Introduction

The Skeleton Key—Dialectical Hermeneutics

> When I read *The Technological Society* for the first time, I was delighted,
> because I thought, "Here is someone who is saying what I have already
> been thinking."
>   –Theodore Kaczynski, 1998[1]

Throughout the eighteen-year search for the identity of "the
Unabomber," the Federal Bureau of Investigation compiled very little
concrete information about the perpetrator. One conclusion they
did come to: the Unabomber was very familiar with the writings
of the French philosopher and theologian Jacques Ellul. In letters to
newspapers and in work subtitled *Industrial Society and Its Future*,[2] the
Unabomber used an uncommon amount of Ellul's vocabulary. Also,
his critiques of modern technological society were oddly consistent
with Ellul's critique of technology.[3]

   On April 3, 1996, Theodore Kaczynski was arrested in his cabin
near Lincoln, Montana for murdering three people and injuring
eleven. In pretrial interviews, Kaczynski acknowledged Ellul's

1. Theodore Kaczynski, quoted in Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (New York: Norton, 2003), 294.
2. Theodore Kaczynski, *The Unabomber Manifesto: Industrial Society and Its Future* (Berkeley: Jolly Roger, 1995).
3. See Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber*, chapter 1.

immense influence on his thinking, along with his reverence for Ellul. In fact, before Ellul's death in 1994, Kaczynski briefly corresponded with him. According to Kaczynski's brother, Ellul's book *The Technological Society* had become his "bible."[4] When the FBI searched his cabin, they discovered a small but impressive library containing several books by Ellul. However, none of Ellul's theological works were found, only his philosophical and sociological work concerning technology.[5]

While Kaczynski was quite familiar with Ellul's thought, it seems as if Kaczynski failed to read a vital portion of Ellul's work, his Christian writings. As a confirmed agnostic wanting nothing to do with any type of institutional religion, Kaczynski limited himself to a reading of Ellul that was incomplete, and therefore insufficient. Like many others, Kaczynski failed to understand this: in order to understand correctly Ellul's work, one must grasp his distinctly dialectical methodology and worldview. By doing so, one is able to grasp both Ellul's philosophy and his theology in a clear, integrated, and complete way.[6]

By interpreting Ellul's work in the same narrow way that Kaczynski did, one comes to see Ellul as merely a neo-Luddite or a fatalist calling for a complete overthrow of "the system." In fact, even historian Lewis Mumford describes Ellul's work as "fatalistic."[7] Postmodern philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg also dismisses Ellul's work as "pessimistic" and "deterministic."[8] Indeed, if one reads only Ellul's work on technology, one will most likely agree

4. Ibid., 332.
5. Ibid., 92–93.
6. David W. Gill also makes this claim in "The Dialectic of Sociology and Theology in Jacques Ellul: A Recent Interview" (interview and paper given at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, November 21, 1988).
7. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine,* vol. 2, *The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 290–91.
8. Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

with Mumford, Feenberg, and many others who respect Ellul as a founder of the philosophy of technology, but fail to take his work seriously because they mistakenly believe it offers no solutions to the problems raised by technology.[9]

Ellul published over fifty books in his lifetime, and almost everything he wrote was either philosophical or theological in nature.[10] To use an analogy he was fond of, Ellul's work was like the two parallel rails of a train track, one rail being theological, the other philosophical.[11] Clearly, no train can move ahead on just one rail. For every philosophical work Ellul wrote, he wrote a theological counterpart to it. This was central to his dialectical methodology. For example, the counterpart to *The Technological Society* is *The Meaning of the City*, a biblical study of cities from Genesis to Revelation. In addition, *The Politics of God and The Politics of Man*, a study of 2 Kings, was written as a dialectical counterpart to *The Political Illusion*.[12] For Ellul, the dialectical tension between his two strands of work was constant and acted as the conjoiner between them.[13]

The purpose of this study is to establish the necessity of being acquainted with both sides of Ellul's work by way of his dialectical methodology. If one reads only his philosophical work, it will seem to offer no solution. If one reads only his theological work, it will seem shallow. If, however, one is familiar with Ellul's conception of

---

9. See Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*; Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*.

10. In the following, I refer to Ellul's non-theological work as "philosophy." Ellul was primarily a historian and sociologist, but his work concerning technique is highly philosophical in nature. Likewise, Ellul maintained that he was not a theologian, but as we will see, this is clearly not the case. So, for the purposes of clarity, I will address the two veins of Ellul work as philosophy and theology, respectively.

11. For Ellul's discussion of his dialectical methodology, see Jacques Ellul, "On Dialectic," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 291–308.

12. Ellul published *The Technological Society* in 1964 and *The Meaning of the City* in 1970, as well as *The Political Illusion* in 1967 and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* in 1972.

13. Ellul, "On Dialectic."

dialectic—the hermeneutical key to his work—one will gain a full and coherent understanding. By weaving together Ellul's most significant philosophical and theological works with the thread of dialectic, I seek to accomplish this task.

In chapter 1, I discuss the three primary intellectual influences on Jacques Ellul: Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, and Karl Barth. I explain how Marx's dialectical view of history, as well as his critique of capitalism, influenced Ellul's sociological and philosophical hermeneutics. Also, I describe how Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology and his emphasis on paradox, combined with Barth's notion of dialectical inclusion, influenced Ellul's theological hermeneutics.

Ellul's notion of dialectic as worldview and methodology are discussed in chapter 2. By looking at the process of history and the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we learn how Ellul defended his dialectical position. Additionally, I explain how Ellul's conception of dialectic influences his Christology.

Ellul's relation to other dialectical theologians, as well as his conception of God, is detailed in chapter 3. Also presented is an important discussion of two of Ellul's key distinctions: religion and revelation, and seeing and hearing. Finally, the logic behind Ellul's belief in universal salvation is outlined and explained.

In chapter 4, Ellul's philosophy of technology, including his conception of technique, is described. As the most important concept in Ellul's oeuvre, technique's conditions, characteristics, and ethical entailments are presented. Included in this chapter are brief considerations of two thinkers who share with Ellul a deep concern with the technological society, Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger.

The subjects of chapter 5 are propaganda and politics. As two spheres within the realm of technique, propaganda and politics

comprise the biggest threats and temptations to Christians. Also considered herein are the inherent physical violence in current political systems, and the innate psychological violence in modern propaganda.

Finally, in chapter 6, I return to Ellul's theology. By presentation and analysis of his concept of hope, his defense of nonviolence, and his theory of universal reconciliation, I demonstrate that Ellul's work—theological and philosophical—forms a coherent whole, united by his dialectical outlook.