

**Jacques Ellul.** *On Freedom, Love, and Power*. Expanded edition. Translated by Willem H. Vanderburg. University of Toronto Press 2015. 324 pp. \$52.50 CDN (Hardcover ISBN 9781442631922); \$22.46 CDN (Paperback ISBN 9781442629066).

The editor describes this book as a ‘transcription of a series of talks given by Ellul in 1974 in which he refines and clarifies some of his most controversial insights on the Jewish and Christian Bibles’ (1). Vanderburg accurately represents Ellul for what he was: a French scholar of law and history (University of Bordeaux), not a professional theologian, and certainly not a narrowly focused professional philosopher. Ellul (1912-94) was a highly erudite and prolific intellectual force (almost 60 books and more than 1000 articles) whose cultural significance may yet remain to be more fully appreciated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A convert from Marxism and a self-described ‘Christian anarchist’, Ellul also draws heavily on Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, even though his writings generally lack Barth’s engaging humour, and his revolutionary vigour more often reveals his underlying Marxist inclinations. His rhetorical style is very direct and never politically correct (*Cf.*, Jacques Ellul, *Islam and Judeo-Christianity A Critique of Their Commonality*, Cascade Books, 2015). *On Freedom, Love, and Power* is particularly timely for philosophers today. Ellul’s arguments and his revealingly vivid mode of articulating them reflect mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Christian experience and reopen methodological resources of a rhetorical kind for philosophers to use in our own century.

Vanderburg sums up his own editorial project as renewing Ellul’s view that ‘Our broken-down societies do not need yet another morality or religion’ (vii). Vanderburgh sees this as an authentic practice of contemporary scholarship, including philosophy. Both Vandenburg and Ellul seem to work within the ‘personalist’ idiom that emerged, partly under Ellul’s own leadership in the 1930’s, and now seems poised to attract renewed interest. Elsewhere, Ellul himself warns of his own unorthodox phenomenological ways:

Do not look here for some scholarly study on iconic expression or syntagmatics or metalanguage. I am not pretending to push forward scientific frontiers. Rather, I try to do here the same thing I do in all my books: face, alone, this world I live in, try to understand it, and confront it with another reality I live in, but which is utterly unverifiable. Taking my place at the level of the simplest of daily experiences, I make my way without critical weapons. Not as a scientist, but as an ordinary person, without scientific pretensions, talking about what we all experience, I feel, listen, and look. (*Humiliation of the Word*, trans. J. M. Hanks (Eerdmans, 1985, Introduction, line 1).

Thus Ellul poses an increasingly vital philosophical challenge today, one that may again emerge as an urgent dynamic of that ‘other reality’ he references. Christianity’s own quasi-Marxist project is, of course, to turn the everyday world upside down by unmasking Christian culture’s chronic refusal to recognize the self-serving violence it can so easily ignite. Ellul’s and Vanderburg’s well known philosophical preoccupations with the cultural origins and trajectory of technology reflect this urgency.

The book is divided into four sections, each dealing with sections of the Bible as foundational documents in western, if not world, culture. The first two are explorations, respectively, of human liberation from morality and religion and of the ultimately beloved human condition (*Genesis* 1-3 & *Job* 32-42). The last two sections turn to the New Testament, and

explore the Judaic project of the 'kingdom of love' and the vision of redeemed humanity in John 1:1-2.

These four studies are rich in the reflections that a skilled sociologist-historian can bring to interpreting some of the core foundational texts of human experience. Ellul, the sociologist, uses contemporary life as a lens that discloses renewed meanings in texts that have, over time, become hopelessly foreign and largely unreadable by those who might most profit by them. As noted above, Ellul reasserts the 'utterly unverifiable' character of the 'other reality' that animates his work. This absence of verifiability may pose a hermeneutic problem for those philosophers who still find troubling the absence of exclusively positivist or nominalist epistemic ambitions. But this will not pose a problem for all contemporary philosophers, or for scholars like G. E. L. Owen, Martha Nussbaum and, more recently, Ian Hacking and Thomas Pfau, who read Aristotle without the distorting modernist lenses that dominate contemporary thought. In fact, Ellul himself, although he was a lonely modernist in many ways, nonetheless offers (at Section 1.4) a helpful response to the hermeneutic problem for those still troubled by their positivist commitments. He invokes

another theological current...that the Bible itself is not compatible with infallible inspiration... On the contrary, the God revealed in the Bible is, first and foremost, the One who liberates people... This is fundamental for the interpretation of any text... When God speaks, human beings are put into a situation of responsibility and decision as opposed to a situation with new constraints.

It strikes me, though this is not the occasion to argue it, that this 'other theological current' corresponds well with the renewed interest in a rhetorical approach to contemporary method in the human and natural sciences that is being revived by those, like Ian Hacking and Thomas Pfau, who explore ways in which witness sometimes actually does 'rupture history' (*On Freedom, Love, and Power*, 271).

Thus, Ellul and Vanderburgh invite philosophers to rethink artificial, self-defeating, self-imposed constraints on human will and reason that have precipitated a long retreat from epistemic, moral, and political responsibility. Late in the book Ellul also sketches a possible logic of non-discursive speech, such as prayer, that he had explored in a more extended analysis, *Prayer and Modern Man* (1970, Seabury Press), where he gestured toward forensic aspects of speech / witness (*idem* 270-1).

Admittedly, the book is prey to ambiguities, inaccurate page references, and similar textual gaffes that are frequent enough to distract the reader. But, happily, these distractions do not jeopardize the book's substantial value to scholars with any Biblical familiarity or with an informed interest in the intellectual and spiritual movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their urgent 21<sup>st</sup> century echoes.

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