



Countering the Technological Era with Worship: A Theological Response to the Insights of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul

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Abstract. The common view that technology is ethically neutral and not intrinsically harmful to humankind has been challenged in the twentieth century by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul. They both reject a simplistic interpretation of technology and maintain a distinctive view of “modern” technology and its repercussions. Heidegger believes modern technology affects our understanding of “being.” Ellul argues that modern technology has automatically augmented itself into a system which entraps humanity, curtailing humankind’s freedom, and even redefining humanity. In other words, modern technology has started to rule over humanity. Thus, the danger of the technological era, driven by modern technology, is by nature not merely ethical, but systemic. Both Heidegger and Ellul suggest that the countermeasure to this entrapment lies in elements which can be related to the transcendent. This paper attempts to conceptualize this proposed solution through the Christian’s understanding of worship, suggesting that via a certain fundamental posture of worship, the recovering of true “being” in Heidegger is made possible and the dialectical theology of Ellul can be concretized.

Keywords: Ethic; Politic; Theology; Technology worship

1 Introduction

Modern technology is not commonly regarded as harmful, but Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul consider it destructive because it incapacitates humankind’s ability to properly understand themselves and the world and creates a system which imprisons humanity’s freedom. This paper aims to describe their arguments and then contends that the kind of modern technology they describe, which characterizes the current technological era, is a systemic threat to humanity. Meanwhile, both Heidegger and Ellul have also hinted, in varying degrees and from different perspectives, counteractive ideas and measures that have some relation to the transcendent. By explaining and analyzing these thoughts, this paper suggests that a certain fundamental posture of Christian worship is the concretization of these ideas.

2 Methods

The approach used in this writing is descriptive literature, encompassing a thorough examination of the problem brought to light by the data and its elucidation. In this process, the writing commences by seeking pertinent sources from libraries, various media such as journals, periodicals, or the internet, and the book that garners the highest number of citations. The paper would likely start with a comprehensive literature review to establish the existing viewpoints on the ethical implications of technology and the perspectives of thinkers like Heidegger and Ellul. A comparative analysis may be undertaken to demonstrate the compatibility or divergence between Heidegger's views on "being" and Ellul's ideas on technology's systemic influence.

3 Finding and Discussion

3.1 The Insights of Heidegger

To Heidegger, the essence of technology is to reveal, but for modern technology, to "enframe." He considers technology in general as "a manner of disclosing through a process of production," where such disclosing allows truth (aletheia) to be obtained [1, p. 47]. Modern technology, emerging after the industrial revolution that enables machine-driven mass production, possesses the same essence; but what it reveals is its challenge to nature to supply its needs, not for the purpose of revealing the "truth" about the nature, but for efficiency [1, p. 48]. According to Heidegger's classical text on technology, *Questions concerning Technology* (QT), such a "challenging claim that gathers human beings together in the direction of ordering the self-disclosing as standing reserve" is called "im-position" [Ge-stell], or more commonly, "enframing" (QT 19) [1, p. 49]. Namely, pre-modern technology is understood to reveal the true "being" of things, but modern technology is ruled by a revealing that "puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supplies energy that can be extracted and stored as such," (QT 14). Pre-modern technology exhibits an unambiguous course of causality, and it "reveals" the "truth" through a process of bring something into being (poiesis). Human's understanding of nature and self is maintained throughout this process. But in modern technology, with its mass production and multilayered processes, people lose touch with the "things" which are involved. They enframe as they see things as only resources to be ordered and exploited.

Heidegger's critique on modern technology is generally and essentially, based on his "objection to all former ontologies," [2, p. 21]. More specifically, Heidegger opposes Western metaphysics that has "a dual, ontotheological core." He denounces the attempts of past metaphysicians in securing "their understanding of the intelligible world by 'doubly grounding' what-is from both the inside-out (or 'ontologically') and the outside-in (or 'theologically')" [3, p. 176]. Thus, Heidegger is not opposed to any type of technologies, but the "(ontological) understanding of being that such devices paradigmatically embody and exemplify," [3, p. 175]. His concern is how metaphysics and

modern technology have caused people to have a diminished view of their own being and the world. He criticizes Western metaphysics that has developed an understanding of the world through the separation of, among others, “subject and object,” beginning with “Aristotelian distinction between matter and form,” [4, p. 74]. Even God has been objectified as the “god of the philosopher” that fits into the metaphysics of the day. Western metaphysics has since reduced our understanding of the world into “a mere instrument or resource for human purposes,” [4, p. 74]. Along this development came Friedrich Nietzsche who introduces the “will” which asserts “meaning” to things for our own service [4, p. 77]. Indeed, to Heidegger, Nietzsche is “the metaphysician most responsible for leading us into technological nihilism,” [3, p. 178].

Modern technology pushes this further with enframing, where things and people are not only objectified but “revealed” as mere resources ready to be used. Hence, Heidegger pronounces that “technology is the genuine completion of ‘metaphysics,’” [5, p. 527]. He also states, “whereas pre-modern technologies accommodated themselves to nature, nature is built (verbaut) into modern technologies as a gigantic delivery system (QT 16),” [1, p. 48]. Ultimately, central to Heidegger’s concern is the loss of Dasein (understand of being) in the technological era. Our true being – one which is rooted in our relationship with things around us, is “forgotten,” [5, pp. 527-528]. With modern technology people are enframed to see “standing reserves” instead of having the freedom to understand the true being of things, God, and one another. Hence, Heidegger describes enframing as “de-worlding, de-earthing, de-humanization, and de-ification of beings,” [5, p. 530].

The challenge presented by modern technology is systemic because enframing has been imposed on humankind. To Heidegger, technology has the attribute of domination and maliciousness, and “includes all the areas of beings which equip the whole of beings: objectified nature, the business of culture, manufactured politics, and the gloss of ideals overlying everything.” (Heidegger, *Overcoming Metaphysics* 74) Through enframing, modern technology obscures the things around us, making us unable to see their true being. As we may not be aware of the danger of seeing everything as “resources” or a means to be utilized, we too, become a means for efficiency. The outcome is detrimental – there is no right (or “free”) relationship between us as individuals and between us and all things around us. Yet we remain ignorant because we are imprisoned by modern technology, mistaken it as neutral [1, p. 39].

3.2 Ellul’s Technological Society

To Ellul, the technological era (or “society”) is dominated by modern technology or technique. Like Heidegger, modern technology is not considered as merely instrumental but “is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency.” (Ellul, *The Technological Society* xxv) Technique differs from pre-modern technology; it is an all-encompassing phenomenon which comprised of the “proliferation, inescapability, and dependence on technology and technical device,” [6, p. 7]. Technique is also a mentality. In fact, humans have “uncritically adopted the mindset of technique,” applying it in every aspects of life, and technique has become a kind of consciousness

[6, p. 7]. In a nutshell, technique “describes both a mindset that strives for efficiency and the type of social unity created by this mindset. These are simultaneous and interdependent, each fostering the development of the other,” [6, p 7]. Ultimately, there is no more telos as “everything has become ‘means’; there are no more ‘ends.’” The whole reason for technological progress is lost because “technological progress becomes a good in itself, pursued for its own sake,” [6, p. 1]. Namely, the only “ethics” that matters in the technological society is efficiency.

Once efficiency is adopted as the way of life, automation is the natural outcome, and with automaton, not only is efficiency enhanced, it is always preferred. Subsequently, technique progresses in a self-augmenting manner, as people too, tend to prefer, and are eager to develop more efficient systems. Eventually, the technique expands, and the whole society becomes dependent on technology. When this happens, every sector of society will be interlocked by their mutual dependency on technology, as they cannot function to fulfill the efficiency level needed alone without one another. For instance, the financial systems rely on the networks of the telecommunication system and vice versa. Ellul calls this monism, a totalitarian, closed system directed and maintained by technology. Thus, technique is a systemic threat that rules humans.

3.3 Heidegger’s “the Other Thinking”

At first sight, Heidegger seems to have no association with “worship” as he guards his philosophy against theology. Yet, Heidegger has not completely left out any elements which are related to the transcendent. This is argued by Lin and van Brakel, as they consider the element of transcendence in Heidegger by comparing it with Eastern philosophy [5].

According to Lin and van Brakel, Heidegger turns to “the other thinking” instead of “traditional metaphysical thinking” to find a way to real freedom in the technological era.[5, p. 528] The basis for such a possibility is his proposition of the forthcoming Eignis. In the later part of his writings, Heidegger sees “ge-stell coinciding with the very last epoch in which metaphysics comes to an end,” and “the inevitable step toward...Eignis,” [5, p. 532]. “Eignis points to a more restful event of peaceful owning whereby one comes to a proper understanding of Being by letting oneself be owned by Being, and Being achieves the proper mode of disclosing by letting its voice be heard by one,” [5, p. 531]. This coincides with Heidegger’s other idea of Gelassenheit, which can be understood as “‘letting-be,’ ‘releasement,’ ‘equanimity,’ and ‘composure,’” [5, p. 534]. Gelassenheit should be understood “in relation to Heidegger’s suggestion of listening to the call of Being from out of the essence of technology.” Indeed,

“Gelassenheit is not a passive activity, nor is it entirely active. It is an active disposition of self-restraint or withholding in order to allow other entities to present themselves on their own terms. It is this second aspect of allowing entities to present themselves to us instead of for us (as they do in modern technology) which comprises the mode of Gelassenheit as releasement to others (Überlassen). This releasement to other entities can be thought of as deferring to them... Our releasement from our will to will coupled with our releasement towards other entities transforms our understanding

whereby we no longer think of the entities we encounter as objects (Gegenstände) to be used, but instead encounter them in their own self-belonging," [7, p. 8] (Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations* 70-75).

Heidegger believes *Gelassenheit* is best expressed through "the other thinking" which is free from the "constraints of metaphysical thinking," [5, p. 535].

Gelassenheit and "the other thinking" are the elements related to the transcendent which can set humankind free from enframing. Through them, a right way of thinking is made possible. The "God of the Aristotelian-Thomist" is replaced, not by one which fits into the defected metaphysical category of scientific and technological language, but one which is free from being objectified. [4, p. 91] Namely, "objectifying" (ontotheology) and "utilizing" God (technological enframing) are defected ways of relating to God that needs to be substituted with a new thinking. Specifically, a Heideggerian restoration of the understanding of being would remedy the subject-object divide that plagues the thinking of many Christians. With "the other thinking" and worship, the true being of the transcendent God can eventually be encountered. Otherwise, not only is God "objectified," modern technology and enframing would also taint our thinking about God with utilitarianism. Too often, Christians make the mistake of thinking "about" God with Western metaphysical categories or, in the other extreme, treating God only as a "standing reserve" in their prayer and petition, and in these processes, losing sight of God's true being. Christians should heed Heidegger's warning and be set free from an ontotheological understanding of God and the world. This will release them from seeing the world and God as either object or subject. In other words, their understanding of self is always in relation to God and the world rather than based on the Cartesian divide where subjective self is independent of the objective world. Subsequently, by avoiding objectification, they would be free from seeing God and the world as mere resources.

We can also identify a few similarities between "the other thinking" and the concept of worship. First, consider the disposition of *Gelassenheit* and "the other thinking" that is "non-imposing or non-coercive" as they are concerned with a state of readiness for the eventual possibility of encountering the call of Being. This corresponds to the concept of worship which requires Christians to wait upon God. As "the other thinking" is essentially "preparatory" and "does not provide any certainty for a supposedly bright future," one needs to be patient [5, p. 539]. Similarly, Christians may await an encounter with the true being of God patiently, adopting the posture of *Gelassenheit*. In fact, *Gelassenheit* is "theological in origin." [7, p. 8] Although Heidegger refuses to relate it to God "as a case of giving oneself to God or somehow surrendering one's sense of self," [7, p. 8] *Gelassenheit* remains a theological concept that fits well in worship. With *Gelassenheit*, it is possible to resist "the domination of technology." It "releases us from the danger of technology and opens us to alternative ways of relating to reality" and allows us to "open ourselves up to other ways of existing and gain an intimate relation with the various things we encounter in our everyday life," [7, p. 8]. Obviously, such "opening up" can also be applied to worship, where one relates to God.

Secondly, it is said that "the most important feature of the other thinking is uselessness," [5, p. 539]. Uselessness here aligns with meditative thinking and denotes a

contrast to calculative thinking and utilitarianism which characterizes the technological era [5, p. 540]. Again, here Christians may discern the trace of worship in the form of classical Christian spirituality exercises of meditation. When Heidegger suggests poetry as the way out of humanity's current metaphysical dead end, he "did not immediately conflate such poetic thinking with 'thinking' in the strong sense. Rather, he spoke of the 'proximity' of poetry to thinking," [4, p. 82]. Meditation, like poetry and the way language is used in it, are typical ways Christians relate the transcendent. The basis for "the other thinking" is the poverty of Western metaphysics and the need for a new beginning. The potentiality of poetry as a way out of the enframing as seen by Heidegger is due to its language which consists of "the meaningful word that is to open horizons of truth obscured by the language of science and technology," [4, p. 89]. This coincides with the Christian understanding of worship, which is also poetic.

Thirdly, Christians may resonate with Heidegger's concept of *Eignis* as a kind of eschatological new age in the future. While worship is an attitude and act of the present which allows the worshipper to be free from the *ge-stell* dialectically, worship is also related to an eschatological hope directed to the future.

To Christians, their worship is a way to experience intimacy with God, and they too need to open themselves up to marvel at the "being" of God, which should never be distorted or reduced, relegated either as object (as in ontotheology) or resource (as modern theology does through enframing). Holistic worship is interpersonal encounter between human and God. Without succumbing to the subject-object divide, Christians can find a truly authentic relation with God "being to being." This eliminates the danger of Christians worshipping God as an "object" using only modernist ideas which are rationalistic.

3.4 Ellul's Dialectical Theology

Ellul considers modern technology a threat to humanity because people treat it as a form of religion [6, p. 11]. Ellul was among the first who associated "the principalities and powers" to "domains other than the state," [8, pp. 5–6]. He sees people putting their hope and trust in the latest technology, believing they can find meaning in it. They create communities based on the technology they share. Hence, modern technology that gives meanings to people, organizes them as communities, and shape their way of seeing the world, has indeed becomes a religion [6, p. 11]. Namely, modern technology replaced God as the highest authority.

Pattison agrees with the challenges which modern technology brings to humanity as described by Ellul, but critiques Ellul's lack of solution for the present, as Ellul seems to base his hope on "an impossible eschatological future." [4, pp. 55–57] Indeed, Ellul's dialectic understanding of the world is heavily influenced by Marx, and his lament of the current technological era is dialectically countered by an upcoming eschatological age of freedom [9, p. 26]. Yet, Pattison's critique against Ellul misses his other dialectic approach, namely his dialectical turn to the transcendent.

Apart from his historical dialectic, Ellul's dialectic worldview consists of both "necessity" and "freedom," where modern technology has become the necessity in life

which limits human freedom [9, p. 37]. True freedom can only be found in the transcendent [9, p. 37]. As Ellul's dialectical theology also stems from Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth, [9, p. 26]. Ellul does not believe in developing a systematic response to the systemic problem of technology apart from confronting it dialectically with theology [8, p. 9]. Seeing modern technology as a powerful force which is akin to the "principalities and powers," Ellul does not believe that technology can be "Christianized" although he does not see the need or possibility to avoid technique [8, pp. 341–342]. Instead, he thinks that technology must be desacralized [6, p. 11]. In the context of dialectical theology, such desacralization points to a turn to God who is transcendence, whose sacredness should be the right place of devotion. In other words, the systemic threat of the technological society of Ellul is not to be confronted with another system, but a dialectical approach of turning to the transcendent God.

Ellul's analysis of modern technology is based on uncompromising realism which paints an alarming picture, and his theological solution is set to confront this situation dialectically. In other words, he decisively emphasizes the severity of human devastation caused by the modern technology that cannot be resolved by human endeavour, while determined that only God who is transcendent can be the hope and solution. His approach is "trans-disciplinary confrontation" rather than "interdisciplinary synthesis" – he offers no sociological solution, but confrontation via dialectical theology [8, pp. 351–354].

3.5 A Fundamental Posture of Worship

With the insights of Heidegger and Ellul, it is obvious that not only they have depicted the systemic threats of modern technology, they have also pointed to elements which are related to the transcendent as the potential solutions to the problem of technological entrapment. Ellul's social analysis has much to offer, especially its depiction of the dialectical tension between God and the powers and principalities of modern technology. Heidegger, on the other hand, provides a philosophical basis for a fresh and fundamental understanding of worship which is based on the restoration of our ability to acknowledge and appreciate the true and fuller being of the transcendent and the creations.

Ellul refers to "prayer" as a way to relate to the transcendent that serves to counter technological entrapment. He sees prayer as consisting in a "free act of God to bestow grace on the individual, and the decision of the individual to participate in it," [6, p. 4]. To him, prayer is dialectical in nature because God's grace is beyond humanity but it is bestowed upon them. Prayer is "the form of the believer's life with God, and God's gracious dwelling within the believer," [6, p. 4]. Its dialectic nature is demonstrated by the believer's life which is "lived in the grace of Wholly Other," [6, p. 4]. It is in his definition of prayer that Ellul employs Heidegger's concept of Dasein, delineating that prayer as a kind of being in the world. Prayer is not limited to the act of communication but "a form of life, the life with God," [6, p. 4] (Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* 60). However, this kind of prayer proposed by Ellul is still susceptible to enframing and ontotheology. Ellul emphasizes "hope" in his prayer, where God becomes the fixation

of believers' trust, instead of material goods [6, p. 4]. While such hopeful prayer focuses on God instead of material goods, it can still be hijacked by modern technology's metaphysics that obscure our view of God and poses the danger of enframing God as a resource. Further, Ellul's understanding of hope is eschatological and points toward a future. His view of history is dialectical. He believes in periods of history when God is silent, and the technological era is such an age. Hope is the "dialectical counterpart" of God's silence [9, pp. 40–42]. As pointed out, Heidegger too, employs the concept of *Eignis*. The "worship" proposed here does not deny such hope, but focuses on the present, and it is not necessary a part of a larger dialectic view of history.

Learning from Heidegger, worship can be "the other thinking" which serves as a dialectic countermeasure to current technological entrapment. By turning to the transcendent, worshippers puncture the entrapment and regain some glimpse of true being in God and His creations. The kind of fundamental posture of worship which stems from the insights of Heidegger and Ellul is:

An awareness to reject the object-subject divide, not just in relation with the Creator, but also with other members of creation; not turning our object of worship from technology to God because the language of subject-object is rejected altogether. The worshipper's being is understood not as subjectively independent of God but in relation with God.

A commitment to relate to God and His creation as they are, not succumbing to Western metaphysics, an openness to discern the presence and "being" of the transcendent God holistically through the arts. An underlying awareness that allows one to refrain from (a certain type of) enframing; not about a battle against efficiency (which is only at the ethical level) but a resistance against the metaphysical structure which causes humankind to fall into modern technology's myth of efficiency. Not about communal act of worship but a posture in life. A way of thinking directed to God on the part of worshipper, acknowledging the dialectical transcendence of God, but not necessarily relying on a historical dialectics.

With the suggested fundamental posture of worship, one would be able to counter the threat of the technological era, as the following case illustrates: When a social media app is made available, modern technology allows the mass distribution and commercializing of such product, creating an entire ecosystem. A worshipful Christian will be aware that people whom he communicated with through this app are more than a means for his purpose of usage of the app. A contact on social media, for instance, is not just a target for marketing; there is an awareness that people are not mere resources. There is more to a person than that which is shown and limited by the app. In fact, there will be the awareness that the presence and being of God and people are not limited by any app and they are not reduced to the information that the app is presenting to its users. The app and its algorithm are driven by efficiency and will cause the app users to operate with the same mentality, causing them to see the things and people around them as mere resources to be utilized, but a worshipful posture breaks its indoctrination. As the Christian focuses on God, meditates, and thinks of God personally and creatively, the Christian is reminded of the "being" of God and His creations. The Christian's

understanding of self will also be understood as one which is related to God and the creations instead of a mere subjective island.

4 Conclusion

Evidently, there are lessons which Christians can learn from the insights of Heidegger and Ellul about the systemic threats of modern technology and the ways to counter them. The reality of environmental crisis, power of social media companies, and the danger of nuclear warfare are just some examples how modern technology has become a systemic threat. Modern technology has undoubtedly benefitted humanity, but if these benefits are at the expense of human wellbeing, such “necessity” needs a countermeasure. This study concludes that a turn to the transcendent can be the solution, and it is embodied by a fundamental posture of worship. Through it, relating to the transcendent requires no systematic philosophizing nor social reform because it is dialectic in nature. With this fundamental posture of worship, Christians would be free from the technological mindset that distorts their perspective of God and the world.

Research Contribution: My focus is practical theology where theology is constructed with an integration of contextual studies, including the interaction between various interdisciplinary subjects involving politics, and social studies, among others.

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