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The search for ethics in a technicist society

Jacques Ellul

1983

In order to avoid misunderstanding it may be useful to mention again

that what I mean by “Technique” – often wrongly called “Technology”

(cf. La Technique ou l’enjau du siècle [1954], Le Système technicien [1977]).

What is called Technique can be assimilated neither to the machine nor to

a collection of machines, methods and products. No longer a secondary

factor integrated into a nontechnical society and civilisation, Technique has

become the dominant factor in the Western world, so that the best name

for our society is the “technicist society”[1]. It is on technique that all other

factors depend. Technique is no longer some uncertain and incomplete

intermediary between humanity and the natural milieu. The latter is totally

dominated and utilized (in Western society). Technique now constitutes a

fabric of its own, replacing nature. Technique is the complex and complete

milieu in which human beings must live, and in relation to which they

must define themselves. It is a universal mediator, producing a generalised

mediation, totalizing and aspiring to totality. The concrete example of

this is the city. The city is the place where technique excludes all forms

of natural reality. Apart from the city, the only choices left are either the

ubanization of rural areas, or “desertfication” (nature then being submitted

to a technical exploitation controlled by a very small number of people).

This emphasizes again that technique is really the Milieu in which modern

humanity is placed. This technical milieu involves, on the human side,

a complete re-examination of ancient modes of behavior, or physiological

capacities (cf. G. Friedman, [2] Sept études sur ’homme et la technique). On the

other side, technique constitutes a system in the strict sense of the term (cf.

Bertalanffy), that is to say, an ensemble in which factors are so closely linked together that:

- Each element has a meaning or significance only within the ensemble.

[1] The translation of Ellul’s “Technique,” “technique,” and “socieété technicienne” have

presented problems for all English versions of his work. In this instance we have sought to be more literal than on other occasions when “technique” has been redered as “technology” and “société technicienne” as “technological society.”

[2] The French text mis-titles this volume “Sept essais”.

- Any modification of an element has repercussions on the ensemble

and modifies it. Any modification of the ensemble likewise modifies

the elements of their relationships.

- Privileged, almost exclusive relationships exist among the elements

of the system, regardless of what is situated outside the system.

It is thus necessary to consider technique as an ensemble[3] The charac-

teristics of the technical phenomenon are Autonomy, Unity, Universality,

Totalization. Technique obeys a specific rationality. The characteristics of

technical progress are self-augmentation, automization, absence of limits,

casual progression, a tendency toward acceleration, disparity, and ambiva-

lence. Nevertheless, technique is lacking in one of the essential characteris-

tics found in any organized ensemble, reaction. It is not yet able to control

its errors and dysfunctions, to react on its source and modify itself. However,

we may now be in the presence of the progressive elaboration of such a

reactive capability. The ethical problem, that is human behavior, can only

be considered in relation to this system, not in relation to some particular

technical object or other. Learning how to use “rightly” or “do good” with

such and such a technique does not much matter, since each technique can

only be interpreted within the ensemble. If technique is a milieu and a sys-

tem, the ethical problem can only be posed in terms of this global operation.

Behavior and particular choices no longer have much significance. What is

required is thus a global change in our habits or values, the rediscovery of

either an existential ethics or a new ontology.

1 Avoiding some traditional ethical mistakes

Since all previous morality is conceived in terms of relationships between

the individual and society, which is in turn taken to be the normal human

milieu, traditional and ethical concepts and constructions appear to me

today to be completely devalued by the development of this new milieu

for humanity. At the same time, the total increase of techniques completely

annihilates the possibility of “pure morality,” and even the utilitarianism

no longer has an ethical significance if one is situated inside the technical

milieu[4].

Frequently, the ethical problem related to technique is posed by consid-

ering technique as a simple neutral tool. People have control over technique

(in general) just as they do over automobiles. They can use their cars rightly

[3] The bullets for the three previous sentences and the introduction of a new paragraph

which this sentence constitute editorial adjustments of the French text. Similar editing has taken place at a few other points in this translation.

4 The preceeding paragraph constitutes a footnote to the section title in the French text.

in either of two ways: according to the laws of cars themselves (that is, cor-

rectly and in accordance with the mechanism itself, in order to make the

best use of it and avoid damaging it as much as possible), or they can use

them so as to make someone happy (by giving a lift to a hitch-hiker). But

they can also use them wrongly, again in two ways: they can either damage

their machines, or cause an accident. It is also possible for people, thanks to

automobiles, to will evil (to assassinate someone). A car is a simple neutral

agent which is heavily dependent on the decisions of those who use it. The

automobile cannot start itself, any more than a computer is able to program

itself.

Yet even at this level, things are not so simple; the sole fact of owning

a car and using it modifies the driver. One is not the same person when

driving a Mercedes as when driving a Chevrolet. One is not the same

person when with one's family and when behind the wheel. Handling a

tool leads to a number of behavioral and even psychological consequences.

Moreover, there is no possible comparison between the fact of having a tech-

nical tool and that of being in the technical system / The latter is neither neutral nor mastered by some human being. The system has its own operational

laws that lead to an ensemble of consequences, and the only thing a person

can do is to register those consequences. Changing the system is out of the

question, unless one goes for total regression ("zero growth," for example).

Technique is not neutral, it has its own orientations, implications, and op-

erational conditions. . . . [5] It modifies the totality of human beings and their

environment.

Another approach frequently derived from the previous one is the con-

viction that human beings must establish the ends, and that technique is no

more than a set of means to achieve these ends. Here again, people think

that a person has (or is supposed to have) mastery of the phenomenon and

that all one has to do is to impose the proper ends upon it. It is quite right

to say that technique is only made of means, it is an ensemble of means (We

shall return to this later), but only with the qualification that these means

no obey their own laws and are no longer subdinated to ends. Besides,

one must distinguish ideal ends (values, for example), goals (national, for

example), and the objectives (immediate objectives: a researcher who tries

to solve some particular problem). Science and technique develop accord-

ing to objectives, rarely and accidently in relation to more general goals,

and never for ethical or spiritual ideals. There is no relation between the

proclamation of values (justice, freedom, etc.) and the orientation of tech-

nical development. Those who are concerned with values (theologians,

philosophers, etc.) have no influence on the specialists of technique and

cannot require, for example, that some aspect of current research or other

means should be abandoned for the sake of some value.

5 Ellipses here and elsewhere are Ellul's.

A very significant aspect of this incapacity is shown through the more

and more frequent tendency of scientists or technicians to transform them-

selves into moralists, it is from techniques that a proposed ethics in harmony

with the system arises. In the same way, when one envisages the possibil-

ity (genetic, chemical, electrical) of fundamentally modifying the human

being, of creating a new being in a test-tube, of placing electrodes in the

brain, etc., one does not ask what type of human being one wants to create.

And when this question is raised, it seems obvious that it is up to scien-

tists or technicians to decide. The same thing happens today when there

is proposal to modify education – in order to adopt new techniques. The

big deficiency in the finalist position is to ignore a fundamental law of the

development of technique, which is that technique develops according to a

casual and not an end-oriented process.

To adopt one of these first two ethical orientations is to argue that it is

human beings who must create a good use for technique or impose ends

on it, but always neglecting to specify which human beings. Is the “who” not

important? is technique able to be mastered by just any passer-by, every

worker, some ordinary person? Is this person the politician? The public

at large? the intellectual and technician? Some collectivity? Humanity as

a whole? For the most part politicians cannot grasp technique, and each

specialist can understand an infinitesimal portion of the technical universe,

just as each citizen only makes use of an infinitesimal piece of the technical

apparatus. How could such a person possibly modify the whole? As for the

collectivity or some class (if they exist as specific entities) they are wholly

ignorant of the problem of technique as a system. Finally, what might be

called “Councils of the Wise” (the “Seven Sages of Europe,” for example [6])

have often been set up only to demonstrate their own importance, just as

have international commissions and international treaties (the experience

of institutions charged with limiting the proflifeation of nuclear weapons

is clear in this regard, as is the importance of official organizations that are supposed to control pollution). Who is supposed to impose ends or get

hold of the technical apparatus? No one knows.

At the same time, one should not forget the fact that human beings are

themselves already modified by the technical phenomenon. When infants

are born, the environment in which they find themselves is technique, which

is a “given.” Their whole education is oriented toward adaptation to the

conditions of technique (learning how to cross streets at tra ffic lights) and their instruction is destined to prepare them for entrance into some technical

employment. Human beings are psychologically modified by consumption,

by technical work, by news, by television, by leisure activities (currently,

6 The original “seven sages of Europe” date from the Middle Ages and constitute the

patron saints of England (St. George), Scotland (St. Andrew), Wales (St. David), Ireland (St. Patrick), France (St. Denis), Spain (St. James), and Italy (St. Anthony). Some contemporary commissions have been referred to metaphorically as contemporary versions.

the proliferation of computer games), etc., all of which are techniques. In

other words, it must not be forgotten that it is this very humanity which

has been pre-adapted to and modified by technique that is supposed to

master and reorient technique. It is obvious that this will not be able to

be done with any independence. The subject is no longer independent

with respect to a neutral object. The subject is determined by the object,

and frequently as an object of the technical process. This is why the two

classical orientations in ethics (individual ethics and social ethics), as well

as the distinctions between fundamental and special ethics, appear to me

outdated. We are no longer, for example, dealing with ethics of choice with

regard to possible futures. And, if the ethical situation is characterized by

choice, we are no longer, in the technical milieu, in such a situation. Choices

and orientations in technique are made according to technical criteria and

not in virtue of some deliberate human decision which has been made as a

choice between several non-predetermined possible solutions. In the same

way, any reference to values (except insofar as one is axiological “realistic”

and believes in the existence of values as metaphysical, transcendent, and

active entities in themselves) is meaningless since the values defined by the

traditional societies no longer have anything in common with the use of

technique.

Another ethical orientation which seems excluded is the theory of the

“adiaphora.” There are some specifically ethical questions (for example,

sexuality, human relationships), and then there are a number of indifferent domains that do not pose moral questions, which are called adiaphora.

Thus it used to be said: greed is an ethical question, but what one eats or

should eat is completely indifferent from an ethical point of view. Thus, for two centuries it is precisely technique that has been considered among such

“indifferences.” After all, is morality really important with respect to some engine or technique of calculation? And on

this basis, without realizing it,

authority has been granted to diverse techniques. Each technique in itself

is quite indifferent.

Finally, one other ethical orientation in regard to technique is that of

adaptation. And this can be added to the entire ideology of facts: tech-

nique is the ultimate Fact. Humanity must adapt to facts. What prevents

technique from operating better is the whole stock of ideologies, feelings,

principles, beliefs, etc. that people continue to carry around and which are

derived from traditional situations. It is necessary (and this is the ethical

choice!) to liquidate all such holdovers, and to lead humanity to a perfect

operational adaptation that will bring about the greatest possible benefit

from the technique. Adaptation becomes a moral criterion. But this is an

introduction to what follows.

2 The technicist ethics

One continuing appearance of new Ethics in our society is what I have

called a technicist ethics (in 7 Le Vouloir et le Faire), because it derives exactly

from the technical milieu and orients human beings to serve this milieu.

A technicist morality presents two fundamental characteristics: it is a

moralirty of behavior and a moralirty which excludes problematic morality.

The morality of behavior, that is, one exclusively interested in behavior,

seeks to produce an orthopraxis, and challenges the validity of problems

of intention, feelings, ideals, and struggles of conscience. The interesting

or valuable behavior must not be selected according to moral principles

(for example, what Skinner calls “Freedom” or “Dignity”), but according

to precise technical rules. Human beings must be psychological adapted so

that technique produces an overt morality, or even a morality of ambiguity

(S. de Beauvoir); indeed, technique excludes ambiguity. What is right is

clear. The relevant behavior in the technical universe thus becomes obvious

and leads to an identification between personal and moral decisions about

what is right and social-financial development; there is a confused unity

between what is right and happiness (well-being).

In another sense, technique has become itself a value. Technical progress

appears to most people in the West as a guarantee of a good future and hap-

piness where techniques assure the necessity of a behavior facorable to this

program. Our hopes are invested in technique (thanks to technical progress,

cancer will be defeated, etc.). It gives a meaning to life (which was precisely

challenged in May 1968[8]). And whenever there are inconveniences in the

use of techniques, the common attitude consists of claiming that it is not

due to technique, but to the fact that human beings do not yet know how

to use it, implicitly, this means that human beings produce the bad, and

consequently, that technique is what is good. It is a desirable value and

well-deserving of human self sacrifice (the “martyrs of science”).

Thus there appears a whole system of values. (Later we shall examine

the “situation” that we have so far identified by this name – the values sub-

ordinate to Technique, as well as that value to which it is subordinated. [9]).

Fourastie (La Morale prospective) and Monod (Chance and Necessity) have

tried to show how science involves a certain virtue on the part of human

beings and that it is from this virtue, now scientifically based (on the same

basis as science), that ethics in its entirety can be reconstructed. This virtue

is intellectual honesty. But in that which concerns technique, there is no sys-

tematic intellectual elaboration of a scale of values. There is a spontaneous

creation that corresponds to the operational needs of the system: normality,

e fficiency, success, labor, professional conscientiousness, devotion to collec-

7 The English translation renders “éthique technicienne” as “technological ethics.”

8 May 1968 in France was marked by large-scale student and worker demonstrations.

9 This parenthetical remark is a footnote in the French text.

tive work, such are the principal values of this technist ethics from which are

judged the various types of behavior in our society. All agree in the sense

that, in the first instance, humanity is completely adaptable to machines, in-

struments, and processes, and, in the second, to the technical environment.

Adaptation, based on diverse psychological techniques, is vital in regard

to the attitude toward production, toward consumption, and in relation to

diverse technical organisms. Social maladaptation corresponds exactly to

the ancient “immorality” of traditional societies. The only positive good

that is offered and recommended is adaptation, whether one refers to the “Human-Machine” combination or that which is envisaged in the creation

of cyborgs.

Yet society continues to proclaim a traditional morality. According to

Karen Horney, this is because of “the neurotic personality of our time.”

The opposition between the principles, values, and morals are taught to

children, and the later behavior in fact required from the audit, is a con-

tradiction. “Christian churches preach meekness, charity, and auterity,

but finance industrial programs; socialists enforce a Stalinist mode of pro-

duction” (Illich).[10] But this essential disagreement tends to be overcome

through the creation of a technicist morality.

Technicist morality tends to devalue alternative kinds of conduct (waste-

fulness, inefficiency, gratuitousness, laziness), alternative values and virtue (humor, faithfulness, goodness, etc.). But gradually one witnesses the re-

markable fact of the integration of certain patterns of conduct into the

technical system itself, as we hinted earlier with a reference to the pro-

liferation of “games” with computers. Game conduct is integrated. But

this morality rejects as gratuitous and inefficient that which would allow a person to give a meaning to life. It allows no other meaning than itself.

It is totalitarian and exclusive. But it has never been formulated in this

authoritive way. It is not systematized. At least we are under that im-

pression because no philosopher or moralist has ever done it. Yet it is in

fact formulated, not as morality but as an imperative behavior by a whole

ensemble of psycho-technicians (for example, B.F. Skinner and others). Un-

der such circumstances, it is not possible to envisage any reconciliation or

“rough compromise” between two moralities. What prevails is morality

based on the behavior required by technique. Under these circumstances,

those who argue that they support another ethical orientation are tolerated

as holdovers or else are forced to get involved in a conflict – not directly

with technique but with the ideology of technique, technicist beliefs, and

morality.

10 Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 100. The French

text is slightly di fferent, apparently reflecting the French translation of Illich's book.

3 Ethical problems in focus

The ensemble of problems raised by technique can actually be reduced to

a question of power. It is because the human being is able to do nearly

everything that such questions as, for example, the exhaustion of world

resources, the multiplication of risks (cf. Salmon's La Societé du risque, or

Jacquard's Endangered by Science?) are raised, as well as issues about ex-

ponential population growth or the characteristic destructiveness of wars.

Each of these problems, in fact, contains a purely technical and an ethical

aspect. This is characteristic of all the difficulties that we experience. Spe-cific ethical problems all derive from this situation. It is thus an issue of

power. But the latter exhibits a two-fold character, the first of which is

extrinsic. It is not part of the human being. It is not incorporated into the

person, this power that resides in the new human environment. Second,

it is concerned exclusively with means. It is the disproportion in terms of

means that eventually leads to the crisis.

Ethical reflection must thus be situated on a level that can deal with

power. Now, we have here a first fundamental factor, that is, the contra-

diction between power and values. All expansions of power always bring

about a questioning, declining, or abandoning of values. Of course, this

proposition cannot be objectively and scientifically demonstrated. It is on

the order of experience and practice. When a State accepts some legal limits

and a constitutional frame for values, this means either that it has little

power, or that it agrees to remain with little power, or that it agrees not to

use all the power it has. When a state becomes effectively powerful, values are no longer respected. It is totally illusory to pretend that power can serve

values, and that by increasing power, values will be better defended. This

is quite idealistic and unrealistic. In reality, an increase in power annihilates

values, except those that serve this power.

But if commonly believed and recognized values no longer exist, there

are neither limits nor guidelines. The destruction of values results in human

beings becoming unable to judge and effectively appreciate their actions. At this moment, the prevailing rule becomes

“Everything that can be done,

must be done.” Why not employ torture or concentration camps. There is

no predetermined limit. Power implies an “always more . . . always more

and more.” At what point should it be stopped. Neither inner limit nor

objective limit can be found. Each time, there is just one more step to take.

An ever-increasing escalation of power and demoralization go together.

And since the previous step has been taken, why not the next? In order to

judge one’s actions, to impose upon them limits and meaning, it is necessary

to have a set of values that cannot be reduced and challenged. Obviously,

if one adheres to the ideology of power, it is necessary at the same time to

declare loudly that there are no more ethical problems, that ethics does not

even exist any more, that human beings no longer have a need for ethics.

But one must also be aware of what one does; in particular, it is necessary

to ask oneself if human beings will be satisfied with the fact that everything

becomes meaningless, and that nothing can be used as a point of reference

to give a meaning to what happens. But the question of power does not

exist in itself, it is part of the phenomenon of the increase in means.

Any ethical search can thus be referred only to the order of means. We

can forget about the “End-Means” problem, because it seems that more

and more thinkers agree on the impossibility of actually separating the

two. There are no good ends that can be reached by just any type of

means. The end is already contained in the means that technique puts at

our disposal. Bad means absolutely corrupt the most excellent ends. Power

and expansion of the contemporary technical means totally occupy the field

of our thought, of our life, and leave no place for extra-technical ends. Thus

the issue is to remain in this universe of means, and it is there that we have

to pose ethical problems and look for the appropriate response. Otherwise,

we enter upon the path of evasion, which is more and more common today,

as with escapism in religion, mysticism, or getting lost in rock music, etc.

4 Suggestions for an ethics

In the light of the previous conclusions, we can say that an ethics for a

technical society is an ethics of nonpower, of freedom, of conflicts, and of

transgression.

But before taking up these four issues, it seems important to mention that

there are a number of writers who, although they use different terms, make the same point, as when de Jouvenel requires that modern man practice

amenity (an art of living according to which one must search for what can

suit one’s neighbor, never using extreme means) (de Jouvenel’s Arcadie), or

Friedmann speaks of Widom (La Daesse et la Puissance), Illich of conviviality

(Tools for Conviviality), and Fourastie of self-discipline (which, unfortunately,

he sees realized in the scientific mentality, La Morale prospective), Schumacher

(11 Small is Beautiful), etc. Each time, the issue is the reduction of power, of

discovering what is most essential for human life in that universe, and each

time it is a moral quality allowing the nonuse of all possible means. People

are called upon to grow on the moral plane at the same time that they pass

judgment on means. After having criticized Bergson and his “supplement

of soul” a great deal, a number of people today would readmit it, at least if

they fully understood it.

An ethics is nonpower – the root of affair – is obviously that human beings agree not to do everything they are able to do. Nevertheless, there is

no more probject, nor value, nor reason, nor divine law to oppose technique

from the outside. It is thus necessary to examine technique from the inside

11 The French text has “Goldsmith” for “Schumacher.”

and recognize the impossibility of living with it, indeed of just living, if

one does not procative an ethics of nonpower. This is the fundamental

option. As long as people keep their minds oriented toward the spirit of

power and the acquisition of power, toward an ever-increasing expansion

(in production, consumption, etc.), nothing is possible. The issue is that

we must search systematically and willingly for nonpower, which of course

does not mean accepting impotence (Nonpower is far from being a synonym

for impotence!), fate, passivity, etc. (But it is not this danger that lies in wait

for us! On the contrary, since today “destiny” equals “more and more

technique”!).

This ethics of nonpower is to be found at all levels. Accordingly, it can be

practiced in the individual use of technical means (not trying to pass others,

not being everywhere, not driving one's car at its fastest speed, not playing

one's radio at top volume, etc.). But it can also be found in institutions;

institutions that tend to develop power by putting competition at the foun-

dation of the social organization must be rejected, and this will also apply

to some teaching methods (like competitive exams), the Olympic games,

and the economic system based on free competition or on the international

market among the most competitive! Each time, the issue is to demonstrate

e fficiency and in this way to cultivate power, and in this sence to serve the technical system and the devaluation of all possible moralities. But

the ethics of nonpower also plays a role within the scientific research itself

(as with what Illich calls radical research, which tries to provide criteria to

enable determination about when a tool becomes purely harmful, and to

invent tools that optimize harmony in life). Again, it is found in politics

(powerful people are penalized, the minorities, the wak and the exploited

are protected a priori, etc.).

An ethics of nonpower implies the setting of limits. At this point, it is

important to refer to the remarkable analysis made by Illich on thresholds

(which are dictated by the necessity to koop on surviving) and limits (which

are the bounds set by a group of people, corresponding to what is and is

not allowed). Setting limits is always part of society as well as culture. An

absence of limits is the negation of the human being as well as the negation

of culture. A group is unable to live in a human way without limits, no

matter what group it is (whether there is a strict system of regulations or an

absence of regulations). But this is going to be tied up with the taking of a

global position decisive in the domain of all technical applications; it is “the

apriorism of Nonintervention.” That is to say, whenever the scientist or

technician are unable to determine with the greatest accuracy and certainty

the global and long-term effects of a possible technique, it is absolutely vital to refuse to engage the processes of such a technique. We are here in the

presence of an ethical rule that is central is one wants to maintain life and a

viable society. But this decision, as well as the setting of the limits (which

corresponds to the ancient “sacred”) are the results of freedom; it is only

when people have learned what it is like to be free that they are able to limit

themselves.

It is obvious that these indications concerning the fundamental root of

ethics leave unanswered the question of its possibility and of the “how” of

this conversion to nonpower. However, it is necessary to emphasize that

such a transformation is not impossible, because it is linked to the search for

meaning that seems to me extremely characteristic of modern experience.

The second aspect of this ethics is that of freedom. The power of the

means confers no freedom on humanity. A person in the techicist society

enjoys no freedom – although I know quite well all the rhetoric put out on

this issue: freedom related to primary needs, freedom related to dangers,

sickness, the natural environment, the right to choose in terms of consump-

tion and freedom of movement, etc. All this is true. But the rights being

referred to are superficial appearances. Fundamentally, human begins are

alienated in the technical system that has substituted a fatalisty of technique

for a fatality of nature.

Human beings are continuously called upon to free themselves from

that which constrains and determines them. But whereas previously they

were determined by the natural and then socialogical (cultural) factors (and

they have used Science and Technique to be liberated from these), now they

are alienated in what was at one time the means of liberation. But there is

only freedom insofar as one is able, on the one hand, to challenge the factors

of alienation or, on the other hand, to use or divert them. Freedom consists,

in the face of a possibility, of being able effectively to say yes or no. But we have shown that, in the present situation, no mastery seems to be able to

be exercised on the technical system. Technique, as a system, represents for

contemporary human beings the world of necessity into which they find

themselves inserted, and which argues that it can help them to get around

the ethical problem itself by assuring that it establishes itself outside the

area of ethical choices and situations. Liberation can only coonsist in what

challenges people, driving them back into an increasingly narrow domain.

At this very point, then, we again come across the ethics of nonpower.

As mentioned before, freedom will come about if limits are set, and if, at the

same time, the choice is the ethical situation above all elkse. If it is in and

through the choice that freedom is expressed, the fundamental choice that

is placed before us is certainly the choice that rests upon us: to increase or

decrease power, production, means, etc. Compared to this choice, all others

(the right to choose the color on one’s automobile, or the place for one’s

vacation, or the brand of one’s computer) are totally vain and superficial!

But the fact is already present; modern world-weariness, “being at odds

with oneself,” rebellion or apathy among teenagers, suicidal tendencies,

all express the global fact that modern humanity suffers from an absence

of freedom and an increasing number of constraints. But people do not

yet know from where this oppression is coming. They accuse unimportant

things, secondary factors. They struggle like blind men. The decisive fact

here would be to become aware that the ethics of freedom is on the level of

the possible and attainable, and not only of the advisable.

The ethics of nonpower and freedom generates tension and conflicts. Now

we are here in the presence of an essential feature of ethics in a technicist

society. Technique tends to require an agreement, a unity, a unification, and

this disappearance of conflicts is even presented as a virtue. But it is known

that human groups in which tension and conflicts disappear are groups that

become ossified, lose their ability to change and to resist aggression, as well

as to develop.

We are here in the presence of an essential issue, that the substitute for

technical progress (with its uniform and linear aspect) of the ancient type of

human progress (which has always been brought about in an agonistic and

multidimensional way). Current technical progress, for the human group

such as, is disastrous, because the effect of sclerosis (als called entropy) necessarily continues to recur. A human society can only exist if it is

based on the successive negotiations of contradictory positions. But, for

example, a computer-aided decision excludes Negotiation. If we want

human grousp to continue to exist and see human beings as playing a

specific part within a human environment, we are obligated to call into

action an agonistic ethics, the production of tensions, and the placing in

question of uniformity in the great unities, the great organizations produced

by and necessary for technical progress. Conflict is a survival value for the

whole of humanity. But obviously, this involves an agonistic “true image”

of what is possible, negotiated, mastered, one that does not aim at the

pure and simple destruction of the group, or its break up. This is not an

issue of nihilism but of a production of tensions calculated in the human

groups so that the latter cannot shut themselves up, close themselves off, put an end to their self-perfecting (because any perfected society is a dead

society), but rediscover an ability to develop by themselves, and without

using Technique as a reference point for their evolution. Surely, we do not

claim that we can exhaust all the content of this ethics!

Finally, another feature of ethics in a technicist society would be Trans-

gression. This may seem to contradict the ethics of limits expressing free-

dom. But such is not the case. Because the issue is not to transfress the

limits that do not exist so as to enter into limitlessness, but the issue is

the transfression of the rules and limits produced by technique and lead-

ing to alienation (for example, we must consider the concept of growth

as one such limit). It is essential not to be mistaken about the direction

taken by transgression; when one refers to the latter today, one mainly at-

tacks the principles and the taboos of eighteenth century society. Entering

into the limitlessness by taking drugs, transfressing sexual taboos, trans-

gressing family relationships, paternal or maternal authority, politeness or

honesty, is not really committing an act of transgression, since it is proceed-

ing exactly in the same direction as technique. This is what has already

shaken, sometimes destroyed, and what eroticism, for example, claims to

transgress. The whole business of the destruction of the so-called taboos

is actually a mere representation of technical reality. Transgression must

deal with reality. Reality is technique itself. Transgression will therefore

take the shape of either the demythologization of technique or a challenge

to the imperatives of action based on technique, or a questioning of the

conditions imposed on people and on groups so that technique is able to

develop. Once again, it will involve the “desacralization” of technique, the

criticism of the illusions of the progress, the calculation the the real “costs”

incurred by any growth, etc. Transgression with respect to technique will

take the form of the destruction of the faith that people place in technique,

and the reduction of technique to a point that it is nothing more than a

producer of haphazard and insignificant object. It thus implies the search

for an external meaning in the name of which transgression can operate and

which at the same time undermines the significance of technique. Such are,

according to me, the main orientations that can be singled out for an Ethics

that means something to a person situated in the technicist world.

Translated by Dominique Gillot and Carl Mitcham from “Rechesche pour

une Ethique dans une société technicienne,” Morla et Enseignement (1983),

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