The Unlovable Violence of Technique: George Grant’s Reception of Jacques Ellul

BWD Heystee

Memorial University, Canada

Abstract: This paper discusses George Grant’s analysis of the Vietnam War in “Canadian Fate and Imperialism” and how that analysis depends on the thought of Jacques Ellul. On the basis of Ellul’s The Technological Society, Grant argues that technique tends toward violence and that the Vietnam War is ultimately an expression of technique. Because the basic structure of Western society tends toward violence, it has become unlovable. In Grant’s view, this represents a crisis because human well-being depends on “love of one’s own,” including love of one’s own society.

Keywords: Technique; Violence; Liberalism; George Grant; Jacques Ellul; Plato.

DOI: 10.22618/TP.PJCV.20237.2.175.002
The Unlovable Violence of Technique: George Grant’s Reception of Jacques Ellul

BWD Heystee
Memorial University, Canada

Abstract: This paper discusses George Grant’s analysis of the Vietnam War in “Canadian Fate and Imperialism” and how that analysis depends on the thought of Jacques Ellul. On the basis of Ellul’s The Technological Society, Grant argues that technique tends toward violence and that the Vietnam War is ultimately an expression of technique. Because the basic structure of Western society tends toward violence, it has become unlovable. In Grant’s view, this represents a crisis because human well-being depends on “love of one’s own,” including love of one’s own society.

Keywords: Technique; Violence; Liberalism; George Grant; Jacques Ellul; Plato.

I. Introduction

In his 1967 essay “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,” Canadian philosopher George Grant argues that the unconscionable violence of the Vietnam War has revealed to Canadians and all those living in contemporary Western society that they live in a “barren twilight.” In this twilight it has become extraordinarily difficult to know what is worth doing because, in Grant’s view, the possibilities of living a good life have narrowed significantly. The gloomy tone of this essay reflects a significant departure from his earlier work in which he hopes that out of North America’s intellectual poverty there will be a “dawn of [an] age of reason.” While early in his career Grant criticizes how, under the grip of late state capitalism, reason has been reduced to an instrument for the pursuit of economic expansion, he remains hopeful that young people will recognize the inadequacy of the situation and ultimately demand a restoration of a contemplative tradition. By the time Grant writes “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,” however, such hopes have been dashed. Instead, he condemns Western modernity—the spearhead of which is the United States—

2 George Parkin Grant, Philosophy in the Mass Age (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 13.
3 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 64; George Parkin Grant, Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), 53–67.
as structurally, irreversibly opposed to human well-being. His philosophical project becomes the “destruction of inadequate sources of hope,” something he achieves through, among other things, analysis of the violence on display in Vietnam.

The purpose of this paper is to unpack the nature of this turn in Grant’s thought and, in particular, to show the central role that Jacques Ellul’s influence plays in Grant’s assessment of the violence of the Vietnam War and what it reveals about the structure of Western society. In “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,” Grant affirms that technique, as Ellul understands it, is the defining feature of Western society and, further, that the Vietnam War is an expression of technique. On the basis of Ellul’s account of technique as self-augmenting and autonomous, Grant argues that the Vietnam War reveals a crisis for the West. This is because the nature of technique is that it both assures its own continued hegemony and that it is given to imperial violence. At the same time, human well-being depends on “loving one’s own,” including the society to which one belongs. Technological society is therefore deeply problematic because when it is revealed as structurally violent, it becomes unlovable to those who call it their own. Grant therefore believes that a full and complete human life is no longer possible for those who live within the grip of technique. What makes the crisis particularly profound for Grant, however, is that technique is not simply a mistake to be corrected once recognized, but the fate of the West because the nature of technique is that it all but guarantees it will continue to impose itself for the foreseeable future.

This paper is divided into five parts. First, I outline the way in which Grant criticizes North American society prior to his encounter with Ellul in order to bring Ellul’s later influence into relief. Second, I explain Grant’s reception of Ellul and the features of technique that Grant deems most important, namely self-augmentation and autonomy. I show why Grant no longer believes that his earlier hope for a “dawn of the age of reason” is realistic. Third, I turn to the violence that Grant finds inherent in technique. Although Ellul offers no detailed discussion of violence in The Technological Society, Grant maintains that technique is necessarily given to violent imperialism; this is in part due to Grant expanding on the logic of Ellul’s analysis and in part due to the influence of Leo Strauss. Fourth, I explain why Grant insists that “loving one’s own” is central to human well-being and how we now find ourselves in the crisis of the unlovability of technological society. Fifth and finally, I briefly discuss Grant’s departure from Ellul and why Grant believes in a technological determinism that Ellul refuses.

II. Grant’s Early Hope

In order to appreciate the force of Grant’s reception of Ellul and the ways in which Ellul transformed his thought, we must first discuss the nature of Grant’s early criticisms and the hope contained therein. We shall therefore begin with Grant’s 1959

---

book *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, which represents the sum of his thought up to the end of the 1950s. As Grant’s first major publication, this book lays out in relatively clear terms what he thought was at stake in philosophy and what he thought were the most important issues concerning human well-being. Grant begins the book explaining why he thought North America was philosophically and intellectually impoverished, but also why there was an opportunity for philosophical revival. This opportunity, he believed, would allow the youth of his day and subsequent generations to work out the pressing problem of moral philosophy, namely the competing claims of law, progress and freedom.

In Grant’s assessment of North American culture, there are two characteristics that distinguish it from previous Western cultures:

First, it is scientific; it concentrates on the domination of man over nature through knowledge and its application… [Second,] our society is above all the expression of the dominance that the large-scale capitalist exerts over all other persons.\(^5\)

This is to say that knowledge is understood as an instrument of control so that we can make “progress” (however vaguely the word is used) and realize human freedom by overcoming natural necessity. This understanding of knowledge has expressed itself in an industrial capitalism where all but a few individuals are also objects of scientific control. Yet it goes even one step further in Grant’s mind:

so great is the power that society can exert against the individual that it even subjects to dominance those very élites who seem to rule. Thus, at this stage of industrial civilization, rule becomes ever more impersonal, something outside the grip of any individual.\(^6\)

Knowledge understood as instrument has produced a society where all are practically compelled to behave in a certain way: the majority are themselves scientifically developed, managed and manipulated, and the élite must act according to the dictates of this industrial capitalism or else be reduced to membership in the majority. Grant calls this mass society and asserts that it is definitive for North America.

The nature of mass society is that it paradoxically both inhibits philosophical reflection and reveals the pressing need for it. Mass society inhibits philosophy because individuals are compelled to adjust themselves to social norms in order to get by in life, and a central feature of those norms is reason understood as an instrument. Further, individual autonomy and self-determination are diminished because with the development and expansion of mass society individuals grow more and more dependent on “the whole system” so that to resist the incentives and compulsions of society would be difficult, uncomfortable or even violent. In adjusting herself to mass society, the individual comes to understand reason in the way that North America generally understands it, namely as a practical instrument. As a result, the sort of thinking required for philosophical reflection, namely

\(^{5}\) Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 5–6.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 6.
contemplative thinking, becomes marginalized, rarer, and more difficult because it is neither productive nor manipulative.\(^7\)

At the same time, those in mass society may discover the occasion for philosophy because they recognize their situation as profoundly new. The novelty of the conditions of mass society coupled with the fact that North America has no history from before ‘the age of progress’ will lead people to question their own circumstances and, ultimately, to questions of philosophy:

As we live in these conditions of mass culture, we come to recognize them as profoundly new, and this newness forces us to try to understand what they mean. We ask what it is that man has created in this new society. And as we try to see what we are, there arises an ultimate question about human nature and destiny.\(^8\)

The unprecedented conditions of North America—namely the facts that reason has been all but completely reduced to an instrument for economic expansion and “progress,” and that this society is by and large unmoored from any previous history or traditions which would act as a countervailing force—mean that North Americans have especial occasion to reflect on the conditions of their lives and, ultimately, the meaning of human history and human life in general.

The remainder of Philosophy in the Mass Age is devoted to brief introductions of some key themes in moral philosophy. The purpose of introducing these themes is to articulate the competing claims of various moral visions so that Grant can outline the task that a philosophical renewal will have to undertake. Grant does this by introducing the thought of Plato, Marx, and Sartre, who respectively represent the claims of law, progress and freedom.\(^9\) Grant contends that these three claims stand in tension in contemporary Western society and that none of them can be abandoned. If and when there should be a philosophical renewal in North America, its primary task will be to resolve the tension between these three claims without abandoning any of them. Historically unique cultural conditions coupled with an unresolved moral tension permeating society mean that North America is ripe for a “dawn of reason.”

This is all to say that while Grant certainly had reservations about the social and intellectual implications of living in a society characterized by increasing scientific control and pressure for individuals to adjust themselves to that control, he does not believe that scientific control will have the final word. He predicts that there will be

\(^7\) Ibid., 8–11.

\(^8\) Ibid., 6.

\(^9\) The claim of law is that “there is an order in the universe, and that right action for us human beings consists in attuning ourselves to that order”; the implication of this is that there ought to be non-negotiable limits on our conduct which we do not choose but discover. The claim of progress is the recognition that there is suffering and evil in the world and that it ought not be tolerated but overcome and eliminated by scientific control of the natural world. The claim of freedom is that humans in their subjectivity can never finally be determined by objective conditions and that we always have the capacity to become what we are not. See ibid., 90–103.
a philosophical and contemplative renewal. Out of the negative moment in which we find an unresolved tension between law, progress, and freedom, there will emerge a resolution that recognizes and preserves the truth of all three claims. Although the scientific control typical of North America inhibits philosophy, dissatisfaction among the youth at this reduction of reason will ensure that at least some of them will return to philosophy, and contemplation will never be entirely extinguished. The possibility of this return is evident to Grant in the boredom he sees among university students who have been taught that they are free but that no careful reflection or intellectual discipline could give content to that freedom, that “there is nothing that it concerns us to know.”

In returning to philosophy, the youth will confront the aforementioned tension and think toward its resolution. This hope is where Grant stands prior to his encounter with Ellul.

III. Grant’s Reception of Ellul

Grant did not long sustain this hope for the future of philosophy. In 1966, seven years after its initial publication, Grant republished Philosophy in the Mass Age with a new introduction outlining the important matters about which he had changed his mind in the intervening time. The thrust of this new introduction is that his earlier hope was misguided and the project he had envisioned for philosophy could not be done. The reason for his change of mind was principally his encounter with Ellul, who showed him what technique is and what practical possibilities lie ahead for the West.

In his new introduction, Grant explains that the chief difficulty facing the possibility of moral philosophy is technique. What he means by technique is precisely what Ellul describes in his book, namely technique understood as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.” That is, technique is the sum of all activities that we undertake that collectively drive toward efficiency, and this is the major force characterizing Western society, the force to which all other social factors have been subordinated. This is not restricted to one area of activity or certain applications (e.g., industry, the military etc.), but characterizes the whole of Western

---

10 It is no coincidence that the project Grant outlines here sounds vaguely Hegelian. In the 1966 edition of Philosophy in the Mass Age, Grant says that at the time of original publication, he “considered Hegel the greatest of all philosophers” and says that his book was inspired by the Hegelian project of preserving the truth of the Greek world alongside freedom and modern science (ibid., 120). We may note, however, that Grant is likely overstating Hegel’s influence over his early thought; scholars like Athanasiadis and O’Donovan characterize Grant as a reluctant and qualified Hegelian. Harris Athanasiadis, George Grant and the Theology of the Cross: The Christian Foundations of His Thought (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 120; Joan E. O’Donovan, George Grant and Twilight of Justice (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 7.

11 Grant, Philosophy in the Mass Age, 88.

society. On the basis of Ellul’s account, Grant claims that technique has become the dominant morality in North America and is hostile to all other moralities. It inhibits the pursuit or serious consideration of ends other than itself, making moral philosophy a practical impossibility. The philosophical renewal that Grant envisioned in *Philosophy in the Mass Age* is precluded by the dominance of technique. Therefore, in order to understand why Grant abandons his earlier hope and why his thought takes on a new tenor exemplified by his analysis of the Vietnam War and its implications, we ought to review his reception of Ellul and *The Technological Society*.

The way in which Grant receives Ellul is indicated in his 1966 review of *The Technological Society*. There Grant states explicitly why he thinks Ellul’s work needs to be read and which aspects of Ellul’s account of technique he finds particularly instructive. Technique must be studied because it has “become both geographically and qualitatively universal” and Ellul must be studied because he has understood this better than others. That is, Ellul has understood better than others why technique dominates nearly every corner of the globe and every aspect of human life. Where Grant finds Ellul particularly penetrating is in his discussion of technique’s self-augmentation and autonomy. It is precisely the fact that technique always increases its scope and its power by its own accord that leads to the inevitability of technological violence and the apparent certainty of a technological fate for the West. Let us first discuss self-augmentation and then autonomy.

Grant quotes Ellul’s two laws of self-augmentation: “(1) In a given civilization, technical progress is irreversible. (2) Technical progress tends to act, not according to an arithmetic, but according to a geometric progression.” What is striking about technique as self-augmenting is that not only is technique’s growth assured, but it is also assured independently of the work or choices of any individuals. Ellul notes that others have acknowledged that technique progresses “almost without decisive intervention by man,” though apparently by the collective effort of those working at research institutions and the like. In other words, the common conclusion is that technique’s progress is “the resultant” of common effort. What Ellul means in calling technique self-augmenting, however, is that the growth is automatic and independent of human factors:

We can no longer argue that it is an economic or a social condition, or education, or any other human factor [that determines technical progress today]. Essentially, the preceding technical situation alone is determinative. When a given technical discovery occurs, it has followed almost of necessity certain other discoveries. Human intervention in

---

15 Ibid., 414.
16 Ibid., 414; Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 89.
this succession appears only as an incidental cause… Technique, in its development, poses primarily technical problems which consequently can be resolved only by technique. The present level of technique brings on new advances, and these in turn add to existing technical difficulties and technical problems, which demand further advances still.\textsuperscript{18}

Far from the wealth (or poverty) of a given society, or the attitude adopted by a host of researchers or educational institutions, the determining factor of technique is nothing other than technique. Technical developments are not the result of an excess or desire for wealth in a society, nor are they driven by a society that has built and can support institutions out of a pure desire to discover things, and so forth. The sole reason that technique increases its scope and power is because technical conditions themselves demand it.\textsuperscript{19} As one technical development is implemented, it presents problems or difficulties that need to be addressed; this brings forth further technical developments, which themselves produce problems or difficulties which in turn must be addressed by technique, since technique is the only means of addressing technical problems.\textsuperscript{20} No particular decision or intervention by a person is meaningful, since regardless of that person’s actions, the problems and solutions of technique will arise according to technique. The consequence of this is the ever-increasing scope and power of technique that is independent of “human factors,” making technical progress irreversible.

What is more, that irreversible progress accelerates, or develops “according to a geometric progression.” Each technical development does not produce an additional occasion for technique, but several. Ellul observes that each discovery will affect several other fields and/or create several opportunities, which in turn have several effects, many of which are unintended or unanticipated. He writes, “A technical discovery has repercussions and entails progress in several branches of technique and not merely in one. Moreover, techniques combine with one another, and the more given techniques there are to be combined, the more combinations are possible.”\textsuperscript{21} Because each development has several effects, technique has the tendency to multiply opportunities for its growth and application, so existing fields tend to accelerate in their development and altogether new fields come into existence. To be sure, not every field is constantly accelerating—Ellul readily acknowledges that fields do stall from time to time—but the general fact is that technique develops more rapidly today than it did yesterday and will be yet more rapid tomorrow. Consequently, the overall meaning of self-augmentation is that technique develops

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 90–92.
\textsuperscript{19} Lovekin likens the exclusion of human decision-making to a kind of technical “collective unconscious, encouraging the anonymous but steadfast involvement and the submersion of the individual in the technical process.” Lovekin, “Jacques Ellul and the Logic of Technology,” 258.
\textsuperscript{21} Ellul, \textit{The Technological Society}, 91.
more and more rapidly regardless of human factors or the interventions of individuals.\textsuperscript{22}

This growth is further safeguarded by the autonomy of technique. Grant explains that the autonomy of technique means that “technique is not limited by anything external to itself. It is not limited by any goals beyond itself... It is the creator of its own morality.”\textsuperscript{23} The question of ends is key for Grant because this question is central to moral philosophy; consequently, Ellul’s claim that technique excludes all ends other than itself is of paramount importance. Ellul explains that “technique tolerates no judgment from without and accepts no limitations... Morality judges moral problems; as far as technical problems are concerned, it has nothing to say. Only technical criteria are relevant.”\textsuperscript{24} As a result, technique is not morally neutral as some claim, but in fact is the creator and arbiter of its own internal morality. In fact, technique systematically excludes or subordinates other ends so that they cannot even be seriously considered wherever technique is at work.\textsuperscript{25} Whatever technique touches, it does so on the basis of technical criteria alone and is not guided by any external ends. Technical criteria, of course, are exclusively directed toward rational methods of efficiency.

The combined effect of self-augmentation and autonomy is that the scope and detail of technique’s influence are constantly increasing so that what we may call “technical morality” is not limited to a special province but colonizes every aspect of human activity and systematically excludes any factors that might interrupt its drive to efficiency. This is clearest in the way that technique progressively reduces the role that humans play in any technical operation, whether it be factory workers, airplane pilots, or statisticians. Ellul explains that when human interference in a given activity cannot be eliminated or substantially reduced, humans are adjusted to become more technical so that they more closely resemble the machines they are operating; humans become an appendage of technique rather than a user.\textsuperscript{26} Humans are not permitted to interfere with technique, nor do they contribute to technique’s activity in a uniquely human way. They are only permitted to participate in a technically determined operation as simply one part of the machine among many. Put more generally, whatever human ends, interests or desires could have disturbed technique’s efficiency, they are all diminished or excluded from technique’s ever-increasing domain so that the sole criteria are technical and no alien morality could limit or redirect technical activity. While continuously expanding the scope and detail of its activity, technique sets the terms that justify that activity and refuses the possibility of any other terms.

These then are the two features of technique that Grant finds most important in Ellul’s analysis and which have the most significant impact on his own thought. It is

\textsuperscript{23} Grant, “Review of The Technological Society, by Jacques Ellul,” 414.
\textsuperscript{24} Ellul, \textit{The Technological Society}, 134.
\textsuperscript{26} Ellul, \textit{The Technological Society}, 134–40.
primarily the self-augmentation and autonomy of technique that Grant has in mind when he says that Ellul has taught him “what is occurring in the ‘advanced’ societies during our era” and what the structure and dynamic of the modern West is. It is these characteristics of technique that Grant did not understand when he wrote Philosophy in the Mass Age and which have led him to believe that his earlier assessment of North American society was naive. Although he was critical of industrial capitalism and the reduction of reason to an instrument, he had thought those were mistakes that could or would be corrected when their shortcomings were understood. He did not see that such correction was supremely unlikely because of the way that technique assures its continued hegemony by increasing its own power and denying the possibility of other social structures. Self-augmentation and autonomy mean that Grant’s hope for a “dawn of the age of reason in North America” was a vain hope, and that an event like the Vietnam War was not a passing catastrophe but an indication of the structure of Western society and the fate to which it is beholden.

IV. The Violent Imperialism of Technique

Let us now turn to Grant’s examination of the Vietnam War in “Canadian Fate and Imperialism.” Armed with Ellul’s account of technique, Grant explains that Vietnam is not a policy lapse of an otherwise decent country, but an indication of the fate to which Canada belongs, Western technological fate. He starts from the premise that the evil of Vietnam is self-evident and uses this as an occasion to show why technique tends toward violence and why this violence is all but assured for the foreseeable future. In so doing, Grant adopts a kind of technological determinism which makes it all but impossible to escape the violence exemplified by the Vietnam War. At the outset of his essay, Grant asserts as evident that in the Vietnam War, the American empire is doing evil. He says that “it is clear that in that country the American empire has been demolishing a people” and calls such demolition “ferocious.” He notes that a good many Canadians have acknowledged the “sheer evil of what is being done in Vietnam,” even though some suggest that Canada still has to go along with the United States in spite of that evil because the two countries are allies. Regardless of the various practical responses to the war that people have proposed, underlying those proposals is a recognition that evil is being done. Any understanding of Canada’s fate within a technological society begins in recognition of that fact.

Grant argues that the fact of the violence in Vietnam is significant not because it determines Canada’s fate but reveals it. In Grant’s view, a single event such as a war could not determine the fate of a country, not least because in this case Canada’s fate is deeply intertwined with that of the United States, and what is common to them both is far profounder than the particularities of any single military misadventure.

28 As I discuss below (Section VI), Grant’s technological determinism is a departure from Ellul. The analysis of this section does not imply that Ellul himself was such a determinist.
29 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 63.
30 Ibid., 64.
Rather, events like the Vietnam War provide, with greater or lesser degrees of clarity, an indication of the broader structure determining a given society. In this particular case, the Vietnam War does not substantially change the situation in which Canadians and Americans live, except insofar as the war acts as “a glaring searchlight exposing the very structure of the imperial society.”31 In other words, the Vietnam War is unique not in its violence, but in the obviousness of that violence. Grant condemns the war as evil, but he urges his reader to continue past simple condemnation in order to consider the basic structure of society that has led the United States to war. That structure has long characterized the West, but now there is a “glaring searchlight” to expose it to all.

Grant contends that the structure which characterizes the Western empire, and hence its violent outbursts, is nothing other than technique. Following Ellul, Grant contends that the animating faith that unifies Canada and other Western countries with the United States is “the belief in progress through technique;” the United States is the effective spearhead of this belief, but it very much characterizes other countries within the American sphere of influence as well. Grant claims that it is this belief that “gives meaning and purpose to the lives of western men” so that so far as public conduct is concerned, only service to technique is significant.32 The only criterion by which anything is measured is the criterion of technique and there is consensus that technique will solve any and all problems or questions of human good. Superficially, this expresses itself as a nearly universal expectation that we can ‘use’ technique to shape our society: we will be able to make our lives incrementally better so that we eliminate problems piecemeal and move steadily toward a more just and happier society.33 In contrast to that expectation, Grant says that we do not ‘use’ technique so much as it is uses us. Because it is self-augmenting and autonomous, technique sets out its own ends exclusively and guarantees the increasing scope and detail of its own influence. That is, the widespread hope that people implicitly place in technique does not indicate that technique is being subordinated to a broad social goal, but rather that Canada and other Western countries are profoundly characterized by technique. Technique is not one feature of Western society among many, but the basic structure within which other features, decisions and events appear.

Given that technique is the basic structure of Western society, and given that the Vietnam War is a clear expression of imperial violence, the question facing Grant is whether the violence of Vietnam reflects that technical structure or is merely accidental to our society. Grant acknowledges that this is an exceedingly difficult

31 Ibid., 75.
32 Ibid., 64.
33 As Grant often noted, in its roots, the Western scientific mastery of nature was originally inspired by Christian charity and a desire to relieve hardship and suffering. The desire to improve everyone’s lives through practical science is noble in its intention. Whatever criticisms may be made of technique, he insists that we not forget that intention nor diminish the real suffering that technological progress has attempted to overcome. George Parkin Grant, *Collected Works of George Grant*, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 458; Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 103, 138.
question to answer with certainty, but he maintains there is good reason to connect technique and violence. There are those who maintain that Western liberalism is basically decent and humane, even if good people make mistakes and there are some bad people who will commit evil; they say that Vietnam should not condemn the whole of the United States, let alone the West, because the West is generally good although imperfect. Grant insists, however, that such an argument does not appreciate what is going on with technique, nor how it is intimately related to the liberalism Western apologists defend. If we inspect some of the political implications of technique, we will see that it tends toward violence. Further, we will see that liberalism does not mitigate this tendency but augments it.

We may first note that technique goes hand in hand with “an increasingly externalized view of human life.” That is to say, technique tends to treat everything that it encounters as an object to be manipulated and mastered, including human beings. Technique does not recognize the interior lives of humans or what is not useful to its own purposes, unless somehow those things can be transformed into something manipulable. As Lovekin explains, the human body is co-opted and individual subjectivity is objectified; as a result, “man now only has an essence only to the degree that he becomes ‘mass man.’” The only thing that matters in a technological society is what is open to mastery or control so that technique can proceed with its activity. It makes no difference to technique what the object to be manipulated is, because the technical apparatus is directed toward “the mastery of human and non-human nature” alike: so far as technique is concerned, the two are equally objective and external.

Technique reinforces its preferred ‘externalization’ of the human by way of the fact-value distinction. In another essay from the same period, “The University Curriculum,” Grant explains that although Weber’s articulation of the fact-value distinction was intended to protect the dispassionate work of the academy from interference, technique has co-opted the distinction in order to remove any checks on its own power. Under the fact-value distinction, judgments of good and bad (and hence of the proper ends of human activity) become matters of value, which are themselves “subjective preferences” based on emotional makeup and the contingencies of personal history. Technique makes use of this distinction by relegating any potential obstructions to its own activity to the category of values, which have only secondary importance in public decisions. Technique does this by supporting the development of sciences which exclude value judgments, thereby cultivating a paradigm of knowledge which has nothing to say about good and bad and which serves to reinforce technique’s autonomy.

---

34 Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 72.
36 Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 118.
37 Ibid., 119.
In addition to reinforcing technical autonomy, however, this also results in humans increasingly being understood in objective terms. After all, under the technical paradigm of knowledge, objective terms are the only way in which anything can be understood. Consequently, humans become nothing but a composite of objective qualities, which is convenient for technique since objective qualities are open to technical manipulation. Though the fact-value distinction is premised on the claim that values are the free will’s imposition of meaning on a meaningless world of facts and, hence, that humans are in some sense free subjects, technique relegates that subjectivity just as it relegates values; technique superficially allows that humans are subjects, but only so that it can set aside that subjectivity to make space for the human’s objectivity qualities.\(^{39}\) To the extent that subjectivity and values apparently remain involved in technical processes, they are increasingly understood in objective terms, i.e., as conditions that can be managed and/or mitigated by technique. In short, because technique uses the fact-value distinction to assure its own autonomy, it is able to treat the human as something that is exclusively objective or ‘external.’

The externalized human is particularly vulnerable to the violence of technique because there is no longer anything about the human that could put a check on technique. The only things that can be said about the externalized human—the human as object—are facts, and facts say nothing of what ought or ought not to be done. There are no remaining features of the human that could put a “possible brake on the triumphant chariot of technology”\(^{40}\) so that the expansion of technique across the globe never meets (or rather, never acknowledges) any opposition. Even when someone does occasionally object to integration into technique, they find that they are unable to articulate reasons for their opposition that technique and those under its sway recognize as legitimate or convincing. That objector will inevitably be integrated into technique, by force if necessary—that is, if force is the most efficient expedient.\(^ {41}\) For neither can the objector say why not or how not to be integrated, because technique is morally autonomous and drives absolutely toward efficiency. If the most efficient means happens to be violence, technique will be violent because (1) there is nothing about the externalized human which deserves to be spared and (2) there is nothing special about violence as a means that technique may employ. As an object like any other, the human has only instrumental value and has no more intrinsic worth than trees, a herd of cattle, or an old factory. Humans are potentially open to all technical means, including violence.

Of course, technique will inevitably have recourse to violence because its self-augmentation demands that it expand across the globe. The world is filled with human and non-human resources to be developed and used, and technique’s drive to efficiency requires that all potential resources are actually used. Technique cannot leave resources alone if they would otherwise offer greater control and efficiency. There will, however, be some peoples—human resources—who resist integration into technique and being treated as resource, or who simply do not wish to be managed by a particular set of personnel (e.g., those running the United States). Yet

---

\(^{39}\) Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 120.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 119.

since those peoples cannot articulate in the context of technique a legitimate reason for rejecting integration, they are left with one of two choices: either a willing integration into technique, or open conflict with the technological society. If the calculus of technique determines that, on the balance, it is less efficient to gently or politely persuade integration into the technical apparatus, and more efficient to resolve a given conflict through violence, then technique will resort to violence. This remains true even if that violence will demolish a people, because useful though people are to carrying out technique’s operations, that usefulness only goes so far. Thus, in Grant’s view, the externalization of humans has made violence permissible, and the self-augmentation of technique will produce occasions to make use of violence.

Ellul is not the sole influence for Grant in his assessment of the violence of technique. Grant also draws on the thought of Leo Strauss and his analysis of liberalism in On Tyranny. Grant finds Strauss’s analysis instructive because of the way it connects technique to liberalism and liberalism to violence, but ultimately, he finds it lacking because Strauss places too much stock in a restoration of classical political philosophy. Although Strauss shows yet another reason why the technological society tends toward violence, he fails to see that technique is not simply a problematic symptom of our modern situation, but is itself a contributing cause that sustains and assures itself. It is on this point that Grant departs from Strauss, thereby emphasizing his debt to Ellul.

The thrust of Strauss’s argument, so far as Grant is concerned, is that when liberalism is brought to its logical conclusion, it amounts to a universal and homogeneous state, and such a state will of necessity be technological and will as a matter of course resort to violence. For the purpose of this analysis, liberalism is “a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man’s essence is his freedom.” According to Strauss, the assertion of human freedom is the central idea in modern political philosophy, and this expresses itself as a drive for maximal recognition of that freedom. This leads toward the creation of a state of political equals that includes everyone, i.e., a state that is both universal in scope and homogeneous in membership. One the one hand, the demand for universal recognition leads to violence because inevitably there are individuals and groups that refuse to give recognition, a refusal that ultimately can only be resolved through force. In order to become actually universal, a theoretically universal state is impelled to bring every other person and nation into its compact of mutual recognition by one means or another. On the other hand, the demand for homogeneity requires unlimited technological development in order to overcome scarcity and thus overcome any substantial divisions between rich and poor, ruler and ruled. Strauss

42 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 114 n. 3. As I note below (Section VI), Grant does not make the distinction between false and authentic freedom as Ellul does. This is a consequence of their differing interpretations of the relationship between Christianity and technique.

43 Strictly speaking, the theory of the universal and homogeneous state is developed not by Strauss but by his interlocutor, Alexandre Kojève. Strauss, however, accepts Kojève’s analysis as accurately describing the thrust of modern (i.e., Hegelian) political philosophy. Where
claims that this technological development is tantamount to removing the limits on practical sciences, which requires the abandonment of "sacred restraints" (e.g., taboos, received religious practices, traditional notions of virtue) and leads to the belief that any means is justified by the end of maximal recognition. Consequently, there arises technique willing to explore any and every practical avenue, up to and including gross violence. Thus, in Strauss’ and Grant’s view, liberalism—the political expression of the assertion of human freedom—leads both to technique and to violence.

Where Strauss and Grant differ is in what practical possibilities remain in light of the dilemma posed by liberalism and modern political philosophy. Strauss’s position is that classical political philosophy is better equipped to understand political questions than its modern counterpart and, implicitly, that we would be better advised to restore classical political philosophy than proceed with the modern project. Strauss believes that such a possibility lies open to us because the premise of classical wisdom is that historical conditions have no bearing on our ability to do philosophy: the basic political problems are unchanging, and humans always have the ability to ask and consider questions of ultimate importance. Hence restoring a politics based on classical principles is both advisable and possible.

For reasons learned in his reading of Ellul, Grant in contrast believes that no such possibility lies open to moderns. While Grant does agree that classical philosophy is superior and better understands what the good life is, he does not think restoring classical philosophy is a practical possibility. This is because in Grant’s view, Strauss fails to see the way in which technique sustains and assures itself. Strauss’s analysis of technique effectively treats it as a symptom of liberalism and not a contributing cause of the modern situation. Effectively, Strauss believes that if we understand politics through a classical lens, we would, to some extent, be able to restore proper ends to practical science and restrain technique’s unlimited growth. Yet as Ellul has shown and as Grant agrees, the dominance of technique does not depend on some kind of collective, sustained misconception about what it means to be human or what the important questions are and thus is not open to correction. This is because technique systematically excludes criteria external to itself and any potential limits it
may encounter, either by marginalizing such criteria and limits or by somehow subordinating them to technological aims. Technique does this independently of what anyone in particular thinks or tries to do. No effort at reforming or restraining technique, no effort at restoring classical political philosophy will realistically make society any less technological. However noble ancient wisdom may be, Grant does not think that the autonomy and self-augmentation of technique leave any possibility for a future other than the technological. Although Grant finds Strauss instructive in unpacking the differences between ancient and modern philosophy, it is Ellul’s influence which is decisive in understanding the practical reality of the present. Grant’s qualified reception of Strauss thereby highlights the importance of Ellul in understanding the dilemma of technological violence.

At the heart of this dilemma is the fact that because technique is violent and it assures its own hegemony, the violence characteristic of technique will remain for the foreseeable future. As we have seen, technique is violent for a variety of reasons: it externalizes the human, leaving it vulnerable to violence; it is self-augmenting and needs to expand its scope, thus creating opportunities for violence; it is morally autonomous, meaning that there are no external moral limits which would forbid violence if it is expedient; and it is most fully realized in a universal and homogeneous state that has abandoned “sacred restraints” and has practical need of resorting to violence. Technique is and will continue to be callous in the way that it handles humans, both domestically and abroad. Further, precisely because technique is autonomous and self-augmenting, it assures its own continued dominance and all but guarantees its violence will remain for the foreseeable future. The forces that lead to this violence are not the malice of individual bad actors or the strategic errors of social and political elites, but the very structure of a technological society which assures and sustains itself.

In Grant’s view, such violence plainly belongs to Western society, despite liberal professions of basic decency and humanity. Grant observes that liberal doctrine “identifies technology with evolution, and the identification of evolution with movement of the [human] race to higher and higher morality” and this doctrine is carried out by governments that “talk and sometimes act the language of welfare both domestically and internationally.” The common wisdom is that we liberals are basically good people who mean well and sometimes make mistakes, but are getting better bit by bit so that the state of the world is gradually improving and becoming more moral. Yet the government that talks about international cooperation and human rights is the same government that demolishes a people halfway across the world with the use of napalm. The government superficially committed to humanitarianism in fact solidifies its technological empire. More fundamental to the West than decent liberalism is technique, and the demands of technique determine society far more than kind intentions.

We should, of course, note that although technique demands recourse to violence, it does not have a monopoly on violence. Grant is apparently vulnerable to the criticism that he ignores the violence of other civilizations. Minogue argues that

---

46 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 72.
Grant would have done well to remember Roman proscription, Ancient Greek infanticide, and the Golden Horde; since such violence was not a modern phenomenon, Grant may be overstating his criticism of technique.\textsuperscript{47} Yet Grant is quite conscious that violence and imperialism are coeval with human society.\textsuperscript{48} He is also ready to acknowledge that ancient philosophy in particular depended on a slave class and that technological development was intended, in part, to overcome that dependency.\textsuperscript{49} In calling attention to the violence of the Vietnam War, Grant is suggesting neither that only the modern West is violent, nor that such violence is the worst that has ever been. Rather, the urgency of his criticism stems from the facts that the violence is ours; that it belongs to the basic structure of our civilization; and that that structure means there is little we can do about it. We have need to reflect on the Vietnam War not because it is more violent than any war before it, but because it reveals that this violence is a necessary and inevitable expression of what the technological society is.

For Grant, the Vietnam War is remarkable in how obvious it is in its violence. It is for this reason that he calls Vietnam “a glaring searchlight exposing the very structure of the imperial society.”\textsuperscript{50} Even if that violence should abate temporarily, nevertheless through this example we can clearly see that the technological society will resort to violence if it is necessary for its drive to absolute efficiency. Grant proposes that the United States and its allies may learn to “carry out [their] policies (e.g. in South America) more effectively and without such open brutalities,” but they will still resort to that brutality should the occasion call for it.\textsuperscript{51} To the extent that violent imperialism is ever rejected, it will not be a matter of principle but a realization that open violence is only sometimes expedient. For his part, Ellul is clear that technique will resort not first to violence but to ‘gentler’ means such as education, which employs “the minimum possible use of force,” so that humans become integrated into and satisfied with technique, making violence normally unnecessary.\textsuperscript{52} Regardless, violence will remain a part of what technique is and does. As technique’s dominance of Canada and the rest of the world increases, that violence will come to belong to more and more people.

V. Loving One’s Own and The Good Life

In Grant’s view, this situation poses an acute crisis because it undermines possibilities for the good life by making “our own” unlovable. Devoted Platonist that he is, Grant argues that the good life consists in knowing and loving the good and that we come

\textsuperscript{47} Kenneth Minogue, “Grant’s Technology and Justice: Between Philosophy and Prophecy,” in By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of Lament for a Nation, Carleton Library Series 161 (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), 170–72.
\textsuperscript{48} Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 72.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 121, 129.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{52} See, for instance, Ellul, The Technological Society, 344–49, 412–15.
to know the good by first loving our own.\textsuperscript{53} For that reason, loving our own is central to human well-being:

In human life there must always be a place for love of the good and love of one’s own. Love of the good is man’s highest end, but it is of the nature of things that we come to know and to love what is good by first meeting it in that which is our own—this particular body, this family, these friends, this set of traditions, this country, this civilisation.\textsuperscript{54}

He receives this line of thinking from Plato’s \textit{Symposium}. In that dialogue we learn from Socrates and his teacher Diotima that there is a hierarchy of different kinds of love and a corresponding hierarchy of beautiful and good things. We first experience love in our attachment to particular things, especially particular people with particular bodies. Yet we soon find that the beauty in a particular body is incomplete, and hence that our love directs itself toward progressively more complete kinds of beauty: bodies in general, souls, laws, ideas, and ultimately the good or the beautiful itself. Diotima explains to Socrates that

a lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies… [and in the end] the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving.\textsuperscript{55}

The end goal of love is to behold the good or the beautiful itself, but one cannot approach the good directly. One must proceed step by step, in the right order, beginning with what is closest and most immediate to us.

Plato’s account in the \textit{Symposium} only says that we begin with particular bodies, but Grant interprets this to include a variety of particular things which we may love—bodies, family, friends, traditions, countries, and civilisations. In our particularity, we may find ourselves attached to any or all of these things and may rightly call them “our own.” In one sense, they belong to us; in another sense, we belong to them. It is through these particular attachments, through loving what is “our own” that we come to know and love the good. When we love “our own,” we are on our way to loving the good. As O’Donovan puts it, “Love of the particular good is… ordered to love of the universal good. There is an ascent of love from particular goods to the


\textsuperscript{54} Grant, \textit{Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America}, 73.

universal good.” The good first appears to us, however dimly, in the particularities of our lives which we love, though these particular loves must ultimately be transcended in our love of the good.

Grant explains what he means by giving the example of one’s own body. He says that one’s well-being depends on loving one’s own body, but that, ultimately, we must pass beyond concentration on it. Someone who hates or is alienated from their own body will not grow up properly; yet neither will someone who never passes beyond love of their body, for they will simply be a narcissist. In either case—alienation or narcissism—a full human life will not be realized. Only when we can accept and love our own bodies without remaining exclusively preoccupied by our bodies will more complete forms of love and hence more complete lives be open to us. In loving our bodies and yet passing beyond that love, we are loving the good. Likewise in loving friends do we also love the good. Thus, Grant maintains that the ultimate human end requires that we begin by loving the particularities that are “our own.”

The difficulty is that sometimes “our own” is in conflict with the good and what should be a starting point for a full human life ends up a source of dilemma. Grant cites the example of Germans who had to face what their country did during under the Nazi regime:

An obvious case in our era is those Germans who had to oppose their own country in the name of the good. I have known many noble Jewish and Christian Germans who were torn apart because no country but Germany could really be their own, yet they could no longer love it because of their love of the good.

What should have been an object of love became hateful and “love of one’s own” became impossible to them. One cannot simply and easily substitute in another country as “one’s own” because what is “one’s own” is not a matter of choosing: in an important way it is given to us whether we like it or not. While it may be possible for someone to come to love another country—who could deny that immigrants may come to love their adopted homes?—this is not a matter of choosing something new to love so much as discovering what has become one’s own. And yet even if those Germans of the mid-20th century came to love a new home, they would still be faced with the fact that Germany was their own and that could not be undone. Grant insists that it could not be undone any more than a parent could stop being a parent to a child who has committed some horrendous crime: “One would want to say: "This person is not my own," and yet one could not. The facts of birth are inescapable. So [too] are the very facts of belonging to the civilisation that has made one.” When it is no longer possible to discern the good in “one’s own,” one is in a conflict for which there is no obvious resolution.

It is precisely this problem that Grant thinks now befalls Canadians—in fact, all those living in technological society—because they are implicated in the Vietnam

56 O'Donovan, George Grant and Twilight of Justice, 103.
57 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 73.
58 Ibid., 73.
59 Ibid., 76.
War. Grant insists that Canada was deeply involved in the Vietnam War because that war was conducted by a civilization to which Canada belongs and for reasons that are definitive for the dominant pattern of life in Canada:

What is being done there is being done by society which is in some deep way our own. It is being done by a society which more than any other carries the destiny of the West [i.e., the United States] and Canadians belong inevitably to that destiny... As the U.S. becomes daily more our own, so does the Vietnam War.\(^6^0\)

Canada belongs to technological civilization, which Grant says finds its spearhead in the United States. Further, the Vietnam War was conducted precisely for technological reasons: the autonomy and self-augmentation of technique, coupled with the way in which technique treats humans as objects to be controlled, manipulated or, when necessary, destroyed, led the United States to “demolish” the Vietnamese people. Since technique is Canada’s “own,” so too is the Vietnam War. This war and other atrocities like it do not belong to foreign politicians, military hawks, or some class of elites; it belongs to each of us who daily lives out the technological pattern of life.

As it becomes increasingly clear what Canada is and to what sort of society it belongs, it becomes increasingly difficult for Canadians to love “their own.” The dilemma that faced Germans during and after the second world war now faces Canadians as they contemplate what it is that their own society inevitably does:

The events in Vietnam must help to push [some Canadians] over that great divide where one can no longer love one’s own—where indeed it almost ceases to be one’s own. Vietnam is a glaring searchlight exposing the very structure of the imperial society. Even if hopefully the violence there should ease off, the searchlight has still been cast on that structure. We can never be as we were, because what has been done has been done.\(^6^1\)

Vietnam has made painfully clear to some that what was believed to be a basically decent and humane society, if an imperfect one, was in fact necessarily given to violent imperialism. Canada and the whole West are technological, and technique will commit this sort of violence when it is necessary. As technological, the West drives absolutely toward efficiency and that means it may have to subdue or destroy those who might resist technique in vain. Canadians may now know this is what “their own” is, and find that they cannot love it as they once did. Those in technological civilization become alienated from it as they find they can no longer love it. A full human life wherein one comes to know the good through loves of one’s own seems less possible to Canadians now that they recognize the structure and tendencies of the technological society for what it is.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 74.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 75.
This situation is particularly troubling for Grant because it is unclear what, if anything, can be done about it. As we saw in our discussion of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Grant had long been critical of the contemporary structures of Western Society, even before his encounter with Ellul. In that book, he decried the instrumentalization of reason in North America, but he insisted that recognition of the poverty of this conception of reason would likely lead the youth to reject it and give rise to a “dawn of the age of reason in North America.” His criticism was tempered by hope.

Such hope is no longer possible for Grant when he writes “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,” so his criticism of the structure of Western society has a new stake. Grant was able to sustain his previous hope because he did not see the structure of technological society, in particular that it is autonomous and self-augmenting. Under Ellul’s influence, he comes to understand that the technological society guarantees its own continuity. That means the imperial violence of technique is not just a passing error that will be corrected once recognized. It will continue to characterize Western society because the West is fated to remain technological. The West may not always be open and obvious in its violence, but it will be violent.

Consequently, it seems all but inevitable that as technique expands and intensifies across the globe, “our own” will be unlovable and we will be cut off from the good life. There is no feasible course of action that will make technological society any less technological and hence any less given to violence. Grant would insist that there is nothing that an individual can do to substantially mitigate the tendencies and dynamics of technique. Ellul would maintain that individuals can indeed resist technique, but Grant does not think this is a meaningful possibility. Although there may be protests against such violence as the Vietnam War, these do not change the general direction of society so much as counsel the ruling class to take a more prudent course. As far as Grant is concerned, the very facts of technological society that make it unlovable are for all practical purposes immutable. For those under the hegemony of technique, “one’s own” is and will remain unlovable.

When faced with a problem with such high stakes, it may be tempting to figure out what one ought to do about it. Grant’s dismal reply is that there is apparently little to be done since it is not within our power to simply reject or redirect technological society. While he would maintain the nobility of protest against injustice—he was an active member of anti-Vietnam protests—Grant has no illusions that such protests will substantially change the political reality. Grant would insist to his readers and listeners that “nothing [he has] said denies that justice is good and that injustice is evil, and that it is required of human beings to know the difference between the two.” But at the same time, he would fatalistically remind those critical of technique and its violent outbursts that they should not nurture false hopes that, when disappointed, soon turn into despair and the death of moral fervour. Those who see the Vietnam War for what it is—an expression of technique—must not think that in condemning or protesting the war they will be

---

62 Ibid., 75 n 2.
63 George Parkin Grant, “Protest and Technology,” in *Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 398.
64 Ibid., 399.
able to radically remake the West into something less appalling. Hence, we are faced with the dilemma that we are of a society that we can no longer love, and there is nothing we can do to make it lovable once again.

Although Grant is writing primarily to Canadians as Canadians, trying to impress on them the fact that Canadians cannot simply disavow the Vietnam War as if it had nothing to do with them, he is quite clear that the implications of his analysis are global. Taking his cues from classical wisdom, Grant insists that “man is by nature a political animal” and that political alienation means the loss of “one of the highest forms of life.” Some Canadians may find that they can no longer call Canada “their own” and that they can no longer consider themselves citizens in the full and complete sense. Yet because the problem facing Canadians is the problem facing the whole of technological society, and this society is quickly becoming global, soon enough just about everyone will come face to face with political alienation. What is more, this alienation will not simply be from one’s own country, but from the global civilization. The “one’s own” that has become unlovable will no longer be the particularity of some corner of the earth where someone happens to live, but the whole of human civilization. The nature of technique is that it brings everyone under its control, so any crisis introduced by technique is global in scope. The issue is not simply how a Canadian can live well, but what kind of human well-being will be possible to anyone, anywhere.

VI. Grant’s Departure from Ellul

In contrast to Grant, Ellul insists that resisting technique is possible, albeit difficult. Whatever technological dilemmas we may face, they are not insoluble. In the foreword to the American edition of The Technological Society, Ellul acknowledges that some readers may find in his writing a kind of “rigorous determinism” or “fatalism.” In response to this charge of fatalism, Ellul notes, first, that his analysis operates at the sociological level and therefore says nothing about what individuals may or may not do and, second, that the technological future his book describes is only a certainty “if man—if each one of us—abandons his responsibilities with regard to values; if each of us limits himself to leading a trivial existence… if we do not even consider the possibility of making a stand against these determinants.” The technological society Ellul depicts is only inevitable if individuals allow themselves to be carried along by social currents. In his 1982 book Changer de révolution, Ellul would remind his readers that the technological future was only probable and that each of us still had a responsibility to effect a better society as best we can. Although the book apparently

65 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 77.
66 It is for this reason that Grant can write, “What lies behind the small practical question of Canadian nationalism is the larger context of the fate of western civilisation. By that fate I mean not merely the kinds of relations of our massive empire to the rest of the world, but even more the kind of existence which is becoming universal in advanced technological societies.” Grant, Technology and Empire, 78.
surprised a number of his readers because it seemed to contradict his earlier account of technique, in fact *Changer de révolution* was restating what Ellul emphasized in *The Technological Society*’s foreword.⁶⁸ Effectively, Ellul argues that although technique is the author of its own morality and works to marginalize and exclude other moralities, humans still have the capacity to place themselves outside technique in order to resist it. While technique does not allow itself to be subordinated to other ends, it does not ultimately extinguish the human capacity for extra-technical morality. Indeed, Ellul’s project of articulating the contradiction between technical necessity and Christian freedom and responsibility is premised on the possibility of meaningfully resisting technique.⁶⁹ Ellul maintains that with sufficient awareness and understanding of technique people can change the direction of social developments. We are not irrevocably condemned to live in a violent society.

Grant knows well that Ellul is no fatalist, and yet he clearly differs from him on this score. His reception of Ellul does indeed become a “rigorous determinism” and for three reasons. First, Grant seems to estimate that society is harder to resist than does Ellul. He says that “the drive for radical change in this society tends only to harden the very directions that society is already taking.”⁷⁰ What Grant means is that protesting or resisting the direction of society typically elicits a reaction that toughens the institutions one is trying to resist so that, at the practical level, protest can have a counterproductive effect.⁷¹ Second, Grant argues that technique is extremely difficult to resist (perhaps practically impossible) because it has a mutually sustaining relationship with liberalism, the “set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man's essence is his freedom.”⁷² As I have noted above, technique asserts the fact-value distinction so that it can proceed unencumbered and unobstructed by notions of human good. One implication of this assertion is that it maintains that humans do not have a determinate good but rather only the values we impose on the world through the activity of our limitless wills, i.e., our freedom. In encouraging the belief that humans do not have ‘goods’ but ‘values,’ technique leads to the assertion of human freedom and its political expression, liberalism. In turn, liberalism encourages technique because its aim, the concrete realization of human freedom, requires the practical means provided by technique. Human freedom runs up against natural necessity and technique allows us to overcome that obstacle. Technique is the appropriate means for liberalism to realize its end.⁷³ Thus for Grant, human freedom is not a position outside of technique from which we could resist it but belongs to its very sociological dynamic.

This argument connecting technique and liberalism, of course, denies the distinction between false freedom and authentic freedom so important to Ellul. Grant denied the distinction because he insisted that freedom must be subordinated

---


⁷⁰ Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 77.


⁷² Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 144 n. 3.

⁷³ Ibid., 118–28.
to virtue and that the human understood as free necessarily leads to technique. Grant’s insistence on the necessary connection between freedom and technique is reflected in the third and most significant way that he disagrees with Ellul: Grant believes that Ellul has misunderstood or at least neglected to adequately consider the origins of technique. In his review of *The Technological Society*, Grant says that he is skeptical of Ellul’s account of the historical development of technique because although Ellul touches on the “immediate factors present in Europe from the sixteenth century,” he has not addressed the heart of the matter, namely that “modern secularism is secularized Christianity and particularly secularized Protestantism...To understand the origins of modern technique one must surely look more closely than does Ellul at its intimate relation with Biblical religion.” Grant concedes that this omission may have been a practical necessity; no book can say everything, and Ellul’s primary task was to describe the present state of technique. Yet Grant believes that because of his Protestantism Ellul separates Christianity from philosophy and for that reason fails to understand how Protestantism contributed to the transformation of reason into an instrument and the implications of that contribution. Although Ellul has done a marvelous job describing technique as it operates in the 20th century, in Grant’s view he has not adequately described its origins and foundations.

---


75 Grant, “Review of The Technological Society, by Jacques Ellul,” 416–17. We may note here that when Grant writes of “Christianity” in this passage, he is referring to ‘Aristotelian’ Christianity in the West and the Protestant response to that Aristotelianism. Following Philip Sherrard, Grant thought that opposite Western Christianity there was a ‘Platonic’ or ‘Greek’ Christianity which emphasized renunciation of the will and therefore would not lead to technique. This was exemplified among moderns by Simone Weil, in whom Grant held a lifelong interest and from whom he took his theological cues. George Parkin Grant, *Collected Works of George Grant*, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper, vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 324, 742–43, 870–71.


77 “Ellul’s account of modernity seems to me to fail because it comes out of a type of Christianity which scorns the discipline of philosophy. Obviously there has been a side of Protestantism—what one might call positivist Protestantism—which tries to cut out Christianity from philosophy. It seems to me Ellul’s writings about technology exactly show the failure of such a position. It fails to understand what technology truly is, because it refuses to come to terms with reason, except as a human instrument.” Grant, *Collected Works of George Grant*, 2009, 4:381. It is not the business of this paper to judge whether or not Grant’s criticism of Ellul is ultimately compelling. Rather, my only intention here is to indicate Grant’s stated reasons for differing from Ellul. Defenders of Ellul may note that it is unclear how much of Ellul Grant read: we know that Grant read *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda*, but in locating his disagreement with Ellul Grant says only that he read “[Ellul’s] other books.” Ibid., 4:380.
Grant argues that in failing to adequately account for the origins of technique, Ellul has not seen how profoundly technique has become a part of what Westerners believe themselves to be and thus how difficult it is to resist technique. According to Grant, far from being the source of a meaningful response to technique, the freedom enjoyed by Protestantism is central to the development and dominance of technique. With an obvious debt to Max Weber, Grant would argue in “In Defence of North America” that it is precisely the Calvinists’ rejection of natural theology that allows for an openness to the practical science that has so characterized North America and now the whole world. The confrontation of Calvinist subjectivity with the transcendent and elusive will of God meant that the external world was for them unimportant and indeterminate. Its importance lay exclusively in serving the restless righteousness typical of Calvinism. The restlessness of Calvinism, the consequent openness to practical science, and the confrontation in North America with a land that was not already their own meant that among Calvinists technique would find its most complete and profound expression: they would tend toward the mastery of human and non-human nature more completely than any other civilisation. In North America, the Protestant affirmation of human freedom was inseparable from the emergence of the technological society, even after the religious feeling that originally accompanied that freedom disappeared.

To put this in other terms, Grant’s disagreement with Ellul is that Ellul treats technique as a strictly sociological phenomenon, as something that happens to each of us but, in the final analysis, does not change what each of essentially is or believes ourselves to be. Despite the changes that technique imposes on us, at bottom each of us is (at least potentially) free and shall always retain the freedom to resist technique. In contrast, Grant argues that technique is not simply sociological; it is also ontological insofar as technique includes affirmations about what we and the world are. North America and now, indirectly, the whole West has inherited the Calvinist assertion of human freedom and its corollary, the external world as object to be manipulated. Because these assertions are so deeply a part of who we are, and because they are inseparable from technique, Grant would come to say that “technique is ourselves” and that “all descriptions or definitions of technique which place it outside ourselves hide from us what it is.” The technological society is not something that happens to our freedom; rather it is the social expression of the assertion of human freedom. Underlying the social phenomena of technique is an ontology of the human as free will and of the world as object.

---

78 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 19–25.
79 On this point I depart from Badertscher. He says that “Grant shares Ellul’s understanding that the phenomenon to be described and understood [technique] is not something outside or over against us. It is our own social order and we have internalized it.” Badertscher, “George P Grant and Jacques Ellul on Freedom in Technological Society,” 81. Rather, it is precisely because Grant believes Ellul’s sociological account locates technique outside of us that he feels the need to criticize Ellul’s account. Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 11.
80 Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America, 137.
Grant owes this account of technique in part to his encounter with Martin Heidegger. After his reception of Ellul and discovery of the political consequences of technique, Grant turns to some of Heidegger’s works like *Nietzsche, The Question Concerning Technology*, and *The Principle of Reason*.81 There Grant discovers that technique does not stand opposite or outside our will, but rather emerges out of the primacy of the will.82 As Grant argues is clearest in (though certainly not exclusive to) the Calvinist puritans who formed the pattern of North American society, the will is profoundly a part of what we as moderns believe ourselves to be and why we have come to believe freedom and autonomy are central to what human beings are. It is so part of our self-understanding that we are scarcely able to think outside this assumption and thereby adopt a stance not enclosed by technique.83

This is not to say that at any point in his career Grant rejected Ellul outright in favour of Heidegger. Indeed, Grant would maintain that in some respects Heidegger’s account of technique is incomplete and requires Ellul, while in other respects Ellul’s account requires a Heideggerian completion. In Grant’s estimation, Heidegger thinks the origins and underlying assumptions of technique more clearly than Ellul, but Ellul’s analysis gives a better account of the political implications of technique.84 Of course, in the final analysis one cannot separate the questions of what technique is and what its origins are from the question of its political implications; for that reason Grant would say Heidegger’s neglect of the politics of technique means that Heidegger cannot sufficiently think what technique is.85 At the same time, because Grant thinks that Ellul has focused almost exclusively on the politics of technique to the neglect of its origins and underlying nature, he believes that Ellul does not see how difficult it is to think outside technique and how fruitless attempts to resist technique will likely be.

Regardless of Grant’s reservations about Ellul, however, it remains clear that Grant’s understanding of the political dilemma posed by technique is deeply indebted to his reading of *The Technological Society*. The accounts of the self-augmentation and autonomy of technique Grant finds therein reveal the structure of Western society as it is in the 20th century and why it tends toward imperial violence. Grant wholeheartedly accepts the political analysis of technique that Ellul gives and based on that analysis confronts the violence of the Vietnam War. Where Grant differs, we may say, is that he does not allow for meaningful resistance to technique as Ellul does.

83 “All coherent languages beyond those which serve the drive to unlimited freedom through technique have been broken up in the coming to be of what we are. Therefore, it is impossible to articulate publicly any suggestion of loss, and perhaps even more frightening, almost impossible to articulate it to ourselves.” Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 139.
85 Ibid., 3:680; see also Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 102; Strauss and Kojève, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, 212.
because he locates the origins of technique in an account of the human as free which finds expression in Protestantism and foundation in the primacy of the will.

Conclusion

As I have tried to emphasize, Grant’s analysis of the political realities of technique and the consequent crisis are only possible because of his reception of Ellul. For Grant, it is not simply that those living in a technological society have an impoverished understanding of reason as merely instrument, nor is it that various technological institutions or nations have committed horrendous acts, though those are terrible facts. What makes the technological situation so terrible for Grant is that it is inescapable. Technique spreads across the globe inevitably. All those living in technological societies will themselves be shaped by technique. With the exception of a rare few, everyone will come to think and act according to technique. What is more, Grant believes these facts are irreversible, because technique assures its own hegemony and is virtually impossible to resist. Given this inescapability, and given that technique tends toward violent imperialism, it is the all but certain fate of humanity that “one’s own” either is or will become unlovable. Alienation from the highest potentialities for human life—political life or love of the good, depending on your emphasis—is everyone’s fate. In Grant’s view, those who recognize technological society for what it is are forced to ask themselves “what is worth doing in the midst of this barren twilight,” a question for which there is no easy answer.

Although Grant’s abandonment of the hope he expressed in *Philosophy in the Mass Age* and his criticism of the violence of technique is a function of his encounters with both Leo Strauss and Jacques Ellul, and later Martin Heidegger, it is to Ellul that we should attribute Grant’s borderline despair in the face of the Vietnam War. Admittedly, Grant says that Strauss helped him answer “the more difficult and more important theoretical questions,” but he says that it was Ellul who showed him the structure of modern society and allowed him to answer “practical questions.”86 (Heidegger, for his part, had nothing helpful to say about morality or politics.87) In the present analysis, it is the practical questions that are more important to Grant. He is concerned above all with “one’s search for the good in the here and now”88 because it is in the here and now that we first discern the good. As we come to know the good by loving our own, that is, through the particularities of our actual existence, the question of what can possibly be done in our present circumstances is paramount. While Grant would maintain that the height of human life is achieved in contemplation of the good rather than action, it must nevertheless be asked whether that contemplation is practically possible. If the good cannot be discerned in the here and now by loving our own—and Grant argues technique puts this in serious jeopardy—then the best life for humans may no longer be possible except by some miracle. The technological determinism that Grant discovers in his reading of Ellul

---

86 Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 122.
88 Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, 63.
means that the range of actions and of possible lives open to us has become intolerably narrow, especially because it excludes what is essential to our well-being. The violent imperialism manifest in the Vietnam War makes this plain to see.

References


