Translator's Introduction

Rediscovering Ellul's Theological Ethics

In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton describes the special kind of pleasure found only in a *re*discovery: the thrill of adventure and novelty dovetails with the beloved familiarity of a homecoming.[1] Creating this new translation of *To Will & To Do* offered this unique pleasure, uniting the adventure of uncovering a lost and unknown manuscript with the joy of revisiting a classic text from a singular writer.

While exploring Ellul's vast and multifaceted corpus for my doctoral research, I felt I had stumbled upon a forgotten gold mine. When I described this impression to Stanley Hauerwas, he replied, "I think you're right." When juxtaposed with giants such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, Hauerwas, etc., Jacques Ellul's relatively minor place in contemporary Protestant theological dialogue might lead one to believe that the light of his theological contribution is waning, its relevance now largely behind us. On the contrary, I suggest that a full understanding of Ellul's true importance is still to come. This new translation of *To Will & To Do* hopes to mark a key moment in this rediscovery among anglophone readers, who continue to show a strong (and growing) interest in his work.

But why should a new edition of *To Will & To Do* play such a central role? Should not this rediscovery belong to a new translation of one of his more celebrated texts—such as the book that first secured his North American notoriety, *The Technological Society*? Even in the theological domain, his *Meaning of the City* and *Humiliation of the Word* have had more sustained echoes than any of his theological-ethical volumes. Could it be that these ethical volumes were forgotten for a reason?

1. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 2–5.

In fact, Ellul's volumes of ethics have yet to make their true mark on anglophone readers. In what follows, I will set out the case for why we need to revisit Ellul's theological-ethical works; offer a short overview of Ellul's plan for these works, and the place of *To Will & To Do* within them; concisely summarize the contents of *To Will & To Do*, volume 1; briefly situate *To Will & To Do* within twentieth-century theological-ethical discussion; and propose ways in which it might be relevant for us today.

The Need for a New Hearing

If we are to hear him seriously, we must recognize that despite its many merits, the anglophone reception of his work has not allowed Ellul's voice to come through loud and clear. Reading Ellul can be a challenge at times, even in French or in an excellent translation. His writing—which spanned specialist domains such as politics, communication, sociology, law, history, biblical commentary, and ethics—was intended as an address to the intellectual layperson. He tried to present a huge amount of specialized material in a relatively accessible way, challenging his reader to do the intellectual work necessary to understand their present age and formulate an ethical response. However, this meant that he sometimes eschewed academic conventions, which—when combined with his often polemical directness and his penchant for criticizing his friends and saying nothing to those he disagreed with—led him to be taken less seriously in the academy. And yet, his communicative style risks leading the lay reader to think they have understood him when in fact they have not. This means that the anglophone reader should be doubly on guard: this balance between accessibility and rigor can be tricky to negotiate.

Something is always lost in any translation, but the varying quality of existing English translations of Ellul's works means that even a careful reader of these translations would come out with the wrong impression. I am not referring to simple typographical errors, misspellings, or even misunderstandings, which are inevitable in any work of this kind (and will undoubtedly plague even the present translations). Beyond these errata, Ellul's English translations have been plagued by historical mistakes, strange editorial choices, and huge gaps. Some translators misread Ellul's references, failing to acknowledge the discussions in which Ellul took part. Some translators removed quotation marks where they should not have, leaving discerning readers to think that Ellul simply plagiarized Karl Barth or Karl Marx. Due to Ellul's popularity in North America, some of Ellul's books were published in English before he finished writing them in French, which

means that the French editions are more polished, complete, and sometimes greatly expanded compared to the English translations. These problems have been flagrant in translations of Ellul's theological ethics, and most particularly *The Ethics of Freedom*: compared to the three-volume French edition, it lacks more than a full volume of Ellul's argument, leaving out important passages that show Ellul's detailed engagement with the intellectual currents of his time. Anglophone readers are left with a piecemeal account that cannot communicate the true nuance of Ellul's structured thought.

It is no wonder, then, that Ellul's largest and most careful works are overlooked and forgotten in anglophone discussions. Focusing on his studies of technology or politics veils the fact that on the sociological side, Ellul was a *legal historian* at heart. His largest sociological work is his as yet untranslated five-volume *Histoire des institutions* (History of Institutions). What drives his sociology is less a concern for technology (which is nevertheless important) than an interest in understanding social unity, the bond between the individual and the group. It is because of this interest that Ellul's *Technological Society* sees *technique* as a threat to societal development—not the other way around. Things are similar in his theology: focusing on his more accessible and provocative works veils the fact that theologically, Ellul was not a biblical scholar or a systematician but a *theological ethicist* at heart. His theological ethics comprise his most significant (and weighty) contributions; unless these are accounted for, we give Ellul only a partial hearing, ignoring some of his most serious work.

(Re)discovering Ellul's Theological-Ethical Project

These two parts of Ellul's corpus—the sociological and the theological—were meant to be taken together, confronting one another. Ellul's theology confronts the reality observed by his sociology with a truth of a different order. His sociology confronts his theology, ensuring that it does not cloister itself away in a hermetic discourse or try to ignore the problems of the world. If the church is willing to perform a serious self-critique, Ellul's sociology gives her an impressive set of diagnostic tools to do so. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2 NRSV). For Ellul, sociology was an attempt to describe this "conforming" world. If sociology can describe the church in precisely the same way as any other sociological group, perhaps she ought to question if she is guided by the Holy Spirit or by some sociological force

or pressure.[2] His ethics, then, attempts to offer the church ways to orient herself, to incarnate the presence of Jesus Christ in the modern world.

Ellul planned his theological ethics in four parts. After a substantial introduction (part one), parts two, three, and four would be an ethical outworking of Saint Paul's trio of faith, hope, and love. For faith, Ellul envisaged an ethics of holiness; for hope, an ethics of freedom; and for love, an ethics of relationship. This massive project was never completed. Ellul began with *To Will & To Do*, which constitutes his introduction (though, as we shall see below, it was never fully available until now). Convinced of its contemporary urgency, he then wrote *The Ethics of Freedom*, which includes three volumes in French (of which only two are partially rendered in the English translation). A full manuscript of *The Ethics of Holiness* exists; we are hopeful that it will be published in French in coming years, after which it may be translated into English. Ellul never managed to write *The Ethics of Relationship*. *To Will & To Do* thus introduces Ellul's ethics, laying the groundwork for all that follows. It was originally published in French in 1964 and translated into English in 1969, followed by a second French edition in 2013.

However, this is not the whole story. More than a decade after the 1964 publication of *To Will & To Do,* in his preface to *The Ethics of Freedom* (1976), Ellul remarked that though the full Introduction had not yet been published, he felt the need to move onto the next major portion of his ethics. This sign that there might be a further, still unpublished portion of *To Will & To Do* was happily confirmed when a lost manuscript of this second volume was recently rediscovered.[3] Published in French for the first time in 2018, volume 2 of *To Will & To Do* picks up where volume 1 left off, filling a major gap in our grasp of Ellul's ethical project. The present translation of (what we now know to be) volume 1—following its initial English translation by fifty years—complements a first English edition of volume 2. Anglophone readers are thus offered a quality presentation of Ellul's introduction to Christian ethics, putting part one of his ethical project on a timely par with the French editions.

To Will & To Do: Laying the Foundations

To Will & To Do is divided into five parts, with the first three parts comprising volume 1 and the last two parts comprising volume 2. The three parts in volume 1 include critiques of ethics as a discipline and of what the good is *not*, descriptions of different goods adopted by societies, and a discussion

2. This is especially visible in Ellul, *False Presence in the Modern World*.
3. See my introduction to volume 2 for more detail.

of the *impossibility* and *necessity* of a distinctively Christian ethic. The two parts in volume 2 approach the conditions, characteristics, and content of a Christian ethic. Ellul is clear at the outset that his ethics deals with biblical revelation; it is *Christian* ethics. However, he is also hopeful that non-Christians will not dismiss it on these grounds; the whole value of his work comes from confrontation in dialogue.

Part one discusses the origins of the ethical question of good and evil. In these chapters, Ellul clearly lays out his basic positions, which go hand in hand with his interpretation of the biblical narrative recounting the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis. For Ellul, human knowledge of good and evil already displays a broken communion with God. Ellul says his position is explicitly "nominalist": a thing is good *because* God says it is, and not the other way around. Anything humans call good is necessarily set up in opposition to what God calls good. All human morality, therefore, is made in separation from God, in the "order of the fall" and the "order of necessity." Ellul uses "necessity" to imply that human morality is a kind of social constraint on freedom. He notes that morality is crucial to the individual-society link. Because morality is something inevitably produced in social groups, an individual's decision to disobey morality may not harm them, but questions the group and their place in it. Part one concludes with a chapter on "the double morality." For Christians, morality is "double" because on the one hand, they cannot be conformed to the same morality as the rest of society. And yet, this other morality is nevertheless important and ought to be accounted for and respected when possible. The morality of our society is thus one part of the double; the ethic that results from the community gathered around scriptural revelation marks the other part.

Part two offers a brief sociological examination of the various "moralities of the world." Ellul notes, first, that there is indeed a diversity of moralities. As it is lived out in different societies throughout world history, morality is not absolute but relative and changing. Since morality is a human phenomenon, "We must approach it from the relative point of view of human understanding, not the absolute point of view of metaphysics" (122). If one refuses this approach and adopts a metaphysical standpoint, one treats morality only theoretically, as many thinkers have done. Without claiming to address all such theories, and in dialogue with sociologists of his era, Ellul treats the ensemble of theoretical moralities as a phenomenon. He notes that theoretical morality springs primarily from Mediterranean, "Judeo-Greek" civilization (126). Offering strong critiques of existentialism and of the philosophy of values popular at the time, Ellul notes that these moralities offer idealized images of their own society; they remain theoretical and are never actually applied. In practice, morality is neither absolute

nor unimportant: it is inevitably produced by human groups, linked to their individual and social life. However, the behavior of individuals never fully aligns with their group's morality. Either individuals assume their group's morality, in which case it becomes a destructive moral*ism*, or they reject it, in which case it is an equally isolating *im*moralism. Part two finishes with a chapter on "technical morality," a morality adapted to the world of techniques. Ellul sees this morality progressively replacing the old bourgeois morality derived from Christendom, which still characterizes much of Western society.

Part three describes the *impossibility* and the *necessity* of a Christian ethic. For all the reasons laid out in part one and more, a Christian morality is impossible. Like any other morality, it is set up in the order of the fall, of necessity, and in opposition to God. The New Testament does not give us a complete ethical system; it discusses human action with a different vocabulary. Christian ethics is a function of God's free gift of grace, which cannot be made into a law. Christian ethics cannot be a casuistic system—that is, a description of possible situations and the right or wrong action to perform in each case. Christian ethics implies following the Holy Spirit, whose action cannot be reduced to a law. The freedom of God and the freedom of the Christian liberated in Christ and living in God's presence problematize any theoretical ethical construction. Ellul continues with a schematic of the formulation of Christian moralities in the history of the Western church. From the very beginning, the church posed ethical questions to Paul, to elders and bishops, to which they cautiously responded. But in later centuries, less caution, Greek philosophical influence, and the rise of Christendom led to a transformation: ethics became more collective and objective, less personal and relative. Ellul finishes his historical schematic with a provocative charge: "While the Reformers reaffirmed the authentic content of the Revelation, despite appearances, they did not elaborate an Ethic corresponding to their Theology" (223). Nevertheless, Christian ethics is *necessary*, because as a human group, the church will spontaneously produce a morality, whether consciously or not. It is thus better that it be conscious and willed, purposely articulated as something relative. Otherwise, Christian ethics might collapse into a naïve use of Scripture to create an absolute moral law—and thus remain too transcendent and unrelated to this world; or contemporary problems may be seen as having no relation to biblical revelation, since times have changed. For Ellul, the difficult task of Christian ethics is to maintain the importance of human life and works while acknowledging their relativity. This relativity ought to be appropriate to their situation in time: neither untainted works of a past creation nor works in the fullness of the eschatological kingdom of God, the Christian's

works are works of the in-between, the already-but-not-yet; we ought to treat them commensurate with their transitional and fleeting character.

A Moment in Dialogue

To Will & To Do is perhaps the finest example of Ellul's dialogue with major voices in twentieth-century theological ethics. Throughout both volumes, we find Ellul engaged in extended appreciative dialogue with Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Ricoeur, Reinhold Niebuhr, Oscar Cullmann, Gunner Hillerdal, Niels Søe, Hans Reiner, and Gerhard von Rad, as well as more interdisciplinary voices such as Émile Durkheim, Georges Gurvitch, and Henri Bergson. His dialogue with Bernard Häring, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and the philosophers of "value" is more critical than appreciative, but it importantly demonstrates the range and depth of his awareness and engagement in the broader conversations of his time. Briefly reviewing a few elements of these dialogues can help us see how Ellul positions himself therein.

Barth and Bonhoeffer are unquestionably Ellul's two most prominent interlocutors in *To Will & To Do*. Almost without exception, Ellul's citations and interactions with both (primarily from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* II.2 and Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*) display agreement with and support for their positions. I will address Barth below; concerning Bonhoeffer, *To Will & To Do* marks Ellul as a very early and careful reader of the German theologian's *Ethik*.[4] This latter work was not translated into French until 1965, a year after *To Will & To Do*'s initial publication. Even upon its translation, it received little attention, for "[*Ethics*] was no sooner eclipsed . . . by [Bonhoeffer's] *Letters and Papers from Prison*."[5] Ellul's attention to *Ethics* thus distinguishes his reading of Bonhoeffer from the lesser importance accorded to this volume among the majority of his contemporaries. In their introduction to the 2013 French edition, Müller and Rognon note that Ellul particularly drew out Bonhoeffer's "dialectic of the ultimate and the penultimate."[6] Only later (in his treatise on secularity, *The New Demons*) does Ellul concentrate on his sole serious criticism of Bonhoeffer, concerning the latter's statements on "man come of age"—which, first, come not from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* but from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and second, were the subject of varying interpretations in the French discussion.[7]

4. Müller and Rognon, "Introduction," 9; see also 11.
5. Müller and Rognon, "Introduction," 9.
6. Müller and Rognon, "Introduction," 12.
7. See Ellul, *The New Demons*, 19–20, 45, and especially 215–18; Ellul, *Hope in Time*

Ever since his discovery of Barth through his friendship with the French Barthian Jean Bosc, the Swiss theologian remained one of Ellul's most significant lifelong dialogue partners (alongside Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx). In the 1930s, Ellul found that Barth's thought "unblocked" an impasse in the French Reformed church, split between "conservative" Calvinists and a "liberal" approach that applied science to interpretation.[8] Barth caused Ellul to rethink his earlier Calvinist stance on human freedom and the question of salvation, eventually pushing him toward his distinct theological emphases on freedom and universal salvation, yet still opposed to a thoroughgoing theological liberalism. Still, Ellul wrote,

> . . . [I] had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth's theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and politics. However, there was everything there necessary to formulate an ethic without losing any of the rediscovered truth, being totally faithful to the Scriptures, but without legalism or literalism. But this work seemed possible to me only if one conserved the groundwork laid by Barth . . .[9]

Much the same as his approach to Marx—in which Ellul much preferred Marx's own writings to Marxists and their application thereof—Ellul highly esteemed Barth's work but thought that his ethics were insufficiently developed, a situation that led Barthian Christians into conformism. He thus set out to construct an ethic on Barthian foundations to remedy this problem. Additionally, Ellul specifies that it was to be primarily an Old Testament ethic:

> After Luther's and Barth's commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans, it was not worth the trouble to do another one, and at that time I thought the Gospels were clear and easily understood. So I was especially attracted by the Old Testament . . . That is why I wrote biblical commentaries on the books of Kings, Jonah, and Job . . . I also searched the Old Testament for the foundations of an ethic, and this led me progressively to construct one.[10]

Alongside the Old Testament books mentioned, Ellul drew significantly on the prophets, the legal texts, and above all on the book of Ecclesiastes,

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of Abandonment, 98n4; and indirectly, Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, 85–90.

8. Ellul, "Karl Barth and Us," 22.

9. Ellul, "Karl Barth and Us," 24.

10. Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, 175.