caritas* as the supreme end of any human endeavor is doomed to dysfunction and dissatisfaction. Augustine famously speaks of human happiness and virtue by referring to what is the object of our love. Indeed, Augustine even speaks of sin in terms of love—preferring to speak of sin arising from loving the wrong things in the wrong ways. Indeed, the human desire to love is fulfilled and the human being is happy/flourishes when their loves are ordered properly and things are loved for their own sake rather than the utility that they afford to us.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Augustine puts it more strongly in a theological register when he says that one can never be happy unless God is loved as the supreme end and source, and God's creation is loved in light of God.<sup>19</sup> In this way, our happiness and well-being is not a final end alone but rather a product of loving God and because of loving God, loving all that he has created. To quote the oft-cited refrain of Augustine: "you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, any other value placed as the pinnacle of human achievement will ultimately end in dissatisfaction and dysfunction. Any society or individual that seeks to set its foundation on anything less is doomed.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

I've argued here that technological failure can be morally and personally constructive, particularly when that failure is embedded in a technological society that has placed efficiency as its supreme value. Ellul teaches that one of the animating characteristics of modern technology is the

18. Augustine, *City of God*, 637 [XV.23].

19. Kent, "Augustine's Ethics."

20. Augustine, *Confessions*, 21 [I.1].

21. For further reference to how Augustine and his followers understand how societies themselves are animated by what they love see Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 193–210; O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*.

rationalizing and universalizing force it has on every area of human activity. Efficient means will triumph in any situation and particularly when this value is celebrated by members of such a technological society as ours. Technological failure—that is when it no longer contributes to efficient work and is not catastrophic to the well-being of people involved—can be morally uplifting because, as Heidegger intimates, it awakens the people embedded in the technological task to explicit reflection on the purposes and goals of those involved: it leads to moral and personal deliberation and can be the avenue to reorienting and reordering our lives and societies towards more loving and, hence, fulfilling ends.

In my move from the USA to the UK, I often catch myself grumbling about trains not being on time, my water heater running out of hot water prematurely while I'm in the shower, and the battery on my phone dying. But I have come to learn that these inefficiencies merely reveal a societal culture that has not become as bedazzled with efficiency as my native USA and that this can be an opportunity to recognize there can be more important values at work. I have learned to cultivate the virtue of waiting that gives me the space to do things like pray for my fellow delayed passengers. I might use the extra time not spent in the shower to read a story to my daughter. Or, instead of searching for a spot to recharge my phone, I could start a conversation with someone around me. The point is that the system and its continual efficiency as the supreme virtue does not matter as much as the people in it and their virtuous development that ultimately finds its source in a loving God. So, when you are frustrated because your computer is slow, angry when your car breaks down, or you choose to not to get the latest smartphone but instead keep your perfectly capable but less efficient one, remember that these moments can be acts of virtuous personal development and can help reorient you to the more important purposes and goals of life that will invariably help you flourish better.