Birds of the Air and Winged Creatures:  
An Ironic Critique of Surveillance in Ecclesiastes and an Ellulian Ethic of Language, Love, Fear, and Freedom  

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I. Introduction

Although popular and academic discourses typically narrate surveillance as a modern phenomenon, Ecclesiastes, a book among the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom literature, suggests surveillance and its threats are pre-modern:

Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king,  
Nor in your bedroom curse the rich,  
For a bird of the air will carry your voice,  
Or some winged creature tell the matter.¹

Sociologist-theologian Jacques Ellul argues in Reason For Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes that these verses are ironic because the author of Ecclesiastes, whom he refers to as philosopher “Qohelet”—he takes this to be a complex, Kierkegaard-esque, pseudonym for king “Solomon”—routinely “sifts through human absurdities, false wisdom, and cowardly caution, bringing all his irony to bear on

¹ Ecclesiastes 10:20. 450–180 BCE.
them.” The *reductio ad absurdum* logic of these verses about surveillance does imply an ironic thrust. It is difficult to imagine a bird or winged creature hearing one’s seditious thoughts and words in a private place and carrying them to a powerful king or a controlling miser. Nevertheless, as humorous the ironic observations are in these verses, Qohelet’s jests also convey the violence of a world with rulers and rich people who ceaselessly surveil.

Surveillance technologies and practices often paralyze, malform, and inflict harm because they herald the constant presence of powers that at least extract, analyze, purchase, sell, and manipulate the peripheral and intimate aspects of peoples’ lives, and at most, crush people if they catch them speaking or acting in ways considered transgressive.

Qohelet does not live in a world with CCTV (closed-circuit television), predator drones, hacked smart phones and televisions, surveillant devices masquerading as assistants in the home, and surveillance capitalism. But Qohelet does demonstrate a prescient awareness of the connections between surveillance, power, discipline, and violence. Qohelet sees surveillance producing a paralyzing, malformative fear because it foreshadows the ubiquitous, penetrating presence of political and economic power and violence—even in the most intimate and seemingly impenetrable places, such as the psyche and the bedroom. Of course, the camera or the bird cannot really hear one’s thoughts, but surveillance’s ubiquity conjures a mystique in the Ecclesiastes passage that makes it seem as if those who are doing the surveilling can. Qohelet exposes and disarms this fear with irony. See the fear, Qohelet suggests. Look past the fear. Interrogate it. Look at the bird, the camera, and the device. Those who constantly watch, extract, analyze, sell, manipulate, and crush can see and hear some things. They cannot see and hear everything.

What can and cannot the surveyors see, hear, and do?

Such ways of thinking about surveillance echoes thematically with Ecclesiastes, for Ecclesiastes is about wisdom. Wisdom, according to Qohelet, is knowing what and whom to fear, knowing what and whom not to fear, and knowing how much to fear and what to do with that fear when fear is rightly called for. Consequently, Qohelet, with an ironic critique of pre-modern surveillance, offers wisdom to people who want to understand what the enduring phenomenon surveillance is and what ought to be done in light of it.

Structurally speaking, this essay is divided into two parts. First, it introduces the person and work of Jacques Ellul and highlights important aspects of his writing on surveillance, power, and violence. It shows that Ellul’s critique of surveillance predates the work of other critics of surveillance such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben. This provides a conceptual sociological frame for the more philosophical, theological, and ethical work provided in the conclusion.

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Second, this essay engages Ellul’s reading of Ecclesiastes, as provisionally demonstrated here, to uncover the wisdom of this curious scriptural text that helps individuals and groups to think and live well in surveillant environments, even when they constantly are being watched and heard, and therefore, constantly manipulated, threatened, and/or harmed by the presence of political and economic power. Ultimately, this essay will culminate in the argument that the apparent necessity of surveillance, the power it promises, and the harm it causes is exposed as an illusory obligation in light of the liberation, often dangerous freedom gifted to all of creation by a fear-inducing and love-bestowing God.

II. The Invisible-Visibility of Surveillant Power

Although there is much that can be said about the person and work of sociologist-theologian Jacques Ellul, this section begins with a quote from his landmark text La Technique ou l’Enjeu du siècle. Ellul lived and taught in France before, during, after the second world war, and wrote La Technique over the course of two years from 1948 to 1950. The book was published in 1954, and soon after, was translated into English and published in North America as The Technological Society in 1964. As a part of La Technique’s ambitious argument that technique (which is not limited to but includes technology) is to the twentieth century what Marx’s capital is to the nineteenth century, Ellul writes the following about surveillance (it is a long passage, but it is worth quoting at length):

The police have perfected to an unheard-of degree technical methods both of research and of action. Everyone is delighted with this development because it would seem to guarantee an increasingly efficient protection against criminals. Let us put aside for the moment the problem of police corruption and concentrate on the technical apparatus, which, as I have noted, is becoming extremely precise. Will this apparatus be applied only to criminals? We know that this is not the case; and we are tempted to react by saying that it is the state which applies this technical apparatus without discrimination. But there is an error of perspective here. The instrument tends to be applied everywhere it can be applied. It functions without discrimination—because it exists without discrimination. The techniques of the police, which are developing at an extremely rapid tempo, have as their necessary end the transformation of the entire nation into a concentration camp. This is no perverse decision on the part of some party or government. To be sure of apprehending criminals, it is necessary that everyone be supervised. It is necessary to know exactly what every citizen is up to, to know his relations, his amusements, etc. And the state is increasingly in a position to know such things.⁵

Twenty-one years prior to the publication of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and its theoretical application of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticism to modern society; thirty-six years prior to Gilles Deleuze’s “Postscript on Societies of Control” and its analysis of adaptive systems of control; and forty-one years prior to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* and its theorization of the concentration camp as the *nomos* of the modern, Ellul offers prescient commentary on and critique of modern forms of surveillance in this passage. Ellul sees in 1954 what Foucault sees in 1975: society is indiscriminately panoptic and therefore coercive; what Deleuze sees in 1990: crises in social institutions are produced when surveillance technologies and practices become increasingly adaptive and ubiquitous; and, what Agamben sees in 1995: the concentration camp has become the biopolitical paradigm of the modern.

Emphasizing this connection is not intended to formulate a ‘who made the point first’ argument nor is it intended to suggest that Foucault, Deleuze, or Agamben lifted from, let alone were aware of, Ellul’s work on surveillance. Rather, the purpose in highlighting this is to acknowledge Ellul as a timely and far-seeing critic of surveillance, power, and violence, and in so doing, to point out that he ought to be read as an early figure in a line of thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Agamben—all of whom who have endeavored to expose and critique modern forms of surveillance and the violence it can inflict. Putting it differently, in bringing each of these thinkers into view and conversation, more fulsome accounts of the illusive and complex phenomenon of surveillance, its causes and effects, and what to do about it can be engendered. Further, such comparison creates a conceptual framework for Ellul’s engagement with the theological wisdom of Ecclesiastes and its commentary on surveillance.

Foucault argues, via Jeremy Bentham, that the controlling power of surveillance exists in the fact that it is visible, but unverifiable. For example, a person is waiting for a train and happens to see the CCTV camera or the sign that tells them CCTV cameras are operating. But the person cannot be certain that there actually is someone on the other end of the camera watching them. Whether or not someone is watching is beside the point, however. The fear of being watched causes the person to act as if someone is watching. This is the paradoxical, but substantially formative, invisible-visibility of surveillance power. It becomes normalized to the extent that people do not actually see the camera, or the sign anymore, but simply

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Policing,” *Jacques Ellul on Violence, Resistance, and War*, eds. Jeffrey M. Shaw and Timothy J. Demy (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 41-52 offers a reading of Ellul’s analyses of the connections between technique and policing, but due to Alexis-Baker’s aim to use Ellul’s work to critique ‘just’ policing, his piece does not offer an extended treatment of Ellul’s discussions of the technique of surveillance used in and beyond policing as I am here.


9 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.
behave as they believe they are expected to because the fear of being watched has disciplined them enough to become obedient according to the rules of those doing the watching and disciplining (i.e., those who are in power).

Deleuze mobilizes Foucault’s work with the observation that the disciplinary societies exposed by Foucault become much more difficult to escape because, whereas early forms of modern surveillance technologies and practices keep people in their metaphorical and literal places (i.e., they discipline people in a more static sense), increasingly sophisticated forms of these technologies and practices follow and direct people (i.e., they control people in a more dynamic sense).\(^\text{10}\) As Deleuze puts it, “We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure—prison, hospital, factory, school, family. The family is an ‘interior,’ in crisis like all other interiors—scholarly, professional, etc.”\(^\text{11}\) In such a universe, Deleuze suggest that what is private becomes far too public when the most intimate, interior social spaces become increasingly indiscriminately exposed for the purposes of political and/or economic control and gains.

Agamben advances Deleuze’s and Foucault’s work with the argument that the concentration camp’s form signifies the absolute biopolitical space in the modern world because it is the place where state power directly confronts people stripped of all personhoods. This is because the camp is erected and exists outside of any law or right when the state declares a state of emergency that suspends all laws and rights for the supposed safety and interest of the citizens. The most provocative claim Agamben makes is that this form, that of the concentration camp, is the normalized space of public life.\(^\text{12}\) According to Agamben, when acts and threats of terrorism force society into a perpetual state of emergency, all public spaces, even the seemingly innocuous ones, exist on the brink of becoming concentrations camps. An airport, a bus or train station, a stadium, a school, a mall, a restaurant, a shop, a street, and so forth, all appear to be what we think they are until they become something that we think they are not: a concentration camp. Like Foucault’s panopticism, then, there is an invisible-visibility paradox of surveillance power always present in public spaces. The line-forming structures, metal detectors, x-ray machines, biometric scanners, and CCTV cameras in public spaces are the most obvious indication of this reality. They are normalized to become an invisible part of daily life, so the concentration camp aesthetics and attendant threats become internalized to become perceived and experienced as normal—normal and invisible, at least, until something happens and the veil of normalcy and lack-of-threat drops. Then, a state of emergency causes public space to morph and assume the form of the concentration camp, people see the reality behind the façade, and extreme levels of violence become permissible for the ostensible safety of all who are present.

Ellul’s sociological work, as quoted above, then, could be read as an embryonic encapsulation of Foucault’s articulation of panopticism, Deleuze’s descriptions of

\(^{10}\) Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

societies of control, and Agamben’s exposure of the normalized concentration camp as summarized here. Moreover, Ellul’s sociological work on surveillance adds to their work with its sober emphasis on technology’s role in the state’s powerful surveillant apparatus. Ellul writes a few pages later in La Technique: “The distinction between peaceful industry and military industry is no longer possible. Every industry, every technique [and technology], however humane its intentions, has military value.”

Likewise, Ellul’s structural analyses of the functions of surveillance in technological societies and systems are enhanced by Foucault’s, Deleuze’s, and Agamben’s finer-grained, more current treatments of surveillance technologies and practices.

Space limits further pursuit of the implications of the analyses provided by these thinkers, but it is enough to point out here that their observations are confirmed by, most obviously, the increasingly militarized police forces in the West. The without-warrant monitoring of citizens phone calls by “sting ray devices” originally designed and used to track enemy communications in places of war, for example, alert us to the accuracy, perhaps even the prophetic nature, of these thinkers’ observations and warnings. Likewise, Shoshona Zuboff’s more recent work on surveillance capitalism demonstrates the degree to which similar technologies and practices increasingly are pervading Western and global economies. From Ellul onward, then, these thinkers individually and collectively capture the steady, significant ratcheting up of surveillance technology means and ends from discipline to control, to concentration camp resembling social spaces, to capital extraction and circulation. At which point in the ratcheting might the word violence be used to describe the surveillance technologies and practices? The point when a global technological ecosystem is constructed in which one cannot even urinate and/or evacuate one’s bowels in one’s own washroom without having to wonder if these private behaviors are being surveilled and analyzed by an automated vacuum capturing and recording of that information to a multitude of people and entities for further analysis and manipulation?

What is most pertinent to this essay is how these analyses of surveillance frames

16 None of these thinkers are exaggerating. For one of many examples, see Ellen Guo, “Roomba testers feel misled after intimate images ended up on Facebook,” *Technologyreview.com* (January 10, 2023), accessed January 12, 2023, https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/01/10/1066500/roomba-irobot-robot-vacuum-beta-product-testers-consent-agreement-misled/. The story documents cases in which the automated vacuum, which is non-employing advanced machine learning technologies, has captured and posted onto social media images of an adult using the toilet and a minor playing in their homes.
Ellul’s theological engagement with Ecclesiastes and its critique of surveillance. In Ellul’s project, which spans fifty years of scholarship, sociology and theology interact and inform each other dialectically. Theology always informs Ellul’s sociology and vice-versa, and this gives readers something thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Agamben do not offer as extensively or richly: namely, theological and ethical responses to what has been mapped out here. Ellul thought the critical role of the Christian is to be a prophetic “watchman” on the wall of the world that diligently reads the signs of the times and alerts people when danger materializes. In the context of this essay, Ellul certainly showed, and continues to, display himself as a prophetic watchman who spotted the emergence of violent surveillance technologies and practices in his time and our own. With this in view, the second, theological part of this paper begins in the next section.

III. The Measured Word

Although there is no scholarly consensus on the philosophical traditions that shape Ecclesiastes’ wisdom—that is, how much influence can be attributed to Greek, Babylonian, and/or Egyptian thought—Ellul suggests there is a “bit of everything in Ecclesiastes” because it was written at the “crossroads of various civilizations” in its socio-historical context. At the same time, Ellul writes, Ecclesiastes is “polemical with respect to everything people believed to be serious, important, and useful” at the time. For this reason, he reads Ecclesiastes as polemically engaged with the pre-modern philosophies. In particular, he reads Ecclesiastes as representing a specific type of polemic: it is Biblical, and therefore, a communication of revelation.

For Ellul, the importance of revelation to Israel from God marks Ecclesiastes’ unique treatment of wisdom. “Over and against this practical and theoretical philosophy, Ecclesiastes rises up to the specificity of the revelation to Israel,” Ellul writes. As in most philosophical traditions, then, knowledge, love, wealth, politics, work, power, sex, art, and many other concepts and things, receive attention in Ecclesiastes, but its philosophy and polemic always are expressed most fully in an Israelite wisdom determined by God’s communicative revelation. Consequently, even if one does not relate to Ellul’s presuppositions regarding God’s existence and self-revelation, Ecclesiastes can, at the very least, be read as a singular book of wisdom with a unique perspective at the crossroads of a philosophically rich point in history. From this vantage point, Ecclesiastes’ theological wisdom and its critique of surveillance in chapter ten is illumined.

The tenth chapter of Ecclesiastes is a complex, poetic, interrogation of open mouths and flapping tongues that produce dangerous unmeasured words, power, and knowledge directed at the embodiment of political and economic power in the


18 Ellul, Reason for Being, 7.
figures of the kings, the rulers, and the rich. Beginning with verses five to seven, the following passages communicate the overall theme and tone of the chapter:

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler:
Folly is set in many high places, And the rich sit in a low place.
I have seen slaves on horseback,
And princes walking on foot like slaves.

Now, verses twelve to fourteen:

Words spoken by the wise bring them favor, But
the lips of fools consume them.
The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and
their talk ends in wicked madness;
yet fools talk on and on.
No one knows what is to happen,
and who can tell anyone what the future holds?

Finally, the concluding verse of the chapter, verse twenty:

Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, Nor
in your bedroom curse the rich,
For a bird of the air will carry your voice,
Or some winged creature tell the matter.19

There is an abundance of linguistic polemic and irony here—too much, in fact, to work through entirely. But what is of interest here is this text’s subversive linguistic critique of power and the people who hold and exercise it in the world. The linguist-philosopher-theologian Qohelet may not have the power of the king or the money of the rich, but he can subvert the power of the king and the rich with words. Qohelet says evil often proceeds from rulers who install fools in positions of power. Paradoxically, a fool in a high position of power often is low (like a slave on a regal horse); the wealthiest people often are the people in the lowest places (like a prince walking on foot portrayed as a slave). The irony deployed here does not romanticize the poor and powerless person so much as it poetically points out that, if the power of kings and rich folks can lead to folly due to the inebriating and warping effects of too much power and wealth, the lack of power and wealth of the poor and powerless person can lead to wisdom because they know what it is like to be crushed by those who drank too much from the cup of power and money. In this way, a visual inversion of the high and low—hierarchical—nature of power is formed.

As Ellul puts it in To Will and To Do, the person who knows that they are not wise is in fact wise because this humble way of knowing one’s lack of wisdom turns them towards the true, external source of wisdom: God.20 At the same time, the wise

19 Ecclesiastes 10:5-20.
20 Regarding Solomon, who was not inherently wise but had to ask God for wisdom, Ellul writes in To Will and To Do Vol. I, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 19:
and the low must be careful when speaking on serious matters. A fool multiplies frivolous words and gets themself into trouble. A wise person measures their words and uses them with precision. So, the chapter concludes with an ironic barb: even in your thoughts do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, or some bird or winged creature will hear you and deliver the subversive comments to those who are in power. Ellul comments on these verses: “These [passages] offer us wonderful advice to be cautious, indifferent, and suspicious. Can we believe they come from the same writer whose attack on the rich and the king we have [just] considered? The author who depicted the king as senile and mad, who called power an evil? We must get serious!” After directly speaking about and linguistically disarming power throughout this chapter, and then saying not to even think about challenging power, Qohelet’s final words here ought to be interpreted as ironic. The meaning of the word curse (qâlal: kaw-lal) as it is used here should alert readers to such irony. It means a frivolous, swiftly made, remark. As such, for Qohelet and Ellul, the truly effective linguistic attack on surveillance and the powerful must be deliberate and thoughtful. Poetic. Comedic, even.

It may be argued that this chapter primarily is about avoiding loose talk. The folly of indiscriminate speech certainly is an essential theme in the Bible’s wisdom literature. Folly, as is so frequently and concisely warned of in Proverbs, typically is associated with people who talk too much without thinking about what they are saying. Such people are contrasted with the wise person who listens to hear rather than respond, and when they do speak, they speak with discernment and discretion. Proverbs 15:2 is a good example: “The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.” Ecclesiastes 10 is no exception to this enduring rule of wisdom, but Qohelet’s mention of surveillance in 10:12 nuances the distinction between folly/blockered ears/loose lips and wisdom/keen listening/measured speech with poetic descriptions of a world in which folly, blocked ears, and loose lips can get you punished or killed because the rulers and the rich constantly are watching, controlling, punishing, and killing those who are not powerful. It is this poetic nuance within chapter 10 that this essay takes seriously, for it offers wisdom concerning how to live in such environments. Classic Ellulian hermeneutics are at play here, then, in that Ellul so often focuses on that which seems to be tertiary details in scripture to conclusively show that they are primary details that help people live well, live wisely, in the world today.

Ultimately, Ellul situates Qohelet’s resistance to power and its far-reaching arms in language: the measured word which artfully dissolves the fears that grip us when we think about being watched and heard by those in power. Imagining birds and winged creatures functioning as surveillance agents for dangerous, unwise kings and threatening, misguided rich people can produce a liberative response that blooms into a subversive, rebellious response: no king or rich person really manages the birds of the air and winged creatures. God does, just as God watches and cares for

“It is precisely the wise man who knows that he is not wise, and that unless God gives him the knowledge of the good in his revelation, he knows nothing, and is living in folly.”

21 Ellul, Reason for Being, 122.
all of creation. Consequently, a critical theological and ethical contrast is constructed as God’s watchful care is revealed to be the total opposite of the watchful discipline, control, harm, and capital extraction of pre-modern and modern surveillance technologies and practices.

Linguistic subversion signifies a preliminary avenue for resistance to and dismantling of power represented in the form of surveillance, but such a conceptual move remains incomplete if it is not queried: from where does Qohelet’s kind of linguistic subversion come, and is it really effective? The cliché ‘speaking truth to power’ typically lacks the substance and endurance required to make such articulations stick in relation to—let alone undo—the often paralyzing, malformative, and harmful power of surveillance and those who are using it to watch and listen. For this reason, the next section suggests that the source of Qohelet’s subversion of power with language is located in wisdom: a rightly placed fear that finds its fullest expression in love; a kind of love that explodes into dangerous liberation.

IV. Language, Fear, and Love

As Qohelet ends Ecclesiastes, it is said “the conclusion, when all has been heard, is fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person.” A connection is formed with Proverbs’ account of wisdom in 9:10, which says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But if fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, what is wisdom’s end? Wisdom’s end is love. Ellul writes: “In the final analysis, what do we desire any more than, or in addition to, loving and being loved? What do we seek beyond the amazing security and the trembling risk of being loved; what do we long for more than the tremendous experience of the expansion and blossoming of everything that comes with loving?” Wisdom buds with fear of God and blooms with love revealed in God, the two ever-interacting to cultivate a wisdom that not only articulately and artfully speaks truth to power, but also enfleshes the tangible truth of love in spite of power.

The words of 1 John 4:18-20 are penetrating reminders that fear of God generates wisdom, but the love of God perfects the fear and trembling felt when one senses the presence of the Holy, Wholly Other God. John, the Disciple who Jesus loved, writes, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear…. We love because [God] first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.” Rightly ordered fear and love, represented most fully in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, can disarm all powers, and enable a person to love their neighbor well. Whomever loves and fears God in the here and now tangibly, then, is the one who lives the wisest in the presence of a power that constantly watches, hears, disciplines, controls, harms, and extracts. The form of perfect love John the Disciple is referring to here, ultimately is not a what, but a whom, in that it assumes a Christological form. With this in view, this essay concludes with a theological and ethical meditation on Qohelet’s wise words, which end Ecclesiastes

23 Ellul. Reason for Being, 250.
by mentioning a shepherd: “The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd.” Who is this shepherd spoken of by Qohelet? The Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the one who protects his sheep from powerful, vicious wolves.

V. Practical and Poetic Conclusions

How does one love despite a power that constantly watches, disciplines, controls, harms, extracts, and threatens? Qohelet provides two practical suggestions and one poetic signal. First, Qohelet challenges readers to cultivate ways of thinking that contradict a world in which safety and comfort are offered as justifications for increasingly invasive and harmful surveillance technologies and practices. As individuals, groups, institutions, and entire societies confront the phenomenon of surveillance and the power it represents, they need to think carefully about which words to use and how those words are used. Such careful modes of thinking can, as Qohelet demonstrates, become measured, creative, and fear-dismantling ways of speaking and writing—and speech and writing unarguably are determinative for the ways in which people perceive and live in the world.

Second, choosing love over power requires creating times and places free of implicit/explicit forms of surveillance and the coercion, malformative fears, and violence that often accompanies it. With help from Ellul, Qohelet urges readers to think about what it might look like to build and seek out surveillance-free spaces that creatively reveal a love for God, neighbor, and self rather than fear of neighbor. For, it is in such places that a surveilling world might transformatively encounter another way to live, another way to sense the other person who we see in the ordinary and extraordinary stuff of life. This implies looking at our spaces and our lives first when thinking about surveillance, and then, choosing not to surveil and be surveilled constantly even if the option to surveil and be surveilled is available. In Ellulian terms, such choice reflects a theological ethic of non-power; an ethic in which people who have and/or can generate power choose not to because their love of God, neighbor, and self has overridden their desires for the kinds of power so often promised by technologies that implicitly or explicitly lead to violence.

Finally, Qohelet poetically points out the birds and winged creatures to suggest that creation and creatures, if considered thoughtfully, can reveal a particular way of being in relation to the world. Birds, like humans, were not intended to surveil each other out of fear and suspicion. In this, the birds and humans differ because humans do intend to surveil each other. As such, humans could experience a flash of wisdom in the act of looking carefully at the birds and winged creatures heralding a different way to live. It depends, though, upon whether one looks carefully.

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24 Ecclesiastes 12:11.
Engaging the Hebraic wisdom tradition, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, offers the following theology and ethic for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus says,

So have no fear of [the powerful]; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.27

God’s watchful care reveals what, who, and how we really ought to fear: a God who does not suffer fools who watch and act in ways that control, discipline, harm, and extract, thinking they will gain from such ways of watching and get away with it. As captured by this verse, bodies and souls are at stake in these matters—the bodies of the surveilled and the surveilling. Jesus Christ comes to liberate the surveilled and surveilling, to free the captive and the captor. The apparent ‘necessity’ of surveillance technologies and practices are framed by fears of danger that tell a person safety, comfort, control, and freedom can be provided by technologies like those made and used to surveil. But, as Ellul so often reminds readers, most people fear freedom more than danger. According to Ellul, freedom, the true kind of freedom, generates the dangerous demand that people live unconstrained by the apparent necessities of power, control, discipline, violence, and extraction. As he puts it in *Ethics of Freedom*:

Whenever man has made a beginning of liberty, he has taken fright, retreated, renounced his freedom, and sighed with relief at being able to put his destiny finally in the hands of someone else. Freedom is the most crushing burden that one can lay on man. In his vanity and boasting man pretends that he wants to be free. He also has a visceral fear of confinement, conditioning, and servitude. What he calls his love of freedom, however, is really his rejection of imprisonment. It is a revolt against slavery, which he cannot tolerate. Once a little freedom is offered him, however, he starts back at the sight of the void which he must now fill, the meaning he must now provide, and the responsibility he must now carry. He prefers the happy state of belonging to a group. He wants a mediocre happiness which brings no risks.28

Back to Ecclesiastes. Qohelet writes in 3:11 that God “has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” The void one encounters when they step towards freedom and away from ostensible necessity is a reckoning with a world in which illusory foresight and control is revealed to be what it is: illusory for all of creation and not illusory for the God who created it. This

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creative and caring God extends an offer to fill this void with a Son, a Good Shepherd, but such a filling is unlikely to be received if one chooses the apparent necessity of illusory foresight and control over the perfect love of God that casts out all fears and offers wisdom.

A significant part of Ellul’s legacy in and beyond his engagements with Ecclesiastes is a constant prophetic word given to readers—especially those who are Christian—that true, lasting freedom is gained only when a person is willing to forsake what appears to be necessary in order to walk with the one Good Shepherd who does not tell a person that life will be easy or safe, but does reveal that all that truly threatens has been overcome. In the context of this essay, the seemingly necessary power gains offered by surveillance technologies and practices are resisted by Ellul’s work in and beyond Ecclesiastes because Ellul made it a habit of resisting violence from an early age onward. Who will take up similar work today and tomorrow? Hopefully, those who hear and see what is spoken and observed in Ecclesiastes, Ellul’s work, and respond with action.

References


29 John 13:6; Mark 8:36.
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