

**GEORGE GRANT'S CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY**

THE INFLUENCE OF JACQUES ELLUL, MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND  
SIMONE WEIL ON  
GEORGE GRANT'S CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY

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## Abstract

The dissertation considers the influence of Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, and Simone Weil on Grant's understanding of technology. Chapters One and Two analyze Ellul's influence on Grant, while Chapter Three examines Heidegger's influence on Grant's understanding of technology. Chapter Four examines the consequences of Grant's ambiguous evaluation of Ellul and Heidegger. Grant's unwillingness to entirely accept either account of technology leads to a tension in which aspects of Ellul's account of technology are held simultaneously with elements of Heidegger's account. As a way to overcome the tension between these explanations, Grant becomes open to gnostic elements in Weil's theology, which manifest themselves in radical dualism and esoteric wisdom.

The purpose of the dissertation is to clarify the significance of Ellul for Grant's thought. Scholars often overlook the extent of Ellul's contribution for Grant's account of technology, particularly in Grant's refinement of concepts such as technological necessity and his critique of liberal ideology. Furthermore, the dissertation seeks to reveal the pliability of Grant's account of technology, which is closely linked to Grant's theological, philosophical, and political judgments. The dissertation suggests that Grant's understanding of technology leads Grant to espouse gnostic elements from Weil's theology (such as radical dualism and esoteric wisdom) as a palliative to the arid technological necessity and moral inarticulacy of technological civilization.

The dissertation challenges the scholarly orthodoxy that exists in the interpretation of Grant's work. Through a fresh reading of primary and secondary sources, the dissertation advocates an alternative approach to understanding Grant's thought.

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INTRODUCTION:

The dissertation will examine the influence of Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, and Simone Weil, on George Grant's understanding of technology. The dissertation will investigate how the conflicting accounts of technology constructed by Ellul and Heidegger can be understood as a catalyst for Grant's openness to gnostic influences in Weil's thought. The dissertation will argue that Grant's dissatisfaction with the concept of technological necessity in Ellul, and with Heidegger's account of human freedom, is a pivotal factor in Grant's openness to gnosticism.

Examination of the scholarship in the field of Grant studies reveals that a discernable orthodoxy has arisen in the areas of classification and exegesis. Scholarship on Grant interprets Grant's work through the orthodox lens, thus approaching the subject from a limited and incomplete perspective. Some scholars approach Grant's work from the assumption that his primary goal is to reconcile ancient truths with modern science (Lee, 1998). Other scholars suggest that Grant's thought can be understood as a futile attempt to defend Plato and the Gospels against the onslaughts of modern secular thought (Emberley, 1992; Davis, 1994). By contrast, the dissertation offers a fresh interpretation of Grant's account of technology, and its implications for his theology.

Scholars are aware that Ellul's thought played a seminal role in Grant's understanding of technology, but many consider Ellul's influence on Grant to be limited to a perceptive, but theoretically weak, sociological analysis of technology in the modern context (Davis, 1994; Angus, 1987). Most scholars seem to accept Frank Flynn's

division of Grant's thought into three stages, in which Ellul's influence is largely relegated to Grant's middle, penultimate period.<sup>1</sup> Flynn asserts that, "[a]s he had taken Hegel as his guide during his first phase, so now [Grant] found in Jacques Ellul...intimations of the darkness that comes with the co-penetration of North American continentalism and technological mastery" (Schmidt: 1974, 198). Thus, Ellul's thought is understood as an intermediary stage situated between Grant's Hegelian view of technology and Grant's encounter with the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Ellul's account of technology is more significant for Grant's thought than most scholars suppose. Indeed, echoes of Ellul's analysis of technology and political philosophy survive throughout Grant's later writings. For example, Ellul's definition of technology as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity" (Ellul: 1969, xxxiii) remains vitally important for Grant. Ellul's definition of technology as efficiency is an integral aspect of Grant's criticism of technology throughout his writings, from Grant's articulation of intimations of "deprivation" in *Technology and Empire* (1969) to his discussion of the university curriculum in *Technology and Justice* (1986). Furthermore, Ellul's influence on Grant is manifested in his appropriation of Ellul's characterization of modern technology, originally outlined by Ellul in *The Technological Society* (Ellul: 1969).<sup>2</sup> According to Ellul, the autonomy, universalism and monism of modern

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<sup>1</sup> A similar version of this division of Grant's thought into various stages can be found in Joan O'Donovan, *George Grant and the Twilight of Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, (New York: Seabury, 1969). Cf.: 79-147.

technology have separated humanity from “natural necessity” in favour of “technical necessity” (Ellul: 1969, 146). Technical necessity underlies the modern quest for absolute efficiency in all aspects of life. Grant eventually distances himself from Ellul’s thought because of the theological assumptions inherent in Ellul’s brand of Calvinist Christianity. Grant considers Ellul’s inability to perceive the relationship between the legacy of Western Christianity and the rise of the technological civilization to be problematic. However, Grant does not reject Ellul’s definition and characterization of technology, as indicated by several of Grant’s post-1969 lecture notes and public comments.

Arthur Davis, in *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity* (1996),<sup>3</sup> asserts that Grant’s work is primarily influenced by Grant’s encounter with Heidegger. Davis suggests that Grant drifts away from the influence of Ellul when he begins to critically engage Heidegger’s account of technology. According to Davis, “[Grant] had decided that Heidegger understood modern technological science in relation to the decline of religion and morality in a way that another of his formative thinkers, Jacques Ellul, though a Christian, did not” (Davis: 1996, 143). Davis asserts that Grant’s major contribution as a philosopher is to direct younger thinkers toward the task of thinking Platonic and modern thought together. Davis states that “Grant did not take us into a way of thinking that combines Heidegger and Plato. But he did insist that the job had to be

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Davis, ed., *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, and Education*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

tackled, and he drew our attention to the failure of others to complete it.” (Davis: 1996, 155).

More recently, Harris Athanasiadis, in *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross* (2001),<sup>4</sup> has suggested that Grant’s turn from Ellul to Heidegger is the result of Ellul’s lack of philosophical depth. Athanasiadis asserts that “[Ellul’s] inability to perceive the inherent connection between biblical, Calvinist Christianity and the progress of scientific, technological expansion” (Athanasiadis, 2001: 126) turns Grant away from Ellul. In his account of the interdependence of art and techne, Grant considers Heidegger to have revealed a novel aspect of modern technology: something that was overlooked by the classical Greeks. Heidegger’s account of modernity remains the deepest because it turns away from normative conceptions of justice in the Greeks and in Judeo-Christianity.

Scholars argue that Grant’s appropriation of Heidegger’s account of modernity is mitigated by Grant’s acceptance of the Platonic/Christian conception of justice (Davis, 1996; Athanasiadis, 2001; Angus, 1987).<sup>5</sup> Dennis Lee asserts that Grant’s attempt to combine the insights of Plato with those of Heidegger forms the basis of an unrelieved tension in Grant’s work. Lee interprets Grant’s attempt to unite Platonic and Heideggerian accounts as a goal that ultimately leads to a sense of despair and inarticulacy. According to Lee, Grant understands the pervasive nature of technology,

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<sup>4</sup> Harris Athanasiadis, *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Ian Angus, *George Grant’s Platonic Rejoinder to Heidegger: Contemporary Political Philosophy and the Question of Technology* (Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).

and observes that one encounters a “checkmate...when we try to analyse or judge a specific technique, and find that every standard we invoke is itself an expression of technological thinking” (Emberley, 1990: 34).<sup>6</sup> Humanity can no longer articulate what has been lost with the adoption of technological modernity.

Lee’s analysis of Grant is perceptive, but Lee assumes that the Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts of technology represent only one strand of influence on Grant’s understanding of technology. Thus, Lee overlooks the tension in Grant’s thought between the different accounts of technology set forth by Ellul and Heidegger.

Throughout Grant’s work, the concept of technological necessity is given substance by Ellul’s definition and characterization of technology in *The Technological Society*. This is the clearest manifestation of Ellul’s influence on Grant. For Ellul, all social and political necessities are tied inseparably to the expansion of technology. Indeed, Grant suggests that technology has become the “dominating morality” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 572) in North American society. Conversely, Heidegger’s thought appeals to Grant because of Heidegger’s ability to articulate technology as the “ontology of the age” (Grant, 1965: 16). Heidegger considers technology to be dangerous because of its propensity to relegate human and non-human beings to the status of repositories for potential usefulness. There remains the possibility that humanity can alter its course, because of the freedom inherent in the dissolution of all metaphysical constructs, and in new approaches to Being. Although Grant is drawn by Heidegger’s theoretical depth,

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis Lee, “Grant’s Impasse,” in *By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of Lament for a*

Grant cannot support Heidegger's account because it seems to allow no room for the Christian God. According to Grant, Heidegger's criticism of technology is carried out within the fundamental modern assumptions about human freedom.

In Lee's estimation (Emberley: 1990), Grant's greatness as a philosopher comes from his elucidation of the fundamental truth about technological modernity: the inarticulacy of all non-technological critiques of the technological civilization. Lee dubs Grant's philosophical achievement "Grant's Impasse" (Emberley: 1990, 24). Lee asserts that Grant's Impasse contains two important truths. The first truth of Grant's Impasse is that all aspects of contemporary life operate according to the dictates of technological necessity. This first truth parallels Ellul's influence on Grant's understanding of technology. The centrality of the concept of technological necessity in Grant's understanding of modernity indicates the importance of Ellul's analysis, because Grant's account of technological necessity echoes Ellul's description of necessity in *The Technological Society*. The second truth of Grant's Impasse is consonant with Heidegger's influence on Grant's account of technology. Grant understands Heidegger's account to be the most comprehensive criticism of technological modernity. However, Heidegger's insistence on the primacy of freedom, combined with Heidegger's unwillingness to construct his critique of modernity on a theological basis, leads Grant to reject Heidegger's account. Lee's discussion of Grant's Impasse is a useful hermeneutical tool for illuminating the influence of Ellul and Heidegger on Grant's

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*Nation*, ed. Peter Emberley (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990) 11-39.

understanding of technology. Unfortunately, Lee evaluates Grant's work solely in the context of Grant's attempts to reconcile ancient and modern truths.<sup>7</sup>

Grant's thought cannot be understood solely in terms of his failure to reconcile ancient and modern thought. Grant moves beyond such simple dichotomies through his increasing openness to gnostic elements in the writings of Simone Weil. Indeed, the dissertation will show that Grant's openness to gnostic elements forms the basis of Grant's response to the pervasiveness of technology in the West. In 1961,<sup>8</sup> in the context of a discussion about the status of biblical scholarship in North America, Grant provides a definition of gnosticism:

[t]he word *gnosis* means knowledge, and the Gnostics believed in a secret knowledge, divinely imparted, and not available to ordinary men. They believed that the true God is unknowable without such knowledge. The true God is not the creator of this world of imperfection which was in fact created by an imperfect God. Man can only free himself from the evil tyranny of this imperfect world by a secret *gnosis* which returns him to the perfect God. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 101)

Later, Grant's understanding of gnosticism becomes intimately linked to Weil's interpretation of Plato. In a letter written to a friend in 1988,<sup>9</sup> Grant explains why he disagrees with many contemporary accounts of gnosticism, particularly Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*<sup>10</sup>: "I do so because I think [Voegelin's] use of it is unfair to what is true in ancient gnosticism. Of course, as in all religious traditions, there is a lot of

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<sup>7</sup> For Lee's criticism of Grant, see Dennis Lee, *Body Music: Essays* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998). For an example of Grant's early attempt to unite the truths of ancient and modern thought, see George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: Copp Clarke Publishing Company, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> George Grant, "The Year's Development in the Arts and Sciences: Philosophy and Religion," in Davis and Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 66-108

<sup>9</sup> William Christian ed., *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

madness in many manifestations of ancient gnosticism, but in the greatest Gnostics there is a hold on what is fundamental in Platonism” (Christian: 1996, 381). Voegelin, in associating gnosticism with modern, immanentist movements such as Marxism, has overlooked the truth of what Plato says about the existence of evil. In a letter to Joan O’Donovan, written in 1982, Grant suggests that while “[g]nosticism has been very foolishly used by official western Christianity,” nevertheless “Petrement was a great gnostic scholar before she gave up her own studies to edit SW. Read her on it...All Christianity is in tension between the gnostic and the agnostic.” (Christian: 1996, 323).

The most important element that Grant appropriates from ancient gnosticism is dualism. According to Grant, dualism provides the only reasonable basis for theodicy. If God is good, the existence of evil and suffering can only be explained by radical separation: “[a]s I see it, the great advantage of any dualistic system...is that it squarely faces the problem of suffering and does not swallow it up in any easy explanation” (Christian: 1996, 230). One reason why Plato holds such a place of prominence in Grant’s thinking is because Plato offers an explanation of the human condition that does not try to explain away suffering: “I do not think it is comprehensible that one could come to understand the ultimate purpose of things except in this way; otherwise is one not shallow about evil?” (Christian: 1996, 232). Plato’s thought is informed by a separation between the order of good and the order of necessity, as it appears to mortals caught in the web of suffering. In Grant’s view, the truth about dualism is best

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

articulated by Simone Weil, particularly in Weil's account of the insurmountable distance between God and necessity (Weil: 1951; 1952; 1957; Veto: 1994).

The second element of gnosticism that is significant for Grant is found in Weil's esoteric teaching about decreation and otherness. In his "In Defence of Simone Weil"<sup>11</sup> (Christian & Grant: 1998, 256) Grant writes that "it is with hesitation that I categorize Weil as a 'gnostic,' in order to make clear that it was more than accident that held her from becoming a Catholic" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 259). According to Grant, the institutional Church's inability to sanction otherness kept Weil from participating in the mass. For Weil, focusing one's attention on the significance of the other in the act of decreation recalls God's original act of creation through withdrawal. It is only through openness to heterogeneity and otherness that one is saved. Through the abandonment of the doctrine of the will propounded by Western Christianity since Augustine, Weil and Grant see the process of "decreation" as "giving oneself away." The concept of decreation represents the basis of the gnostic, esoteric wisdom that Grant appropriates from Weil's theology; in fact, the giving-oneself-away that Weil's concept of decreation urges requires the tremendous courage available only to the saints; "[b]y 'saint,' I mean those rare people who give themselves away" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 257). In his essay, "Justice and Technology,"<sup>12</sup> Grant writes that "what makes one tremble when one

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<sup>11</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of Simone Weil" in ed. Christian and Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> George Grant, "Justice and Technology" in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

thinks about the saints is that one knows how painful is going to be their journey to...joy” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 437).

Not all scholars agree that Grant is open to gnosticism. Zdravko Planinc suggests that Weil’s gnosticism is part of Grant’s “polyphonic” critique of modernity (Umar: 1992, 27).<sup>13</sup> According to Planinc, Weil’s gnosticism can be understood as one aspect of Grant’s critique of modernity, which also draws upon the thought of other scholars such as Strauss, Kojève, Heidegger, Ellul, and others. Barry Cooper, in his essay “George Grant and the Revival of Political Philosophy,”<sup>14</sup> suggests that while Grant may have been tempted by “the gnostic appeals of Simone Weil’s speculations” (Emberley: 1990, 116) as a palliative to the pervasive nature of the technological civilization, Grant’s social activism belies a gnostic attempt to flee from reality. On the other hand, Lawrence Schmidt strongly asserts that neither Weil nor Grant are gnostics, and that scholars have misinterpreted Grant’s “Christian Platonism” (Davis: 1996, 268) as gnosticism.

Grant once called Simone Weil a “great saint and thinker” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 257).<sup>15</sup> Grant also asserts that “Weil [is] essentially a gnostic saint” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 259). Although Weil taught that it was important to love the world as an expression of God’s creativity, Weil was clear that the temporal universe, the reality which we sensibly inhabit, exists only to the extent that God has withdrawn in order to

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<sup>13</sup> Zdravko Planinc, “Paradox and Polyphony in Grant’s Critique of Modernity,” in ed. Yusuf Umar, *George Grant and the Future of Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Barry Cooper, “George Grant and the Revival of Political Philosophy,” in *By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of Lament for a Nation*, ed. Peter C. Emberley (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990) 97-121.

create it. In *Waiting For God*,<sup>16</sup> Weil asserts that God's love culminates in self-love through the mediative status of Christ, but that "there is the infinite separation over which it triumphs, which is the whole creation spread throughout the totality of space and time, made of mechanically harsh matter and interposed between Christ and his Father" (Weil: 1951, 75). Grant interprets Weil's thought as an attempt to live in response to God's reality, while trapped in the order of necessity.

One may protest that Grant's reading of Weil is not consistent with gnostic principles. For example, in his essay "Justice and Technology,"<sup>17</sup> a critique of the attempt by theologians to equate technology with God's justice, Grant quotes Weil: "Human nature is so arranged that any desire of the soul which has not passed through the flesh by way of actions, movements and attitudes which correspond to it naturally, has no reality in the soul" (1984, 243). The statement appears to indicate a vital connection between spiritual salvation and the physical body and its "actions, movements and attitudes." Nevertheless, Grant often finds in Weil's writings the articulation of transcendent goodness that remains inaccessible to the technological civilization. Randy Peters points out that, "[f]or Grant, calculative thinking and Western metaphysics led to a world filled with madness because they cease to see that otherness can only exist if the

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<sup>15</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of Simone Weil," in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951).

<sup>17</sup> George Grant, "Justice and Technology," in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

Good is beyond Being” (Peters: 2002, 35).<sup>18</sup> The dissertation will show that the ambiguity in Grant’s reading of Weil is the result of Grant’s appropriation of Weil’s esoteric teaching regarding decreation and the significance of otherness. For Grant, as for Weil, God is absent within the order of necessity/technology, but God’s moral claim on the individual remains accessible through one’s encounter with the beauty of otherness. For these reasons, Grant himself understands Weil’s thought in the context of gnosticism:

In saying that Simone Weil belongs to Greek Christianity, I am not saying that she was near to the institutionalized form, namely the Greek Orthodox church—because I am taking Greek Christianity to be something wider than this—I include in it much that has disappeared from the world. Its last appearance in the Western world as more than an individual phenomenon was according to her in the civilization of Languedoc and the religion of the Cathars. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 250)

For Grant, God is understood to be utterly beyond the order of necessity, while God’s justice remains a moral imperative in the world of human experience. Grant can appropriate gnostic elements from Weil’s theology, while being involved in various social and political movements.

In 1941, Grant underwent a profound religious experience while working as a farmhand in Buckinghamshire. Throughout his life, Grant continually referred back to the experience as formative in the development of his Christian belief. It should be noted that Grant’s Christianity is a continuous thread underlying his various writings and

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<sup>18</sup> Randy Peters, “Overcoming Metaphysics: George Grant and the Good beyond Being,” *Illumine 1*, no. 1 (2002): 28-35.

speeches. While the dissertation will argue that Grant eventually develops an openness to gnostic elements in Weil's theology, it should be stressed that the movement toward gnosticism is a gradual process. It would be erroneous to suggest that Weil's gnostic influence on Grant's theological ideas is in all cases synonymous with the content of Grant's belief. Grant considers Weil to be a modern saint and a genius, and this is so because Weil is able to uphold the truth found in Plato's dialogues and in the Gospels. Grant's Christian Platonism is refined by Weil's thought, not defined by it or premised upon it. Indeed, Grant's Christianity pre-dates his initial reading of Weil in 1952.<sup>19</sup>

The dissertation will examine Grant's understanding of technology in light of a new reading of the primary and secondary sources. The aim of the dissertation is to deepen the scholarly understanding of Grant's account of technology by analysing the lasting impact of Ellul on Grant, and the subsequent tension between the differing accounts of technology elucidated by Ellul and Heidegger. The tension between the accounts of technology by Ellul and Heidegger forms the basis for Grant's openness to gnostic elements in Weil's theology. Grant overcomes what Lee dubs "Grant's Impasse" by incorporating radical dualism and esoteric teachings from Weil's theology as a palliative to the lack of moral articulacy in technological civilization.

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<sup>19</sup> For an account of Grant's mystical experience, and for an account of Grant's first reading of Weil, please see William Christian, *George Grant: A Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

CHAPTER ONE: GRANT'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE THOUGHT OF JACQUES ELLUL

The chapter examines the influence of Jacques Ellul on George Grant's understanding of technology. It will analyze the various ways in which Grant comes to understand the nature and scale of the technological civilization. Under the influence of Ellul, Grant comes to frame modern technology in terms of an autonomous and hegemonic force, colonizing human and non-human nature. The chapter will begin with an analysis of Grant's early conception of technology, prior to his encounter with Ellul. Next, the chapter will examine Ellul's understanding of technology, as set forth in *The Technological Society*. The chapter will conclude with a detailed examination of how Ellul's understanding of technology influenced Grant's understanding during the five years leading up to the publication of *Technology and Empire*.<sup>20</sup> Ellul's influence on Grant's understanding of technology forms one of the intellectual foundations on which Grant's work as a whole can be better understood.

i) Grant's Early Understanding of Technology

In *Philosophy in the Mass Age*<sup>21</sup> Grant analyzes the moral ambiguity occasioned by the widespread application of modern science in North America. On the one hand, North Americans have been freed from the necessity of constant, backbreaking labour in order to survive on an unforgiving continent. Modern science allows increasing numbers

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<sup>20</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).

of people to concentrate on leisure. There can be no deep, abstract thought where one must tirelessly struggle against natural necessity, which offers little succor from human suffering. Grant asserts that “reason, considered as domination over nature, has freed man from his enslavement to nature so that it is open to him to pursue the life of reason as more than simply domination” (Davis & Emberley: 2002, 320). Technological advances in medicine and transportation have made the world a much less painful and isolated place, and these advances have allowed humanity to pursue interests other than basic survival. Nevertheless, scientific advances remain morally ambiguous. Grant asserts that the ability to dominate nature has provided humanity with the potential for great good and for great evil, as witnessed by the events of the twentieth century. There has been much excess in the creation of the modern mass, scientific society “that...breaks down the old natural forms of human existence” (Davis: 2002, 320).

Grant distinguishes between mythic and the modern consciousness in order to describe how the scientific worldview differs from that of our ancestors. For ancient civilizations, the world was sacred; all things were seen as reiterations of primal, sacred events. Early humankind did not gain its sense of meaning from historical action. Instead, meaningful action was understood as the participation of individual and society in the divine, through a cyclical re-enactment of primal events. According to Grant, Plato represents the culmination of the mythic consciousness, as well as a bridge between the ancient, cyclical view of reality and the modern, linear view. Plato interprets time as the

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<sup>21</sup> George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, in ed. Art Davis, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. II*

“moving image of an unmoving eternity...in which the passing events of life only have meaning as they lead men to the unchanging reality of God” (David: 2002, 326). Grant contrasts this with the modern conception of meaning as a historical process. Modern civilization, with its linear conception of time, understands human action in a historical context which posits a series of unending, irreversible events. Grant interprets the modern worldview to assume that “[m]an, and not God is the maker of history. Unique and irreversible events must be shaped by creative acts of human will” (Davis: 2002, 328).

According to Grant, the moral sources of the ancient worldview are found in a clear conception of natural law. Natural law is premised on the idea that there exists an intrinsic order to the cosmos which transcends all human codes and laws. Furthermore, the concept of natural law suggests that humans can derive their ethical orientation from the cosmic order. Rational contemplation can uncover the truths of the cosmic order and the goal of humanity is to act in conformity with these truths. For Grant, the concept of natural law forms the basis of ancient Western political and cultural institutions, from the Greek polis, to the Roman Imperial conception of citizenship and law, to the attempt to connect Christian theology and ancient political philosophy during the medieval era. Human laws only remain binding to the extent that they approximate the eternal, unchanging cosmic order.

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*1951-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 310-407.

Natural law theory assumes the existence of a universal moral framework and an immutable human nature. In contrast, the normative morality of the modern worldview denies the static understanding of human nature, and anathematizes the conception of a universal moral framework. In the modern context, moral sources are commonly understood in terms of individual conscience and freedom, for “the idea that we make history and that this is what is important is so completely taken for granted that we hardly think of it” (Davis: 2002, 328). Grant asserts that the modern moral framework forces the individual to assume responsibility for the creation of meaning.

The modern idea of history as progress has its origins in the Judeo-Christian conception of God. In early Hebraic religion the concept of ‘history’ becomes understood as the canvas on which God asserts Its divine will. This development represents a new way of understanding the world: time is no longer understood as an endless cycle. Instead, the movement of history is rendered sacred by the immanent actions of the divinity. God’s covenant with Abraham is a historical act for the Jewish people, as is the exodus from bondage in Egypt. According to Grant, early Christians universalized the Judaic conception of history as the vehicle for the divine will. Through the human aspect of Christ, divinity enters bodily into history, thus making history the paradigm in which human salvation and punishment are enacted. It is a short leap from this concept to the teleological idea of historical progress towards perfection.

Grant suggests that the emphasis on progress in the modern worldview has its roots in the concept of autonomy espoused in Calvinist Christianity: “[c]onscious of

themselves as free, men came to believe that history could be shaped to their own ends” (Davis: 2002, 345). The centrality of human will in Calvinist theology is the catalyst for an increasingly secular humanism which denies absolute moral frameworks. The gradual fading of Christianity as a moral fulcrum for the West leads modern humanism to elevate freedom as the primal civilizational value.

Grant argues that while scientific progress has achieved its fullest expression in North America, the empires of the East also place their hopes in progressive humanism. Marxism has frequently been misunderstood in the West. For Marx, the economic and social privations borne by the majority in the capitalist system have alienated the masses of humanity from political goods. Evil is interpreted by Marx as the result of the alienation of the proletariat from the means of production. Humanity will inevitably overcome evil when the proletariat overthrows the capitalist order and ushers in the communist state. Grant sees Marxism as an essentially modern, historicist understanding of history. It is important for Western thinkers to study Marxism because it represents an unprecedented intellectual accomplishment of the modern spirit. Indeed, Grant calls Marx a “great prophet,” and suggests that “Marx must be studied not so much as a political propagandist than as a theorist who brought together the varying streams of the humanist hope and in whose synthesis, therefore, the value of the doctrine of progress is most clearly exposed to us” (Davis: 2002, 349). The central flaw of Marxism lies in its tendency to subordinate subjects to objects. Marxist thought subordinates humanity to the means of economic production. In doing so, Marxism denies transcendence. Grant

construes this as a fatal flaw, because any philosophical system that explicitly denies human spirituality can never be fully appropriated by the West.

The historicist spirit has been seminal in shaping the modern consciousness. The modern emphasis on increasing human mastery over nature, combined with aggressive individualism, has led to profound problems in the modern era. Grant points to the deformed rationality underlying the Nazi concentration camps, and the systematic destruction of the natural environment at the hands of industry, as examples of the modern consciousness gone awry. The normalization of the conception of limitless freedom has not ushered in an immanent Utopia; the ideal of progress at all costs raises fundamental moral questions regarding human interactions with each other and with nature. Grant asserts that radical moral freedom breaks down when it is applied to other individuals, because the moral claims of other individuals represent a barrier to limitless freedom. Grant asks whether there is any action that can still be considered categorically wrong:

This question of limit surrounds us at all points, both important and unimportant, whatever our occupation. The scientists may be singled out as an example, because on the clarity of their vision so much of what happens will depend. If we could gain knowledge by experimenting on live, conscious human beings against their will, should we do it? Should we do it if the knowledge gained added to the happiness of the greatest number? (Davis: 2002, 367)

If an intrinsic moral limit to human freedom exists, such a moral limit implies the existence of natural law. For Grant, the idea of God represents an absolute moral limit and an ordered cosmos. If there are no absolutes in the Universe, all things become permissible: “God is that which we cannot manipulate” (Davis: 2002, 367).

The roots of what Grant calls “American morality” (Davis: 2002, 368) lay in Calvinism. The ‘worldly asceticism’ of the Puritans gradually forms the basis of pragmatism, the most important philosophical system in contemporary North America. Pragmatism identifies virtue with utility. Combined with utilitarian ideals, pragmatism claims that the most quantitatively beneficial solution is always the best solution to moral problems. With exponents such as William James, pragmatism forms the philosophical justification for the enormous output of energy into practical reason and scientific mastery in the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries.

Grant criticizes pragmatism as the doctrine which exalts action over thought. Pragmatists cannot condemn any action, however deplorable, because pragmatism interprets all morality as situational and relative. If even ghastly crimes such as torture or genocide cannot be categorically denounced as wrong, then the idea of human moral limit is rendered meaningless. Humanity has already witnessed the fearful consequences of limitless freedom in the ovens of Auschwitz and the fallout from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He asserts that any philosophy that refuses to set moral limits on action in the real world is not worthy of philosophic pedigree. Pragmatism “denies moral law despite all its high-sounding language” (Davis: 2002, 377) thus pragmatism can never be an adequate philosophical basis for morality. Nevertheless, pragmatic assumptions form the bedrock of modern, North American morality.

In *Philosophy in the Mass Age* Grant attempts to find a balance between the modern conception of freedom and the ancient idea of natural law. What is required is a

substantive morality that is fluid enough to acknowledge both human freedom and the existence of evil. Modern people must be wary of either extreme, because the ‘conservative’ idea of limit can be used to thwart the hope that evil can be overcome. On the other hand, the idea of human freedom can be used to justify any action. Grant calls for the creation of a new conception of nature which allows room for human freedom as well as a substantive morality connected to the natural order:

Insofar as artists come to take their art seriously and try to think and practice their own work in relation to being as well as to history; insofar as practical men of all sorts and conditions think deeply about what they are doing; and insofar as metaphysicians, in fear and trembling are not content with inadequate unities, the contradictions of our present practice may yet be overcome. A morality that does not scorn joy and relates it to suffering may perhaps arise. Whether or how this will happen in our particular civilization cannot be determined. (Davis: 2002, 388)

Grant remains open to reconciliation between the modern, historicist spirit and the conception of a cosmic moral order that provides limits to human freedom. In the early phases of his thinking about modernity, the history-making spirit is understood to be the main culprit in the modern lack of a substantive vision of justice. Although Grant goes to great lengths to examine the roots of the scientific worldview, he does not yet perceive technology as the ontological basis of the modern era. In writing *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Grant has not yet forsaken the immanent dream of liberalism: the creation of the perfect, earthly society.

Several years later, Grant’s understanding of the problem in North America has undergone a significant shift. He perceives the technological system to be a result of

mass consumption and the depredations of North American capitalism. Technological advances provide the individual with a new sense of freedom. However, the individual is increasingly controlled by impersonal forces, particularly by transnational corporations. For Grant, the loss of meaning that results from the dissolution of the old moral limits is the pivotal question for modern politics. In his 1961 article “An Ethic of Community”<sup>22</sup>

Grant notes:

When men have no easily apprehendable law of life given them by tradition, the danger is that their freedom will be governed by an arbitrary and external law of mediocrity and violence which will debase their humanity rather than fulfill it. This relation between increased freedom and the lack of well-defined meanings is the essential fact with which any politics of the mass age must come to grips...basically the same problem will be present in all societies, whatever their economic structure, once they have reached a mature stage of technological development. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 26)

There is the sense, in Grant’s writings from this era, of a growing popular dissatisfaction concerning mass society and the capitalist structure. He questions the ability of capitalism and mass consumption to nurture human excellence. Capitalism is explicitly ordered in favour of managerial elites at the expense of less affluent classes. On a deeper level, manufactured consumption destroys public life and leads to unfettered individualism, which emphasizes the private sphere. Thus, political and social equality cannot flourish in a system in which capitalism is the driving social force. Equality, understood to be the ability of all people to pursue human excellence, becomes impossible in the capitalist system of mass consumption.

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<sup>22</sup> George Grant, “An Ethic of Community,” ed. Arthur Davis & Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George*

Grant considers the will to dominate the natural world through technology as one of the debasements caused by the capitalist system. Grant is drawn to a dialectical understanding of social reality, in which humans are not entirely determined by technology. In “An Ethic of Community” Grant urges his audience to re-consider the requisite form of a society based on the principle of equality, which all Western democracies profess to be. Modern people are not determined by external social forces insofar as they can still choose which form of politics to support.

By 1964, Grant’s dissatisfaction with the liberal, technological vision of Canada has become evident. In his speech, “Value and Technology,”<sup>23</sup> Grant laments the loss of meaning experienced as the result of the modern emphasis on the primacy of individual freedom. Grant understands that the drive to technological progress has become an end in itself because it is considered to be the practical manifestation of radical freedom. The modern interpretation of human essence as freedom is rooted in modern liberalism, which became prominent in the West as the secularized version of the Calvinist emphasis on individual will and the spiritualization of prosperity. Because the modern account of moral freedom is divorced from earlier social myths, there is an increasing sense of massive alienation from public life. The assertion of freedom is most direct in the domain of morality, where modern humanity is taught by liberalism to create its own

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*Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 20-48.

<sup>23</sup> George Grant, “Value and Technology” (originally published in *Conference Proceedings: Welfare Services in a Changing Technology*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference on Social Welfare, 1964; 21-29), in ed. Art Davis & Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 227-247.

values. Grant insists that the emphasis on value-creation strips the external world, beyond the private sphere of the individual, of intrinsic meaning:

Value is seen as something external to the facts; something which is created by man and not given in the world. This is to deny that the world apart from us is valuable, and to deny that the world is in itself good is the heart of blasphemy. In this sense the crisis of value in technology is nowhere better seen than in the social sciences which make the fact-value distinction. For in that very distinction is the denial that the world is in itself valuable. This is to leave the individual naked and alone in the dreadful pressure of time. No wonder ours is the most dynamic society on earth when we believe we have to make the meaning of our own lives. No wonder the most explicitly modern men alternate between the rage to live and despair about their contingency. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 235)

According to Grant, the modern mode of valuation is rooted in the impersonal organizations of the vast private and public corporations that rule North American economic and social life. In mass society, meaningful participation in public life has become impossible as the technological drive to mastery and radical human freedom become divorced from any conception of transcendence.

In another public address, given in 1965,<sup>24</sup> Grant speaks once more of the change wrought by the modern emphasis on individual freedom. Addressing advances in the field of biogenetics, he asserts that the drive to ever-expanding technological control over nature raises ominous questions about the social consequences of radical human freedom:

For several centuries the dominant classes of Western society have believed with increasing certainty that the most important human activity is that science which issues in the conquest of nature. Three centuries ago there was some moderation in the reverence paid to that activity, but in the last century the moderation has disappeared. And in the last century the dominant classes have directed themselves more and more towards knowledge that will issue in the conquest of

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<sup>24</sup> George Grant, "Man-Made Man," in ed. Art Davis & Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. III (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 255-270.

human nature. Modern people's most comprehensive self-definition has been that our essence is our freedom, and that freedom means to make the world (our race included) as we desire it. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 256)

A gap exists between those who define the essence of humanity as freedom, and those who posit natural or moral limits to human freedom. Those who suggest that human freedom should be constrained by an external moral paradigm are increasingly isolated from power in the modern world. Those who interpret humanity as freedom view nature as the receptacle of morally neutral matter, the purpose of which is to serve human freedom. This expresses itself in the view that humanity must gain as much control as possible over nature. Grant notes the assumption regarding human nature underlying the modern view: if humanity, through the exercise of moral freedom, is infinitely perfectible, then no static human nature exists:

In general, we can say that the motive behind this conquest [of human and non-human nature] was the desire to perfect man. But one assumption of the conquest of human nature becomes clearer and clearer in the modern world. If we are set on conquering human nature, we have to give up the idea of an unchangeable human nature. For the idea of an unchangeable human nature puts limits on our ability to conquer it. Therefore the mark of modern social science has been to deny that there is such a thing as unchangeable human nature. Man can shape man to make him as he pleases. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 262)

In the seventeenth century, science as the conquest of natural necessity was pursued for the benefit of humanity as a whole. The ultimate goal of the scientific conquest of nature was liberation. Liberation from natural necessity would allow a greater number of people to pursue human excellence. However, as modern science and philosophy developed over recent centuries, the boundaries between human and non-human nature have become blurred. With the goal of liberating humanity, "the center of

the modern scientific movement was no longer the control of that which was not human in the name of the human, but the conquest of human nature itself' (Davis & Roper: 2005, 262). The 'social' sciences arose as an attempt to control and predict human action as a response to widespread social change wrought by the practical applications of scientific progress. Thus, the modern standpoint conceives of both human and non-human nature as infinitely labile and flexible in the pursuit of freedom as technological mastery.

Grant asserts that the modern view, which underlies the social sciences, is extremely problematic. Indeed, the distinction often made between factual and subjective judgments is indicative of the philosophical naiveté of modern social science. The idea that humans create value implies that there is no fundamental meaning in nature beyond its subjection to endless manipulation and control in the service of human freedom. The understanding of nature as inherently meaningless has come to include human nature as well. The action of freedom on the human object is what makes the object valuable; the modern system of valuation conceives of human responsibility in the context of the separation of matter from meaning. Objects (human or otherwise) remain ethically neutral; what matters in a moral sense is the way humans manipulate these objects in freedom. Human objectification is premised on the assumption that human nature is infinitely malleable. According to Grant, it is conceivable that there is no longer any clear vision of human excellence which can place external limits on freedom. The liberal myth that humanity can choose to use modern technology for good or evil purposes is

based on a shallow understanding of the mechanisms that control modern Western society. Liberal ideology overlooks the fact that, if human nature is infinitely malleable, no ethical choices are possible beyond the shallow legitimization of the existing social system:

The point is that the new social sciences, by denying an unchangeable human nature, deprive us of any clear standard of human good and evil by which such [ethical] decisions can be made. The ambiguity of our era is then that the very development of science requires the development of moral nihilism. It is not by accident that our society is marked by an enormous progress of science and an enormous progress of moral nihilism. The two go together. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 264)

These themes are expanded in Grant's most famous book, *Lament for a Nation: the Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*.<sup>25</sup> One of the central themes of the book is the concept of technological necessity as the engine of modern civilization, and the inexorable expansion of the technological civilization outward from North America. In his examination of the operative forces behind the gradual disappearance of Canadian sovereignty, Grant analyzes the relationship between technology and liberal ideology. His diagnosis of technological modernity is quite severe, and there is a note of desperation in *Lament for a Nation* that is not present in the conciliatory prose that characterizes *Philosophy in the Mass Age*.

One of the reasons underlying the political and cultural subordination of Canada in the American empire is to be found in the continentalist attitude of the Canadian

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<sup>25</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: the Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1965), in ed. Art Davis & Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, Vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 271-367.

business establishment, concentrated in Toronto and Montreal. According to Grant, Diefenbaker's political fall from grace was precipitated by the fact that his prairie populism failed both to harness Quebec nationalism and to provide a consistent and widely acceptable alternative to continental capitalism. For all Diefenbaker's vaunted conservatism and populist rhetoric, Diefenbaker failed to understand that the Canadian business elite would never be comfortable with Canadian independence. The idea of a sovereign Canada as a middle power in the international arena ran contrary to the continental tendencies of transnational capitalism.

Grant interprets the loss of Canadian sovereignty as the inevitable outcome of decisions made by key political and economic figures. He mourns the fact that most contemporary historians interpret the loss of Canadian sovereignty from within a progressivist understanding of history. Liberal politicians and intellectuals have ushered Canada into a new colonial era by pursuing the agenda of continental capitalism. Canadian liberals have a persuasive way of reconciling colonial status with economic and social comfort. Canada's disappearance is presented as a necessary good, as continental capitalism represents the only realistic way to ensure comfortable survival. Grant laments the assumption that "in the age of progress...the broad movement of history is upward. Taken as a whole, what is bound to happen is bound also to be good. But this assumption is not self-evident. The fact that events happen does not imply that they are good" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 303).

There are also other reasons for the demise of Canadian sovereignty; homogenizing forces exist in the philosophical understanding of reality which underlies the North American way of life. The roots of North American modernity lie in the age of progress, in which the most important human goal is understood to be the exercise of freedom with the aim of controlling nature. One of the clearest expressions of freedom in North America is capitalism, which is inherently corrosive to nationalism. According to Grant, in order for Canada to have withstood the fundamentally anti-nationalist forces of continentalist capitalism since 1940 would have required hereditary roots in philosophical and religious traditions that preceded the era of progress. Because capitalism is not only a practical way of life, but also a philosophy that places the accumulation of profit as the height of human excellence, there would have to have been deep roots in an older tradition capable of resisting the siren song of materialism. The Roman Catholicism of French Canada might have been able to provide such roots at one time, but most Quebeckers have been excluded from the relevant corridors of power for this very reason. The idea of Canada as a conservative foil to the Republican experiment in the United States has become irrelevant in the modern era.

Canadian nationalism has fallen prey to the ideology of the universal and homogeneous state that represents the goal of the modern worship of technological progress. Modern humanity envisions the universal and homogeneous society as the ultimate goal of political history. A connection is perceived between modern science,

embodied in technological mastery over nature, and the universal and egalitarian politics of the new age:

This state will be achieved by means of modern science—a science that leads to the conquest of nature. Today scientists master not only non-human nature, but human nature itself. Particularly in America, scientists concern themselves with the control of heredity, the human mind, and society. Their victories in biochemistry and psychology will give the politicians a prodigious power to universalize and homogenize. Since 1945, the world-wide and uniform society is no longer a distant dream but a close possibility. Man will conquer man and perfect himself. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 314)

Of course, the United States is the center of the Western empire and therefore it is also the spearhead of the modern political process towards scientific achievement of the universal and homogenous state.

According to Grant, both Marxists and American conservatives would deny that the U.S. is the vanguard of modernity, but they do so for different reasons. Marxism attempts to reconcile human freedom and social order in history. Like modern liberal ideology, Marxism interprets the essence of humanity as freedom. Freedom is achieved through technological means, but Marxism nevertheless retains its teleological vision in its quest for the immanent perfection of human society. Whereas modern liberal ideology contains no concept of moral limit, Marxism understands technology, the practical expression of human freedom, to be “an instrument that serves the human good” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 316). Modern liberal theory posits that no external moral claim can be allowed to limit human freedom. One chooses one’s own subjective good based on private judgment. While one is free, in the private sphere, to pursue his or her own vision

of the good, public policy must be oriented to a technical mastery over nature; all barriers, be they moral or otherwise, must be transcended.

In Grant's judgment, Marxism is essentially a conservative political doctrine, in that it attempts to limit the human passions of greed and acquisitiveness. However, Marxism has been unable to make serious inroads into the dynamic, technological societies of the West since 1945; "Western civilization was committed in its heart to the religion of progress and the emancipated passions. Those who accepted such a doctrine found corporation capitalism was a much more suitable regime than the inhibiting policies of socialism" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 318). Western capitalism is truly progressive, whereas Marxism plays the role of a conservative force even though Marxism itself is informed by the modern assumptions about history.

The other powerful group which opposes the idea that the U.S. represents the vanguard of the new universal and homogenous state can be referred to generally as American conservatives. American conservatives claim that there exists a wide gulf between the ideological forces underlying the French Revolution, with its emphasis on the perfectibility of humanity, and the American Revolution, with its emphasis on the rights of the individual. According to Grant, American conservatives divide modern political philosophy into two groups: those who criticize the classical political philosophers and those who understand humanity's essence as freedom. The first group, inspired in a limited way by the thought of Machiavelli and Hobbes, criticizes classical notions of teleology and natural law, but nevertheless believes in the limited applicability

of such concepts to politics. The second group, composed of thinkers like Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, believes that human freedom is able to perfect itself through technical mastery.

Canadian nationalism is bound inevitably to be swallowed up in the universalizing and homogenizing forces of continental capitalism, yet Grant refuses to equate necessity with goodness: “Belief is blasphemy if it rests on an easy identification of necessity with the good” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 341). The purpose of life in the post-nationalistic era is consumption, and people can choose to take part in it fully, or relegate themselves to the dim margins of political life. While the liberal faith in progress remains dominant in Canadian politics, Grant asserts that the new continentalism does not necessarily entail a more peaceful life.

Liberal ideology, born out of the desire for political reform in earlier centuries, has itself become a reactionary ideology in the modern world. It is only with great difficulty that the political assumptions of liberalism and technological progressivism can be challenged, for “[t]hose who criticize our age must at the same time contemplate pain, infant mortality, crop failures in isolated areas, and the sixteen-hour day” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 345). Modern liberalism, when contemplated in the context of these practical gains, might seem prudent, but Grant asserts that liberal ideology partakes in the assumptions of thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Hegel, each of whom criticized the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

In an age of confusion, tradition remains the most prudent way to achieve human excellence. Thus, Grant asserts the importance of “the ancient faith,” which conceives of an eternal order over which human freedom has no claim:

Beyond courage, it is also possible to live in the ancient faith, which asserts that changes in the world, even if they be recognized more as a loss than a gain, take place within an eternal order that is not affected by their taking place. Whatever the difficulty of philosophy, the religious man has been told that process is not all. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 347)

ii) Ellul’s Influence on Grant’s Understanding of Technology

Although it is uncertain when Grant first became aware of the writings of Jacques Ellul, Ellul’s influence on Grant’s understanding of technology cannot be overestimated. Grant considers technology to be largely inimical to the achievement of human excellence. The direction of technological progress, as the application of science for the purpose of controlling human and non-human nature, is indicative of the moral nihilism that pervades the technological civilization. However, he also perceives the possibilities for human betterment that technology provides. In *Philosophy in the Mass Age* Grant discusses the possibility of finding a *via media* between modern conceptions of freedom and natural law. His writings from this early period contain the hope that somehow it will become possible to combine the practical advantages of the modern view with the moderation and reverence that characterize the ancient view. In *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Grant’s understanding of technology has not yet become deterministic.

In his speech, “Man-Made Man,”<sup>26</sup> Grant re-asserts the possibility that Western humanity has the ability to restrain itself from the moral nihilism which modern science and technology has helped to foster:

Now when control of nature has reached power over the very roots of our beings, we have surely come to the point where even the most reckless may be willing to admit that talk about restraints and limits is not simply to be pushed under the carpet by calling them taboos and superstitions. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 269)

This is not the lament of a man who has lost hope in the potential of modern humanity to rescue itself from nihilism.

Grant is certain that social action can still be effective, provided one recognizes the importance of contemplation and the possibility of absolute limit as the moral foundation for action. As his understanding of technology matures, these relatively optimistic evaluations begin to change. Much of Grant’s thought after 1965 is a response to the dark and hegemonic forces at the heart of the technological civilization. After 1965, Grant’s reflections on the nature of technology are profoundly shaped by his encounter with the thought of Ellul.

At a conference in his honour in 1974,<sup>27</sup> Grant is clear about the significance of Ellul:

When I first read Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, it seemed to me a wonderful account of what was going on—the illustrations of the central fact that the unfolding of technology was determinative in the modern world. That dominance

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<sup>26</sup> George Grant, “Man-Made Man,” speech delivered at the Vermont Conference (24 March, 1965), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 255-270.

<sup>27</sup> The discussion arising at this conference, in which Grant participated, is partially reproduced in Lawrence Schmidt, ed., *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1978).

was a destiny which transcended all else and to which all else in the modern world had to be related...Ellul's description of technology was quite outside such a shallow account, and he faced what was actually happening with his lucid French and Christian common sense. He just seemed to state the score. (Schmidt: 1978, 146)

Grant goes on to discuss how he later came to disagree with several of Ellul's theological assumptions. However, Grant was clearly influenced by Ellul's characterization of technology and its relation to modern social life.

In the preface to the French edition of *The Technological Society*, Ellul outlines his basic definition of technique.<sup>28</sup> Ellul states that "*technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity*" (Ellul: 1969, i).<sup>29</sup> Ellul does not assume a Hyperborean perspective on technique, but admits that technique, having completely permeated all aspects of Western society, profoundly effects each of us, including his own critical approach. Ellul claims that the purpose of the book is to unveil the mechanisms of "technological necessity and what it means. It is a call to the sleeper to awake" (Ellul: 1969, xxxiii). He makes a point of countering those who claim that his work is motivated by excessive determinism, fatalism and pessimism. Ellul considers his work as a clarification of sociological fact; he is not passing judgment on an aspect of Western

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<sup>28</sup> Ellul uses the term 'technique' to describe the technological phenomenon for several reasons, but primarily because Ellul feels that this term is able to encompass the nature and role of technological methods in the modern world. Technique is not merely a collection of machines, or a particular technological application. Grant uses the word 'technology' to describe what Ellul is referring to when Ellul writes of 'technique'. Thus, in order to be true to the individual style of each, I will use 'technique' when discussing Ellul's work, and 'technology' when discussing Grant's work, even though, in the final analysis, I take them to mean the same thing.

<sup>29</sup> Italics in original.

culture. Freedom is not inherent to human nature. Life constitutes a web of determination, but as an individual one can choose to struggle against these determinants or to remain passive. To suggest that freedom or determination rests in an idealized ‘human nature’ misses the point. For Ellul, freedom exists in the stance we take in response to various determinants. The struggle itself defines the individual in relation to the necessities that constantly entangle human moral agents. Ellul asserts that “[w]e must look at [technique] dialectically, and say that man is indeed determined, but that it is open to him to overcome necessity, and that this *act* is freedom” (Ellul: 1969, xxxiii). Nevertheless, individuals are determined by their surroundings, and Ellul states that “the most dangerous form of determinism is the technological phenomenon. It is not a question of getting rid of it, but, by an act of freedom, transcending it” (Ellul: 1969, xxxiii).

Ellul notes that there are many common misconceptions about technique. Many people equate technique with machines. In fact, the machine is only the primitive ancestor of technique, which has far outstripped its parent. Machines are merely the most explicit manifestations of technique. The adaptation of human personal and social life to the realities of the machine age is merely an example of the power of advanced technique:

Technique integrates everything. It avoids shock and sensational events. Man is not adapted to a world of steel; technique adapts him to it. It changes the arrangement of this blind world so that man can be a part of it without colliding with its rough edges, without the anguish of being delivered up to the inhuman. Technique thus provides a model; it specifies attitudes that are valid once and for

all. The anxiety aroused in man by the turbulence of the machine is soothed by the consoling hum of a unified society. (Ellul: 1969, 6)

Technique is omnipresent in the modern era, and there remains no niche left unaffected.

Another common misconception is the relationship between science and technique. Ellul agrees that there exists a link between science and technique, however technique is not dependant on science, as many people suppose. Scientific progress is dependant on technique because of the prohibitive cost of performing cutting-edge experiments, and the resources available to large, modern laboratories. He observes that there is very little support for the ‘pure’ sciences in the universities and government laboratories, just as there is little support for the humanities. These subjects are understood to be peripheral to technical application, and are thus considered irrelevant in the technological civilization.

Two aspects of modern technique have allowed it to go beyond historical forms of primitive technical application. The intervention of consciousness in technical application has allowed the technician to consider alternative possibilities in the search for the most efficient technical methods. Furthermore, the mixing of reason with technical application has allowed humanity to transcend pragmatic or intuitive forms of technological application, because reason can focus on efficiency in the abstract. The most efficient means to a given end is not always the most obvious means. The insertion of these two modalities into the search for technical efficiency has led humanity beyond more primitive forms of technical activity.

Ellul examines the development of technique from its most primitive manifestations as a form of protection against nature in the guise of magical forms and rituals. Emerging from the earliest forms of technology and superstition, the Greeks became conscious of various Oriental techniques,<sup>30</sup> but Greek civilization seems to have developed a suspicion toward technical application in the interests of social harmony. The Romans were the first civilization to develop technique beyond the intuitive military, administrative and religious techniques adopted by previous civilizations. The Romans initiated vast political and economic techniques. He notes that while these were not always the most effective techniques, it explains how the Roman Empire became so powerful and lasted as long as it did. Indeed, several technical structures created during the Roman era have survived the millenia, such as the political organization of the Roman Catholic Church.

However, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the end of the medieval era in Europe, technique did not make many inroads into Western culture. This was primarily because the Christian Church was wary of implementing technical improvements in most areas, because of the perception of hubris or pride in the use of human technical will as a corrective to God's creative power. According to Ellul, the stultification of technology in the medieval era ended with the European Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although there were periods of technical atrophy, technological expansion in Western Europe lasted until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The

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<sup>30</sup> Ellul points out that technique originated in the East before appearing in a systematic way in the West.

Industrial Revolution sparked the systematization and unification of efficiency in technological style, and culminated in the application of total social effort to the development of technique. Ellul describes the enormity of the social forces dedicated to the development of technique during the Industrial Revolution:

[T]here were always individuals who possessed a clear vision of technical supremacy; say, Archimedes in mechanics, or Loyola in spiritual technique. But we almost never find the distinctive characteristic of our time—a precise view of technical possibilities, the will to attain certain ends, application in all areas, and adherence of the whole of society to a conspicuous technical objective. All these, taken together, constitute what I have termed a clear technical intention. (Ellul: 1969, 52)

This clear technical intention rose as a result of bourgeois support and state interest; it forms the root of technological civilization.

One of the significant aspects of Ellul's analysis of technique is his characterization of modern technique. He asserts that there are seven characteristics which distinguish modern technique from earlier technical forms. The first normative characteristic is rationality. The ability to consider particular means on an abstract level has allowed modern techniques to go beyond the simply intuitive or practical technical accomplishments of earlier societies. The second characteristic underlying modern technique is artificiality. Artificiality is closely tied to the concept of technical rationality. The artificial character of modern technique is the result of an increasing distance in human perception between natural processes and technical procedure. The mechanical aspect of modern techniques, combined with the development and application

of non-material (political and organizational) techniques has produced an artificiality that removes its application from natural processes.

The third characteristic of modern technique is automatism. According to Ellul, technical application has reached such an advanced stage in modernity that it functions without specific human direction. Technique is everywhere, in every aspect of human life, while the development of technique is no longer guided by human agency. Technical progress has surpassed the bounds of human control. This is not to suggest that the human will is no longer necessary for the application of particular techniques. Ellul is suggesting that human beings no longer exert a directive will which chooses which techniques to apply and which are discarded:

Let no one say that man is the agent of technical progress...and that it is he who chooses among possible techniques. In reality, he neither is nor does anything of the sort. He is a device for recording effects and results obtained by various techniques. He does not make a choice of complex and, in some way, human motives. He can decide only in favor of the technique that gives the maximum efficiency. But this is not choice. (Ellul: 1969, 80)

Because technological man must always submit to the doctrine of the most efficient means, the aspect of choice has been virtually removed from technical decisions. The human agent has been reduced to the role of maintainer and operator in the modern technological paradigm.

The fourth normative characteristic of modern technology is self-augmentation. Ellul considers modern technique to be pervasive, in that it subordinates all aspects of human life to technical necessity. Invariably, technical necessity prevails because it is always the application of the most efficient means. He posits technical growth at a

geometric rate, because each new technical application entails a corresponding recalibration of the technological system as a whole. All new techniques are necessarily based on earlier techniques, and each new accretion, because it conforms to technical necessity, must become increasingly effective in terms of the principle of efficiency. Modern technical advances are not driven by social or economic conditions, or by any other human factor. Nevertheless,

A technical discovery has repercussions and entails progress in several branches with one another, and the more given techniques there are to be combined, the more combinations are possible. Thus, almost without deliberate will, by a simple combination of new data, incessant discoveries take place everywhere; and whole fields are opened up to technique because of the meeting of several currents. (Ellul: 1969, 91)

The fifth characteristic of modern technique is monism. Ellul asserts that all specific techniques are interwoven. Practically, this entails that technique is not connected to elements external to itself. Even though there can be spiritual or mental techniques, technique itself is intrinsically active; there is no technique that is entirely passive. Technique is essentially the most efficient action possible, and is uncluttered by moral precepts that are external to the motivating principle of absolute efficiency. Any moral or ethical code that attempts to hinder technical application from without will necessarily be rendered obsolete or will be appropriated and lobotomized to accommodate technical requirements.

The sixth characteristic of technique is universalism. There exists an inexorable necessity in the tendency of technique to impose itself on all aspects of life, even aspects which were formerly non-technical. Modern technique overcomes all heterogeneity, and

normalizes according to predictability. According to Ellul, heterogeneity is disappearing at an increasing rate through the universal application of technique:

Technical invasion does not involve the simple addition of new values to old ones. It does not put new wine into old bottles; it does not introduce new content into old forms. The old bottles are all being broken. The old civilizations collapse on contact with the new. And the same phenomenon appears under every possible cultural form. (Ellul: 1969, 121)

In the cultural sphere, the technical invasion triggers civilizational collapse, as older paradigms dissolve before the onset of technical progress, and the need to adhere to the most current technical standards in order to maintain relevance. In the political sphere, existing political forms are quickly transformed (or replaced) by tyranny and dictatorship. In the religious and moral sphere, old ways of understanding meaning are being replaced by the religion of immanentism and psychological adjustment. The irresistible outcome of the universalizing process inherent to modern technique is that it inevitably corrodes all civilizational forms external to itself. This is the inexorable outcome of modern technique; it is unrelated to human intention. Ellul considers technique to be necessarily hegemonic in its quest for absolute efficiency. “Once technique has fastened onto a method,” he writes, “everything must be subordinated to it” (Ellul: 1969, 125). Indeed, there can be no recourse to methods other than the most efficient; the principle of efficiency becomes essentially determinative in the technological society. Technique ushers in adaptive civilizational forms in order to mitigate the radical separation of public, communal life from the specialized conditions necessary for technical production.

Heterogeneous civilizational forms are eventually replaced by homogeneous forms, more suited to the widespread application of technique to all aspects of life.

The seventh characteristic of modern technique is autonomy. Technique is inimical to all heterogeneity, even to those social forms in which modern technique germinated. Morality exerts no influence on the internal mechanism, nor on the external effectiveness, of a particular technique. Ellul considers technological necessity to be inimical to human freedom because the role technique plays in the erosion of elastic and chaotic probability structures. Ultimately, the overarching goal of technical application is the elimination of chance. Any attempt to mitigate this brings failure or ineffectuality, because technical necessity demands the strict application of the most efficient means in every situation. Thus, he asserts that technique operates according to its own internal necessity, beyond human control.

In the past, technical applications represented the human response to natural necessity. The fact that the natural world was full of dangers known and unknown forced humanity to fashion tools in order to help them adapt to their environment. The characteristics of modern technique indicate that humanity now serves a new order. Technique has supplanted nature as the locus of necessity:

This new necessity is not natural necessity; natural necessity, in fact, no longer exists. It is technique's necessity, which becomes the more constraining the more nature's necessity fades and disappears. It cannot be escaped or mastered. The tool was not false. But technique causes us to penetrate into the innermost realm of falsehood, showing us all the while the noble face of the objectivity of result. In this innermost recess, man is no longer able to recognize himself because of the instruments he employs. (Ellul: 1969, 146)

Because of the characteristics inherent in technique, technique has impacted virtually every facet of human life, including economic aspects. The myths of economic progress and growth are seminal in the technological society. Since the beginning of the industrial era, economists have considered the planned economy as the vehicle through which a new age of prosperity and plenty could be achieved. Ellul asserts that while the myth of progress might be correct in suggesting that labour conditions have improved since the beginning of the industrial era in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this does not necessarily entail a widespread improvement in the general human condition over human life prior to the onset of industrialism. It is futile to compare the quality of life of the medieval peasant to that of the modern labourer. Each represents fundamentally different interpretations of reality, which do not bear comparison. Contrary to the myth of progress, life in the modern, technical era might not be qualitatively better than life before the age of progress.

While it is futile to compare living conditions in the technical society with those of previous civilizations, it is possible to discern a qualitative difference in the effect exercised by the economy on modern humanity. With the bourgeois spiritualization of work in the nineteenth century, the virtue of hard work came to be viewed as the measure of an individual's worth. The application of the principle of technological efficiency, combined with the myth of economic and material progress, has resulted in a civilization in which "the only important thing became the exercise of a *métier*, and for the youth, the choice of an occupation and preparation for it" (Ellul: 1969, 220). The new social reality

necessitates the placement of each individual into certain pre-ordained categories of possibility (such as ‘productive capacity’ and ‘cost of labour’, etc). The categorization inevitably erodes one’s moral and spiritual life, as well as one’s individuality, because human biology is not inherently conducive to technical efficiency. The attempt to shape human life according to the dictates of technological necessity results in the severe alienation of the majority of humanity. In order to overcome the profound alienation of humanity from technical necessity, ways of adapting the individual to the technical society are required, which result in the creation of socializing techniques such as entertainment culture.

For Ellul, technical necessity has become the central political fact according to which states are governed. Technique evolves at the private level until it becomes too powerful and costly to be left to individual scientists or private effort. The rapid extension of private techniques into the public domain entails that such techniques, in order not to become harmful to state hegemony, must be controlled by the state. Furthermore, the prohibitive expense associated with the application of advanced techniques makes individual or private control unfeasible. He suggests that, authoritarian or democratic, all states are forced to adapt to technological necessity. As a result of its appropriation of increasing levels of responsibility because of its tightening control over various technical spheres (from transportation, to the military, to culture and art) the state is forced to continuously re-shape itself to control the development and application of technique. As the purview of the state becomes increasingly specialized, the managers

and technicians become proportionately more important in the smooth functioning of the state. Thus, tension forms between the politicians, who are increasingly ignorant and superfluous, and the technicians who actually maintain and operate the systems within the state's purview.

One of the results of the primacy of the technician in the modern state is the inexorable erosion of "ideological and moral barriers to technical progress" (Ellul: 1969, 266). In order to remain current and relevant in the technical world, the modern state is forced to abandon the traditional forms of moral or spiritual limit that historically might have been invoked to slow or halt technical progress. Because technique is autonomous and universalizing, technical progress becomes a self-justifying phenomenon in terms of state action and support. To pursue any other course would place the state at a technical disadvantage in relation to other states.

Another result of the primacy of the technician in the modern state is the transformation of the politician to technician. The successful politician in the technological society must be, first and foremost, a technician—an adept at political technique—if he or she is to remain relevant in the modern political arena. The adoption of political techniques (such as propaganda) on the part of politicians forces modern politics into centralized political forms.<sup>31</sup> There can be no true democracy in a technological society because of the imbalance of knowledge between the technicians

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<sup>31</sup> Grant also praised Ellul's later work on propaganda as an admirable study of an important facet of the pervasiveness of political technique. See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, tr. Konrad Kellen & Jean Lerner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

and the workers. An oligarchy is inevitably formed at the highest political levels. Ellul asserts that the technological state, whether democratic or authoritarian, relies on a small class of technical elites who “hold a monopoly of technical means” in order for the state to function at all (Ellul: 1969, 275). This is logical, as those who understand the total function of the various facets of the technical apparatus are the only ones who can efficiently control the technical means. The disparity in knowledge between rulers and the majority of citizens inevitably leads to a form of aristocracy: “Technique shapes an aristocratic society, which in turn implies aristocratic government. Democracy in such a society can only be a mere appearance” (Ellul: 1969, 275). The result of the primacy of the technician in the modern state is that the state must always choose the most efficient means in order to survive. This entails that the state must choose the technical solution to any dilemma, whether or not the citizenry desires the most efficient solution. According to Ellul, this “dooms parliamentary forms of government” (Ellul: 1969, 278) and eventually makes politics itself redundant to the masses. Both the structure and the political doctrines of the state are altered by the state’s appropriation of technique. Democracies are forced to imitate authoritarian governments in order to ensure survival. In order to legitimize this, the state justifies its actions through an appeal to necessity. Ellul believes that dictatorship, with its authoritative immediacy, is the most effective political system in the technological society:

The superiority of dictatorship stems wholly from its massive exploitation of techniques. Democracy has no choice in the matter: either it utilizes techniques in the same way as the enemy, or it will perish. It is clear enough that the first term of this proposition will prevail. For this reason, wars always bring about a

prodigious advance in the use of certain techniques in democratic societies. The democracies are, of course, careful to assert that they are using these techniques only because of the state of war. But there are always wars of one kind or another: war preparations, cold war, hot war, new cold war, and so on, ad infinitum. (Ellul: 1969, 289)

Ellul notes that in the past there existed traditional obstacles to all new social influences: morality, public opinion, social structure, and the state. Each of these obstacles opposed new ideas and sought social equilibrium. However, with the advent of the technological society, these traditional obstacles have been rendered ineffective. Morality has become irrelevant in the public context because of the inexorability of technological necessity. Public opinion now blindly supports technical advancement, because of the pervasiveness of the modern, utopian myth of progress. In addition, social structure and state are each entirely focused toward technicization. This entails that humanity no longer possesses the collective ability to effectively arrest the social appropriation of technique:

Technique is essentially independent of the human being, who finds himself naked and disarmed before it. Modern man divines that there is only one reasonable way out: to submit and take what profit he can from what technique otherwise so richly bestows upon him. If he is of a mind to oppose it, he finds himself really alone. (Ellul: 1969, 306)

For Ellul, the pervasiveness of technique is a reality to which humanity must accommodate itself. The fact that the human being is not biologically or spiritually suited to the technical environment of the congested modern city or the impersonal industrial plant necessitates the mitigating influence of human techniques. The individual is overcome by the sheer pervasiveness of technical necessity; necessity refashions every

aspect of human life. In order to survive in the technological society, the individual has been forced to adapt to the technical system. The adaptation to technological necessity occasions previously nonexistent neuroses; adaptation is impossible without the widespread application of human techniques, the most significant of which is the deliberate creation of mass society. Mass society is the only forum in which the individual can live a life free from complete alienation in technological civilization. The application of human techniques, such as psychoanalysis, techniques of education and labour, vocational counseling, propaganda and mass amusement, sports and pharmaceutical (and recreational) medicine, facilitates the adaptation of the individual to the foreign environment created by technological necessity.

The sheer vastness of the technical apparatus, combined with the universalizing character of modern technique, leads to the phenomenon of “technical convergence” (Ellul: 1969, 391). Because modern techniques are so widespread, there is a tendency to overlap various specialized techniques into a more efficient fusion of application. Thus, administrative techniques become fused with medical techniques, and propaganda techniques become connected to vocational counseling. The list of overlaps and interdependencies is virtually endless, forming a complex web of technical applications. The individual is hemmed in on all sides by the encroaching application of techniques in all aspects of human life. There is no Machiavellian impulse underlying this encirclement; technique has gone beyond human choice or control, and has become intricately fused with the structures of human life itself.

Ellul is certain that the individual stands in peril of losing something innate and important as the result of modern technique, even though the content of the loss is difficult to describe clearly. “Man,” he asserts, “will continue to steer the machine, but only at the price of his individuality” (Ellul: 1969, 397). In order to be viable, the technological society must totally integrate its citizenry with its technique. The human desire for individuality, expressed as freedom, chafes against the requirements of technological necessity. The final result of human adaptation to technical necessity is the total integration of the individual into the technical system: the elimination of desire for individuality or freedom. The individual’s attempts to escape integration only serve to ensconce the individual deeper in technological necessity. Indeed, “[m]an is caught like a fly in a bottle. His attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique’s filing cabinet” (Ellul: 1969, 418). The final act of submission to technological necessity appears with the absorption of religious and instinctive categories into the technical apparatus. At this stage, technique will have become universal, and individual freedom no longer relevant to human life:

With the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of...human techniques, the edifice of the technical society will be completed. It will not be a universal concentration camp, for it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. We shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win. Our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published, and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired. And the supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the onus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile. (Ellul, 1969, 427)

In 1966, Grant was asked to review two books written by Ellul, one of which was *The Technological Society*.<sup>32</sup> Ellul's thought became a seminal influence in the development of Grant's thinking about the role of technology in the modern world. William Christian writes that "Ellul let [Grant] see more clearly the unity behind the many individual manifestations of modern technology and how its spirit permeated every aspect of contemporary life" (Christian: 1993, 227).

In the published version of a speech Grant read in 1965, entitled "Protest and Technology,"<sup>33</sup> Grant refers to Ellul's characterization of technology as autonomous. While discussing the ineffectiveness of protest in the technological society, Grant criticizes the tactics of dissent proposed by the New Left in response to the escalation of violence and Canadian complicity in the Vietnam War. He rejects the notion of the independent, morally responsible, democratic citizen in the technological civilization; Western society is controlled by gigantic public and private corporations which shape and are shaped by the imperialist system. What is far more realistic is to accept that democratic citizenship has become virtually impossible in the vast bureaucracies which control life in the technological civilization. Grant refers to Ellul's concept of technological necessity while describing the dangers of the political immanentism of the

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<sup>32</sup> Grant was asked to review the books by *Canadian Dimension*. *The Technological Society* first became available in French in 1954, but it was not available in English translation until 1964. Ellul's other book, reviewed by Grant, Ellul's *Propaganda*, first appeared in French in 1962, and was translated into English in 1965. Grant's review of both books appears in *Canadian Dimension* 3/3-4 (March-April; May-June): 59-60.

<sup>33</sup> George Grant, "Protest and Technology," originally published in Charles Hanley, ed., *Revolution and Response: Selections from the Toronto Teach-in* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), in ed. Art

New Leftists, who “seem to think that these massive institutions which stifle human excellence can be overcome, and I think this arises from a profound misinterpretation of modern history” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 396). According to Grant, the technological civilization is the outcome of humanity’s attempt to control the natural world. In gaining mastery over the natural world, modern humanity “has subjected men to the forces of the artificial necessities of the technological society” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 396). Citizens in North America are bound by the necessities imposed on them by the technical system. Grant asserts that the status of the citizen in the technological civilization has become the most important question facing the modern West.

Contrary to the Utopian rhetoric of the New Left, the system of technological control is gaining political ground at a steadily increasing rate. Those who think that protest can bring about radical change in the structure of the technological civilization are deceiving themselves; for Grant, this is the most dangerous aspect of the ideology of the New Left. The apocalyptic radicalism embraced by many leftist groups is founded on a misconception about the nature of the technological civilization. The previous gains made by protesters in the realm of civil rights or social justice should not obscure the fact that the dominant liberal powers in North America generally supported these gains. He predicts that the idealism of the radical Left will meet an entirely different fate when its adherents protest against a cause or tendency that is supported by the dominant continental powers. The essential powerlessness of such revolts is demonstrated by the

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Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto; University of

ineffectuality of protest against nuclear proliferation, or against the Vietnam war. Grant asserts that protest is generally manipulated by the bureaucracies themselves to legitimize the existing system of injustices:

To state the foregoing is not to advocate inaction or cynicism. Nothing I have said denies for one moment the nobility of protest. Nothing I have 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...What I argue against is the politics based on easy hopes about the future human situation. The hope, for example, that some future transformation of power in North America is going to overcome the implicit difficulties of the technological apparatus, and that the North American society can in the future radically change its direction. Hope for the future has been the chief opiate of modern life. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 399)

For Grant, the only possibility for true citizenship in the technological civilization lies in being able to perceive the assumptions and realities that underlie the technological civilization in all of their implications. Discerning the truth about reality is the prerequisite to responsible political action. The inability of Leftist political movements to adequately discern the true nature of the technological civilization results in the hopeless vision of social change through protest and civil disobedience.

Grant's assent to the inevitability of technological necessity is one of the chief ways in which Ellul's thought influenced Grant. The technological phenomenon has infiltrated every aspect of human life in its relentless quest for efficiency. The process of technological infiltration is a product of technological necessity, which requires the interoperability of various parts of the technical apparatus in order to grow. The inevitability of the technological process is rooted in technological necessity. In a

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Toronto Press, 2005) 393-405.

televised discussion on CBC television in 1966,<sup>34</sup> Grant asserts that the pace and direction of technological progress cannot be arrested:

I don't think we can do anything about it. I mean, I think that...for the last three hundred years, Western society has, with increasing immoderation, given itself over to the worship of mastery....The whole of society is so committed to the idea that unlimited technological progress will solve human problems, that there is no question of turning back. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 411)

There can be no turning back from the aims of the technological society, because the goal of technical mastery has become the animating moral and spiritual orthodoxy of Western civilization. One of the reasons why the technological civilization is imperialistic is because technical mastery has come to be considered the only substantive good, to be exported around the world with missionary fervour in the name of human liberation. Grant considers the discussion of technical autonomy to be the most illuminating and important aspect of *The Technological Society*. Technology is not a mere collection of machinery that can be manipulated for good or for evil purposes by free moral agents. According to Ellul, things are no longer good or evil in themselves; objects and techniques have come to be considered ethically neutral in the new order. This has come about as the result of the new morality that represents the most pervasive product of the new technical civilization; the drive to technical progress has become the central moral tenet of the new orthodoxy. The autonomy of technique, its infiltration into every aspect of human life, becomes more palatable to citizens of the West as previous

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<sup>34</sup> George Grant, "Individuality in Mass Society," (CBC Television interview by Adrienne Clarkson, First Person Series, 2 June 1966), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2005) 407-412.

standards of human excellence begin to dissolve in the expansion of the technological civilization. Grant is effusive in his praise of Ellul's clear vision of the realities of life in the technological civilization. In his review of *The Technological Society* Grant writes:

In my opinion, the most important part of the book is [Ellul's] account of how technique has become autonomous. What he means by autonomous is that technique is not limited by anything external to itself. It is not limited by any goals beyond itself. It is autonomous with respect to the areas of economics and politics—indeed throughout society as a whole. It is the creator of its own morality. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 415)

While Grant is impressed by Ellul's piercing analysis of technical civilization, he is also aware of the flaws in Ellul's account of modernity. Grant criticizes Ellul for the latter's inadequate understanding of the pivotal role played by Western Christianity in the coming-to-be of the technological civilization. According to Grant, one cannot understand technological modernity without understanding the Christian roots of secular morality. The secular liberalism that has provided the ideological justification for the technological civilization is grounded in a conception of human freedom that rises from the Western interpretation of Christianity. Western Christianity has, for centuries, been focused on the goal of spiritual transformation through practical reformation of social and political institutions. In Grant's estimation, Ellul's account of technology overlooks the complicity of Western Christianity in this process; Ellul's analysis lacks an integral piece of the puzzle.

While Grant considers Ellul's account flawed, Grant praises *The Technological Society* as a brilliant sociological analysis of the technological civilization. Whereas Grant repeatedly criticizes the utopian reformers of the New Left for their lack of vision

in evaluating the potential of social protest, Grant praises Ellul for his ability to describe the technological civilization as it truly is. Grant considers the lack of philosophical depth in *The Technological Society* to be a product of Ellul's attempt to clearly describe social reality:

In no spirit of impudent psychologising, but simply from his own words, I would deduce that Ellul's lack of discussion [on the relationship between modern technique and Biblical tradition] comes from a highly conscious and noble turning away from philosophy toward a sociological realism. Indeed, his very turning away from philosophy is surely in part responsible for the greatness of his sociological writing. The danger of attempting philosophy is that one can be so taken up by the difficulties in knowledge of the whole that one is overcome by a vertigo which demolishes one's ability to look at the whole with steadiness...It must have taken immense steadiness and courage to have maintained unflinchingly one's gaze on modernity as Ellul has done. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 417)

Grant praises Ellul's ability to discern the reality of the modern situation, and the technological necessity underlying Western civilization. For Grant, the ability to perceive clearly is a prerequisite for the struggle against technological necessity. One of the areas in which technological necessity is most obvious, and where the ability to see clearly remains essential, is in the North American political sphere. Grant often warns that Canadian sovereignty is in danger from American imperialism. The fact that Canada bears responsibility for the continuation of the Vietnam War exemplifies the loss of Canadian sovereignty. The inevitable erosion of Canadian sovereignty is the result of the inability of the technological civilization to countenance heterogeneous elements. After all, Canada has been, since its inception, an attempt to build a society based on different principles than the individualist republicanism that characterizes political life in the

United States. Grant concurs with Ellul that the increasing power of technological necessity is inevitable. As the United States represents the most advanced technological civilization to date, he thinks that it will be virtually impossible for Canada to retain any form of heterogeneous sovereignty.

There is still hope for a society in which citizens can pursue a conception of human excellence that lies beyond technological necessity. For Grant, the importance of the continuation of a sovereign Canada lies in the fact that many Canadians retain the vision of a society founded on a different interpretation of human excellence. Although technological necessity creates a web of inevitability, and political tyranny is one of the necessities of the homogenizing, technological order, Grant hopes that one can in a limited sense still choose how to live in the monolith. In a CBC conversation with Gad Horowitz in 1966,<sup>35</sup> Grant notes:

I would say above all that it was possible to build a technological society that could be more ordered, that didn't have to be based on individuals, the fight of each against each, that didn't have to be ordered entirely on contractual relations, and that perhaps because of Canada's past, we might be able to build a more ordered technological society, a society which isn't as demanding on the individual and in that sense, as de-rooted as the great American society. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 441)

While human nature itself might be dissolved in the technological civilization, Grant thinks that the possibility of choice in how one lives still exists. The possibility of political choice is the result of being able to perceive things clearly. In order to perceive

things clearly, Grant considers courage to be the most important virtue. Grant sees the courage of clear vision in Ellul's sociological analysis of the technological civilization. In a 1967 speech,<sup>36</sup> he suggests that there are two overriding purposes in human life: "to live together well in communities and to think" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 458). The modern consensus is that the elements in nature that remain beyond human control interfere with the human ability to achieve excellence. In contrast, Grant defines human excellence as "the realization in people of the various virtues necessary to the achievement of these two purposes" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 458).

Chapter Two will show that Grant's critique of liberalism and its relation to technology is deeply indebted to Ellul's account of the relationship between technology and political philosophy. Liberal ideology is the great legitimizing force behind the technological drive to mastery, and liberalism has provided the moral impetus to North American society since its inception. The most important principle of liberal ideology is the assertion that the most effective way to achieve human excellence is to ensure the possibility of unfettered freedom in equal measure for all citizens. According to Grant, the application of technology to control human and non-human nature has become fused with liberal ideology. Even though the combination of technological necessity and liberal ideology inevitably results in political tyranny, Grant suggests that this is not an

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<sup>35</sup> "Ideals of Democracy and Social Reality" (Program 12, aired on CBC television on 7 February 1968), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, Vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 431-454.

<sup>36</sup> George Grant, "The Great Society," delivered at 35<sup>th</sup> Couchiching Conference and originally published in ed. John Irwin *Great Societies and Quiet Revolutions* (Toronto: CBC, 1967), in ed. Art Davis and Henry

acceptable reason to retreat from the public sphere. It is possible to live well while being aware of the realities of life in the technological civilization. If one is open to the truth about technological civilization and its connection to liberal ideology, one may be able to assert a modicum of real choice in important matters. It is possible to live beyond the ideology of mastery which pervades the technological civilization:

I would...suggest that the virtue most necessary for this era is what I would call openness. This quality is the exact opposite of control or mastery. Mastery tries to shape the objects and people around us into a form which suits us. Openness tries to know what things are in themselves, not to impose our categories upon them. Openness acts on the assumption that other things and people have their own goodness in themselves; control believes that the world is essentially neutral stuff which can only be made good by human effort. Openness is a virtue most difficult to realize in our era as it requires daily the enormous discipline of dealing with our own closedness, aggressions, and neuroses, be they moral, intellectual, or sexual. To be open in any age of tyrannical control will above all require courage. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 460)

The fusion of liberal ideology with technological mastery represents the pivotal concept that animates Grant's writings of the late 1960s. He most explicitly engages the social consequences of technological necessity in *Technology and Empire*.<sup>37</sup> Ellul's sociological analysis of the technological civilization is decisive in shaping the development of Grant's understanding of the technological civilization throughout this period. Although Grant disagrees with Ellul on important theoretical issues, Ellul's continuing influence on Grant, specifically Ellul's account of technological necessity, forms the foundation of Grant's continuing analysis of technology.

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Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2005) 455-462.

CHAPTER TWO: JACQUES ELLUL'S CONTINUING INFLUENCE ON GRANT'S UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY

Chapter Two will examine the influence of Ellul's account of technological necessity on Grant's understanding of technology in 1969 and beyond. Grant's 1969 publications represent a watershed moment in Grant's understanding of technology. While impressed by Ellul's analysis of the determinism inherent in the technological civilization, he begins to distance himself from Ellul's thought for a variety of reasons. The chapter will examine the ambiguous nature of Ellul's continuing impact on Grant's understanding of technology. Such analysis is essential in order to clarify how Ellul's influence on Grant relates to Grant's partial appropriation of Heidegger's account of technology. By analyzing Ellul's influence on Grant, particularly through themes such as technological necessity, and the relation between technology and politics, one can recognize Ellul's crucial importance for Grant's account of the technological civilization.

i) Ellul's Influence on *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*

In *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* Grant confronts the problem of practical ethics in the technological civilization. Because it is a collection of essays written at various times between 1963 and 1969, *Technology and Empire* reveals Grant's thought during the period when he was most directly influenced by Ellul.

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<sup>37</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969) in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 473-594.

“Religion and the State,” originally published in *Queen’s Quarterly*<sup>38</sup> in 1963, is an examination of the role of religion in public education. Although the essay was written before Grant came in contact with Ellul’s writings, the essay represents a valuable glimpse into how his thinking about the technological civilization shifts under Ellul’s influence. Grant describes the difficulty in thinking clearly about the relationship between religion and the state. One problem that is particularly difficult to articulate is the role religion plays in the education of young people in North America. Nineteenth-century Western civilization saw the usefulness of religious education in state-funded schools because of the ability of religion to inculcate socially useful habits. However, given that Christianity no longer retains pride of place as the public religion of the majority of Canadians, Grant attempts to discern whether there should remain a connection between ancient biblical and philosophical truths and the contemporary political system. He deplores the contemporary system of education in Canada, which inculcates the religion of technical mastery in the minds of the young. He links the religion of progress taught in the schools to the growing moral nihilism in Western civilization. The adherents of the religion of progress brazenly advocate for the dissemination of their faith in the public schools, without understanding the moral consequences of their faith for Western civilization:

Has the secular state and the religion of progress which dominates its education, led to widespread happiness in North America in the last forty years? How can

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<sup>38</sup> George Grant, “Religion and the State,” *Queen’s Quarterly* vol. 70 (1963, 183-197), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, Vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2005) 504-519.

we escape the fact that the necessary end product of the religion of progress is not hope, but a society of existentialists who know themselves in their own self-consciousness, but know the world entirely as despair? In other words, when the religion of progress becomes the public religion, we cannot look forward to a vital religious pluralism, but to a monism of meaninglessness...Surely the basic problem of our society is the problem of individuals finding meaning to their existence. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 517)

The most significant part of “Religion and the State” is the Introduction that Grant appends to the version of the essay found in *Technology and Empire*. Ellul’s subsequent influence on Grant can be detected in the later addition. Grant is somewhat ironic in tone in claiming that his essay is “an obtuse writing,” and that its survival is “a matter of amusement” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 504). The reason he gives for the obsolescence of “Religion and the State” is that its primary argument is premised on a misconception about the true nature of the technological civilization: “[t]he folly of this writing is that it did not grasp what the technological society really is. Therefore the general principles of political philosophy asserted in it have no possible application in the society to which it is addressed” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 504).

Grant provides several reasons for his earlier inability to understand the technological civilization. The most important reason for the essay’s irrelevance is his refusal to come to grips with the death of Western Christianity in the society to which it gave birth. He admits that “I could not face the fact that the only interpretation of Christianity that technological liberalism would allow to survive publicly would be that part of it (e.g. the thought of Teilhard) which played the role of flatterer to modernity” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 505). By 1969, Grant has come to see that it is no longer possible

to ensure the survival of heterogeneous elements in the public sphere. To align oneself with anything other than liberal ideology is to make oneself a stranger to the public realm in North America. He has appropriated Ellul's understanding of the autonomy of technological civilization, which is self-propagating and therefore inevitably invades external moral and religious spheres in order to legitimize itself. The Introduction to "Religion and the State" reveals Grant's understanding of the pivotal relationship between liberalism and the technological civilization. When he employs the epithet "technological liberalism" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 505) to describe the present state of affairs, Grant is highlighting the relationship between the rise of technological civilization and liberal ideology.

Grant's essay "Tyranny and Wisdom"<sup>39</sup> also elucidates the interrelationship of technological civilization and liberalism. The essay represents his attempt to clarify the scholarly debate between Alexander Kojève and Leo Strauss. According to Grant, the debate represents "the most important controversy in political philosophy" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 532). Kojève is a proponent of Hegelian political philosophy, which asserts that the universal and homogeneous state is the political system most conducive to human excellence. Strauss is a proponent of classical political philosophy, which claims that human excellence can only be fully realized within the paradigm of an eternal, unchanging moral order. These claims are conflicting because they adhere to different

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<sup>39</sup> George Grant, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 532-557.

assumptions about the intrinsic ‘goodness’ of nature and human motivation. While he criticizes Strauss for his “remarkable reticence whenever he writes of Biblical religion, and particularly about the authority that the Bible should have for Western men” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 556), Grant nevertheless agrees with Strauss that the rise of the universal and homogeneous state will entail the death of philosophy and the creation of a universal tyranny. In piecing together Strauss’ account of the relationship between Biblical religion and modern political philosophy, Grant notes that Christianity has been a precipitating factor in the rise of the technological civilization. With its emphasis on the ‘fallenness’ of nature, Christianity remains one of the primary forces underlying the rise of the ideology of mastery. Because nature is fallen in the Biblical worldview, it becomes possible to conceive of the natural world as inimical to the attainment of human excellence. In order to ensure the achievement human excellence while in the grip of natural necessity, it becomes necessary to look at the natural world as a vast reservoir of objects to be manipulated by human will. The understanding of nature as a reservoir to be tapped in order to fulfill human goals, combined with the conception of natural necessity, leads Grant to posit the interrelation between Western Christianity and the technological civilization. “[C]learly,” Grant asserts, “the question arises as to the connection between the religion of Western Europe and the dynamic civilization which first arose there, the spread of which has been so rapid in our century. This is the civilization which in the opinion of both Strauss and Kojève tends towards the universal and homogeneous state” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 555).

In the essay “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,”<sup>40</sup> Grant further elucidates the connection between the technological drive to mastery and liberal ideology. The United States is the heartland of the technological empire, and understanding the relationship of Canada to the United States is the key to comprehending the fate of Canada in the modern world. Aside from the obvious geographical proximity of the United States, the fate of Canadian sovereignty is also the result of Canada’s position as a second-class citizen in the technological empire. Although there are benefits to being “second class members of that system” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 520), American imperialism in places such as Vietnam challenges the moral foundations of not only American hegemony, but also the moral legitimacy of the modern project as a whole. The technological civilization is forced to commit genocide in Vietnam, and this is a clear manifestation of the inherent violence that lies at the heart of the modern project. In order to maintain the way of life of the citizens in the heartland of the empire, and to maintain its status as the vanguard of technical mastery, American involvement in Vietnam is an example of the inevitable atrocities committed in the name of the technological civilization in its destruction of heterogeneity. Canadian involvement in that imperial venture, however indirect, must force thoughtful Canadians to reconsider their allegiance to the fundamental moral assumptions of the technological civilization. To be a Canadian citizen in the face of the violence of Vietnam inevitably leads certain people to re-think

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<sup>40</sup> George Grant, “Canadian Fate and Imperialism,” *Canadian Dimension* vol. 4 (March-April 1967: 21-27), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1969-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 519-532.

or even reject their political allegiance to Canada: “the events in Vietnam must help push them [a minority of people in the West] over that great divide where one can no longer love one’s own—where it almost ceases to be one’s own” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 529).

The fact that this inability to love one’s own is a minority view is the result of the normative identification of liberal ideology and technical mastery with human excellence. In Grant’s estimation, the religion of progress is the religion of the majority in North America, with the result that most people refuse to acknowledge the violence inherent in the propagation of the technological civilization. Many North Americans are blind to the intrinsic violence of the technological civilization because of their identification of America (as the vanguard of technological dynamism) with “the belief that questions of human good are to be solved by technology; that the most important human activity is the pursuit of those sciences which issue in the conquest of human and non-human nature” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 527). The North American combination of technological mastery and liberal ideology has been carried to the rest of the world with missionary fervor by the Western imperialism. For Grant, as for Ellul, the ultimate supremacy of the technological civilization is inevitable because of its inherent tendencies toward universalism and self-augmentation. The war in Vietnam reveals the depth of the connection between the universalizing tendencies of technological dynamism and the ideology of liberalism:

Imperialism, like war, is coeval with human existence. But the increasingly externalized view of human life which is the very nature of the progressive spirit has given and will continue to give an enormous impetus to imperialism. As the classical philosophers said, man cannot help but imitate in action his vision of the

nature of things. The dominant tendency of the Western world has been to divide history from nature and to consider history as dynamic and nature controllable as externality. Therefore, modern men have been extremely violent in their dealings with other men and other beings. Liberal doctrine does not prepare us for this violence because of its identification of technology with evolution, and the identification of evolution with movement of the race to higher and higher morality. Such a doctrine could not understand that an expanding technological society is going to be an imperialist society even when it is run by governments who talk and sometimes act the language of welfare both domestically and internationally. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 527)

The loss of Canadian sovereignty in the face of American imperialism is significant for the thoughtful minority, because with the loss of the ability to conceive of human excellence as connected to the public sphere, it becomes virtually impossible for such people to decide on an effective course of political action. Rebellion against the imperial system is futile because resistance in the form of civil disobedience merely constitutes a subtle form of systemic self-legitimation. Furthermore, attempts to reform the system by taking part in the political life of the empire are doomed because of the monolithic and universalizing nature of technological civilization. Grant asserts that “dissent on major questions of policy is impotent” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 530). Finally, loyalty to one of the other major empires on the planet, such as the Russian or Chinese empires, does not represent a valid escape from political impotence because they are themselves in the process of transforming into technological empires, in which the ideology of technological mastery dominates human and non-human nature. There exists no escape from the iron grip of fate in which the Canadian citizen lives. What small sovereignty Canada retains represents the thin thread keeping Canadian distance in the imperial wars of the empire:

[W]hat lies behind the small practical question of Canadian nationalism is the larger context of the fate of Western civilization. By that fate I mean not merely the 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. What is worth doing in the midst of this barren twilight is the incredibly difficult question. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 532)

The question of the fate of Western civilization, and its entanglement with the drive to technical mastery, is the subject of “The University Curriculum.”<sup>41</sup> The essay represents Grant’s attempt to clarify the role of the university in the technological civilization. He cites Ellul’s definition of technology as it is set forth in *The Technological Society* (1965, xxxiii): “the primary purpose in Canadian society is to keep technology dynamic within the context of the continental state capitalist structure. By technology I mean ‘the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity’” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 558). The drive to mastery over human and non-human nature through the elimination of chance has become the dominant motivating force in Western civilization. The dual role of the university in the technological civilization is to both train and legitimize the dominant civilizational goal. When one considers the relatively high status bestowed on those departments within universities which teach and research technical subjects, it becomes clear that the nature and role of arts and humanities faculties is in question. The social sciences remain essential to the technological society because of their ability to quantify and control the human elements of that society. Modern social

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<sup>41</sup> George Grant, “The University Curriculum,” originally published in two parts under the title “Wisdom in the Universities” in *This Magazine is About Schools* (1967-1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper,

science emphasizes the principle of ‘value-free’ research, thus claiming that it can be used to understand and control human nature within an objective paradigm. With the ability to pursue their research objectively, social scientists can deduce facts about human nature and motivation without the constraints of metaphysical or religious presuppositions. “Within the last hundred years,” Grant writes, “it has become increasingly clear that the technological society requires not only the control of non-human nature, but equally the control of human nature. This is the chief cause of the development of the modern ‘value-free’ social sciences” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 562). Because modern social science is carried on within the framework of ‘value-free’ research, objectivity is purchased at the price of adopting a specific view of human nature: questions about human excellence cannot be considered objectively within an objective, morally neutral paradigm. There can be no objective and factual knowledge about the ultimate ends of human life or about human excellence.

Because of its fundamental assumptions about human nature, modern social scientific research runs the risk of losing sight of the original intentions underlying such study in the past. Social scientific research, as it exists in the modern university, has lost the ability to consider the most important questions about human life in its attempt to gain scientific legitimacy:

[s]uch studies are impotent to lead to what was once considered (perhaps and perhaps not naively) the crucial judgment about ‘values’—whether they are good or evil. Their scholars have gained their unassailable status of mastery and self-

justification by surrendering their power to speak about questions of immediate and ultimate meaning—indeed generally by asserting that such questions only arise through confusion of mind. Such a position provides immunity within the academic fortress, but it can still be asked whether the impotence of mind towards meaning is man's necessary condition. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 569)

The inability of the modern university curriculum to address questions of ultimate meaning has created a situation in which the idea of human excellence cannot be raised within the institution which was originally created for that purpose. For Grant, the 'value-free' nature of modern social science is the result of assumptions about human nature propounded in the doctrines of modern liberal ideology. Although modern, objective research suggests the impossibility of obtaining knowledge about ultimate human ends, liberalism provides a practical articulation of the modern conception of human excellence. The inculcation of liberal ideology, along with its proper direction as a justification for technological mastery, has become the chief role of the university curriculum in Western civilization. Grant writes: "[c]lass liberalism is the ideological cement for a technological society of our type" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 564). This is significant because liberalism, in providing moral legitimacy for the drive to technological mastery, has fused the technological drive to mastery with the conception of political equality. According to this view, in a technologically advanced society, more people can be freed from the burdens of natural necessity in order to be able to enjoy their freedom, a freedom that provides the vehicle to achieve individual excellence. Thus, liberalism has become a powerful tool in the expansion of the technological civilization:

[w]estern men live in a society the public realm of which is dominated by a monolithic certainty about excellence—namely that the pursuit of technological efficiency is the chief purpose for which the community exists. When modern liberals, positivist or existentialist, have criticized the idea of human excellence, they may have thought that they were clearing the ground of religious and metaphysical superstitions which stood in the way of the liberty of the individual. Rather they were serving the social purpose of legitimizing the totally technological society by destroying anything from before the age of progress which might inhibit its victory. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 572)

Liberalism is indispensable to the rise of the technological civilization because of its ability to legitimize the drive to mastery as a means to achieve human excellence (defined as political equality). The problem with modern liberal ideology is that it ultimately gives birth to moral nihilism. One of the chief purposes of liberalism in the technological civilization is to mitigate the aridity of the technological drive to mastery. In doing so, liberalism loses much of its earlier nobility of vision: “[t]he demands of the increasingly complex apparatus have dissipated the dream of modern liberalism which sought through education to give substance to equality. The mastery once thought of as a means becomes increasingly the public end” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 573).

In the essay “In Defence of North America”<sup>42</sup> Grant asserts that North American foreign policy manifests itself not only in political or military conquest, but also through cultural, economic, and ideological imperialism. The imperialism of the technological civilization is fueled not only by collective avarice and personal greed on the part of North Americans, but also by the ideological assent given to technology.

North America remains the civilization most fully given over to the drive to technical mastery, because it is “the only society which has no history (truly its own) from before the age of progress” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 482). Technological civilization first sprouted in Europe, and with it the modern social sciences and modern liberalism. North Americans are aware that they are not Europeans because North American identity is primally located in the long battle between settlers and the untamed wilderness of the new continent:

[t]he roots of some communities in eastern North America go back in continuous love for their place, but none of us can be called autochthonous, because in all there is some consciousness of making the land our own. It could not be ours also because the very intractability, immensity, and extremes of the new land required that its meeting with mastering Europeans be a battle of subjugation. (Davis & Roper, 2005, 482)

For Grant, the great precursor to the moral framework of the technological civilization, Calvinist theology, was a turning away from Greek philosophy to the primacy of the Bible. Both the emerging modern sciences and Calvinist theology attacked medieval Aristotelianism because of its conception of natural theology. According to Protestants, medieval Aristotelianism (manifested most explicitly in the Scholasticism of Aquinas) turned men away from a reliance on Christian revelation as the sole path to knowledge about the divine. The medieval doctrine “encouraged men to avoid the surd mystery of evil by claiming that final purpose could be argued from the

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<sup>42</sup> George Grant, “In Defence of North America,” in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto; House of Anansi, 1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2005) 480-503.

world” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 485). Calvinism, with its emphasis on the will of the individual sinner before God, highlights the role of the individual’s moral choice in effecting one’s personal salvation. Calvinism eschewed the attempt to come to knowledge of God through reason founded on knowledge of natural processes. The primacy of biblical revelation as the sole path to knowledge of the divine, combined with the Calvinist emphasis on the independent moral status of the individual believer, made Calvinist theology amenable to the goals and methodologies espoused by the emerging modern sciences. The Calvinist view cleared the way for the conquest of human and non-human nature required in order to survive life in the primeval wilderness of North America in the pioneer era.

Public morality is formed as a response to perceptions of technological practicality, while choice has been relegated to the private, subjective sphere. There remains, especially in North American political leaders, an identification of liberalism with technological mastery. What is more, identification has been made between practical mastery and universal human liberation, which has become the legitimizing slogan of technological expansionism. Grant argues that the entire political spectrum subscribes to the same technological dream in which technological mastery and the liberal doctrine of equality become mutually interdependent. While the political left and the right may bicker over superficial issues, such as the allocation of certain resources to specific purposes, they are ultimately pursuing the same goal. North Americans elucidate a set of collective values in relation to technical mastery from within the modern

paradigm. The modern conception of values as subjective choices is the result of the philosophically naïve appropriation of the nihilistic terminology used by more philosophically aware Europeans. The conception of freely chosen social values and their gradual ascendancy in North American society is related to the historicism and objective scientific methodologies that justify and flatter the spirit of technological mastery.

Europe inherited its intellectual tradition of contemplation from Christian revelation. The height in this revelation was religious charity (agape) and contemplation became a route to charity. However, in going back to Greek sources, some Renaissance thinkers were led to a form of contemplation not beholden to the doctrines of the Church, and not motivated by Christian charity as the highest expression of human excellence. From the re-discovery of the significance of Greek sources during the Renaissance emerges the political philosophy of Machiavelli and Hobbes, who place their understanding of human nature outside the Christian moral framework. At the same time, the Calvinists attempted to free theology from all non-Biblical sources. In the Calvinist attempt to revitalize Christian theology through the return to Christian origins and a literal interpretation of biblical revelation, Calvinists cut themselves off from earlier forms of Greek and Christian contemplation. According to Grant, Calvinism eventually became dominant in Protestant North America, and with the gradual erosion of religious aspects of Protestantism as the dominant moral force in Western life, Calvinist theology became secularized in modern liberal ideology. Modern liberal

ideology is essentially future-oriented and secular, and for this reason modern liberalism makes no attempt to regain contemplation as the path to human excellence; the liberal conception of human excellence can only be manifested in practical political and social gains.

North American optimism and the naïve celebration of technological progress temporarily staved off the moral nihilism that ripped through Europe with the onset of industrialism. Today North Americans think in terms of ‘values’, but often overlook the sobering fact that values represent Nietzsche’s suggested means of overcoming endemic moral chaos. According to Nietzsche, the goals of liberalism (political equality and democratic freedom) represent the final debasements leading to the appearance of ‘last men,’ who seek no moral horizon beyond their own base comfort.

North Americans were spared some of the enormous upheavals experienced in Europe with the rise of nihilism. However, they have naively incorporated the philosophical language of Nietzsche into the paradigm of pragmatism--practicality and values-language combined with the morality of liberal ideology. Now, the specter of nihilism has finally risen in North America, manifesting itself in the inability to think critically about technology beyond the normative assumptions of the technological civilization. Grant writes: “within the practical liberalism of our past, techniques could be set within some context other than themselves—even if that context was shallow. We now move towards the position where technological progress becomes itself the sole context within which all that is other to it must attempt to be present” (Davis & Roper:

2005, 503). With the withering away of previous moral horizons in the rise of the technological civilization, the “winter of nihilism” has descended on North America, when all moral questions are inevitably re-calibrated in the paradigm of a “reliance on technique” (ibid: 503).

Grant’s *Technology and Empire*, represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of his understanding of technology. His thought becomes increasingly preoccupied with the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger about the possibility of rationalism in the modern era. However, in several important ways, Grant’s understanding of technology remains informed by Ellul’s account of technology. Grant’s critique of modern liberal ideology represents a consistent thread throughout the period after 1969. Another constant is his articulation of the potential for practical morality in the face of technological necessity. Technological necessity operates in the specific determinisms that arise from life in the technological dynamo, which together form a destiny in which modern people remain trapped.

## ii) Scholarly Understanding of Ellul’s Influence on Grant

Scholars often overlook the continuing influence of Ellul’s thought on Grant’s understanding of technological civilization. Scholars are aware that Ellul’s thought played an important role in Grant’s understanding of technology, but many consider Ellul’s influence to be limited to a sociological analysis of technology in the modern world (Flynn, 1974; Davis, 1994; Angus, 1987). Many accept Frank Flynn’s division of

Grant's thought into three stages, in which Ellul's influence has largely been relegated to Grant's middle, penultimate period.<sup>43</sup> Flynn asserts that, "[a]s he had taken Hegel as his guide during his first phase, so now [Grant] found in Jacques Ellul...intimations of the darkness that comes with the co-penetration of North American continentalism and technological mastery" (Schmidt: 1978, 198). Ellul's thought is considered to be an intermediary stage in Grant's development from his early Hegelian view of technology to Grant's later attempt to grapple with the thought of Heidegger. In *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity*<sup>44</sup> Arthur Davis asserts that Grant's later work is influenced primarily by Grant's encounter with Martin Heidegger. In the same vein as Flynn's division of Grant's thought, Davis suggests that Grant moved away from the influence of Ellul when he came under the influence of Heidegger's account of technology. According to Davis, "Grant had decided that Heidegger understood modern technological science in relation to the decline of religion and morality in a way that another of his formative thinkers, Jacques Ellul, though a Christian, did not" (Davis: 1996, 143). Davis notes that one of Grant's important contributions as a thinker is to point younger thinkers toward the task of thinking Platonic and Heideggerian thought together. Davis states that "Grant did not take us into a way of thinking that combines Heidegger and Plato. But he

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<sup>43</sup> Frank Flynn, "George Parkin Grant: A Bibliographical Introduction," in ed. Lawrence Schmidt, *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1978). The division of Grant's work into three distinct periods is also advocated by Joan O'Donovan. See especially Joan O'Donovan, *George Grant and the Twilight of Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) and Joan O'Donovan, "The Battleground of Liberalism: Politics of Eternity and Politics of Time," *Chesterton Review*, 155-166).

<sup>44</sup> Arthur Davis, ed., *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, Education* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 1996).

did insist that the job had to be tacked, and he drew our attention to the failure of others to complete it” (Davis: 1996, 155).

More recently, Harris Athanasiadis, in *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross*,<sup>45</sup> has suggested that Grant’s turn from Ellul to Heidegger is the result of Ellul’s lack of philosophical depth. Athanasiadis asserts that it is “[Ellul’s] inability to perceive the inherent connection between biblical, Calvinist Christianity and the progress of scientific, technological expansion” (Athanasiadis: 2001, 126) that turns Grant from Ellul. In Heidegger’s understanding of the interdependence of art and *techne*, Grant thought that Heidegger had uncovered an aspect of modern technology that was entirely new, something that the Greeks had not conceived. For Grant the deepest account of modernity is that elucidated by Heidegger, whose account goes beyond others in its turning away from ancient conceptions of human excellence in the Greeks and in Judeo-Christianity. Scholars agree that Grant’s appropriation of Heidegger’s vision of modernity as poetic creation is mitigated by Grant’s continued acceptance of the Platonic/Christian conception of justice as that for which humanity is fitted (Davis, 1994; Athanasiadis, 2001).

More recently, Arthur Davis and Henry Roper have summed up this orthodox view in their Introduction to the third volume of Grant’s *Collected Works* (2005):

Grant found in the French Calvinist writer Jacques Ellul an analysis that confirmed his own sense that technology could not be seen as simply external, but as transforming those who lived within its horizon, making it difficult if not

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<sup>45</sup> Harris Athanasiadis, *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2001).

impossible to think outside the realm of the technological... [B]ut Grant found his thinking unsatisfying because its sociological focus failed to provide an adequate philosophical account of the nature and origins of the technological society. He found what was lacking in Ellul in Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. By the late 1960s he was immersing himself in their writings, particularly Nietzsche's, as he worked on the Massey Lectures delivered on CBC Radio in 1969 and published in 1971 under the title *Time as History*. Grant's encounter with Nietzsche and Heidegger would shape his thought throughout the next decade and beyond. (Davis & Roper: 2005: xxi)

It is true that Grant, at a conference in his honour,<sup>46</sup> suggests that Ellul's particular brand of positivist Christianity forces Ellul to overlook the interrelationship between the Western interpretation of Christianity and the rise of the technological civilization. Because Ellul adheres to a brand of Calvinism that denies the usefulness of reason as an instrument to attain knowledge of the divine, Ellul eschews philosophical contemplation, particularly the connection between philosophy and Christianity. Grant asserts that in order to fully understand technology, believers must have the courage to boldly examine the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, between reason and love, and the outcome of the relationship in the technological civilization:

This is very hard for Christians to ask, because it may seem to bring into question our fundamental loyalty to Christianity itself. It was an easy question to face when the western society appeared an unequivocal triumph. Then one could simply say: look at what Christianity is responsible for. But now that modernity appears, not only in the greatness of its achievements but in its ambiguities, it is a more difficult question to face. We may easily refuse to try to fathom the relation between modernity and western Christianity, because we may think such a fathoming may put in question what is most dear. But that is not the point. What we are called to do is to think through how the western interpretation of the Bible was responsible not only for the greatness of modernity, but also for what is frightening in it. (Schmidt: 1978, 147)

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<sup>46</sup> This symposium resulted in a book: Lawrence Schmidt, ed., *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto; House of Anansi Press, 1978).

Nevertheless, Ellul's influence on Grant continued to figure prominently in Grant's later philosophical reflections, including *Time as History*, *English-Speaking Justice* and *Technology and Justice*.<sup>47</sup> While it is true that Grant does not mention Ellul in any of his later, major works, Ellul's influence can be discerned beneath the surface of these writings. Through a careful reading of the ways in which Ellul's thought influenced his philosophical understanding of technology, Ellul's continuing importance for Grant's thought becomes apparent.

John Badertscher, in his article "George P. Grant and Jacques Ellul on Freedom in Technological Society,"<sup>48</sup> examines the relation between the thought of Ellul and Grant. Badertscher recognizes that, while Grant often disagrees with Ellul, Grant nevertheless thinks that a careful examination of Ellul's thought is a "prerequisite to a cure" (Schmidt: 1978, 80). Not only does Ellul's thought convince him of the inability to implement truly conservative political principles in the modern world, Ellul also clarifies the interrelation of science and technology for Grant. "The border between technical activity and scientific activity," according to Ellul, "is not at all sharply defined" (Schmidt: 1978, 81). The common view that technologists merely interpret and implement the discoveries made by neutral, objective science is a mistaken supposition. The scientific drive to

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<sup>47</sup> George Grant, *Time As History* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969); George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1974); George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> John Badertscher, "George P. Grant and Jacques Ellul on Freedom in Technological Society," in ed. Lawrence Schmidt, *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1978).

control and predict human and non-human nature is fully integrated into the mechanisms necessary for the propagation of the technological civilization.

Scientific research, for Ellul, “depends upon technique in its procedures, and upon technological society for its support and goals” (Schmidt: 1978, 81). According to Badertscher, Grant appropriates Ellul’s idea of the interdependence between science and technology in his analysis of the ‘pure’ physical sciences and the social sciences. The appropriation is clear in several of his relatively recent works, such as Grant’s 1974 address to the Royal Society of Canada<sup>49</sup> and in his 1969 essay, “The University Curriculum.”<sup>50</sup> Most significant for Badertscher is the fundamental agreement between Grant and Ellul on the importance of the interpenetration of science and technology for the “transformation of life in the technological society” (Schmidt: 1978, 81). The immediate danger in the drive to technological mastery, which represents the prevalent view of human excellence in the technological civilization, is its potential for tyranny. Because the understanding of human freedom espoused by the technological civilization interprets human action as free from moral limit, the possibility of tyranny is ever-present. Modern technology, in its attempt to master chance, “involves always the reduction of the different to the same,” (Schmidt: 1978, 84); and because of this, the fully realized technological civilization will inevitably take the form of the universal and homogeneous state:

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<sup>49</sup> George Grant, “Knowing and Making,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* (4<sup>th</sup> Series: No. 12) 59-67.

For both Ellul and Grant, then, technological society transforms scientific and political activity, integrating both into a social order whose primary intention is the domination of the human and non-human environment and the elimination of chance. In that context, science increasingly becomes a process which leads to mastery, while in politics the exercise of power tends to displace rational discussion in both democracies and dictatorships. (Schmidt: 1978, 84)

Badertscher argues that while Grant and Ellul share important ideas about life in the technological civilization, they differ in their understanding of the nature of freedom in the modern era. Ellul regards freedom as a gift which can only be realized through the utter submission of the individual to the will of God as revealed in the Bible. Ellul's conception of freedom is radical, in that he believes the exercise of freedom represents the sole way for the individual to overcome technological necessity. As indicated above, Grant's view of freedom is ambiguous. The modern conception of unrestrained freedom is one of the chief "problems of the modern quest" (Schmidt: 1978, 86). He considers the corrosive effects of the doctrine of unfettered freedom on social and personal wholeness; he suggests that a palliative to modern notions of freedom might be found in adherence to older traditions of reverence. According to Badertscher,

Grant sees resources in the human situation from which a response to the problem of freedom can be fashioned. We can yet nurture other human possibilities—the power of recollection or participation in a living tradition, desiring or loving, and thinking. Taken together, these powers ground the possibility of reverence, the quality most desperately lacking in technological society. (Schmidt: 1978, 87)

Badertscher summarizes the divergence between Grant and Ellul on the issue of freedom by suggesting that

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<sup>50</sup> George Grant, "The University Curriculum," in George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-*

we can say that Grant seeks an understanding of freedom tempered by the restraint of virtue and a sense of the abidingly true, while Ellul regards morality as an enemy of freedom, and looks for ultimate truth only in the immediate encounter of the individual with Jesus Christ through the witness of Holy Scripture. (Schmidt: 1978, 89)

Badertscher provides a valuable analysis of the theoretical differences between Grant and Ellul, even though Badertscher neglects the practical link between technology and freedom that reveals the depth of Grant's appropriation of Ellul's account of technology. However, he is clear that while Grant and Ellul may disagree about the moral status of human freedom, both would assert that the drive to technological mastery traps humanity in a web of technological necessity leading to tyranny, homogenization and banality:

Though Grant has had further thoughts about Ellul's shortcomings, he has never repudiated this [positive] evaluation of the importance of Ellul's analysis, at least not in print. It is fair to say, then, that Ellul's writings—especially *The Technological Society*—made a major contribution to Grant's own powerful critique of our social order. (Schmidt: 1978, 80)

### iii) Ellul's Continuing Influence on Grant's Understanding of Technology

Ellul's thought plays a prominent role in Grant's lectures at McMaster University. Notes exist from graduate seminars in which Grant "relied on Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger to articulate the essential features of the technological society or technique" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 676).<sup>51</sup> In his notes for a 1970 graduate seminar on "Modern Technology and Religion," Grant explains Ellul's thought as an attempt to articulate the

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1969 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 558-576.

nature of technology and how one is to live well in the midst of the technological civilization. He suggests that “a discussion of Ellul’s theology may help some—not others” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 677). Although it is difficult to overlook the importance of Nietzsche and Heidegger for Grant’s thought during the period after 1969, Grant’s lectures reveal that Ellul’s thought remained central to his understanding of the technological civilization. Indeed, Grant considers Ellul’s account of the relation between practical ethics and technological necessity to be superior to Heidegger’s account.

For Grant, Heidegger’s thought is insufficient for the task of uncovering the true nature of the technological civilization because of his refusal to adequately discuss “the relation of thought to politics” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 680). Heidegger’s account of technology overlooks the question of how one should live in the technological civilization. According to Grant, Ellul examines the relation between philosophy and politics that Heidegger fails to do:

[T]his is where I think Ellul comes in. I do not think Ellul has thought certain things as deeply as Heidegger, but I think he has thought politics much more deeply—what is the nature of the practical life? And I do not mean by this that he can think [the question of how we should live in the technological world] better than Heidegger—though that is so—but rather that he can think what is technique in certain ways more deeply than Heidegger. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 680)

Grant suggests that Ellul ignores the complicity of Western Christianity in forming the technological civilization, and thus Ellul overlooks the connection between “what is

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<sup>51</sup> George Grant, “Modern Technology and Religion,” unpublished lecture notes, McMaster University (1970), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto:

given him from revelation and its relation to thought” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 681). Nevertheless, in 1970 he considers Ellul’s account of technology to be the most profound attempt to clarify practical ethics in the context of the technological civilization.

In an interview discussing *Technology and Empire*, published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*,<sup>52</sup> Grant laments the fact that human beings have created a society in which self-knowledge is largely shaped by the ideology of mastery and the “belief that all problems can be solved scientifically, in an immediate, quantifiable way” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 595). Grant’s comments are informed by a view of technology in which the individual is increasingly at the mercy of technological necessity, stifling the ability to articulate dissent. Once again, the centrality of the concept of technological necessity in Grant’s work indicates Ellul’s continuing importance for his account of technology:

We who have walked the streets of the great metropolis, and seen the giant wars of this century, and live in highly organized institutions which determine us more than we determine them, must feel the need not only to live but to know, to think our living—otherwise we are at the mercy of it. And it seems to me at the moment that we are at the mercy of the technological machine we have built, and every time anything difficult happens, we add to that machine...Now this predicament is too enormous in the history of the race to permit one to say: I’m against it, or I’m for it. The main thing, you know, in my life, is just to see what it is. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 596)

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University of Toronto Press, 2005) 676-682.

<sup>52</sup> “Technology and Man: an Interview of George Grant by Gad Horowitz,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (4/3: August 1969) 3-6, in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, Vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 595-602.

In Grant's Introduction to the 1970 Carleton Library edition of *Lament for a Nation*,<sup>53</sup> he suggests that the exigencies of Canadian politics should be understood within the context of technological determinism. The order of technological necessity and justice are incommensurable. The order of natural necessity in which the human species has always struggled is being replaced by the alternate necessities of the technological civilization. For Grant, technological necessity can only be understood in the context of Western fate. The gradual erosion of Canadian sovereignty, as well as the increasing homogenization of heterogeneous social elements, are the predictable parts of the drive toward liberal egalitarianism and technological mastery. The drive to mastery has not only created the technological civilization, but also the economic, social and political conditions in which the realization of the universal and homogeneous state is considered the height of human excellence. Both Grant and Ellul indicate that the technological drive to mastery cannot be clearly understood without examining its penetration into the minds, hearts, and politics of individual citizens. This remains the most effective way to comprehend the realities underlying North American politics, and particularly the gradual erosion of Canadian political and cultural independence:

Lying behind the immediate decisions arising from our status within the (American) empire is the deeper question of the fate of any particularity in the technological age. What happens to nationalist strivings when the societies in question are given over, at the very level of faith, to the realization of the technological dream? At the very core of that faith is service to the process of

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<sup>53</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, Carleton Library edition (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1970), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

universalization and homogenization. ‘The one best means’ must after all be the same in Chicago, Hamilton, and Dusseldorf. (Grant: 1970, ix)

The technological drive to mastery has been interpreted as the chief political aim of the modern era. But the technological civilization operates autonomously, according to its own determinisms and necessities. “How much difference can there be,” Grant asks, “between societies whose faith in ‘the one best means’ transcends even communist and capitalist differences?” (Grant: 1970, ix).

Grant’s understanding of technological necessity has enormous consequences for his conception of politics in the technological civilization. Ellul’s most famous book, *The Technological Society*, is significant for Grant because of the realism with which Ellul describes the pervasiveness of technological necessity in the political, economic and spiritual spheres. There are important continuities between Grant’s thought about politics and Ellul’s *The Political Illusion*,<sup>54</sup> which examines the nature of politics in the technological society. Ellul’s main argument is that the state has become the sole repository of political power in the technological civilization. The form of the modern, bureaucratic state has virtually eliminated private participation in politics. These ideas serve as the platform from which he examines the role of propaganda in the formation of public opinion, and the status of the individual in the political sphere. According to Ellul, the modern state has become the most powerful political entity because it has been invested with quasi-religious authority. The tendency of many citizens to see all problems as falling under the purview of the state reveals that the state has come to be the

sole political authority, from which each individual draws his or her own authority. While it is true that certain individuals may be radically opposed to specific state policies, the state has become the political arena in which all problems are presumed to have their solution:

We cannot conceive of society except as directed by a central omnipresent and omnipotent state. What used to be a utopian view of society, with the state playing the role of the brain, not only has been ideologically accepted in the present time but also has been profoundly integrated into the depths of our consciousness...we can no longer even conceive of a society in which the political function (on the part of the governmental authority) would be limited by external means...The primary role of political affairs is one of the common sociological presuppositions shared by all and growing in all countries. (Ellul: 1967, 12-13)

There are several interesting continuities between Ellul's *The Political Illusion* and Grant's political thought. In the George C. Nowlan Lectures presented at Acadia University in 1969,<sup>55</sup> Grant again states that he supports Ellul's definition of technique. In analyzing the inadequate emphasis in modern politics on ends as opposed to means, he praises Ellul. "I define technique," Grant asserts, "in the words of Jacques Ellul in his book *The Technological Society*—one of the few truly noble books of our era. He writes: 'By technique I mean the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity'" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 614).

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<sup>54</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, tr. Konrad Kellen (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1967).

<sup>55</sup> George Grant, "The Practice of Politics" and "Thought about Politics," *The George C. Nowlan Lectures* (Acadia University, October 1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 603-632.

The Nowlan Lectures remain important for understanding the strong connections between the political thought of Ellul and Grant. According to Grant, the possibilities created by advances in technical abilities have forced universities and their government sponsors to understand politics in a social-scientific paradigm. Politics has been re-cast in the modern era as “technical thought,” dedicated to being “a servant of the powers of this world” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 613). Furthermore, in the desperate attempt to escape from the arid subject-object distinction at the heart of social-scientific political thought, young people are increasingly at the mercy of ideologies which arise from the fusion of philosophical naivete and the yearning for meaningful existence. For Grant, combining the concept of politics with the state is pernicious because it assumes the modern account has exhaustively described the essence of politics. The modern view of politics reinforces the distinction between the ‘state’ and ‘society,’ a distinction “so grounded in our modern way of thinking, that few of us think outside it” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 605). There is grave danger in the refusal to question the relation of the state to political power, because without a candid questioning about the essence of politics, one cannot cultivate a realistic understanding of modernity; “[w]e must be careful that we do not think that we are sure what the political is, because, if we do, we may miss the ambiguity of what it is to live at this time” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 606).

Grant’s suggestion echoes Ellul’s argument in *The Political Illusion*. Ellul asserts that the state has become the sole proprietor of politics. The power of the state has increased to a point at which it is virtually impossible to question the supremacy of the

state in the political sphere. Ellul writes: “[w]e consider it obvious that everything must be unreservedly subjected to the power of the state; it would seem extraordinary to us if any activity should escape it. The expansion of the state’s encroachment upon all affairs is exactly paralleled by our conviction that things *must* be that way” (Ellul: 1967, 13). He also notes that:

Any attempt on the part of any enterprise, university, or charitable enterprise to remain independent of the state seems anachronistic to us. The state directly incarnates the common weal. The state is the great ordainer, the great organizer, the center upon which all voices of all people converge and from which all reasonable, balanced, impartial–i.e., just–solutions emerge. If by chance we find this is not so, we are profoundly scandalized, so filled are we with this image of the state’s perfection...We believe that for the world to be in good order, the state must have all the powers. (Ellul: 1967, 13)

The investment of the state with complete political power is the result of a deep confusion over the nature of politics. Though the state would seem to be all-encompassing, its power is the result of the voluntary investment of political power by individual citizens. The state is no more than the sum of its human constituents, and therefore the state remains essentially without power in its own right. Ellul is not necessarily an advocate of democratic forms of government. Indeed, he often draws attention to the fact that democratic forms of government are by nature the most tenuous and brittle. Both Grant and Ellul consider the nature of politics to be ambiguous, a fact which is brought into even greater focus by their considerable agreement on the form which the state takes in the technological civilization.

For Ellul, political life in the technological civilization is an ‘illusion’ because the people have misunderstood their own relationship to power. The illusion of modern

politics rests on the fact that, as the masses become increasingly 'politicized,' they become concurrently less powerful in relation to the state. As the masses become politicized, their actions fall into lockstep with the necessities of the political machine, which, as part of the larger technological apparatus, runs autonomously, beyond human control. As bureaucracy becomes increasingly technicized, the exercise of political power is transferred out of human control. Even in the modern democratic regimes, where power is understood to flow from the people to their elected representatives, the administrative technique required to run the massive modern state operates according to its own, internal necessity:

[G]overnmental administration has acquired considerable weight and complexity. It is all well and good to claim that the corps of functionaries can be reduced to some simple rules or statutes, the administration to some general structure. That takes no account of reality. On the contrary, one would have to penetrate into the endless mass of bureaus and their competences, the hundreds of services under a cabinet member, the divisions, the hierarchies, and above all the liaison organs...A dossier must go through five, ten, twenty services, with each adding something and attesting to having taken note of it. As those services are subject to different chiefs, and even belong to different ministries, the channels are not clear...Nobody can have exact knowledge of this vast machinery, and to my knowledge, no organizational chart detailing the various interrelationships exists [in France]...Nobody can grasp the whole, and in reality nobody controls it. (Ellul: 1967, 143)

The vesting of complete power in the state brings politics under the control of the administrative bureaucracy. The role of all government bureaucracy is to run the various components of the state apparatus efficiently. But the bureaucracy is not subject to elected officials, or even to the whims of dictators. The reality, for Ellul, is that the

bureaucratic administration, as a technique of control and efficiency, operates according to technological necessity:

There cannot exist at any time, for any of the administration members or for the administrative organs themselves, any true freedom of choice. They can only make decisions dictated by necessity...Nor can the overall decisions be taken at the so-called political level, precisely because of the state's bureaucratic structure...Freedom can in no way enter into the bureaucratic order. (Ellul: 1967, 148)

Ellul and Grant agree that the tyrannous potential of the modern state is the result of a common agreement about what constitutes human excellence. If humans can control chance, they will be able to create conditions under which all people will be able to achieve human excellence, defined in the Lockean sense as comfortable self-preservation. Ellul asserts that “[t]oday we no longer have the choice: efficiency is regarded as the supreme good by all” (1967, 70). The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America each represent different paths to achieve the goal of technical mastery, but they do not differ in understanding that technological efficiency is the highest good for humanity:

[N]ow it is assumed that all aim at the same ends—and that is true; ends are no longer subject to search or deliberation: the U.S.S.R. pursues precisely the same ends as the U.S., and vice versa. In this search for ends, maximum efficiency is regarded as best...This means that efficiency is no longer a doubtful value; it is the necessary form of contemporary politics. (1967, 70)<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> In a footnote to this discussion, Ellul states: “Even though I am in general agreement with Gaston Bouthoul, I do not share his views when he contrasts the ends pursued by the United States (happiness) with those pursued by the U.S.S.R. (power). These notions are relative to one another. The U.S.S.R. seeks power first, in order to assure universal happiness later. And the United States also seeks power in order to protect its happiness. And both have the same concept of happiness (raising of the living standard), and also of power” (Ellul: 1967, 70).

Similarly, Grant asserts that the goal of human excellence is no longer a political issue, because most people share the view that technological progress represents the height of human striving. Although there may be potential conflicts over the means by which the universal technological state is to be realized, there is no essential disagreement about what the final goal of human striving should be:

The highest good is thought by the vast majority of men to be the building of the totally realized technological society by the overcoming of chance through the use of the natural and social sciences. That is something put beyond politics because it is not a matter of conflict—because everybody agrees about it...For example, should the realized technological society be brought in under the control of the English-speaking empire, or should power be divided among the [countries of the] northern hemisphere, or should even some of the countries of the southern hemisphere have some power over their own realization of technological civilization...But the central question of rival purpose is not political because almost nobody doubts that this is man's highest pursuit. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 608)

Joined to the question of human excellence and the relation of technology to politics is the status of values in the technological society. In the Nowlan Lectures Grant suggests that the modern distinction between facts and values in the physical and social sciences has led to a 'technicizing' of all branches of knowledge. The inability of modern physical and social sciences to properly consider the relationship of their studies to ultimate human ends triggers a great shift toward homogenization. Grant uses the example of the modern 'value-free' social sciences as an illustration of the danger inherent in the fact-value distinction. Although the dispassionate studies carried out by the social sciences reveal a great deal about human motivation, social scientific studies are essentially divorced from substantive concepts of human excellence. The lack of

moral framework is understandable, because the modern world views technological mastery for the purpose of comfortable self-preservation to be the highest human goal.

The findings of the social sciences, like those of the physical sciences, are put to use by those who finance and use the sciences as mechanisms of control:

[I]t must also be said that the result of the fact-value distinction in political science has been to turn nearly all thought about politics in our universities into technical thought and thereby make it a servant of the powers of this world. This happens in the following way. Behavioral political science is interested in objective facts, generally the quantifiable. It therefore proceeds to search out all kinds of facts by all kinds of methods—voting studies, surveys, computerization, etc. But these facts are turned over to the practical men of our society for use as discussion of ends (or as they call them values) must be eliminated from their science, there is no reason to say why it is better that those facts be used by decent rather than by wicked practical men. Indeed their science has nothing to say about who are decent and who are not. Indeed, to go further, it seems to me clear that pluralism has not resulted in those societies where modern liberalism (with its belief in the fact-value distinction) has prevailed...we live in one of the most monistic societies that has ever been. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 613)

Grant's criticisms of values-speech and the social sciences are influenced by his reading of Ellul. The latter's account of technology as the autonomous and universalizing tendency toward efficiency includes a critique of the modern emphasis on values. *The Political Illusion* is an extended meditation on the consequences of values-speech in the technological society. Ellul deplores the politicization of values that results from "the tension between facts and values" (1967, 31). He conceives of the lack of any substantive conception of human excellence to be the result of the homogenization of social standards in the technological drive to mastery:

Justice, freedom, truth, are words still useful in propaganda. But these terms have new connotations: justice now means happiness produced by equal distribution of material goods; freedom has come to mean high living standards and long

vacations; and truth, more or less, has come to mean exactness with regards to facts. I could multiply these examples and expand the analysis; but basically, for many reasons, our time lacks guideposts and aims. (1967, 31)

In Ellul's analysis the most troubling fact about the modern state is the lack of an external moral framework in its operation. The state is a machine, created for the purpose of efficiently carrying out the specific tasks required to maintain and expand political power. Those who suggest that great political reforms or ideological movements can infuse the state or the administration with a moral paradigm are mistaken. "It is not enough," he laments,

[T]o insist that politics must be subjected to values; such insistence will not bring about a reign of values. It is not even enough that the chief of a party or a dictator should make decisions inspired by idealism or non-material attitudes. For the autonomy of political affairs to come to an end, it would be necessary that they be subordinated to common values; that the machinery of parties or the state have no autonomy—that they cease functioning like machines; that acts and decisions inspired by moral reasons be clearly recognizable as such in the eyes of all. But the people's education has been proceeding in exactly the opposite direction; they are too convinced of the corruption and Machiavellian ways of politics not to consider such autonomy inevitable. (1967, 92)

One of the ways Ellul criticizes modern values-speech is in his critique of the conception of politics as the best location for the articulation of meaning. Many citizens consider the state to be moving in a tangible way toward the attainment of specific moral and political goods. The problem with such a view is that it ultimately misses the point about the true nature of the state. The state is a machine, and as such it does not perceive a moral dimension in its actions, except in its presentation of these actions before public opinion through the vehicle of propaganda. As propaganda becomes the vehicle for all

contact between the state and its citizens, it becomes exceedingly difficult for an individual to think outside of the framework of the state as a moral edifice:

But let us ask what would have happened if Hitler had won. We then would never have heard anything of Hitler's concentration camps, the massacres, or the experiments on human beings. Instead, Stalin's crimes of 1945 would have been discovered, and he would have been considered a war criminal. The Russians would have been charged with genocide because of their concentration camps, their massacres in the Baltic countries, the Ukraine, and Rumania...In victory, Hitlerism would have softened progressively, after having liquidated all the elements to be liquidated—such as communism. And ten years later the moderation of the chiefs, who by then would have relaxed their hold, would have been admired...The Nazi doctrine would have been deepened and broadened, eminent philosophers such as Heidegger would have made their contribution to it, and Marxism would have ceased to preoccupy the intellectuals...and because people would have been submersed perpetually in National Socialist ideology, the latter would have appeared perfectly just at the end of ten years, and the well-known Nazi crimes would have been forgotten. (Ellul: 1967, 192)

Public opinion about justice is the plaything of state propaganda. The state should not be considered the vehicle for the realization of any moral principles, because of the fact that “[a] fundamental contradiction exists between politics and justice” (Ellul: 1967, 196).

There also exist similarities between Grant and Ellul in their account of modern liberal ideology. For Grant, the concept of freedom espoused by modern liberalism is extremely dangerous, as is the liberal tendency to flatter the spirit of technological mastery; both contribute to his rejection of liberal ideology. For Ellul, the main problem with liberal ideology is that liberalism ultimately obscures all conceptions of transcendent meaning by attempting to recognize religious pluralism. In *The Political Illusion* he scorns liberalism and suggests that liberalism “is indifferent to truths, or grants equal

footing to all opinions” (1967, 236), and does not truly respect human worth and diversity. In allowing all opinions to be understood as equally true, liberalism neutralizes the articulation of moral truth in the political sphere. The reality of the modern world is that politics operates in a moral vacuum. Any attempt to see the individual as a vital participant in the political regime falls prey to idealism. Ellul thinks that modern politics operates according to technological necessity, and thus beyond human control, as all modern politics takes place as a specific technological application within the broader technological framework. The modern technological state is an appendage of technological necessity, and one remains politically naive if one considers the state to be a vehicle for justice in the world. This is the substance of the political illusion, which persuades the individual that the state is omnipotent and that the political regime is the vehicle of moral progress. For Ellul, “[c]oncerning the problem of justice, it is an illusion to think that justice can be attained by a political organization of any kind” (1967, 191). Justice, like any other ‘value,’ is not capable of realization in the political sphere, because aside from the drive to technological mastery, there exists no unquestioned point of moral reference from which to establish a political consensus. There no longer exists an external moral ideal that can garner comprehensive social agreement and support. Conversely, the universalizing aspect of technology can be witnessed in the widespread agreement about what constitutes significant human activity. Sociologically, the modern notion of justice has been linked to the hope for an elevation in general living standards. According to Ellul, “[j]ustice, freedom, truth are words still useful in propaganda. But

these terms have new connotations: justice now means happiness produced by equal distribution of material goods; freedom has come to mean high living standards and long vacations; and truth, more or less, has come to mean exactness with regard to facts” (1967, 30-31). Through the widespread use of propaganda and the diminution of the power of the individual in the public sphere, the masses have become convinced that practical affairs cannot be governed by ideals.

Ellul’s evaluation of liberal ideology remains influential for Grant’s criticism of liberalism. In *English-Speaking Justice*,<sup>57</sup> Grant examines the status of liberalism in the technological civilization. It is clear that liberal ideology is normative when one considers that “our liberalism is the only form of political thought which can summon forth widespread public action for the purposes of human good” (1974, 12). On the other hand, modern liberalism is experiencing a crisis through the growing awareness that the combination of liberal ideology and technological progress might not lead inevitably to human excellence. In North America, liberalism takes the form of contractualism. For Grant, contractual liberalism was understood by its founders to be the most rational form of justice, which was considered to be “neither a natural nor supernatural virtue, but [one] arose from the calculations necessary to our acceptance of the social contract” (1974: 11). He admits that the concept of political liberty enshrined in modern liberalism is “a central human good” (1974: 4), but modern liberal ideology, based on the contractual understanding of justice, shows signs of weakening in the technological civilization. The

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<sup>57</sup> George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1974).

contemporary turn from contractualism in the public sphere to the emphasis on ecstatic aspects of private life reveals the weakening of contractualism as the basis for modern life. Grant writes: “is not the present retreat into the private realm not only a recognition of the impotence of the individual, but also a desire to leave the aridity of a realm where all relations are contractual, and to seek the comfort of the private where the supracontractual is possible?” (Grant: 1974, 11) In order to understand the relation between modern contractual liberalism and the technological drive to mastery, he examines the account of ‘personhood’ espoused by contractual liberalism. He writes: “[t]hese lectures will...try to enucleate what is being spoken about human and non-human beings in liberal tradition. Only in the light of such an enucleation can one turn to the more difficult question of what is the relation between technological reason and modern liberal reason” (1974, 12).

Contractual liberalism became the dominant mode of political thought in England and North America because of its practical achievements. Linked to the practicality of contractual liberalism was the fact that English-speaking philosophy had not yet understood the ramifications of the “European liberalism of freedom” (1974, 50) articulated by Rousseau and Nietzsche. “Indeed,” Grant asserts, “English political philosophy has been little more than a praise for the fundamental lineaments of their own society, spiced by calls for particular reforms within those lineaments” (1974, 51). Philosophical insularity, the result of an agreement throughout the English-speaking world about the superiority of English contractual liberalism, spared “the English from

those theoretical viruses which have plagued continental Europeans” (1974, 52). The intellectual paucity of English political thought had the benefit of insulating English thinkers from the unsettling results of contractualism in its French and German iterations. The early American tradition of political philosophy was even less perceptive than its British counterpart. The American emphasis on constitutionalism represents the height of liberal contractualism, divorced from substantive conceptions of human excellence:

Contractualism was less inhibited [in the U.S.] even than in capitalist England, where certain disappearing classes maintained remnantal reverences from before the age of progress. In the United States such remnants as Anglican poetry and piety were largely squashed with the revolution, and reverences brought by later immigrants were easily engulfed and legitimised into the public contractual principle in its purest form. (1974, 56)

As England and North America became secularized, the idea of justice espoused by Christianity was gradually stripped of its religious aspects and re-packaged as secular contractualism. The process was only possible because of the relation of secular liberalism to Protestant morality. Protestantism gave contractual liberalism a conception of justice that transcended the merely contractual:

Why should anyone choose to be a soldier or a policeman, if Lockian contractualism is the truth about justice? Yet such professions are necessary if any approximation to justice and consent are to be maintained...The believing Protestants provided that necessary moral cement which could not be present for those who were consistently directed by contractualism or utilitarianism or a combination of both. (1974, 62)

With the end of Protestantism as a powerful moral force in the West, the elite classes in North America “became unable to provide their societies with the public sustenance of uncalculated justice which the contractual account of justice could not

provide from itself” (1974, 65). And yet, in North America contractual liberalism remains the dominant political ideology of the elite classes. Conversely, the rise of the technological civilization, with its violence and its universalizing determinations, has revealed the moral shallowness of liberal contractualism. Even though North American intellectuals have consistently turned away from a transcendent conception of justice in recent years, there has been widespread agreement about the axiom that justice is good. Intellectuals may have ridiculed earlier traditions of reverence, but these intellectuals have been protected by the memories of older traditions “from trying to think why [justice] is good in the light of what we are told about the whole in modern science” (1974, 68).

For Grant, the inability to articulate a substantive concept of justice in the context of the technological civilization has been made explicit in the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Roe v. Wade*. The legalization of abortion exposes the crisis within contractual liberalism. In stating that “foetuses up to six months are not persons, and as non-persons can have no status in the litigation,” (1974, 70) the American Supreme Court has made an ontological statement that cannot be reconciled in the framework of contractual liberalism. The primacy of individual rights over any conception of good is the basis for the decision, and thus “[t]he decision [of the U.S. Supreme Court] then speaks modern liberalism in its pure contractual form: right prior to good; a foundational contract protecting individual rights; the neutrality of the state concerning moral ‘values’; social pluralism supported by and supporting this neutrality”

(1974, 70). In suggesting that mothers are persons and that foetuses are not, the Supreme Court of the United States has made an ontological declaration about personhood which raises a host of questions about contractual liberalism. The decision to legalize abortion “hand[s] the cup of poison to our liberalism” (Grant: 1974, 72) because it fails to define what it is about personhood that accrues rights in the first place. “If foetuses are not persons,” he asks, “why should not the state decide that a week old, a two year old, a seventy or eighty year old is not a person ‘in the whole sense’? On what basis do we draw the line? Why are the retarded, the criminal or the mentally ill persons?” (Grant: 1974, 72) Without a clear account of the concept of personhood, what is it about a person that dictates that he or she should be given rights of any kind?

Nietzsche’s thought exposes the implications of the lack of a substantive concept of justice. His account provides the clearest articulation of the philosophical realities of the modern era. Now that the Christian God is dead, there no longer remains any reason to live under the moral guidelines espoused by Christianity. Technological and scientific progress has undermined the idea of a teleological purpose underlying nature or history; there no longer remains a reason to consider justice or equality or any other socially-useful ideal as inherent to human beings: “Once we have recognised what we can now will to create through our technology, why should we limit such creation by basing our systems of ‘justice’ on presuppositions which have been shown to be archaic by the very coming to be of technology” (Grant: 1974, 80). Contractual liberalism and the drive to technological mastery have emerged “from the same matrix of modern thought, from

which can arise no reason why the justice of liberty is due to all human beings, irrespective of convenience” (Grant: 1974, 86). Grant describes the obscurity that surrounds justice in the modern era as “darkness” (Grant: 1974, 86). The darkness that surrounds justice is dangerous because there appears to be no escape from it. In the midst of the technological civilization it is futile to attempt to recall earlier conceptions of justice, because modern science and technology have revealed the underlying determinations that dictate the realities of life in the natural world. However, neither contractual liberalism nor technological progress can shine light on the darkness that surrounds modern justice, because both contractual liberalism and technological progress eschew concepts of human excellence external to the practical aim of comfort and mastery.

Grant’s critique of the moral and philosophical assumptions underlying modern liberalism in *English Speaking Justice* resonates with Ellul’s critique of liberalism, particularly in Grant’s emphasis on the status of justice in the technological civilization. Ellul and Grant consider technology to be a determining force in Western civilization. Ellul describes the technological civilization as an ‘event’ that cannot be reversed. There is no escape from technological necessity once a given civilization has succumbed, as he asserts in *The Technological Society*, *Propaganda*, and *The Political Illusion*. The modern citizen is caught in technological necessity, which pervades every aspect of human life: political, economic, religious, scientific. There is no escape from the iron grip of technological necessity: “the point is that we have here an adherence to the

ongoing socio-economic development generated by technological motives enforced by technological means, moving in the direction of a technological continuity: there is no longer room for ideological debate” (1967, 44). Ellul asserts that:

There cannot exist, at any time, for any of the administration members or for the administrative organs themselves, any true freedom of choice. They can only make decisions dictated by necessity... Nor can the overall decisions be taken at the so-called political level, precisely because of the state’s bureaucratic structure. (1967, 148)

Ellul’s conception of technological necessity as a determining force in the modern world constitutes a continuing influence on Grant’s account of technology. In Grant’s Nowlan Lectures, he allies himself with Ellul’s account of technology: “I agree, largely, with Ellul that technique has become autonomous and automatic and that as the multiversities are a chief instrument of technological civilization they will go on serving that technical drive” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 627). The universities, like all other institutions in the technological civilization, are directed to master chance in all aspects of life. And yet the drive to technological mastery remains beyond human control. In *Time as History*, Grant paints a picture of the realities of life in the technological civilization. He describes the universalizing nature of the technological society:

When I drive on the highways around Hamilton and Toronto, through the proliferating factories and apartments, the research establishments and super-markets; when I sit in the bureaucracies in which the education for technocracy is planned; when I live in and with the mechanized bodies and resolute wills necessary to that system; it is then that the conception of time as history is seen in its blossoming. An animating vision is not known simply in a retired academic thinking, but in the urgent experience of every lived moment. The words used to explicate ‘time as history’ may seem abstract, but they are meant to illuminate our waking and sleeping hours in technical society. (*Time As History*: 1969, 9)

*English-Speaking Justice* ends with the warning that technological necessity has enfolded us completely. The moral darkness that exists in the technological civilization is endemic to technological necessity:

Analytical logistics plus historicist scholarship plus even rigorous science do not when added up equal philosophy. When added together they are not capable of producing that thought which is required if justice is to be taken out of the darkness which surrounds it in the technological era. This lack of tradition of thought is one reason why it is improbable that the transcendence of justice over technology will be lived among English-speaking people. (1974, 89)

In Grant's 1975 speech, "Knowing and Making," presented to the Royal Society of Canada, Ellul's influence can be detected in Grant's description of the determinism inherent in technological necessity:

Where do we find any positive knowledge in the modern world that can give frontiers to the technological imperative—that imperative which was expressed so lucidly by Robert Oppenheimer when he said: 'If something is sweet, you have to go ahead with it.' The new technologies are taking us into realms of making which occur as it were necessarily, that is, almost outside consideration of human good. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 415)

Grant's thought during and after 1969 is increasingly influenced by the moral and ethical issues raised by his encounter with the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but his understanding of technology remains deeply indebted to Ellul. Although he disagrees with Ellul's Reformed theology "because it refuses to come to terms with reason, except as a human instrument," Grant asserts that Ellul "sees...with great clarity at an immediate level" (Schmidt: 1978, 146). In his 1976 article, "The Computer Does Not Impose on Us

the Ways It Should Be Used,”<sup>58</sup> Grant paints a picture of human fate being inextricably enfolded in the web of technological necessity:

We move into the tightening circle in which more technological science is called for to meet the problems which technological science has produced. In that tightening circle, the overcoming of chance is less and less something outside us, but becomes more and more the overcoming of chance in our own species, in our very own selves. Every new appeal for a more exact cybernetics means, in fact, forceful new means of mastery over the most intimate aspects of the lives of masses of people. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 432)

Throughout his work, there is a sense of determinism which reveals the pivotal importance of Ellul’s conception of technological necessity for Grant’s understanding of the technological civilization. Indeed, Ellul’s influence on Grant’s account of technology is more important than scholarly orthodoxy suggests. While there is some truth to the notion that Grant distanced himself from Ellul’s interpretation of Christianity, it is possible to see strong links between Ellul’s writings about politics, morality, and technological necessity, and Grant’s understanding of these subjects.

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<sup>58</sup> George Grant, “The Computer Does Not Impose on Us the Ways It Should Be Used,” in ed. Abraham Rotstein, *Beyond Industrial Growth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976) 117-131. This essay is one of six Massey College lectures presented at Massey College in 1974-75 and broadcast by CBC Radio. The essay is reprinted with minor changes as “Thinking about Technology” in George Grant *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1986) 11-34.

CHAPTER THREE: MARTIN HEIDEGGER'S INFLUENCE ON GRANT'S UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY

Chapter Three will examine Heidegger's influence on the development of Grant's understanding of technology. Chapters One and Two examined the ways in which Grant's account of technology is influenced by Ellul. While many scholars have noted Ellul's importance for the development of Grant's view of technology, the extent of Ellul's impact on Grant is often understated by scholars. The paucity of scholarship in this area is highlighted by the large number of scholarly analyses of Heidegger's influence. An immediate gauge of Heidegger's influence is the fact that Grant often referred to him as the greatest living philosopher.

One of the reasons for Heidegger's elevated status for Grant is Heidegger's role as the most lucid expositor of Nietzsche's philosophy. Any attempt to understand Heidegger's influence on Grant must first examine Grant's view of Nietzsche. Grant discusses Heidegger's influence during several conversations published in Lawrence Schmidt's *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Schmidt: 1978). When one of the conference participants asks Grant about the influence of Heidegger's writings on his intellectual development, he responds with an answer about Nietzsche. When questioned about the discrepancy, he asserts that Nietzsche and Heidegger "go together" (Schmidt: 1978, 66). He claims that "[i]t is unthinkable that Heidegger would have been without Nietzsche. Why they need to be read is that they are the two thinkers who have

most completely thought through the modern western project from within it” (Schmidt: 1978, 66).

Scholars have attempted to assess Grant’s preoccupation with Nietzsche. Ronald Beiner points out in his essay, “George Grant, Nietzsche, and the Problem of a Post-Christian Theism,”<sup>59</sup> that Grant’s view of Nietzsche appears to be a composite resulting from Grant’s scattered philosophical influences. Beiner suggests that “Grant merely puts together Strauss’ image of Nietzsche as a radical historicist with Heidegger’s image of Nietzsche as the arch-philosopher of technological mastery” (Davis: 1996, 110). Beiner’s principal argument is that Grant’s understanding of Nietzsche is flawed because of his failure to comprehend certain components of Nietzsche’s thought. According to Beiner, Nietzsche and Heidegger are not, as Grant states, “the two thinkers who have most completely thought through the modern western project from within it” (Davis: 1996, 109). Grant’s view of Nietzsche as the prophet of modernity ignores the fact that Nietzsche’s thought is notoriously difficult to categorize. Beiner asserts that Nietzsche’s criticism of modernity places him squarely in the conservative, anti-modernist camp. Placing particular emphasis on Nietzsche’s ambiguous praise of ancient Hebraic theism, Beiner criticizes Grant’s classification of Nietzsche “as the spearhead of radical atheistic modernism” (Davis: 1996, 129). Beiner suggests that Nietzsche espouses a hierarchical understanding of religious traditions which contradicts Grant’s interpretation of

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<sup>59</sup> Ronald Beiner, “George Grant, Nietzsche, and the Problem of a Post-Christian Theism,” in ed. Art Davis, *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, and Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 109-138.

Nietzsche as one of the prophets of modernity. Beiner notes that for Nietzsche, “theism is superior to atheism, that Catholicism is superior to Protestantism, that Judaism and Islam are superior to Christianity, and that theocracy is superior to Enlightenment” (Davis: 1996, 130). Beiner asserts that Grant’s view of Nietzsche as a radical proponent of modernity is perplexing, given Nietzsche’s apparent attraction to pre-modern religious understanding. For Beiner, “serious qualifications need to be attached to the vision of Nietzsche as an uncompromising modernizer. On the contrary, there are equally good grounds for seeing Nietzsche as conducting, in alliance with Burckhart, a kind of cultural war *against* modernity” (Davis: 1996, 130).

Lawrence Lampert, in his “Zarathustra and George Grant: Two Teachers,”<sup>60</sup> offers a more profound interpretation of the issue. According to Lampert, Grant’s view of Nietzsche must be understood in the context of the prophet Zarathustra’s attempt to comprehend and impart truth. Grant shares certain basic characteristics with Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. He has learned, like Zarathustra, that the crowd is not fitted to understand the deep truths about human life. Any attempt to teach the masses about truth inevitably falls on deaf ears, because the masses are not willing to relinquish their hold on comfortable self-preservation. “Both Zarathustra and Grant,” Lampert writes, “regard the prevailing public views as delusions” (Lampert, 449). Another similarity between Zarathustra and Grant is that both seek to “enucleate” the truth of the modern world by boldly facing the practical and fundamental realities that shape modernity. According to

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<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Lampert, “Zarathustra and George Grant: Two Teachers,” *Dalhousie Review* 53 (1973) 443-57.

Lampert, Nietzsche's Zarathustra highlights the importance of Nietzsche's thought for Grant. Through Zarathustra's awareness of the primacy of becoming and the will-to-power, Nietzsche uncovers the fundamental assumptions underlying the modern spirit. In scorning the infirmities and absurdities of the "last men" and the nihilists in favour of the Overman, Nietzsche unfolds the consequences of the fundamental drives underlying the modern spirit. For this reason, Grant sees Nietzsche's thought as the deepest and most penetrating analysis of modernity. According to Lampert,

What is brought forth by the method of enucleation is similar in Zarathustra and Grant. That is, Grant takes Nietzsche to be the philosopher of the modern age which means that Zarathustra is the one who sees and states most clearly what the kernel of the modern age is. The doctrines of Zarathustra's solitude are for Grant the most profound revelations about the modern world. While these doctrines are not stated in such a way as to be recognizable as everybody's truths, for Grant they nevertheless name the basic commitments and propensities of modern existence. (Lampert: 451)

Grant came into contact with Nietzsche's writings while he was a student at Oxford during the early years of World War II. In a letter to his mother at the time of his twenty-first birthday,<sup>61</sup> Grant laments that most scholars have completely misunderstood Nietzsche's thought:

Lately I have been reading Nietzsche [sic]. To say that he is completely misunderstood by most people would be an absurd understatement. To say that he is the forerunner to such bestiality and cruelty as the Nazis is absurd...He uses the theory of 'the blond animal' in utter derision; yet people say that that is the basis of Nazidom. (Christian: 1996, 42)

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<sup>61</sup> George Grant, letter to Maude Grant (22 November, 1939), in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 42-43.

Throughout subsequent decades, he comes to view Nietzsche as one of the most powerful thinkers in the history of western philosophy. Nietzsche is not only the greatest expositor of the nature of modernity; Nietzsche's thought has become one of the philosophical foundations of technological civilization.

In his doctoral thesis on the theology of John Oman,<sup>62</sup> Grant dismisses Nietzsche's idea "that poverty of spirit means the morality of the slave. Presumably such ideas were more current among European intellectuals in his [Oman's] day than this" (Davis & Emberley: 2000, 298). He remains distrustful of the formative thinkers of modernity. North Americans are ensnared in modernity, because of the subversion of all heterogeneous modes of thought by the modern program. Grant notes that while he was studying for his doctorate at Oxford, he was taught theology within the liberal tradition that took for granted that "Christianity went well with the program of modernity. (Nietzsche and Heidegger were of course not talked about. Hadn't the Germans just lost the war?)" (Davis: 2002, 61).<sup>63</sup> Grant proceeds to clarify the depth to which the modern philosophical agenda had pervaded his earlier thought:

It has taken me a whole life time to begin to free myself from the language of modernity. It was hard to recognize that such thinkers as Rousseau and Nietzsche...thought they were digging the grave of Christianity. It took me less time to see that bourgeois Protestantism in Canada was largely made up of people who considered religion simply as a buttress for certain cherished moral ideas. Fewer and fewer of these people were continuing to consider it a useful buttress. Multifarious delusions about society and about myself held me from the real task of

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<sup>62</sup> George Grant, "The Concept of Nature and Supernature in the Theology of John Oman" (DPhil diss., Oxford University, 1949), in ed. Art Davis and Peter Emberley, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. I: 1933-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 157-419.

<sup>63</sup> George Grant, "Two Theological Languages," in ed. Art Davis, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. II: 1951-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 49-65.

expressing Christianity in a non-antiquarian way, which at the same time did not leave it a simple flatterer of the spirit of the decadent age. (Davis: 2002, 61)

It was not until the 1960s that Grant perceived the significance of Nietzsche's thought in the development of the technological civilization. The latter's conception of the life-denying assumptions of traditional morality, and the associated call to think beyond traditional conceptions of good and evil, nursed generations of European scholars on the milk of moral antinomianism. In a radio discussion about the thought and influence of C.G. Jung,<sup>64</sup> Grant asserts:

It is surely no accident that Jung grew up in that Germanic generation which was so deeply shaped by Nietzsche. For Nietzsche's attack on Semitic religion went more to the heart than any other of the many attacks which have characterized the last centuries; and it was made exactly at this point—man should pass beyond good and evil. (Davis: 2002, 190)

For Grant, Nietzsche laid the foundation for the rejection of moral limit which lies at the heart of the technological civilization. In *Time As History*,<sup>65</sup> Grant seeks to clarify the essence of modernity with reference to Nietzsche's role in its inception. Grant's goal is to clarify the philosophical bases from which the technological civilization has risen. He notes that the English language contains two uses of the word history. There is the study of history, the objective search for answers in historical events; and there is also that which is studied, the subjective flow of events of the past. Ultimately, the subjective and the objective uses of the word history cannot be separated from one another because

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<sup>64</sup> George Grant, talk delivered on CBC Radio (December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1961). Later published in *Architects of Modern Thought 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> Series, Twelve Talks for CBC Radio* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: 1962), in ed. Art Davis, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. II: 1951-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 181-192

man is essentially an historical being. Knowledge of origins confers power over the object of study. To know something—to understand something—is to know its history.

Grant attributes this way of thinking to the formative theorists of early modernity: Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. For such thinkers, nature was considered to be separate from history, because human beings partake in both the mechanical determinism of nature as well as the freedom to make historical choices. Human life is beholden to time—in doing and in making. The modern conception of history mitigates the yawning abyss of unpredictability opened up by human mortality.

According to Grant, the difference between humans and animals lies in the human ability to order and arrange nature. Thinkers from different civilizations have always used the “language of will” (Grant: 1969, 15) that summons human beings to action, but the language of will is at the core of the technological civilization. Willing cannot be defined as desiring or as thinking. Actions are related to purposes, whereas deliberation, of whatever depth or forcefulness, is inevitably dissolved in the immediacy of action. Because of this, thought and action appear to be fundamentally at odds with one another. In the technological civilization, the language of willing has evolved into the language of mastery. Thus, “Willing is then the expression of the responsible and independent self, as distinguished from the dependent self who desires” (Grant: 1969, 16). In the modern era, humanity conceives of itself as summoned to manipulate neutral matter in order to transform it according to human willing:

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<sup>65</sup> George Grant, *Time As History* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969).

Human willing is no longer one type of agent in a total process of natural agents, all of which are directed towards the realization of good purposes. We now see our wills as standing above the other beings of nature, able to make these other beings serve the purposes of our freedom. All else in nature is indifferent to good. Our wills alone are able, through doing, to actualize moral good in the indifferent world. It is here that history as a dimension of reality, distinguished from nature, comes to be thought. History is that dimension in which men and their freedom have tried to 'create' greater and greater goodness in the morally indifferent world they inhabit. (Grant: 1969, 17)

The idea of moral progress or moral evolution among human beings rose out of the burgeoning of the natural sciences. There was a perceived connection between technical mastery over nature and moral progress among human beings. The relation of science to technology is not superficial, but formative in the coming together of willing and reasoning. Understanding the subject-observer as separate from the observed or studied object underlies the normative, scientific methodology that modern people have become accustomed to using.

According to Grant, most modern ideologies initially understood the drive to technical mastery to be serving the quest for human excellence. Marxism, early liberal capitalism, and even National Socialism equated the creative will to technological mastery with their diverse conceptions of human excellence. Changing the world has always served an ideological purpose, be it human fulfillment or human happiness. But in the modern era, the elite ruling classes are comprised of those who view mastery, creativity, and novelty as moral ends in themselves. Progress for the sake of progress has become the mantra of the elite in the technological civilization: "[t]his movement inevitably grows among the resolute as the remnants of any belief in a lovable actuality

disappear” (Grant: 1969, 19). As humanity becomes disillusioned by the realities of life in the present, it finds itself doing for the sake of doing, thereby fully divorcing technical mastery from previous conceptions of human excellence.

Nietzsche is the thinker who most clearly articulates the essence and the contradictions of the modern era. Although Grant does not deny Nietzsche’s brilliance as a thinker and as a prophet of modernity, he wonders how much damage Nietzschean thought has caused, because his thought was almost immediately appropriated by savage ideologues who twisted it into a justification for the atrocities of National Socialism. Grant sees in Nietzsche’s work the theoretical basis of much that is terrible in the twentieth century.

Nietzsche understands that the difference between moderns and ancients is that the ancients viewed being as the static basis of reality, whereas moderns view becoming as the basis of reality. Change and striving are eternal in the modern conception. Furthermore, ancient moral codes have been interpreted by the technological civilization as a mutable paradigm of subjective values, of which different ages have espoused different constructs.

According to Nietzsche, human beings have, since the time of the Greeks, associated permanence and being with rationality; for him, even Platonism and Christianity are glorifications of rationality. Traditionally, being was equated with Good, as befitted a rational cosmic order. However, when the idea of permanence dissolves, the status of rationality is called into question. All horizons by which one lives and by which

one measures human excellence become re-interpreted as subjective and arbitrary constructs. Historicism teaches that all previous horizons and truth-claims about the permanence of being are false. All moral horizons are human creations, with the attendant implications. Grant finds these consequences, articulated by Nietzsche, particularly thoughtful and compelling.

Whereas God was once a horizon that sustained humans in the face of chaos, that horizon no longer enfolds humanity. One must recognize the core of truth in the fervent exclamations of Nietzsche's madman in the public square: God is dead and we have killed him.<sup>66</sup> Closely connected to this idea is the fact that modern humanity can no longer be sustained by the horizon encompassed by conceptions of the Christian God, because that moral limit has been destroyed. The death of God represents the dissolution of all moral horizons. Because the Christian God has been so foundational in the construction of morality for almost two millennia, the collapse of the Christian framework signals the end of all horizons that attempt to lay moral claims on human willing. But modern humanity must nevertheless learn how to live in the face of chaos:

This is the burden that Nietzsche sees the historical sense imposing on man. On the one hand, we cannot deny history and retreat into a destroyed past. On the other hand, how can we overcome the blighting effect of living without horizons? In his twenties Nietzsche saw the crisis with which the conception of time as history presented men. The great writings of his maturity were his attempt to overcome it. (Grant: 1969, 30)

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<sup>66</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887), para. 125, in ed./tr. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Vintage, 1974) 181-182.

For several centuries, Western humanity equated rationality and technical progress with the gradual realization of liberal notions of human excellence. Modern visions of egalitarianism had their most persuasive articulation in the guise of liberal ideology, with its emphasis on freedom and equality. Grant considers Nietzsche's thought to be prophetic because he foresees the social consequences of the dissolution of the Socratic equation of "reason-virtue-happiness" in an age when all moral horizons have been destroyed. Nietzsche is aware that the political virtues espoused by liberal ideology can only result in two types of people: last men and nihilists. The last men are those who let personal comfort define their lives. They are content in their limited and banal horizons, and thus they grow stale; they no longer challenge moral horizons. They seek only base happiness and comfort because the last men can no longer sustain great thoughts, so inured are they to free thinking. Last men represent the end of rational humanity—the use of reason as nothing more than an experimental tool. On the other hand, the nihilists will be violent and hateful because they prefer to will nothingness rather than have nothing to will. Nietzsche predicts that the nihilists will wage war against life itself out of their fear of chaos.

According to Grant, rational humanity survived longer in America than in Europe because of the American founding ethos. When Europeans first arrived in the New World, the land that greeted them was difficult and immense; in order to survive, these hardy first arrivals were forced to conquer nature or die. The founding ethos of mastery over the natural world still informs North American action. The ethos of mastery is

connected in a profound way to Calvinist Protestantism, with its strict morality based on hard work and individual salvation. Furthermore, the type of rational man typified in North America was revered by successive waves of immigrants with their optimistic visions of the potential for human excellence available on new shores. Religion protected North Americans from the nihilism that racked Europe in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Grant thinks that with the dissolution of the moral power of Protestantism, and the deep confusion at the heart of modern liberal ideology, the crisis has come to the New World.

Nietzsche interprets Socratic rationalism as the ultimate expression of *ressentiment* against the free exercise of the unbridled will. Socratic rationalism represents the attempt to use reason to mitigate chaos. Because Socratic rationalism ignores the primary status of becoming over being, such an intellectual project inevitably leads to a hatred of life itself. Christianity, an iteration of Platonism made accessible to the masses, with its dying, sacrificing God, is the most pervasive and pernicious example of Socratic rationalism. With the onset of modern historicism, the old concept of time as the moving image of eternity becomes anathema, because it represents moral limit: something beyond which the human will should not go, and over which the will cannot obtain mastery.

Grant agrees with Nietzsche's prophetic evaluation of the consequences of the disappearance of rational man. With the secularization of Christianity in the guise of

modern liberal ideology, Grant perceives that the conception of divine transcendence has been replaced by the directionless transcendence of progress:

The last men want revenge against anything that is noble and great, against anything that threatens their expectations from triviality. The nihilists want revenge on the fact that they cannot live with joy in the world. Their revenge takes the form of restless violence against any present. As nothingness is always before them, they seek to fill the void by willing for willing's sake. There can be no end to their drive for mastery. (Grant: 1969, 40)

In order to be fit to become masters of the earth, humanity must overcome the spirit of revenge in order to create and will joyfully—turning hatred of life into “amor fati, held outside any assertion of timelessness” (Grant: 1969, 41). Nietzsche discerns the way to overcome nihilism in his discovery of the principle of eternal recurrence; becoming is infinite and all things recur eternally in infinite time.

Grant sees Nietzsche as the prophet of the modern era, who has “thought the conception of time as history more comprehensively than any other thinker” (Christian: 1998, 280). Nietzsche’s thought operates on several levels, each of which is important for an understanding of the technological civilization. On an immediate level, Grant understands Nietzsche’s thought as a description of the fate of Western civilization. Nietzsche’s thought has seeped into the self-understanding of modern North American culture, and his influence colours all discussions of morality and politics:

The simpler things that Nietzsche says (for example, that men must now live without the comfort of horizons) seem so obvious to most people today that they are hardly worth emphasizing. Everybody uses the world ‘values’ to describe our making of the world: capitalists and socialists, atheists and avowed believers, scientists and politicians. The word comes to us so platitudinously that we take it to belong to the way things are. (Christian: 1998, 280-281)

Grant considers Nietzsche's work to be written in the context of a positive agenda. Nietzsche's stark and uncompromising analysis of the decadence of modern, technological civilization is not motivated solely by the impulse to shatter modern myths and reduce modern assumptions to rubble. According to Grant, Nietzsche's primary aim is to bring about the conditions for the renewal of Western civilization:

In his work, the themes that must be thought in thinking time as history are raised to a beautiful explicitness: the mastery of human and non-human nature in experimental science and technique, the primacy of the will, man as the creator of his own values, the finality of becoming, the assertion that potentiality is higher than actuality, that motion is nobler than rest, that dynamism rather than peace is the height. (Christian: 1998, 280)

Grant's subsequent writings about Nietzsche are preoccupied with the task of formulating a refutation of his radical historicism. In "Revolution and Tradition"<sup>67</sup> he provides a clear account of why Nietzsche's thought remains the clearest articulation of modernity, and why it must be opposed. Nietzsche attacks the rationality underlying the history of Western philosophy, specifically the Platonic/Christian rationalism that identifies truth with goodness and virtue. The categories of good and evil, as they have been interpreted in the history of western rationalism, are no longer relevant in an era when the Christian God has lost moral authority over human action. According to Grant, the replacement of the sense of moral limit with the Nietzschean system of subjective valuation is a catalyst for the moral darkness that pervades the technological civilization:

It is the claim of the modern, at its height and in its most wonderful self-consciousness, to say that the language of good has been destroyed, and that

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<sup>67</sup> George Grant, "Revolution and Tradition," in ed. Lionel Rubinoff *Tradition and Revolution: the Text of the 1970 Gerstein Lectures held at York University* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1971) 79-95.

therefore men at their greatest must live beyond the limits of good and evil...Nietzsche's immense clarity stemmed from his recognition at a very early age that the very form of 'reason' which had made technical civilization had at the same time destroyed any reason for thinking that we know the proper purposes (the proper goods) of human life. (Rubinoff: 1971, 86)

The modern attempt to place the willing individual beyond good and evil is symptomatic of the darkness that underlies technological modernity.

In Grant's glowing review of Werner Dannhauser's *Nietzsche's View of Socrates*<sup>68</sup> in the *American Political Science Review*,<sup>69</sup> he points out the danger inherent in the tendency of English-speaking philosophers to ignore continental philosophy, particularly Nietzsche. In Grant's estimation, Dannhauser's book is important because it takes Nietzsche's attack on Plato seriously. Modern scholarship must attempt to understand Nietzsche's radical historicism if it is to comprehend the philosophical underpinnings of the technological civilization:

As historicism appears to be the fundamental presupposition of the dominant North American social science, Dannhauser's book is important in our present intellectual situation. I mean by 'historicism' the teaching that all thought is determined by belonging to a concrete dynamic context. If our contemporary academia is to face its main task, which is to try to understand the recent state of our intellectual tradition, this must include the understanding of Nietzsche's writing as it is, in all its greatness, as the work of a thinker who not only assailed Western rationalism, but claimed to have overcome it. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 292)

Grant is suggesting that an examination of Nietzsche's radical historicism is a prerequisite for understanding the animating spirit behind the contemporary social

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<sup>68</sup> Werner Dannhauser, *Nietzsche's View of Socrates* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 1974).

<sup>69</sup> George Grant, "Review of Werner J. Dannhauser's *Nietzsche's View of Socrates*," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 71 (1977) 1127-1129, in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998) 290-293.

sciences, and for understanding the fundamental assumptions underlying the modern drive to technological mastery.

In “Nietzsche and the Ancients: Philosophy and Scholarship,”<sup>70</sup> Grant elaborates on why engaging Nietzsche’s work remains so important to understanding modernity. Contrary to the claims of his philosophically naive readers, Nietzsche’s thought is animated by a positive doctrine of justice. Whereas Grant is beholden to the Platonic and Christian tradition of political philosophy, with its particular interpretation of justice, Nietzsche’s thought represents a wholesale rejection of the Platonism and Christianity. Nietzsche’s conception of justice is premised on the unlimited human potential to accrue power. The true goal of human life is not to seek contentment, but to seek self-transcendence, giving birth to a post-human reality that is unhampered by external moral codes. For Grant, the conception of justice as “beyond good and evil” represents Nietzsche’s clearest influence on the moral framework of the technological civilization. The Nietzschean conception of justice leaves no room for people who stand in the way of human achievement, for those who are to be destroyed or swept aside:

In Nietzsche’s conception of justice there are other human beings to whom nothing is due—other than extermination. The human creating of quality of life beyond the little perspectives of good and evil by a building, rejecting, annihilating way of thought is the statement that politics is the technology of making the human race greater than it has yet been. In that artistic accomplishment, those of our fellows who stand in the way of that quality can be exterminated or simply enslaved. There is nothing intrinsic in all others that puts any given limit on what we may do to them in the name of that great enterprise. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 296-297)

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<sup>70</sup> George Grant, “Nietzsche and the Ancients: Philosophy and Scholarship,” *Dionysius* 3 (December) 5-16, reprinted in George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1986) 79-95.

According to Grant, Nietzsche's thought is to be encountered and taught in the modern universities with great trepidation. In order to understand Nietzsche's importance for modernity, one should realize that he is the great opponent of Plato. Indeed, for Grant, Nietzsche's "criticism of Plato is root and branch" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 294). For Grant, the freedom that Nietzsche grants to humanity in order to reach beyond limiting moral frameworks is related to the modern goal of technological mastery. In the technological civilization, the implications of Nietzsche's philosophy become devastatingly apparent. His doctrine of valuation breeds the moral darkness of the technological civilization, not only through the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps, or in the aberrations of the German medical experiments on prisoners, but also in the imperialistic projects pursued by contemporary technological regimes:

We all know that mass feticide is taking place in our societies. We all should know the details of the eugenical experimentation which is taking place in all the leading universities of the Western world. After all, many of us are colleagues in those universities. We should be clear that the language used to justify such activities is the language of the human creating of quality of life, beyond the little perspectives of good and evil. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 296)

Contemporary movements to legalize and widely apply abortion represent one aspect of the contemporary "oblivion of eternity" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 297) in which conceptions of moral limit are perceived as obstacles to overcome in the drive to technological mastery. Nietzsche's Overman understands that notions of value are relative, and that in order to rule effectively in the moral darkness, one must be able to project the will to create over all things:

What gives meaning to the fact of historicism is that willed potentiality is higher than any actuality. Putting aside the petty perspectives of good and evil means that there is nothing belonging to all human beings which need limit the building of the future. Oblivion of eternity is here not a liberal-aesthetic stance, which still allows men to support regimes the principles of which came from those who had affirmed eternity; oblivion of eternity here realizes itself politically. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 297)

For Grant, Nietzsche's positive doctrine of justice is the animating force behind his eloquent justification of radical historicism. Nietzsche's thought is dangerous today precisely because it is so fundamental to human self-understanding in the technological civilization. Grant asserts that scholars must approach his thought with great caution because of the darkness that such analysis reveals: "one should not flirt with Nietzsche for the purposes of this or that area of science or scholarship, but teach him in the full recognition that his thought presages the conception of justice which more and more unveils itself in the technological West" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 297). The most important reason why students and professors should not flirt with Nietzschean concepts is because Nietzsche's lessons cannot be unlearned.

Heidegger's thought also plays a crucial role in Grant's understanding of technology. Contrary to philosophers such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, Grant's goal is to find a way to think and live a genuine Christianity that is capable of resisting the moral nihilism underlying the technological civilization. For Grant, it must be possible to live a Christian life "in a non-antiquarian way, which at the same time [does] not leave it a simple flatterer of the spirit of the decadent age" (Davis: 2002, 61). In attempting to comprehend Heidegger's rejection of Socrates and Christ, Grant asserts that Heidegger is

“the most profound thinker about modernity” (Davis: 2002, 62). In contrast to Grant’s call for a radical re-formulation of the relationship between Socratic rationalism and Christian revelation, “Heidegger has rejected the above account of the necessary rethinking” (Davis: 2002, 62). Furthermore,

[Heidegger] wishes a return which goes back behind Socrates and he makes plain that revelation, in the sense that Christianity means it, did not take place. Concerning Socrates, Heidegger is not entirely explicit, because he does not come to written terms with the relation between Plato and Socrates. Nevertheless, in his cautious and highly professorial way, he seems to be accepting the basic Nietzschean teaching about Socrates. This was that Socrates, in his terror before the abyss which underlies existence, imposed on thinking that rationalism which united reason and virtue and happiness. According to Heidegger it is from that Socratic rationalism that western technology came forth. Now in the full presence of the sway of technology, we must seek our origins in the Greek thought which came before that Socratic rationalism. Heidegger has also spoken too often and too contemptuously of ‘the moral God of Christianity’ for anyone to believe that he found in the Gospel the revelation of perfection. (Davis: 2002, 62).

This passage is significant because it explains Grant’s ambivalence toward Heidegger’s thought. For Grant, there is no question that Heidegger is the philosopher who has thought most penetratingly about modernity. He acknowledges that Heidegger’s rejection of Socrates and Christ is persuasive. On the other hand, he clearly does not want to surrender cherished philosophical or religious convictions in the face of Heidegger’s genius. Grant asserts that “[i]n the light of Heidegger’s genius, those of us who reject his rejections (if rejection is indeed possible within the masterly historicism) of both the Gospels and the Platonic dialogues, must be able to say what is inadequate in ‘To Be and Time’” (Davis: 2002, 62). He identifies the need for a response to

Heidegger's account of the role of Socratic rationalism and Christian theology in the subsequent rise of the technological civilization.

Grant's engagement with Heidegger's thought begins in the mid-1950s, with his essay "Acceptance and Rebellion."<sup>71</sup> In a footnote to a discussion of Sartre's existentialism, he evaluates Heidegger's description of the consequences of existentialism:

It might be maintained that Heidegger has described in greater detail than Sartre why man cannot transcend time and history and that therefore it would be better to choose him as the archetypal existentialist. I do not think so for two reasons. First, Sartre as a philosopher has been more unequivocal than Heidegger about the consequences of not being able to transcend historical existence. Indeed, Heidegger has expressly disassociated himself from Sartre at this point. Secondly, Sartre has given himself over to the consequences of his thought while Heidegger has played the German role of the academic pundit...[I]t has resulted in Sartre seeing the political consequences of existentialism in a way Heidegger does not. And it is just these political consequences of existentialism which take us to the heart of what it is to be an historical man. (Davis: 2002, 285)

In the academic year 1958-1959, Grant delivered a series of lectures at Dalhousie University, fragments of which are extant. One of the lectures is entitled "On Heidegger's Plato,"<sup>72</sup> in which he examines the basis of Heidegger's account of the origins of Western nihilism. Heidegger conceives of the history of Western metaphysics

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<sup>71</sup> George Grant, "Acceptance and Rebellion," in ed. Art Davis, *The Collected Works of George Grant, vol. II: 1951-1959* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002) 221-299. Although Grant did not publish this 1956-57 manuscript, it clearly contains several themes, such as a criticism of the historical spirit, that Grant develops more fully in later works. As Davis notes, although the work was never published, nor given a title by Grant, the manuscript nevertheless reveals a great deal about Grant's understanding of existentialism and the impact of historicism on Christianity. According to Davis, "[Grant] clearly intended it to be his first book" (Davis: 2002, 221).

<sup>72</sup> George Grant, "On Heidegger's Plato," Dalhousie University 1958-59, in ed. Art Davis, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. II: 1951-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 466-467. Davis' book also contains previously unpublished lecture material from the Dalhousie years on a variety of subjects. See pp. 443-517.

as the story of nihilistic metaphysics set in motion by the influence of Greek rationalism, and exacerbated by Christian theology. Grant is clearly attracted to the latter's account of Western metaphysical nihilism:

I have found in Martin Heidegger, the most famous of German existentialists—indeed the founder of existentialism as a philosophical movement—an interpretation of Greek philosophy which is very similar to some of the remarks I have been making this year. Not in his early works—but in his later works which are only now becoming available. (Davis: 2002, 466)

In another course at Dalhousie,<sup>73</sup> Grant dubs Heidegger “the profoundest of modern existentialists” (Davis: 2002, 492). He explains how Kantian philosophical idealism dissolves the older, Christian idealism. Kant was one of the first Western thinkers to think through the enormous consequences of the historicism that lies at the heart of modern idealism. According to Grant, modern idealism reverberates in Heidegger's existentialism: “Heidegger...may reject Cartesian rationalism, but the sheer fierceness of his idealism is inescapably there in what he says about the world-forming power of the Dasein. Existentialism is not a return to pre-Kantian thought” (Davis: 2002, 492-493).

In his 1970 Introduction to the Carleton Library edition of *Lament for a Nation*, Grant notes the truth of Heidegger's assertion that “technique is the metaphysic of the age” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 371). He discusses the inevitable disappearance of all heterogeneity and difference in the technological civilization, and the consequences of homogeneity for Canadian sovereignty. Canadians have gotten rich from the Vietnam War without having to face their own complicity in that great travesty. Thus, Canadians

must face the fact that they are high-ranking citizens of the technological civilization, a civilization that must periodically become involved in wars like Vietnam in order to insure its hegemony:

[W]e are not in that empire as are the exploited colonies of South America, but rather with the intimacy of a younger brother status. We have all the advantages of that empire, the wealth which pours in from all over the world, the technology which comes to us through the multi-national corporations. Yet, because we have formal political independence, we can keep out some of the dirty work necessary to that empire. We make money from Vietnam; but we do not have to send our sons there. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 371)

To the Quebec nationalists of the 1960s, who proposed to unite French language and distinctness with technological modernity, Grant suggests that uniformity is the only realistic possibility in the technological civilization. No true heterogeneity can be tolerated in an empire built on the idea of technological mastery. Those who attempt to unite heterogeneity and technological modernity do not understand the reality of the technological civilization. He underscores the point by asserting that, “[a]s Heidegger has said, technique is the metaphysic of the age” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 371).

The concept of technology as the “metaphysic of the age” is elaborated by Grant in an interview with Gad Horowitz published under the title “Technology and Man.”<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of the interview, Grant is asked to clarify the concept of “technological civilization.” He replies that the citizens of the technological civilization conceive of themselves as exercising limitless freedom to control the world of objects through

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<sup>73</sup> George Grant, “Kant’s Antinomy between the Self and World,” Dalhousie University, in ed. Art Davis, *Collected Works of George Grant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 490-499.

technological progress. The objectification that characterizes the technological civilization is more profound than mere instrumentalism. The technological civilization is “a whole way of looking at the world, the basic way Western men experience their own existence in the world” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 595). The technological civilization eludes classification because it forms the basic assumptions through which modern people understand reality. Thus, technology informs and determines all human action, even those actions which attempt to rebel against the homogenizing current of technological society:

We who have walked the streets of the great metropolis, and seen the giant wars of this century, and live in highly organized institutions which determine us more than we determine them, must feel the need not only to live but to know, to think our living—otherwise we are at the mercy of it. And it seems to me at the moment that we are at the mercy of the technological machine we have built, and every time anything difficult happens, we add to that machine...Now this predicament is too enormous in the history of the race to permit one to say: I’m against it, or I’m for it. The main thing, you know, in my life, is just to see what it is. Technology is the metaphysics of our age, you know, it is the way being appears to us, and certainly we’re rushing into the future with no categories by which we can judge it. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 596)

The task of thinking is complicated by the metaphysic of technology that informs the language of modern thought. He states that “[t]he only definition of thought in the modern world which seems to re-grasp thought properly is that in Heidegger’s *Was Heisst Denken*...He says there that thinking to the Greeks was: ‘to let it lie before you and let it take your heart’” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 624). In order to think clearly in the

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<sup>74</sup> Gad Horowitz, “Technology and Man: an Interview of George Grant by Gad Horowitz,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 4/3 (August 1969) 3-6, in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 595-602.

technological civilization, one must reach beyond productionist metaphysics, which oppose the willing subject from all other beings as objects.

According to Grant, thinking is akin to love. Love opens its bearer to an appreciation of a particular being, without willing to change the beloved being to fit the parameters of subjective desire. In the same way, Heidegger calls modern people to think clearly by letting given beings lie before us, without exerting a dominating will to control them: “[t]his is what Heidegger means by thinking without willing. The exact opposite of this is that calculation, so common in our age, in which we think about something only for the purpose of changing it” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 625). For Grant, Heidegger’s notion of allowing oneself to “take something to heart” is helpful in sidestepping the mode of thought characterized by the technological civilization. When one remains open to another being, one challenges the subject/object distinction at the heart of modern scientific epistemology. Grant suggests that Heidegger’s call to reconsider our relationship with beings is a way in which humanity can challenge the moral darkness of the technological civilization:

[T]he full scope of such thinking we will not know until we start to do it. In a period when the three great traditional ways to truth for Western man, science, philosophy, theology, have all become ambiguous for us for differing reasons, can anyone believe that the re-possession of thinking can be anything but uncertain and dark. One thing I am sure is that it will be a thinking that will engage the whole man. This is surely what Heidegger means by ‘taking to heart’; it will be a thinking that will overcome the subject-object distinction which has had its usefulness for Western man but has now become the plague of all our science and philosophy—that which above all else stands between us and thinking what anything is fitted for. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 625)

In Grant's view, Heidegger's attempt to regain the pre-Socratic Greek philosophical epistemology is a foundation from which one can begin to re-think the fundamental assumptions underlying Western scientific and philosophical thinking. Heidegger's account represents perhaps the only way that the citizens of the technological civilization can step back from the abyss of nihilism that lies at the heart of Western metaphysics. Grant asserts that, "[a]s I have said, not to know what anything is fitted for is nihilism. That nihilism is the chief mark of what is at the heart of the intellectual life of the Western world. The overcoming of that will be a long process dependent on many men. But that length is no reason to delay" (Davis & Roper: 2005, 625). Grant's response to Heidegger's message is ambiguous, in that while the latter is the most articulate and profound thinker of the modern world, Grant nevertheless refuses what he considers to be the most basic assertion of Heidegger's message, which interprets Plato and Christ as culprits in the rise of the metaphysical thinking that characterizes Western thinking.

In his graduate lecture notes from McMaster in 1970,<sup>75</sup> Grant suggests that Nietzsche and Heidegger both fall prey to the tendency to elevate ideology in the place of religion. He explains that ideology is one of the cornerstones of the modern era, and one of the motivating forces underlying the drive to technological mastery. The secularization of Christianity, and the attempt by philosophers to create political or

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<sup>75</sup> George Grant, "Modern Technology and Religion," McMaster University (1970), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 676-682. Selections from Grant's McMaster University graduate lectures can be found in this volume, pp. 668-762.

historical systems based on secularized Christian morality, lies at the root of technological modernity. Technology is not “something external to us” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 679). Grant perceives religious values at the heart of modern technological progress. Technology is not just the creation of machines which humanity, in its freedom, chooses to use for good or evil purposes. Rather, technique has become a religion in that it is elevated to sacred status in the popular mind as the new vehicle to access human excellence. Technology is more profound than the organizational matrix of machines and administration that pervades the modern world. It has come to be interpreted as that for which humanity is fitted. But according to Grant, human action and human creation that occurs outside of any context of limit cannot be anything other than the shallow praise of power.

From the human standpoint, technology is carried on in the context of real aspirations (such as the elimination of cancer, or the facilitation of communication), but technological progress itself proceeds independently of these goals. Thus, Grant thinks modern technological striving is the clearest manifestation of the “will to will” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 679), carried on external to any tradition of meaning that attempts to place limits on human desire. The will to will, or the technological drive to mastery, remains ideologically-motivated because it is the result of intellectual systems created by philosophers who were attempting to free humanity from the constraints of the old morality while simultaneously secularizing ancient religious forms in order to promote and legitimize human freedom. According to Grant, Nietzsche and Heidegger

themselves fall into this ideological trap, even though they are both more consistent than most in their efforts to overthrow the rational, moral foundations of Platonism and Christianity. The powerful ideologies of the twentieth century--English-speaking liberalism, Marxism, National Socialism--are the offspring of the will to will:

Modernity came to believe two propositions: (a) philosophy could not only do its traditional job, but also what religion did; (b) philosophy and science [are] open to all men. Put these together and you get that modern phenomena--ideology. They are related to great philosophies...but in their popular forms. Communism and liberalism [are] very much secular Christianity as ideologies. And even in a more indirect way certain sides of national socialism. And in the core of these ideologies you see technique and reliance on technique as at the centre--the will to will. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 679)

According to Grant, when translated into a quasi-religious ideology, Heidegger's existentialism remains a secularization of Christian morality.

Another problem Grant perceives is Heidegger's refusal to clarify the relation between practical ethics and philosophy. Although he thinks that Heidegger's writings contain a penetrating analysis of the modern situation, he nevertheless perceives gaps in Heidegger's account of the relation between morality and reason:

[L]et me say that Heidegger's writing is not satisfactory to *me* for one clear reason. He has not written, except in speeches which he now repudiates by not including them in the official list of his writing, about the relation of thought to politics...I use the word 'politics' not here in the Greek sense but as a synonym for morals. That is, [Heidegger] has not thought in my language the relation of thought to practical reason. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 680)

For Grant, Heidegger's lack of discussion about the relation of thought to morality curtails his ability to fully describe the essence of technology. Technology is intimately

linked to morality as well as to thought, and Heidegger's refusal to discuss freedom in relation to practical reason overlooks an important aspect of the technological question.

The question about the role of morality and its relationship to instrumental reason has become the central question of the age. For Grant, the most significant issue in the rise of the technological civilization is the relation of the spirit of technological mastery to the dissolution of old conceptions of moral limit imposed by Plato and the Gospels. The technological civilization founders in moral darkness because of its propensity to perceive the cosmos as morally neutral:

[f]irst in the obvious sense that when the deepest thinkers of an epoch claim to be beyond good and evil, the epoch is in darkness. Also, those of us who assert the language of good and evil can only assert it in a very formal sense, and cannot think its content sufficiently specifiable in any way. The identification of the good with the ancestral or the past is impossible: the identification of the good with the future or the new or the potential is impossible. To live beyond good and evil in total darkness is madness (in the sense that madness and not ignorance is for Plato the opposite of wisdom). It is still darkness when one denies the denial of good and evil, and yet cannot even begin to think them, let alone give specification of them in the world. (Rubinoff: 1971, 87)

The moral darkness is not simply rooted in the perceived lack of moral limit, but also in the inarticulacy of thought beyond the paradigm of ethical neutrality. Although many modern people lament the dissolution of traditional barriers provided by religious and philosophical morality, Grant is clear that a significant aspect of the darkness of the technological civilization is the inability of those who oppose this process to clearly articulate the content they seek to recover. In the technological civilization, where the dominant impetus to action is the drive to technical mastery, modern humanity has lost the vocabulary required to communicate the reasons for dissatisfaction. The inability to

articulate the language of human excellence in the technological civilization is discussed in “A Platitude”<sup>76</sup> at the conclusion of *Technology and Empire*. The morality of the Judeo-Christian myth has been replaced by a valuation which interprets human action through the twin lenses of freedom and equality as expressed in the language of liberalism. Grant notes that as the nihilism that underlies the technological civilization manifests itself in the will to will, the language of modern liberal ideology itself becomes overshadowed in the drive to technological mastery.

In “A Platitude,” he asserts that the moral darkness of the technological civilization has engulfed all horizons and left modern humanity without a moral compass.

This is the root of modern nihilism:

It is difficult to think whether we are deprived of anything essential to our happiness, just because the coming to be of the technological society has stripped us above all of the very systems of meaning which disclosed the highest purposes of man, in terms of which, therefore, we could judge whether an absence of something was in fact a deprivation. Our vision of ourselves as freedom in an indifferent world could only have arisen insofar as we had analysed to disintegration those systems of meaning, given in myth, philosophy, and revelation, which had held sway over our progenitors. For those systems of meaning all mitigated both our freedom and the indifference of the world, and in so doing put limits of one kind or another on our interference with chance and the possibilities of its conquest. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 448)

Grant connects the darkness and its consequences with Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Although he is not always clear about the precise relation between the thought of

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<sup>76</sup> George Grant, “A Platitude,” in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1969), in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 576-581.

Nietzsche and Heidegger, nevertheless he often likens Heidegger to Nietzsche because both thinkers clearly articulate the essence of modernity.

One of the ways in which Heidegger clarifies the essence of modernity for Grant is through his analysis of the interpenetration of knowing and making that typifies modern technology. In Grant's 1974 address to the Royal Society of Canada, he asserts that the interpenetration of the arts and sciences is one of the most telling symptoms of the radically new epistemology that characterizes the technological civilization. According to Heidegger, the new epistemology typified by the interpenetration of knowing and making (sciences and arts) is radically different from earlier accounts of human knowledge. For the Greeks, science as knowledge or *logos* was separate from art as *techne*.

The operative methodology of the modern epistemology is an objective rationality that challenges objects to divulge their reasons for existing. Objects are radically separate from the subject who commands the objects and draws their power from them. In the new interpenetration of art and science, Heidegger perceives the culmination of over twenty-five hundred years of productionist metaphysics, which result in the moral darkness that characterizes the technological civilization. Grant agrees with Heidegger, insofar as Heidegger's analysis of knowing and making elucidates the radical distinction between modern technology (the result of the interpenetration of knowing and making) and the Greek separation of science and art. According to Grant, the modern era is the epoch in which "a particular destiny of knowing and making moves to its climax. Our

paradigm of knowledge is the very heart of this civilization's destiny, and such destinies have a way of working themselves out—that is, in bringing forth from their principle everything which is implied in that principle" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 417). The modern interpenetration of knowing and making is difficult to challenge because of the moral darkness underlying human action in the technological civilization. Without a substantive moral framework in which to judge the ability to make and unmake things, modern humanity is left without any moral anchor which can halt or even hinder the technological drive. In fact, "[t]he new technologies are taking us into realms of making which occur as it were necessarily, that is, almost outside consideration of human good. The thrust of these arts is now turned to the making of our own species" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 415).

Grant repeatedly refers to two of Heidegger's writings as essential to understanding him. According to Grant,<sup>77</sup> the two works which seem to most clearly outline the relevant aspects of Heidegger's thinking are *The Principle of Reason*<sup>78</sup> and "The Question Concerning Technology."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Although Grant was broadly influenced by several of Heidegger's writings, he provides some indications as to which of Heidegger's writings he thought were particularly important. In a 1987 letter to Peter Self, Grant writes: "I spend a great deal of life reading Heidegger. He is certainly the greatest philosopher of the modern era...He is, of course, an ultimately modern philosopher & if I can summon the courage I would like to write an account of why his criticism of Plato is not true...If you ever feel any desire to read him, I think the best way is through his book on Leibniz *The Principle of Reason* or through 'The Question concerning Technique.' I don't think *Sein und Zeit* is the best because that is the classic account of existentialism & he spent the rest of his life writing where he thought that inadequate." (Christian: 1996, 365-66)

<sup>78</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Verlag Gunther Neske, 1957), tr. Reginald Lilly as *The Principle of Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977).

Heidegger's *The Principle of Reason* is an analysis of the impact of the fusion of reason and existence in western intellectual history. According to Heidegger, the "principle of reason," brought into prominence by Leibnitz' assertion *nihil est sine ratione*, (nothing is without a reason), reveals several important aspects of modern epistemology. The principle of reason can be understood in two different *tonalities*. On the one hand, the negative understanding of the principle of reason suggests that nothing can exist without a cause. On the other, there is a positive possibility contained in the principle: everything that has being has reason. Being and reason have become fused as the foundation of modern perceptions of reality. For Heidegger, the two tonalities contained in the principle of reason lay at the heart of the scientific and philosophical paradigms that structure modernity. Modernity can only be understood when one realizes that the principle of reason is premised on radical subjectivism, which comprehends reality in terms of a world of objects opposed to the willing subject. The world of objects has reality only in relation to the subject. Knowledge is nothing but the ability of the willing subject to demand sufficient reasons from a given object. Heidegger laments this development, insofar as the adoption of the principle of reason has obscured the essence of beings from humanity. As rationalism takes hold in philosophy and in the sciences, the modern world loses the ability to see things as they truly are. Heidegger writes: "[s]ubjectivity does not mean a subjectivism, rather it refers to that lodging of the claim of the principle of reason which today has as its consequence the atomic age in which the particularity, separation, and validity of the individual disappears at breakneck speed in

favor of total uniformity” (Heidegger: 1996, 80). The ascendancy of the principle of reason is the product of the history or destiny of being, which began its course with the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, Anaximander and Heraclitus, and culminates in modern subjectivity.

In order to perceive this development clearly, one must study the history of philosophy, and in doing so study the history of metaphysical ontology. While the modern world increasingly turns away from philosophical contemplation in favour of technological progress, Heidegger claims that the study of history, especially the history of ideas, remains essential for understanding modernity:

The increasing flight from the historical tradition is for its part a sign of the claim under which the era stands. In the meantime it even seems as though this flight from history is removing the last bounds that at every turn still stand opposed to an unrestrained, complete technicizing of the world and of humans. The dwindling capacity for historical discernment coincides with this flight from history...We have already frequently mentioned that the era called ‘modernity’ receives the basic trait of its history from that *Geschick* of being wherein being proffers itself as objectness and thus furnishes beings as objects. (Heidegger: 1996, 81)

Grant was fascinated by Heidegger’s idea that technology is the metaphysics of the age. The idea is elaborated in Heidegger’s essay, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977). Heidegger begins with the goal of questioning technology in order to reveal its essence. What is technology? If one is to discover what the essence of technology is, one must observe that the essence of technology is not fully explained by its modern definitions. Although it is true that technology is both a means and a human activity, he suggests that both the “instrumental and anthropological definition”

(Heidegger: 1977, 5) only deal with obvious, surface truths about the essence of technology. What is instrumentality, and what is its relation to causality? Heidegger comes to the conclusion that the play of causality occasions a bringing-forth, and “[b]ringing forth brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment. Bringing-forth comes to pass only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing” (Heidegger: 1977, 11). The revealing bringing-forth into unconcealment corresponds with the Greek conception of truth as that which is revealed (*aletheia*). Therefore, technology can never be only a means to an end. The essence of technology must in some way be connected with truth as revealing. Historically, revealing was connected with creation, or *poiesis*, in that the creativity and skill of the craftsman or artist was what occasioned revealing. But there is a difference between the older type of revealing and modern technology. Modern technology, based as it is upon mathematical, materialist physics, is essentially a “challenging” that demands results from an object: “[t]he revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poiesis*. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger: 1977, 14). Modern technology demands that any given object yield its power to the subject. All of nature has become one vast storehouse, or standing-reserve, for potential use. This leads to the vision of nature as a series of objects for potential use, thrown over opposite the thinking subject. However, the deeper tragedy of the modern

technological paradigm is that humanity itself is ensnared in the concept of “standing-reserve.” Humanity becomes an object which is challenged. Therefore,

Modern technology as an ordering revealing is, then, no merely human doing. Therefore we must take that challenging that sets upon man to order the real as standing-reserve in accordance with the way in which it shows itself. That challenging gathers man into ordering. This gathering concentrates man upon ordering the real as standing-reserve. (Heidegger: 1977, 19)

Man is challenged-forth to challenge human and non-human nature to disclose itself to him. This challenging-forth Heidegger calls *Enframing*, the “essence of modern technology” (Heidegger: 1977, 23). Enframing is a directionality within Being itself, in the sense that Enframing creates a destiny for humanity. Enframing is the way in which humans stand toward unconcealment, and therefore Enframing dictates how what is brought into unconcealment will be interpreted, or misinterpreted.

For Heidegger, Enframing is morally ambiguous because it contains the simultaneous possibility of destruction and salvation. The extreme danger of destining in Enframing is that humanity will lose sight of its own essence, and will become nothing more than “the orderer of the standing-reserve” (Heidegger: 1977, 27). On the other hand, taking his cue from the poet Holderlin, Heidegger suggests that within the danger of the destining of Enframing, there also arises a soteriological possibility for humanity to witness its true essence. He writes: “the saving power lets man see and enter into the highest dignity of his essence. This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment—and with it, from the first, the concealment—of all coming to presence on this earth” (Heidegger: 1977, 32). Heidegger calls for humanity to live poetically,

because poetry is the realm in which the beautiful comes into creation; poetry provides the forum in which one becomes open to the Being of beings. If one is to understand the essence of technology, and therefore the right relationship humanity should have to technology, one must live poetically:

Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are *questioning*. (Heidegger: 1977, 35)

Thus, for Heidegger technology is ambiguous because, while it constrains humanity in a shallow and destructive subjectivism, technology nevertheless contains the possibility of accessing the saving power that permeates artistic sensibility. In Schmidt's book, Grant clarifies why Heidegger is "an illuminator of what modernity is" (Schmidt: 1978, 142). Grant explains why he has moved from the "continental European use of the word 'technique'" to the word "technology" as shorthand for the decisive aspect of modernity (Schmidt: 1977, 141). He asserts that the word "technology" is more apt, because it illuminates the interrelation between the concepts of making and knowing that characterizes modernity:

I changed my mind for the following reason. Technology puts together what the Greeks could not possibly have put together, making and knowing. It expresses a new union between the arts and sciences—a union of the greatest complexity. It seems to me that modernity comes forth, above all, from this new union of the arts and sciences, and what it portends for us. (Schmidt: 1977, 141)

Heidegger, with his uncanny ability to describe the inner workings of modern thinking, has clarified the modern link between making and knowing for Grant. This represents an important facet of Grant's understanding of technology.

Heidegger illuminates the tension between historicism and the traditional account of justice outlined in Platonism and Christianity. Grant parts ways with Heidegger on this issue. He admits that there is considerable scholarly debate about whether or not Heidegger can correctly be classified as a historicist. Grant asserts that “[i]t seems to me that Heidegger is the most perfectly thought historicist that I have ever read. There is some debate about that—whether he is or not—but I am sure that he is” (Schmidt: 1978, 142). He argues that Heidegger's historicism is, “above anything else, responsible for the undermining of the older tradition of justice” (Schmidt: 1978, 142). If Grant is correct in asserting Heidegger's historicism, in what sense do Heidegger's historicist assumptions undermine ancient conceptions of justice found in Plato and the Gospels?

Grant's *Time As History* is written as a response to his fear that Nietzschean historicism underlies the moral darkness of the technological civilization. The prevalence of the language of valuation is an indication of the extent to which Nietzsche's ideas have saturated the modern interpretation of reality. For Nietzsche, the concept of being is outdated, and is to be rejected in favour of the concept of becoming. This suggests that there is no absolute moral code, just as there is no God. Humans must transcend the old, limiting ethical frameworks and assert their radical freedom. Nietzsche thinks that

humanity can only find meaning through willful creativity. This is the grim reality that underlies the death of God.

In light of Nietzsche's philosophy, Grant's assertion that Heidegger's historicism is integral in "undermining...the older tradition of justice" (Schmidt: 1978, 142) is coherent. For Grant, Heidegger's work presupposes an emphasis on the human will, which flies in the face of Platonic and Christian conceptions of justice. He admits that both Nietzsche and Heidegger assert the importance of a positive conception of justice for healthy human life. Grant rejects the Nietzschean-Heideggerian concept of justice because it is so radically opposed to the moral foundations of the Platonic-Christian account. Thus, the modern concept of justice espoused by Nietzsche and Heidegger is intimately connected with the assumptions underlying the technological civilization:

I think this is both the greatness and the terror of Nietzsche and Heidegger; they recognize that the new affirmation of reality in technology brings a new account of justice. I think the English-speaking world is only beginning to see this; namely, that the new affirmation of reality in technology means a new conception of justice. This will be a terrible realization for the English-speaking world. It is to this new account of justice as a human creation that I fundamentally say no. And it is because this new account of justice goes with the technological society that that society is terrifying for Christians. (Schmidt: 1978, 145)

Grant views technology as the dominant force in modernity. Technology is both a new understanding of knowing and making, and a new conception of justice. For Grant, both of these aspects of technology create problems for any attempt to understand reality from within the Christian theistic framework. Although the various aspects of technology might seem to be unrelated, he asserts that the new interrelation of knowing

and making and the new conception of justice ultimately point toward the same ultimate goal:

[B]oth these propositions are saying the same thing. Isn't the question to understand exactly how the affirmation that man's essence is his freedom lies at the heart of technology, and how technology as something new leads human beings to define their essence as freedom? What has to be understood is that primal apprehension of being, out of which both liberalism and technology come. (Schmidt: 1978, 144)

While he admires Heidegger and Nietzsche as the great prophets of technological modernity, Grant nevertheless rejects them as the philosophical advocates of technological mastery and radical human freedom. Chapter Four will discuss the tension between the Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts that form the basis of Grant's understanding of technology. The tension between these accounts leads Grant to a philosophical impasse in which substantive concepts of human excellence external to the assumptions of the technological civilization remain inaccessible. Grant's impasse forces him to seek a radical solution to the lockstep of technological necessity and modern accounts of radical freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SIMONE WEIL FOR GRANT'S UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY

The chapter will examine the impasse that occurs as the result of Grant's dissatisfaction with the Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts of technology. Furthermore, the chapter will clarify how Grant appropriates dualistic and esoteric elements from Weil's theology in order to regain moral articulacy in the technological civilization. Although it is true that Grant later repudiates certain aspects of Ellul's Reformed theology, at no point does Grant deny the profundity of Ellul's analysis of technology. Ellul's account of technology remains an important aspect of Grant's thought well after he perceives the importance of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In his 1970 "Modern Technology and Religion" lectures, he notes that Ellul has unflinchingly addressed the question of practical ethics in the technological civilization:

Now this is where I think Ellul comes in. I do not think Ellul has thought certain things as deeply as Heidegger, but I think he has thought politics much more deeply—what is the nature of practical life? And I do not mean by this that he can think [about the how we should live within modern technique] better than Heidegger—though that is so—but rather that he can think what is technique in certain ways more deeply than Heidegger. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 680)

According to Grant, there are ways in which Ellul's account of politics in the technological civilization is to be preferred to Heidegger's account. His "turn" from Ellul to Heidegger, while real in some senses, is neither complete nor unambiguous.

As late as 1978, Grant remains clear about why Ellul's account of technology is so important. Ellul's account remains significant because it goes beyond most contemporary analyses of technological modernity, which posit various forms of political

or economic substructures at the root of the technological phenomenon. Ellul recognizes that technology itself is the root cause of modernity. Furthermore, his analysis identifies the consequences of the modern worship of technology. Ellul is no pessimist, but his analysis of the technological civilization reveals that humanity has lost the ability to resist the technological impetus behind Western civilization. Ellul's ability to clearly state the way things are, combined with his account of technological necessity, permit Grant to assert that "[Ellul] just seemed to state the score" (Schmidt: 1978, 146).

Nevertheless, as far back as the 1950's, Grant is fascinated by the profound truths revealed in Heidegger's thought. He is drawn by Heidegger's existentialism, in which Grant finds "an interpretation of Greek philosophy which is very similar to some of the remarks I have been making" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 298). As early as 1958, Grant suggests that Heidegger's thought has clarified his own understanding of the Greeks:

What [Heidegger] says at great length and great subtlety is that Western thought has floated out upon a great tide of nihilism, and the origin of that nihilism is what happened to philosophy somewhere between the time of Parmenides and Plato...What [Heidegger] is saying is that all our traditional separations like subject/object, substance/accident...are so many veils over Being, so many chasms between ourselves and Being. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 298)

For Grant, Heidegger is the great expositor of Nietzsche's ideas. Thus, Heidegger understands technology, and the causes of modernity, in a way that is unparalleled. In a 1988 letter to John Siebert,<sup>80</sup> Grant writes:

[F]or myself it is only in the last two decades that I have been ready to bring Heidegger into my writings. He is, after all, a very consummate thinker and also

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<sup>80</sup> George Grant, letter to John Siebert (June 29, 1988), in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 386-87. Italics in original.

a *very* prolific writer. It took me years to find the time to read [Heidegger] comprehensively...Let me say clearly that [Heidegger] must be for me a writer who ridicules Christianity & therefore, to write about him is to say a great 'NO.' His criticism of Plato is related to his ridicule of Christianity, but that is not of the same centrality for me. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 299)

It is clear from Grant's writings that Heidegger's critique of technological mastery operates "within the basic assumptions of...modernity" (Schmidt: 1978, 67).

Thus, Grant admires the thought of Ellul and Heidegger, but neither account of technology is accepted without reservation. For Ellul, the modern world can be understood only in terms of its reliance on technology. Technology is not only something that humans *do*, it is an overarching paradigm that dictates how humanity views the world. Modern humanity is caught in the web of technological determinism; it is impossible to free ourselves from technological necessity. With several qualifications,<sup>81</sup> Ellul presents the reader with a situation that is beyond the individual's power to alter. In Grant's view, the most important aspect of Ellul's understanding of modern technology is his clarification of the autonomy of modern technology. Grant notes that "[w]hat [Ellul] means by autonomous is that technique is not limited by anything external to itself. It is not limited by any goals beyond itself. It is autonomous

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<sup>81</sup> Ellul refuses to think of his account of technology as "pessimistic." While Ellul does not think that humanity has the power to release itself from the grip of technological necessity, Ellul points to possibilities that might change the sway that technology has over humanity. For example, Ellul points to the Christian hope which looks forward to an apocalyptic or soteriological messianic event in which Christ will return and re-fashion the political and social realities by which humanity lives. Also, Ellul suggests that a general war (in all probability nuclear) could potentially throw human civilization into such disarray that the grip of technological necessity might be broken. For Ellul's discussion of pessimism and its alternatives, see the Introduction to *The Technological Society*.

with respect to the areas of economics and politics—indeed throughout society as a whole. It is the creator of its own morality” (Davis & Roper: 2005, 414).

In Grant’s view, Ellul’s Reformed Protestantism leads him to overlook important realities of the technological civilization. His distrust of philosophical rationality allows Ellul to overlook the complicity of Western, triumphalist Christianity in forming the technological civilization. Western Christianity, in Grant’s view, places far too much emphasis on the importance of the human will in achieving salvation. The tradition can be traced back to the Augustinian understanding of the will as morally responsible, yet determined according to God’s teleological plan for creation. Harris Athanasiadis has written:

Where Grant finds Ellul wanting is in his failure to take philosophical thought seriously and, as a result, his inability to perceive the inherent connection between biblical, Calvinist Christianity and the progress of scientific, technological expansion. This is because Ellul is himself a Calvinist Christian who ‘scorns’ serious thought and holds an instrumental view of reason. Grant had already written about the connection between modern technological society and biblical, Calvinist Christianity in the 1950s. What is new in the 1960s is how he connects the emphasis on freedom and will (theology of glory) in biblical, Calvinist Christianity with Western Christianity as a whole, and through Western Christianity, all of Western civilization. This accounts for its dynamic, activist, mastering, conquering mentality and its emphasis on the shaping of history in a way that makes it unique among civilizations. (Athanasiadis: 2001, 126)

While Ellul overlooks the complicity of the Western Christian doctrine of the will in the rise of the technological civilization, Heidegger’s analysis of technology is carried out in the paradigm of Nietzschean historicism and moral relativism. Furthermore, while both Ellul and Heidegger influence Grant’s understanding of technology, their accounts are incommensurable with one another. Ellul and Heidegger carry out their analyses of

the technological civilization from a critical perspective, but Ellul's standpoint is Calvinist, will-centred, and essentially deterministic, while Heidegger's analysis posits radical moral freedom as the catalyst for the gradual "remembering" of Being. The tension between Ellulian determinism and Heidegger's account of radical moral freedom constitutes a tension at the very heart of Grant's account of technology.

Dennis Lee's discussion of Grant's thought in *By Loving Our Own* (Emberley: 1990: 11-39) is instructive in this context. Grant's thought is distinguished by his recognition of the phenomenon Lee names "Grant's Impasse." According to Lee, Grant was the first thinker to articulate the "problematic" nature of "the set of mind-jamming contradictions which emerge when we try to think critically about technological civilization now" (Emberley: 1990, 24). Grant's Impasse has two separate aspects, each of which becomes exposed when the modern mind is faced with trying to understand the technological civilization. The first aspect of the Impasse is located in attempts to think outside of the technological paradigm. Attempts to do so are invariably unsuccessful because all the ideas and rational tools available to modern humanity come to us within the technological paradigm:

We want to analyze critically, or judge morally, some technique, or else some problem created by technology...To achieve this critique, we turn to one of the ideas or standards that form part of the inherited repertoire for critical thought or moral judgment. But we then discover, on looking closer, that this outside arbiter or higher principle is no longer any such thing. In the course of the modern period, it has been transformed out of all recognition; it has become seamless with the technique we're trying to think about, in that both now arise from a common origin—broadly speaking, 'technology'—and dissolve back into it. So it gives us no purchase whatsoever for critical thought. And when this happens enough

times, the whole project of ‘thinking critically’ or ‘judging morally’ starts to founder. This is the first tightening of the impasse. (Emberley: 1990, 26)

According to Lee, Grant perceives that attempts to draw moral judgments on particular techniques, or on technological thinking as a whole, are problematic. Moral judgment and rationality have been assimilated into the technological paradigm, thus rendering their judgments on that paradigm inherently problematic. In other words, Grant recognizes that modern humanity cannot think critically about the technological paradigm that controls their lives.

The second aspect of Grant’s Impasse is the realization that the language of meaning has been assimilated by the technological civilization. Resistance is rendered silent by the fact that any attempt to think outside of the technological paradigm leads nowhere. Lee writes:

In this second tightening...the mind is not trying to analyze or judge a ‘particular technique.’ Instead, it forages for categories simply to *name* the unconditionally claiming realities which modern thought has ruled inadmissible, and to which we have consequently lost rational access. And this engenders an all-but-withering despair, for we cannot find any such categories unchanged by modernity. We are necessarily mute as rational beings, even in the privacy of our best intuitions. (Emberley: 1990, 29)

According to Lee, the Impasse has called into question our status as rational beings imbued with purpose and meaning. Lee’s articulation of the Impasse is significant because it provides a paradigm in which to clarify the tension between Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts of technology in Grant’s thought. Each aspect of the Impasse represents the claim of Ellul or Heidegger on Grant’s understanding of technology. The first aspect runs parallel to Ellul’s deterministic understanding of the technological

phenomenon. As we have seen, this remains consonant with Grant's realization that all things, even criticism of the technological civilization, operate according to the dictates of technological necessity. All modern attempts to criticize the technological civilization are fruitless because the technological civilization has assimilated all critical moral frameworks. Likewise, all attempts at resisting the technological imperative are already caught in the web of technology; attempts at free thought are determined by technological necessity.

This aspect of Grant's Impasse is consistent with the influence of Ellul's account of technological necessity on Grant. Grant is drawn to the sociological validity of Ellul's analysis of the technological civilization. The key characteristic of Ellul's analysis is the web of determinism that underlies technological necessity, manifested in the autonomous and universalizing nature of technology. As we have seen, Ellul's account remains untenable for Grant because of his emphasis on the primacy of faith over philosophical rationality, but the deterministic aspects of his characterization of technology remain an integral part of Grant's account of the technological civilization.

The second aspect of Grant's Impasse parallels Heidegger's influence on Grant. For Heidegger, technology is the result of over twenty-five hundred years of metaphysical tradition in Western philosophy. The metaphysical tradition has been the basis of the subject-object distinction and the obscuring of Being. Heidegger thinks human willing is powerless to control the degree of openness of Being. However, if humanity could somehow avoid the objectifying, controlling, demanding rationality of

technological thinking and embrace an openness to Being, a consequence might be important changes in the relation of Being to human Dasein. Grant admired Heidegger's analysis of technology because of its depth and its honesty. Nevertheless, Grant understood Heidegger to be articulating these truths from within the foundational assumption of modernity, namely the renunciation of traditional moral paradigms. According to Grant, Heidegger leaves no room in his philosophy for the truths of Platonism or Christianity. The second aspect of Impasse is indicative of Heidegger's problem because it clarifies Grant's insight that the technological civilization permits no articulation of meaning beyond its purview; it has no place for the claims of heterogeneous accounts of meaning. Heidegger's emphasis on human creativity is a manifestation of the radical subjectivity that is the hallmark of the modern view. Modern humanity creates its own moral reality, and the saving power lies only in the openness of the artistic, poetic stance to Being in beings.

Lee discusses Grant's Impasse as an attempt to illustrate Grant's philosophical rigor, but the Impasse is significant for my argument because it reveals two different (and often conflicting) strands in Grant's thinking. Lee's articulation of Grant's Impasse is a useful hermeneutical tool that can clarify the tension between the Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts that lay at the heart of Grant's understanding of technology. Grant is forced to seek elsewhere for an adequate and sustaining account of technology beyond Ellulian determinism or Heideggerian moral autonomy. Lee points to Grant's concept of "intimations of deprivation" as his response to the problems inherent in the

Impasse. One can fall silent and acquiesce in the face of the technological civilization, or one can use the silence of inarticulacy to attempt to think outside of the modern paradigm. Lee quotes Grant's *Technology and Empire*:

We are back where we began: all languages of good except the language of the drive to freedom have disintegrated, so it is just to pass some antique wind to speak of goods that belong to man as man. Yet the answer is also the same: if we cannot so speak, then we can either only celebrate [the technological imperative] or stand in silence before that drive. Only in listening for the intimations of deprivation can we live critically in the dynamo. (Emberley: 1990, 29)

According to Lee, Grant's concept of "intimations of deprivation" can be understood as an attempt to think beyond the Impasse, but it is unclear whether he succeeds in this attempt. Grant's inability to articulate specific deprivations is the result of the paucity of meaningful language for describing the technological civilization and its effects.

In a more recent essay entitled "Grant's Impasse: Beholdenness and the Silence of Reason," Lee elaborates the concept of Grant's Impasse.<sup>82</sup> He discusses the significance, for him, of the concept of "beholdenness" in Grant's thought. Whereas Grant uses "the language of classical philosophy: to resort to words like justice, the good, the eternal," Lee says that "[t]hey are not words I'm at home with, at least not on this grand a scale. (When I speak of being 'beholden,' I'm using a word I feel more comfortable with)" (Lee: 1998, 131). According to Lee, Grant's sense of beholdenness can be traced back to his conversion experience of 1943, which Grant described as follows:

I just remember going off to work one morning and I remember walking through a gate; I got off my bicycle and walked through a gate, and I believed in God. I

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<sup>82</sup> Dennis Lee, "Grant's Impasse: Beholdenness and the Silence of Reason," in Dennis Lee, *Body Music: Essays* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998) 129-159.

can't tell you more...I think it was a kind of affirmation that beyond time and space there is order...for me it was an affirmation about what is, an affirmation that ultimately there is order. And that is what one means by God, isn't it? That ultimately the world is not a maniacal chaos—I think that's what the affirmation was. (Lee: 1998, 132)<sup>83</sup>

According to Lee, the experience formed the basis of Grant's life work: an attempt to reconcile ancient and modern accounts of reality: "[t]his set the theoretical goal for philosophy. We cannot deny the efficacy of modern thought; we cannot surrender the truth of ancient thought" (Lee: 1998, 134). However, in his attempt to discover a bridge between ancient and modern conceptions of truth, Grant is attempting the impossible. The cornerstone of modern thought is the understanding of the essence of humanity as radical freedom. The assumptions underlying the technological civilization have become so ingrained in the modern worldview that it has become virtually impossible to think outside them. The assumptions of modernity have resulted in the sharp distinction between reason/objectivity and values/subjectivity. According to Lee, the modern scientific paradigm is permeated by the distinction. The objects that reason controls are void of intrinsic value, and therefore the underlying truth of objects can be accessed by the correct application of reason and will. On the other hand, values exist in the realm of subjectivity and personal choice. Subjectivity does not contain in itself the precision and focused will required to wrest the truth from objects. Lee notes that, "[i]n broad terms, Grant was addressing the problem of modern nihilism. As we've seen, this derived from

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<sup>83</sup> Lee takes this description from David Cayley's interview of Grant in 1985. See David Cayley, *George Grant in Conversation* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1995). The quote Lee uses comes from pages 48-49.

the fact that our version of reason has nothing to orient itself by except its own dynamic. It has posited that the external world is value-free; this leads to the conclusion that traditional ‘values’ are relative, arbitrary, in fact value-free themselves” (Lee: 1998, 139). Thus, neither reason nor values can provide the means to escape the moral darkness of the technological civilization:

Grant’s answer was this. Any critical thought about technology is bound to reproduce that technology—right in the assumptions and methods of the thinking itself. The attempt will reenact the condition it is trying to judge. We may long to escape the nihilism we’re enmeshed in. But we cannot think our way out of it, because we can’t stop recreating it in the very texture of our thinking. (Lee: 1998, 140)

Humanity no longer has access to absolute or divine moral guidelines according to which a standard for moral action can be set. Furthermore, when one attempts to express a sense of alienation in this situation, one approaches the much more ominous realization that humanity no longer possesses a language capable of expressing substantive dissatisfaction with the technological civilization. Lee quotes Grant’s *Technology and Empire*:

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. We have been left with no words which cleave together and summon out of uncertainty the good of which we may sense the dispossession. (Lee: 1998, 144)<sup>84</sup>

Lee thinks that Grant is also a prisoner of the Impasse. Being able to describe the Impasse does not provide Grant with a special immunity from its dangers. Nevertheless,

Lee thinks that Grant is successful in pointing to something beyond the moral darkness of the technological civilization. Grant urges his readers to cherish glimpses of human excellence which are beholden to the reality external to the technological civilization. He points toward what Lee calls “these bittersweet intimations of good,” (Lee: 1998, 149), which can no longer be articulated, but which promise the possibility of accessing a discernible and all-embracing moral order to which all are beholden. In his efforts to overcome the moral darkness that characterizes the technological civilization, Grant points to elements of traditional religion and philosophical contemplation that have their origins before the onset of the age of progress. These elements, which Lee calls “ancestral memory, enshrined in tradition” (Lee: 1998, 150), are signs that might also allow modern humanity to access a moral order with absolute claims.

Although Lee commends Grant’s work, particularly his ability to describe the Impasse, Lee thinks Grant’s view of human potential is limited. In the 1970s and 1980s, Grant stubbornly continues to attempt to “think classical truth and modern science in unity” (Lee: 1998, 152). Lee suggests that Grant is unaware of the full significance of the Impasse he has unearthed in *Technology and Empire*. Lee writes: “[g]iven that demonstration, I have difficulty understanding why Grant went on pursuing the very goal—the unification of ancient and modern truths—which he had shown to be impossible. Yet this would continue to define the framework of his quest right up to his last major essay, ‘Faith and the Multiversity’” (Lee: 1998, 153).

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<sup>84</sup> Original in Grant’s *Technology and Empire* (1969) 139.

Lee concludes by suggesting ways that modern humanity might overcome the Impasse. He does not provide definitive answers to the Impasse, but he suggests that one place to start is to re-think the modern understanding of truth as science and its relation to morality: “[t]he only form of reason worthy of the name would then be one which could move responsibly among two or more dimensions of polyphasic truth” (Lee: 1998, 157). In attempting to access truths that lie deeper than the assumptions of technological modernity, one need not heed Grant’s insistence on the importance of ancient thought. Lee asserts that, “[o]nce we accept the bankruptcy of the modern account, it seems to me, we are not automatically compelled to return to ancient accounts, nor to labour at reconciling classical truths with science” (Lee: 1998, 158).

Grant does not take the step that Lee advocates, in order to surmount the Impasse. However, Grant does overcome the Impasse: not by trying to combine the truths of ancient and modern thought, but by turning to Simone Weil’s theology. Lee mentions the connection between Grant’s attempts to overcome the Impasse and Weil’s philosophical and religious goals. But Lee declares: “it’s not clear (to me at least) how far [Weil] was able to translate it into concrete thought before her death” (Lee: 1998, 157). He continues:

Surely we need a still-undiscovered form of relativity, where everything that is— external world and consciousness alike— exists in the order of necessity, and can be analyzed across the board as structured and value-free; and at the same time, everything exists in the order of good and evil, beholdenness, the categorical claim of truth. The world is factual; the world is meaningful; both truths are true. (Lee: 1998, 157)

Lee overlooks the importance of Grant's intellectual and spiritual debt to Weil. Grant overcomes the inarticulacy and alienation of the Impasse by turning to Weil's dualism. Weil's dualism allows Grant to live and act in the order of necessity, while simultaneously overcoming the Impasse by separating God from the order of necessity. As Grant's response to the inarticulacy and alienation of the Impasse, Weil's theology becomes critically important for his account of the technological civilization. In the final two decades of his life, Grant turns increasingly to an acceptance of gnostic elements in Weil's theology in order to articulate an alternative to the technological civilization. In appropriating certain aspects of Weil's theology, Grant finds a way to live critically within the technological civilization, without becoming a flatterer of modern assumptions.

One way to clarify Grant's openness to gnosticism is to examine Grant's evaluation of contemporary attempts to define gnosticism. For example, Grant's evaluation of Eric Voegelin's critique of modern gnostic political thought is helpful in this context because it provides a glimpse of which gnostic traits Grant accepts and which he rejects. Grant's evaluation of Voegelin's account of gnosticism is ambiguous. According to Voegelin, there is an essential continuity between classical manifestations of gnostic thought and modern variants. Whereas classical political philosophy assumes the general rootedness of the cosmic order in the Good/God, gnostic thought evaluates the cosmic order through the primal assumption of moral corruption. Voegelin claims: "[p]hilosophy springs from the love of being; it is man's loving endeavor to perceive the

order of being and attune himself to it. Gnosis desires dominion over being; in order to seize control of being the gnostic constructs his system. The building of systems is a gnostic form of reasoning, not a philosophical one” (Voegelin: 1968, 42-43).<sup>85</sup> Thus gnosis, the knowledge that will allow its possessor to fundamentally change his or her orientation to the cosmic order, is rejection of the existing cosmic order. In its modern variation, gnostic thought nearly always expresses itself in terms of a programmatic call to action in the political and intellectual sphere. For Voegelin, modern gnostic systems of thought such as Marxism, Heideggerian existentialism, and positivism, assert the requirement to overcome the existing order while pointing to an ideal, future state of being. In order for such a future state of being to be realized, he claims that modern gnosticism manifests itself in the rebellion against the existing cosmic order through the creation of a new, symbolic paradigm premised on the power of human creative freedom. Voegelin is clear in his description of the philosophical requirements of the modern gnostic attitude:

- 1) It must first be pointed out that the gnostic is dissatisfied with his situation....2) Not quite so understandable is the second aspect of the gnostic attitude: the belief that the world is intrinsically poorly organized...If in a given situation something is not as it should be, then the fault is to be found in the wickedness of the world.
- 3) The third characteristic is the belief that salvation from the evil of the world is possible.
- 4) From this follows the belief that the order of being will have to be changed in an historical process. From a wretched world a good one must evolve historically...5) With this fifth point we come to the gnostic trait in the narrower sense—the belief that a change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action, that this salvational act is possible through man’s own effort.
- 6) If it is possible, however, so to work a structural change in the given order of being that we can be satisfied with it as a perfect one, then it becomes the task of the gnostic

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<sup>85</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (United States: Henry Regnery Company, 1968).

to seek out the prescription for such a change. Knowledge—gnosis—of the method of altering being is the central concern of the gnostic. As the sixth feature of the gnostic attitude, therefore, we recognize the construction of a formula for self and world salvation, as well as the gnostic's readiness to come forward as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of mankind. (Voegelin: 1968, 86-88)

According to Voegelin, the danger of modern gnosticism lies in the tendency of gnostic intellectuals to overthrow the existing social order through the establishment of their vision of a utopian, re-calibrated order. The tendency is pernicious because it leads to the dissolution of previously existing moral limits in the corrosive bath of ideological utopianism, informed by the unlimited drive to technological mastery as the key to revolutionary power.

In 1962, Grant published an analysis of modern mass movements under the title "Conceptions of Health."<sup>86</sup> In the article, he evaluates Voegelin's terminology in order to clarify his own position regarding modern gnosticism:

Professor Voegelin uses the term 'gnostic' in his political theory to describe those moderns whose chief end is the realizing of the Kingdom of Man on earth. I will, therefore, call these thinkers 'orgiastic gnostics' because they believe that the liberated life of the instincts will provide the positive glory of that kingdom...The assumptions of gnostic modernity may be false (it is my contention that they are). (Davis & Roper: 2005, 170-171)

Grant's analysis of modern mass movements is clearly influenced by Voegelin's description of modern gnosticism. It does not require a great imaginative leap to perceive a similarity between Voegelin's explanation of modern gnostic utopianism and Grant's account of the technological civilization as the manifestation of radical freedom from

traditional moral limits. Grant's indebtedness to Voegelin's political philosophy is further indicated in a 1986 letter to David Bovenizer<sup>87</sup> in which Grant asserts: "[h]aving learnt much from Leo Strauss over the years, it has come to me lately that Voegelin is the profunder of the two writers" (Christian: 1996, 359).

Grant recognizes the profundity of Voegelin's political thought, but his evaluation of Voegelin's thought remains ambiguous. In a 1988 letter to David Dodds,<sup>88</sup> Grant writes:

[Voegelin] is a very fine thinker: I have certainly learned a lot from him & gave once a lecture series expounding *The New Science of Politics*. As to what your friend Finnis said, I would say that I too learnt a lot from both Voegelin and Strauss, but that I am fundamentally more in Voegelin's ambience than Strauss's, because it comes out of Christianity while Strauss's comes out of Judaism. I do not think, nevertheless, that Voegelin sufficiently comes to terms with Nietzsche & Heidegger and I think this is because he sees the threat of 'modernity' too much in terms of marxism. (Of course, what he says about marxism is very good.) I think this concentration makes him fail to see that 'modernity' is expressed even more explicitly in Nietzsche than in Marx and from this comes the 'modernity' which so terribly threatens the western world from within & not from without (as is the case with marxism). (Christian: 1996, 380)

Grant thinks that Voegelin's preoccupation with the dangers of Marxism caused him to overlook the key influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger on the development of modern civilization.

Furthermore, Grant explicitly criticizes aspects of Voegelin's description of gnosticism. For Grant, his analysis and rejection of modern gnosticism overlooks the

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<sup>86</sup> George Grant, "Conceptions of Health," in ed. Art Davis and Henry Roper, *Collected Works of George Grant, vol. III: 1960-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 163-180.

<sup>87</sup> George Grant, letter to David Bovenizer (September 30, 1986), in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 358-360.

essential truth that classical gnosticism espouses. In his essay, “In Defence of Simone Weil,”<sup>89</sup> Grant criticizes Voegelin’s account of gnosticism as a dangerous subversion of social order: “[i]n our own time, as good a thinker as Voegelin has wrongly used ‘gnosticism’ as a term of abuse in his fine book *The New Science of Politics*” (Christian, 1996, 382). Grant elaborates on his criticism of Voegelin in his letter to Dodds:

I have just put a note in something I have been writing about Simone Weil (my greatest modern teacher) in which I take issue with Voegelin’s use of the word ‘gnosticism.’ I do so because I think his use of it is unfair to what is true in ancient gnosticism. Of course, as in all religious traditions, there is a lot of madness in many manifestations of ancient gnosticism, but in the greatest gnostics there is a hold on what is fundamental in Platonism. Therefore, I think it wrong of Voegelin to use ‘gnosticism’ as a term of abuse and to identify some of the most pernicious elements of the modern with it. I think this is related to his inability to see that intellectually there are more terrible manifestations of ‘modernity’ than Marx and that these undermine the western world from within, not simply from without. (Christian: 1996, 381)

Again, Voegelin’s analysis ultimately fails, for Grant, because his emphasis on Marxism as the chief modern danger overlooks the fact that Marxism itself is an expression of the fundamental assumptions underlying the technological civilization. For Grant, Nietzsche and Heidegger are the chief modern exponents of technological modernity, and this fact calls into question the accuracy of Voegelin’s explanation of modernity as a manifestation of ‘gnosticism’.

Whether or not Grant’s assessment of Voegelin’s political thought is accurate, his critique of Voegelin’s account of gnosticism is significant because it illuminates certain

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<sup>88</sup> George Grant, letter to David Dodds (March 6, 1988), in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 380-382.

gnostic tendencies in Grant's thought. Particularly significant is the fact that Grant's critique of Voegelin is placed in the context of a defense of Weil. Weil's influence on Grant's understanding of technology cannot be overestimated. Her dualism provides the means by which Grant overcomes the Impasse.

Although most commentators admit that Grant was deeply influenced by Weil's thought, scholars disagree over the details. According to Zdravko Planinc,<sup>90</sup> Weil's thought can be understood as one of several strands of the "polyphony" that Grant uses to analyze and critique technological modernity. Rather than divide his thought along the temporal lines suggested by scholarly orthodoxy, Planinc suggests that Grant's thought can be better understood as a variegated use of several foundational thinkers to understand modernity. Planinc suggests the polyphony of Grant's analysis of modernity contains several different strands:

There appear to be eight distinct voices comprising Grant's polyphony. Six appear to arise directly from his appropriation of the works of other writers. For the sake of convenience in the following discussion, they will at times be identified by those writers' names: Ellul, Hegel, Strauss, Weil, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Two other voices closer to the voice of Grant's *daimon* may also be heard: the voice of tradition, or, more precisely, of English-speaking Christian conservatism, and the voice of the 'political philosopher within Christianity.' (Umar: 1992, 28)

Weil's influence on Grant is one of several voices that comprise the polyphony of his critique. Planinc argues that Weil acts as a bridging-agent, whose appropriation by Grant

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<sup>89</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of Simone Weil," *The Idler* 15 (January-February 1988) 36-40, in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 256-265.

<sup>90</sup> Zdravko Planinc, "Paradox and Polyphony in Grant's Critique of Modernity," in ed. Yusuf Umar, *George Grant and the Future of Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press: 1992) 17-45.

allows Grant to acknowledge the arguments of modernistic thinkers such as Kojève, Hegel, and Heidegger while retaining the ability to cling to the ancient truths found in Plato and the Gospels. According to Planinc: “[b]y accepting Weil, Grant accepted modernity and its understanding of nature and history as true, necessary, and the working of Providence” (Umar: 1992, 36). Grant employs Weil’s conception of infinite distance between necessity and God as a palliative against the harsh and inescapable reality of the technological civilization. If God exists beyond the order of necessity, Grant can find solace in the infinite separation: “Weil allows Grant to accept modernity’s self-understanding as true, to disdain modernity as infinitely distant from the good, to escape modernity in search of redemption, and to hope for the redemption of modernity itself through the workings of Providence” (Umar: 1992, 36).

For Planinc, Weil’s gnosticism represents a paradoxical aspect of Grant’s thinking about modernity. Grant’s acceptance of Weil’s separation of necessity and the good beyond being is significant because, while Weil’s dualism is compatible in some ways with Heidegger’s account of technology as ontology, Grant cannot accept the “immanentization” of transcendence that Heidegger’s thought requires. According to Planinc, “Heidegger’s account of being’s presencing in time is compatible with Weil’s account of necessity and goodness because Heidegger’s historicism completely subsumes the eternal and transcendent into time” (Umar: 1992, 39). Grant’s acceptance of Weil’s gnostic distinction between the order of necessity and the good beyond being is, however,

problematic because it overlooks the fact that Heidegger's "parousiastic ontology" (Umar: 1992, 39) is not founded on love, as Weil's gnosticism ultimately is.

Barry Cooper also discusses the extent to which Grant is affected by Weil's gnostic tendencies. In his article, "George Grant and the Revival of Political Philosophy,"<sup>91</sup> Cooper argues that the pervasive nature of technology virtually ensures Grant attraction to the gnostic elements of Weil's thought:

To put the matter very summarily indeed, the question that lay behind Grant's thinking concerned the status of modernity and of technology within modernity. For Grant, technology is our fate and modernity is our destiny. At times, modernity and technology must have seemed to him to have exhaustively symbolized reality as given. It was at these times that the gnostic appeals of Simone Weil's speculations may have been strongest. She may have suggested to Grant a *gnosis* of escape from technology through meditation and thereby also modernity and even from reality. (Emberley: 1990, 116)

Cooper's assertion brings to mind Lee's discussion of the Impasse, in which the thinker is forced to admit that one cannot think "outside of the box" of technology, that all attempts to critically examine technology are carried forward within the assumptions of technological modernity itself. According to Cooper, while he may at times be drawn to the escapism inherent in a gnostic rejection of given reality, Grant resists the temptation to flee into gnosticism. Cooper asserts that Grant's appropriation of Strauss' political philosophy helped him "to retain a balanced consciousness" in the face of Weil's gnosticism (Emberley: 1990, 117). It is significant that Grant considers charity to be

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<sup>91</sup> Barry Cooper, "George Grant and the Revival of Political Philosophy," in ed. Peter Emberley, *By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of Lament for a Nation* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990) 97-121.

higher than wisdom and scholarship. This is one of the primary reasons why Grant considers Weil's writings to be so much more captivating than the writings of any other modern thinker. Nevertheless, Cooper admits that "common sense is not necessarily of assistance in resisting the temptations of a gnostic saint" (Emberley: 1990, 117). Clearly, Cooper is convinced, as is Planinc, that Weil's gnosticism influences Grant's understanding of the technological civilization.

Lawrence Schmidt asserts that neither Grant nor Weil should be classified as gnostic thinkers. In his essay, "Grant on Weil as Saint and Thinker,"<sup>92</sup> Schmidt posits that Weil's thought does not partake in the world-rejection of ancient gnosticism, nor in the modern, more ideological and immanent forms of gnosticism.<sup>93</sup> According to Schmidt, Weil "was neither an anti-cosmic nor a radical dualist" (Davis: 1996, 269). Nor does Weil believe in a God that is radically removed from the material order. In Schmidt's view, Weil might posit an infinite distance between the material order of necessity and the order of love, but this gap is bridged by Weil's "love of beauty" (Davis: 1996, 271) in the world and in other human beings. The love of beauty serves a mediating role, halfway between the divine and the material. According to Schmidt,

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<sup>92</sup> Lawrence Schmidt, "Grant on Weil as Saint and Thinker," in ed. Art Davis, *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 263-281.

<sup>93</sup> The more contemporary version of gnosticism referred to is examined by Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), and Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (United States: Henry Regnery Company, 1968). Some interesting work has also been done in comparing modern existentialism to ancient gnosticism, notably the work of Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), particularly 320-340.

It seems clear that Weil was not proposing a return to Platonism as an escape from the alienation of the modern world, which in focusing on the absolute autonomy of human beings had destroyed the Greek understanding of the metaxu and all the intermediaries between God and man. She realized that gnosticism of a Manichean or Catharist variety was not an option. (Davis: 1996, 274)

Schmidt asserts that Grant is not influenced by gnostic tendencies in Weil's thought, but that Grant is inspired by Weil's self-emptying thought and action, the character of which is distinct from the assumptions of the technological civilization:

A careful reading of Grant's and Weil's writings reveals that Grant was not tempted by the emptiness of the soul that characterizes a gnostic quest which turns its back on this world; he was, rather, inspired by the self-emptying (kenotic) spirituality that characterized the life and the thought of a thinker he considered a contemporary Christian saint. (Davis: 1996, 275-276)

Several things should be noted about Schmidt's article. Many of the examples and arguments that Schmidt employs to show that Weil is not a gnostic are actually quite ambiguous. For example, Schmidt's discussion of the lack of radical dualism in Weil's thought overlooks the fact that her understanding of the separation between the order of necessity and God is often supplemented by references to radical dualism. Furthermore, Schmidt himself admits that Weil's thought contains gnostic elements: "She was a gnostic Christian, that is to say a Christian Platonist, rather than a Christian gnostic like the Valentinians or the Cathars" (Davis: 1996, 267-8). Finally, Schmidt's often dismissive response to Planinc and Cooper seems both excessive and misplaced. Both Planinc and Cooper, by arguing that Grant was influenced by Weil's gnosticism, seem to be acknowledging that Weil's putative gnosticism represents merely one aspect of his

understanding of technological modernity. Neither Planinc nor Cooper appears to be suggesting that Grant is simply a gnostic, of the modern or the ancient variety.

Grant first came into contact with Weil's writings in 1951, when Grant reviewed Weil's *Waiting on God*.<sup>94</sup> William Christian notes that Grant was immediately struck by the force of Weil's ideas: "[h]e read it with growing astonishment; over the next decade her ideas slowly took root at the centre of his thought and to the end of his life her insights into the divine and her philosophic explorations of these intuitions were the standard against which he judged all other contemporary philosophy" (Christian: 1993, 157). Indeed, Weil is elevated above other modern thinkers whom Grant admires, because she combines intellectual genius with deep spiritual awareness and receptivity. Grant asserts: "[o]bviously here I must talk of Simone Weil, who has been the greatest influence in my life of any thinker. She has shown me what it is to hold Christ and Plato together. She has shown me how sanctity and philosophy can be at one" (Schmidt, 1978: 65).

Grant recognizes that Weil's philosophy contains gnostic elements. He asserts that Weil's appropriation of the Gospels and Plato, and her openness to figures such as Marcion and to the medieval civilization of the Cathars, makes Weil "essentially a gnostic saint, and her criticisms of Judaism are similar to those which have appeared through the centuries in gnostic writings: namely, her rejection of the Hebrew Bible and

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<sup>94</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, tr. Emma Craufurd (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

its account of God” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 257). However, Grant recognizes that Weil’s gnosticism requires clarification:

It may...be possible to cautiously call Weil a gnostic. Yet there must be immediate qualifications. As a follower of Plato, Weil holds within her thought that measured blending of ‘gnosticism’ and ‘agnosticism’ that characterizes her intellectual master. Moreover, ‘gnosticism,’ as a recurring historical fact, has had within it excesses and follies, as have all forms of Christianity. ... Therefore, it is with hesitation that I categorize Weil as a ‘gnostic,’ in order to make clear that it was more than accident that held her from becoming a Catholic. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 259)

The most obvious gnostic tendency in Weil’s thought is her dualistic separation between the orders of necessity and God. Many scholars of gnosticism consider a radical dualism between cosmic order and divine reality to be the hallmark of gnosticism. Gnosticism remains extremely difficult to analyze in a holistic sense because gnosticism is a name that signifies a large number of intellectual and religious systems that often differ considerably from one another. One of the most influential scholars of gnosticism, a scholar who has a direct influence on Grant’s understanding of Weil’s gnosticism, was Weil’s friend and biographer, Simone Pétrement. Grant is clear that he considers Pétrement “a great gnostic scholar” (Christian: 1996, 323).<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, in a 1975 letter to Pétrement, Grant asserts: “I have followed all your recent writings on gnosticism...” (Christian: 1996, 283).<sup>96</sup> Given Grant’s comments, it seems fair to assume that Pétrement’s description of gnosticism affects Grant’s understanding of the subject.

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<sup>95</sup> George Grant, letter to Joan O’Donovan, in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 323-325.

<sup>96</sup> George Grant, letter to Simone Petrement, in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 282-284.

Pétrément explicitly claims that radical dualism is the hallmark of gnosticism. In *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*,<sup>97</sup> she writes:

It might...be said that there is a dualist *feeling* in the Gnostics, if such an expression is permissible. The distance between God and the world is so great for them that in the present state of things they are like two separate realms or spheres, and the way from the realm of the world to that of God can be nothing other than *supernatural*. In the soul the inspirations that come from God and those which come from the world are totally distinct. And since the soul properly speaking, the natural soul (distinct from the spirit), is found on the side of the world, it can only know God if he reveals himself. *Such dualism is nothing other than an extreme accentuation of transcendence.* (Petrement: 1984, 172).

Another prominent scholar of gnosticism, Hans Jonas,<sup>98</sup> has also noted that radical dualism is an essential trait of gnosticism:

The cardinal feature of gnostic thought is the radical dualism that governs the relation of God and world, and correspondingly that of man and world. The deity is absolutely transmundane, its nature alien to that of the universe, which it neither created nor governs and to which it is the complete antithesis: to the divine realm of light, self-contained and remote, the cosmos is opposed as the realm of

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<sup>97</sup> Simone Petrement, *A Separate God: the Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, tr. Carol Harrison (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984).

<sup>98</sup> Hans Jonas, 'Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism,' in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: the Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) 320-340. Jonas' essay is significant, because it evinces several similarities with Grant's understanding of moral nihilism underlying the drive to technological mastery. Jonas' essay is an examination of the similarities between modern existentialism and ancient gnosticism. As a gnostic reading of modern philosophy, Jonas' essay provides tools to understand the ways in which Grant's thought contains gnostic elements. According to Jonas, existentialism, like gnosticism, is a response to the perceived lack of meaning in the cosmos. Both gnosticism and existentialism were born from the crucible of civilizations that have become aware of the relative smallness and powerlessness of human life and human action. Jonas writes that "among the features determining this situation is one which Pascal was the first to face in its frightening implications and to expound with the full force of his eloquence: man's loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology" (Jonas: 1963, 322). Rather than putting man into a closer relation to the cosmic order of things, the fact that man thinks and feels makes him smaller and increasingly alienates him from the cosmic order. The physical aspect of man is, of course, subject to the laws of nature, but the fact that man thinks "no longer results in a higher integration of his being into the totality of being, but on the contrary marks the unbridgeable gulf between himself and the rest of existence. Estranged from the community of being in one whole, his consciousness only makes him a foreigner in the world, and in every act of true reflection tells of this stark foreignness" (Jonas: 1963, 323).

darkness. The world is the work of lowly powers which though they may mediately be descended from Him do not know the true God and obstruct the knowledge of Him in the cosmos over which they rule. (Jonas: 1963, 42)

For Simone Weil, there exists an infinite distance between the order of Good (or God) and the order of necessity in which we exist as beings. In *Waiting on God*, Weil describes the infinite distance as follows: “The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go to him? Even if we were to walk for hundreds of years, we should do no more than go round and round the world...We are incapable of progressing vertically” (Weil: 1951, 79). Similarly, in Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*<sup>99</sup> she writes: “The only good which is not subject to chance is that which is outside the world” (Weil: 1952, 98). Again: “God can only be present in creation under the form of absence” (Weil: 1952, 99). In Weil’s *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*,<sup>100</sup> she asserts:

There can be no other proof, for God is nothing else but the good and the only faculty for making contact with him is love. Just as we cannot recognize sound with our eyes, so there is no faculty except love for recognizing God. There are two reflections of the pure good. One of them, which is the idea of the good, is in our souls; the other, which is in the world, is beauty. (Weil: 1968, 131)

For Weil, as for Grant, the Good is beyond being. In contrast with the idea of Western Christianity which imagines God to be the supreme, omnipotent architect of all that exists, Weil and Grant consider the creation of the order of necessity to be the result

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<sup>99</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, tr. Gustave Thibon (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).

<sup>100</sup> Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, tr. Richard Rees (London: University of Oxford Press, 1968).

of the withdrawal of God.<sup>101</sup> For Grant, the way to overcome the impasse is to embrace God as beyond being. He asserts that the tendency of Western Christianity to impute “self-expansion” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 264) to God is one of the roots of technological modernity:

For Western Christians—let us say loosely, since Hildebrand—creation came to be thought of as an act of self-expansion. For Weil, creation is a withdrawal, an act of love, involved with all the suffering, renunciation, and willingness to let the other be, that are given in the idea of love. ... It is clear that the descent of Western civilizational identity into wild technological scrambling goes with the self-confusions of organized Western Christianity. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 264)

Because creation is an act of God’s withdrawal, God must exist beyond being. Grant follows Weil to an understanding of the radical separation between God and the order of necessity: “Both Protestants and Catholics became triumphalist by failing to recognize the distance between the order of good and the order of necessity” (Grant: 1986, 76).

One need not read far in Weil’s works to find dualism. However, the dualistic aspect of Grant’s thought is more subdued. Throughout Grant’s later writings, one can discern an increasing separation between the technological civilization and spiritual truth. For Grant, the pervasiveness of the technological drive to mastery can be understood as a

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<sup>101</sup> For an examination of the difference between Western and Eastern forms of Christianity in Grant’s thought, see Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). For Sherrard’s influence on Grant’s thought, see Harris Athanasiadis, *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Athanasiadis notes that “Sherrard, a scholar of Eastern Christianity, would help Grant understand the Western tradition as a unity, and to distinguish it from a more ‘Eastern’ tradition of Christianity and philosophy. In this regard, Sherrard would prepare the ground for Grant’s deeper appreciation of Weil’s critique of Western civilization, with its brand of Christianity and philosophy” (Athanasiadis: 2001, 122). See also Athanasiadis: 2001, 134-137.

fate, or a destiny. In *Technology and Empire*, Grant explains how technology has come to rule the realm of necessity:

Indeed, the technological society is not for most North Americans, at least at the level of consciousness, a 'terra incognita' into which we must move with hesitation, moderation, and wonder, but a comprehended promised land which we have discovered by the use of calculating reason and which we can ever more completely inherit by the continued use of calculation. Man has at last come of age in the evolutionary process, has taken his fate into his own hands and is freeing himself for happiness against the old necessities of hunger and disease and overwork...The era of our planetary domination dawns; and beyond that? That this is obviously good can be seen in the fact that we are able to do what we never could and prevent what we have never before prevented (Christian & Grant: 1998, 404).

Technological progress and its theoretical basis in the doctrine of radical freedom have culminated in a system in which dissension and heterogeneity are virtually impossible. Mastery does not end at the borders of nature; complete mastery of man over his fellow man is the ultimate destiny of technology, as witnessed by the global conflicts of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the very language that one uses to describe one's moral life has been infiltrated by the drive to mastery:

Modern thought is in [a] sense unified fate for us. The belief in the mastering knowledge of human and non-human beings arose together with the very way we conceive our humanity as an Archimedean freedom outside nature, so that we can creatively will to shape the world to our values. The decent bureaucrats, the concerned thinkers, and the thoughtful citizens as much conceive their task as creatively willing to shape their world to their values as do the corporate despots, the motivations experts, and the manipulative politicians. The moral discourse of 'values' and 'freedom' is not independent of the will to technology, but a language fashioned in the same forge together with the will to technology. To try to think them separately is to move more deeply into their common origin. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 404-5)

As seen in Chapter Three, Grant refers to the penetration of every aspect of life by technology as a moral darkness which inhibits one's ability to perceive good or to make moral judgments outside of the assumptions underlying technological mastery. Weil's dualism provides Grant with a tool which is able to overcome the inarticulacy of the moral darkness that characterizes the technological civilization:

Those of us who are Christians have been told that there is something 'beyond' both thought and practice. Both are means or ways. In their current public division from each other, the memory of their joint insufficiency will be helpful to both. What is also necessary for both types of life is a continuing dissatisfaction with the fact that the darkness of our era leads to such a division between them. In this dissatisfaction lies the hope of taking a first step: to bring the darkness into light as darkness. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 434)

For Grant, as for Weil, there is a radical distinction between God and the order of necessity. According to Grant, "Goodness itself is 'beyond being'" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 442).<sup>102</sup> In *Technology and Justice* he asserts:

[F]or both Christianity and Platonism, goodness itself is an ambiguous mystery. In Christianity, God's essence is unknowable. In *The Republic*, it is said that goodness itself is beyond being. Both Christianity and Platonism have therefore been ridiculed as final irrationality. If the purpose of thought is to have knowledge of the whole, how can we end in an affirmation which is a negation of knowing? It is, above all, these agnostic affirmations which bring Platonism and Christianity so close together. Without this agnosticism humans tend to move to the great lie that evil is good and good evil. In Christian language this great lie is to say that providence is scrutable. (Grant: 1986, 75)

For Grant, the distinction is between the order of necessity (the order of moral and intellectual darkness) and the order of God. The order of necessity is enfolded in the

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<sup>102</sup> George Grant, "Justice and Technology," in ed. Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote, *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), in ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant, *A George Grant Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 435-444.

particular destiny of the North American continent and is increasingly spreading to the rest of the world. The destiny of the West is manifested in the rise of the technological civilization, with its impoverished interpretation of reality:

One might ask: Is not technological change an aspect of what is, and therefore not something other than ontological change? But what is above all misleading in such words is that they obscure the fact that every act of scientific discovery or application comes forth from an ontology which so engrosses us that it can well be called our Western destiny. Technology is not something over against ontology; it is the ontology of the age. It is for us an almost inescapable destiny. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 431)

Grant notes:

[M]y purpose is to state the profundity with which technological civilization enfolds us as our destiny...It is a destiny which presents us with what we think of the whole, with what we think is good, with what we think good is, with how we conceive sanity and madness, beauty and ugliness. It is a destiny which enfolds us in our most immediate experiences. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 432-33)

This is the problem outlined in Lee's description of Grant's Impasse. In order to search for a substantive conception of justice, one must be able to think beyond the moral ambiguity that lies at the heart of the drive to technological mastery. But for Grant, the present inability to escape from the tightening grip of technology leaves humanity with no content beyond the strict confines of the Impasse. He asserts that in our technological destiny, "[w]e move into the tightening circle in which more technological science is called for to meet the problems which technological science has produced. In that tightening circle, the overcoming of chance is less and less something outside us, but becomes more and more the overcoming of chance in our own species, in our very own selves" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 432). Thinkers who refuse to acknowledge the

darkness that characterizes the technological civilization merely add to the darkness by speaking without knowledge. For Grant, “the darkness which envelops the Western world because of its long dedication to the overcoming of chance is just a fact...The job of thought at our time is to bring into the light that darkness as darkness” (Christian & Grant: 1998, 435). The moral and intellectual darkness that characterizes the technological civilization is a destiny which obscures the ability to conceive of an unchanging and universally binding conception of justice. The emphasis on radical human freedom that represents the primal claim of the technological civilization obscures one’s ability to see the light, to see God, to witness God’s justice.

In discussing “intimations of deprivation” in *Technology and Empire*, Grant tacitly points to Weil’s thought as a possible counterpoint to the moral darkness that characterizes the technological civilization:

Despite the noblest modern thought, which teaches always the exaltation of potentiality above all that is, has anyone been able to show us conclusively throughout a comprehensive account of both the human and non-human things, that we must discard the idea of a presence above which potentiality cannot be exalted? In such a situation of uncertainty, it would be lacking in courage to turn one’s face to the wall, even if one can find no fulfilment in working for or celebrating the dynamo. Equally it would be immoderate and uncourageous and perhaps unwise to live in the midst of our present drive, merely working in it and celebrating it, and not also listening or watching or simply waiting for intimations of deprivation which might lead us to see the beautiful as the image, in the world, of the good. (Davis & Roper: 2005, 581)

One of the principal reasons why Grant considers Weil to be his chief modern teacher is because she combines the ancient truths of Plato and the Gospels with a clear articulation of the assumptions underlying the technological civilization. For Grant, Weil’s

understanding and acceptance of Plato allows her to champion a version of Christianity that is at odds with the prevailing Western version of truth as propositional. Grant is certain that modern secularism can be understood as the result of the tendency in Western Christianity to emphasize the primacy of the will.

Rather than considering faith as the manifestation of divine grace, Western Christianity has interpreted faith in the context of the human will. The emphasis on the human will in Western Christianity came to manifest itself in a triumphalist, action-oriented worldview in which God is the ultimately free being, and humans must try to find evidence of God's handiwork in nature. With the onset of modernity, and the increasing emphasis on humanity defined as willful freedom, the concept of God as the ultimate ground of being is rejected. Thus, Grant agrees with Nietzsche's dictum that Christianity has produced its own gravediggers. Modern scientific rationalism can be understood as the result of the Western Christian equation of divine love with immanent power. In *Technology and Justice* Grant criticizes Western Christianity for the identification of God's love with power:

It is not wise to criticize Christianity in public these days when so many journalists and intellectuals prove their status by such criticism. Nevertheless it seems true that western Christianity simplified the divine love by identifying it too closely with immanent power in the world. Both Protestants and Catholics became triumphalist by failing to recognize the distance between the order of good and the order of necessity. So they became exclusivist and imperialist, arrogant and dynamic. They now face the results of that failure. (Grant: 1986, 76)

Another gnostic aspect in Grant's thought becomes apparent in this context: the love of the other expressed in terms of mysterious, soteriological knowledge. Modern

subjectivism corrodes the perception of goodness in otherness. The reason why Weil felt that she could not partake in the Roman Catholic sacraments was not because Weil considered the sacraments to be meaningless, but because the Church failed to adequately recognize and love the divine in heterogeneity.

In *Technology and Justice* Grant discusses the importance of Weil's dictum in *Gravity and Grace* that "faith is the intelligence enlightened by love." Grant acknowledges that such a definition of faith "simply moves one from the uncertainty of 'faith' to the even greater complexity of the word 'love'" (Grant: 1986, 38). For Grant, Weil's definition of faith as love clarifies one of the deepest truths in Platonic and Christian thought: love "is consent to the fact that there is authentic otherness" (Grant: 1986, 38). The opposite of loving otherness is the supreme madness of the tyrant, who has taken self-love as the political and social expression of human excellence. Tyranny can no longer love otherness because the tyrant can only see beauty in the self. In the mind of the tyrant, beauty has been subsumed by a vision of otherness as the means to an end. As the result of the depredations of modern thought, the ability to love the beauty of otherness as a reflection of God in the order of necessity has been lost:

The old teaching was that we love otherness, not because it is other, but because it is beautiful. The beauty of others was believed to be an experience open to everyone, though in extraordinarily different forms, and at differing steps towards perfection...The beauty of otherness is the central assumption in the statement 'Faith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love.'  
(Grant: 1986, 39)

Weil's esoteric wisdom, with its emphasis on the saving power of loving heterogeneity, provides Grant with a way to criticize technology from beyond the modern

assumptions about human moral freedom and creative willing. For Grant, the modern worldview that informs the technological civilization is grounded in the subjectivist outlook that denies the inherent beauty of otherness. The ability to treat the other (human or non-human) as object inherently destroys the perception of beauty in otherness. Such a view has practical consequences:

[t]o state the literal meaning of ‘objects’ yet once again: it speaks of anything which is held away from us for our questioning. Any beautiful thing can be made into an object by us and for us and we can analyse it so that it will give us its reasons as an object. But if we confine our attention to any thing as if it were simply an object, it cannot be loved as beautiful.” (Grant: 1986, 40)

If one fails to recognize beauty in the other, one will be unable to apprehend the Good of which the beauty of otherness is the earthly reflection. For Grant, the emphasis is on love; humans love the beautiful, and can proceed through the love of beauty toward a vision of God.

This represents the basis of Grant’s most profound critique of Heidegger’s thought. Heidegger’s critique of technology rises from the assumptions of technological modernity, in that it fails to recognize God as the basis of truth. According to Grant, Heidegger misinterprets Plato’s metaphor of the Cave in the *Republic* because Heidegger fails to comprehend Plato’s understanding of the visionary role of love. Thus, Heidegger formalizes Plato’s doctrine of truth:

From [Heidegger’s] translation and commentary one would not understand that in the Sun, the Line, and the Cave, the metaphor of sight is to be taken as love. That which we love and which is the source of our love is outside the cave, but it is the possibility of the fire in the cave and of the virtues which make possible the getting out of the cave. When Heidegger defines good as used by Plato simply

formally, as what we are fitted for, he does not give content to that fitting as Socrates does when he says that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it. Heidegger describes Plato's doctrine of truth so that 'being' as 'idea' is abstracted from the love of justice in terms of which 'idea' can alone be understood as separate. (Christian & Grant: 1998, 442)

Weil's assertion that faith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love gives him the key to a radical rejection of the assumptions and the will to power that characterize the technological civilization.

Grant admits that technological progress has ameliorated the human condition in many ways. In *Technology and Justice* he asserts that the technological civilization was motivated at its inception by a yearning for justice:

It is not suggested here that the technology with which we have surrounded ourselves is of only superficial or ambiguous benefit. Modern human beings since their beginnings have been moved by the faith that the mastery of nature would lead to the overcoming of hunger and labour, disease and war on so widespread a scale that at least we could build the world-wide society of free and equal people. One must never think about technological destiny without looking squarely at the justice in those hopes. Let none of us who live in the well-cushioned west speak with an aesthetic tiredness of our 'worldliness.' (Grant: 1986, 15)

Again, "[w]ho cannot be grateful for the electric light" (Grant: 1986, 61). Grant does not deny that the technological drive to mastery has provided many tangible goods for humanity. However, he rejects the notion that human beings can be defined as creative freedom:

In much modern thought the core of being human is often affirmed as our freedom to make ourselves and the world. Whatever differences there may be among Christians about what it is to be human, finally there must be the denial of this account of freedom. Whatever we are called to do or to make in the world,

the freedom to do and to make cannot be for us the final account of what we are.  
(Grant: 1986, 75)

What ultimately allows Grant to reject modern assumptions is that Grant perceives the central reality of human existence to be the human relation to God, who lies beyond the human ability to choose or to create. Grant affirms that the modern world is caught in the lockstep of the technological civilization--it is our destiny and our fate--but ultimately love of the beauty in otherness points toward the Good that lies beyond technological necessity.

Grant's appropriation of Weil's conception of decreation<sup>103</sup> entails hidden knowledge about loving otherness that can only be accessed through divine grace rather than through an act of willing, or through objective calculation. Grace leads one beyond the Cave into a fuller appreciation of reality. This truth represents the secret wisdom that is granted by grace to the individual who has renounced the self and become obedient to the divine will. Wisdom is connected to love of the beauty of otherness; the beauty of the other remains the only way to access any vision of God while one remains trapped in the order of necessity. True wisdom comes from realizing, through openness to otherness in love by divine grace, that the order of necessity also operates in complete obedience to the order of God or the Good.

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<sup>103</sup>One of Weil's interpreters who Grant greatly admired was Miklos Veto, whose *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* "is the most careful among many good books" (Christian & Grant: 1998, 263). Veto discusses this aspect of Weil's thought under the rubric of "decreation." See especially the first chapter of M. Veto, *La Métaphysique Religieuse the Simone Weil* (Paris: J. Urin, 1971), translated into English as *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

In a letter to his friend Peter Self,<sup>104</sup> written near the end of his life, Grant expresses the ambiguity of the gnostic element in his own thinking: “I go on in my usual divided state. ‘Theoretically’ I find Xianity best expressed for myself in a kind of gnostic Platonic way, but in my life I remain a very sensual bourgeois” (Christian: 1996, 365). What he rejects is not the order of technological necessity itself, insofar as necessity is obedient to the order of Good, but rather the underlying assumptions of Western Christianity, which have created the conditions for the rise of the technological civilization. The technological civilization is based on the assumption that humanity can be essentially defined as radical freedom to will and to create. Grant’s Impasse is, as Lee notes, the inability of the modern man to think outside of the technological paradigm. In asserting the radical separation between the order of good and the order of necessity, Grant finds a way to overcome the Impasse. He also discovers the means to seek human excellence beyond technological mastery over chance. Through recognizing the other as beautiful, and therefore loveable, he has found a way beyond the moral paralysis inherent in the Ellulian and Heideggerian accounts of technology. Grant overcomes the moral darkness of the technological civilization by appropriating dualistic and esoteric elements from Weil’s theology.

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<sup>104</sup> George Grant, letter to Peter Self (1987), in ed. William Christian, *George Grant: Selected Letters*

CONCLUSION:

The dissertation has examined Grant's understanding of technology, particularly the influence of Ellul, Heidegger and Weil on the development of his thought. The incommensurability between contrasting accounts of technology put forward by Ellul and Heidegger is the goad that leads Grant to overcome the inarticulacy of revolt through recourse to the theology of Simone Weil. The accounts of technology articulated by Ellul and Heidegger each influence Grant's understanding of the technological civilization. His inability to fully appropriate Ellul's conception of technological necessity or Heidegger's account of radical human freedom leads Grant to the perception of a profound separation between the technological civilization and the transcendent order of God. This is not to suggest that he denies the effectiveness of political action as an agent of change in the technological civilization; however, he understands the technological civilization to be operating in a paradigm of technological necessity that inevitably discourages heterogeneous articulations of human excellence.

Contrary to scholarly orthodoxy in the field of Grant studies, which tends to interpret his thought as a futile attempt to defend Christianity and Platonism against the onslaught of modern assumptions, the dissertation argues that the Ellul-Heidegger dialectic is one key to uncovering a more profound interpretation of Grant's understanding of technology. Through clarifying the impact of Ellul and Heidegger on Grant's understanding of technology, the dissertation has focussed on the centrality of his

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(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 364-366.

concept of technology, particularly on his understanding of the relationship between technology and ethics.

Ellul's account of technological necessity, with its attribution of traits such as autonomy, universalism, and the destruction of heterogeneity, forms a crucial aspect of Grant's understanding of the technological civilization. In Grant's view, the technological civilization itself is only the most visible and imperialistic manifestation of humanity's self-abandonment to the willful mastery and radical freedom that characterizes modernity. His understanding of the deterministic forces at work in the technological society is deeply indebted to Ellul's account.

Ellul's influence on Grant is not a distinct, penultimate phase in Grant's philosophical development. Grant does eventually distance himself from Ellul's Calvinist theology because of the complicity of triumphalist Christianity in the rise of the technological civilization. Nevertheless, Ellul's account of technological necessity and technological politics remains central to Grant's understanding of the technological civilization long after Grant's purported turn to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Grant never entirely moves beyond Ellul's definition of technology as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity" (Ellul, 1969: xxxiii).

The dissertation calls for a re-examination of Grant's understanding of the differences between Ellul and Heidegger and between their respective accounts of technology. Both accounts are attractive for Grant, in that they each offer valuable

insights into the realities of life in the technological civilization. However, as explained in Chapters Two and Three, Grant is unwilling to accept either account as entirely accurate. Chapter Four examines the tension caused by his inability to appropriate either account of technology as the basis for an adequate explanation of the effects of the technological civilization on the notion of human excellence. Dennis Lee's discussion of Grant's Impasse is analysed as a useful hermeneutical tool to emphasize this tension in Grant's thought.

Grant ultimately overcomes the tension in his philosophical understanding of technology through openness to gnostic elements in the theology of Simone Weil. While there is some scholarly disagreement on the topic of gnosis for Grant, the dissertation has argued that Grant understood and approved of the gnostic elements in Weil. Scholars are virtually unanimous in agreeing that Grant's thought was deeply influenced by Weil's theology. Following this influence, Grant posits a radical dualism between the technological civilization and the transcendent realm of the Good beyond being. The dissertation also points out that Grant's later works are replete with references to a secret, soteriological wisdom that has its roots in Weil's esoteric doctrine of the beauty of otherness. These gnostic elements in Weil's theology provide Grant with a vehicle through which to theoretically articulate the nature of technology as well as the prevalence of the Good over technological necessity.

The dissertation has argued that Grant has separated the reality inhabited by the technological civilization from the order of good, the order of true human excellence

intimated by Plato's philosophy and Christianity. In the gnostic elements of Weil's theology, he discovers a tool which can reconcile the sociological rigour of Ellul's account and the philosophical breadth of Heidegger's account of technology, while not abandoning the fundamental truths enunciated in Plato's philosophy and the Christian Gospels.

Admittedly, this interpretation of Grant's intellectual sources differs considerably from the more orthodox scholarly opinion of his thought. It will be helpful to examine this hypothesis in relation to recent scholarship on Grant. One of the clearest accounts of Grant's thought, from within the orthodox interpretation, is Hugh Donald Forbes' recent scholarly introduction. In his 2007 book, *George Grant: A Guide to His Thought*,<sup>105</sup> Forbes examines the philosophical and religious backgrounds to Grant's political philosophy with the aim of clarifying his thought, especially for "readers who are already acquainted with at least one or two of Grant's short books and who want some help in reaching a better understanding of his provocative claims" (Forbes: 2007, i).

Forbes begins his treatment of Grant with a discussion of his understanding of Canadian history and politics. Scholars often mistakenly interpret Grant as either a pessimist who sees Canada's cultural and political disappearance as necessary or as a naive optimist who uses exaggerated language to call forth renewed efforts to clarify alternate accounts of Canadian identity. Both interpretations are misguided, in that Grant

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<sup>105</sup> Hugh Donald Forbes, *George Grant: A Guide to his Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

understands Canada's disappearance to be the result of a changing conception of the good in political philosophy.

Forbes presents Grant's view of technology as inextricably bound to the ambiguous modern concept of freedom. While Forbes asserts the primary importance of Heidegger's account for Grant, he dismisses Ellul's influence as "short-lived" (Forbes: 2007, 33). In dismissing Ellul's importance for Grant's understanding of technology, Forbes places himself squarely in the tradition of scholarly orthodoxy.

Forbes proceeds to discuss Grant's conception of technology as "the paradigm of knowledge that now holds sway over all branches of learning" (Forbes: 2007, 41). However, his interpretation of Grant's understanding of technology is carried out on the assumption that questions about technology are indicative of more profound questions about modernity. In *English-Speaking Justice*, Grant challenges John Rawls' account of liberal justice as problematic because it reveals how liberal moral theory can no longer place moral constraints on individual freedom. The lack of moral limit manifests itself in many areas of contemporary North American political life, but most clearly in the legalization of abortion. Grant interprets the new understanding of human freedom which now exists as a result of liberal conceptions of justice to be ultimately corrosive to the fundamental beliefs underlying modern liberalism:

Consequently, when trying to sum up ideas that now govern our society, it may be better to speak, not of modern liberal theory, but of modern progressivism, for commitment to traditional liberal principles and protections may already have given way to the desire to adapt to the demands of progress, wherever this is deemed necessary or advantageous. (Forbes: 2007, 58)

Forbes interprets Grant's understanding of necessity in the context of his rejection of liberal progressivism. Grant paints a bleak picture of the possibilities for effective dissent or revolt against the dominant spirit of the modern age. Neither youthful rebellion nor antique conservatism can serve as checks to the onward march of the progressive spirit. He understands the ultimate goal of liberal theory to be the creation of the universal and homogeneous state, a tyrannical state in which all heterogeneity is inexorably whittled away.

Forbes' interpretation of Grant's understanding of modern liberalism is a lucid and clear account of the latter's rejection of modern liberal ideals. However, Forbes' interpretation tends to overlook the deeper philosophical consequences of Grant's understanding of political necessity. For example, instead of examining the relation of Grant's understanding of political necessity to technological necessity, Forbes chooses to focus on Grant's refusal to succumb to a pessimistic urge to retire from the political sphere. "[I]t was no solution," Forbes asserts, "for Grant simply to withdraw from any involvement in political life" (Forbes: 2007, 80). Forbes' interpretation of Grant's politics falls within the sphere of scholarly orthodoxy in which his thought is analyzed through the lens of contradictory political and philosophical ideals: a rejection of modern, liberal progressivism and a lack of practical alternatives to support his rejection of modernity.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Cf. Forbes' criticism of Grant's "pessimism" and "fatalism" in *George Grant: a Guide to his Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 80-85.

In his discussion of Grant's philosophical influences, Forbes emphasizes the importance of Strauss and Heidegger. While it is true that he is indebted to Strauss' interpretation of classical philosophy and considers the classical account superior to the modern, Grant disagrees with Strauss in important ways, particularly on their differing conceptions of the relationship between faith and philosophy. Contrary to Strauss, Grant does not see a sharp distinction between philosophy and religious belief. Indeed, according to Grant, the two are complementary. Contrary to radical proponents of religious belief or radical proponents of modern rationalism, Grant champions the wisdom of avoiding extremes in considering the connection between philosophy and faith. Whereas Heidegger's existentialism seems to offer an example of a *via media* between the two extremes, Strauss, much to Grant's chagrin, seems to dismiss the connection between philosophy and religion altogether. Nevertheless, the impact of Strauss on Grant's philosophical understanding of the ancients is significant. Forbes asserts that "[t]he most important point of agreement between [Grant and Strauss] has to do with the existence of an 'objective' overall good that provides public as well as private guidance" (Forbes: 2007, 125-126).

The connection between philosophy and religious faith in Grant's thought provides Forbes with an opening through which to examine Grant's theology. For Forbes, "[t]he keys to understanding the overall character and direction of [Grant's] thought can be found, I shall try to show, in the writings of Martin Heidegger and Simone Weil" (Forbes: 2007, 174). In order to be as clear as possible, Forbes posits that Weil's

influence on Grant can be divided conceptually into four interrelated categories: perfection, affliction, contradiction, and necessity. Forbes asserts that these categories, when taken together, adequately articulate Weil's influence on Grant.

For Weil, perfection manifests itself in the human desire for God. The desire for God is the only legitimate pressure that can make a person live a life attuned to the divine. Forbes asserts that Weil refers to the Platonic tradition of the Good beyond being in her attempt to articulate the object of human desire. Perfection is that which ultimately pulls human desire toward itself. Affliction, on the other hand, represents the profoundest human suffering: physical, psychological, and social. The afflicted person can be so degraded spiritually and physically that “for a time, God appears to be absent” (Forbes: 2007, 198). The integral question for Forbes is how Weil reconciles the existence of affliction with the existence of God's perfection. The question of theodicy is answered in a preliminary way through her articulation of the power of contradiction. Standing before a profound contradiction leads one to the utter limit of human intellectual capacity. While contradiction can be disconcerting and humbling, contradiction also has the potential to become the location of contact between God and mortals because contradiction brings human beings to the intellectual position closest to God. Living thoughtfully in contradiction is preferable to the illusions created by imaginative attempts to ignore the reality of evil in a world created by a moral and omnipotent God.

Weil perceives an infinite distance between the order of necessity and God. Forbes asserts:

Simone Weil's picture of our situation seems to resemble Plato's in at least one crucial respect, that there is a great distance, even an infinite distance, mediated somehow by intellect, between the ultimate reality that is pure goodness and the shadowy world of our experience, one of physical forces and necessities that make life a mixture, from the natural standpoint, of good and evil. (Forbes: 2007, 203)

For Weil, the radical gap between the order of necessity and God is what defines all aspects of human life. Even the human will is subject to the impartial, inexorable and amoral forces operative in the realm of necessity:

On this view, the things that we encounter in the world, including other human beings, have no choice but to obey the necessities governing their natures. There is no question, from this standpoint, of their being morally good or bad or freely striving to become better or failing to be as good as they should be: they are what they are and not anything else, and often, unfortunately, they are far from being anything that we can understand as good. (Forbes: 2007, 205)

Forbes considers how Grant has appropriated these various aspects of Weil's thought. Grant's most revealing essay in this context is "Faith and the Multiversity."<sup>107</sup> For Grant, the pursuit of objectivity in the multiversity leads inevitably to problems for personal articulations of faith and self-knowledge. The modern attempt to objectify and control external reality leads inexorably to the objectification of the self. Self-objectification manifests itself in the modern inability to appreciate the qualities of goodness, happiness or beauty in any experience. The modern consciousness refuses to be open to qualitative experience and forces all experience to submit to rigidly pre-

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<sup>107</sup> George Grant, "Faith and the Multiversity," in *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1986) 35-77.

defined categories. This is how the progressivist imperative operates on the individual level.

As a palliative to this objectifying, technological mode of thinking, Grant takes to heart Weil's dictum that "[f]aith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love" (Forbes: 2007, 211). For Grant, love is openness to the beauty of otherness, which defies objectification. In this way, both Weil and Grant assert the goodness of creation:

To see the beauty of the world in this way—not from any practical point of view, but contemplatively, in a way that provides some respite from practical considerations—is to recognize its essential goodness. And finally, to insist, as Simone Weil does, on the beauty and goodness of the world—using these terms to characterize the whole of the natural order, rather than to distinguish its attractive or useful elements from others that are ugly or noxious—is to suggest that beauty and goodness inhere somehow in the natural order itself rather than, as we like to say, 'in the eye of the beholder.' (Forbes: 2007, 210)

Grant's emphasis on the beauty of otherness reveals itself in sharp contrast to the modern, technological conception of nature. The technological, objectifying conception of nature in the modern account of justice obscures the human ability to conceive of justice as more than simply "a painfully necessary part of our roundabout way of collectively wresting what we want from nature" (Forbes: 2007, 214). Grant's emphasis on faith as intelligence enlightened by love is of paramount importance, because it speaks to a conception of justice removed from blind obedience to doctrinal orthodoxy or irrational faith in supernatural occurrences. The substantive justice inferred by love-enlightened intelligence manifests itself in openness to the beauty of otherness beyond the claims of objectivity and control. Forbes explains Grant's theology in terms of reasoning and willing: Grant sees openness to the beauty of otherness as fundamentally

based on sound reasoning, while he perceives the technological paradigm that animates modernity as a result of the Western emphasis on willing. Forbes concludes:

When we reason, whether it be in determining the weight of evidence regarding some generalization or in working out the implications of premises or axioms taken as established, we submit ourselves to the guidance of something external. Reasoning involves the recognition that right and wrong or truth and falsehood are not in the end matters of choosing. Reasoning, despite its directedness and seeking, requires a certain passivity or receptivity. To will, on the other hand, is to experience oneself as free of any external determination, as behaving in a way that can shape the external world rather than just receiving its imprint. In willing we are no longer aware of ourselves as dependent beings; instead, we feel ourselves to be independent or autonomous, essentially active and creative rather than passive and receptive. We encounter the world as an array of objects against our subjectivity, impeding our purposes or ready for our use, rather than as an orderly whole inviting our admiration. (Forbes: 2007, 218)

Forbes' penetrating analysis of Grant's conception of justice is centred on the political question: what is worth doing in the modern, technological society? Forbes' interpretation of Weil's influence on Grant is helpful in its clarity. However, an emphasis on otherness in the context of practical questions about justice in the political sphere does not expose the full implications of Weil's theology for Grant's understanding of technology.

Recently, there has been sustained interest in the dualistic aspects of Grant's thought, most notably Pam McCarroll's recent essay, "The Whole as Love."<sup>108</sup> According to McCarroll, Grant's religious thought can only be properly understood in the context of Grant's understanding of the Whole:

According to Grant, the Whole includes all of reality—the universe, human and non-human being, and God. The essence of the Whole, however, is love. In a more precise sense, then, the Whole is the vast and intricate network of relationships within the universe and between human and non-human being and God. This network of the Whole is held together by love, visible and invisible. Of course, writing in this way would be foreign to Grant’s thinking. The Whole is nowhere in his writing more than suggestive imagery, a canvas upon which he focuses his thought on the particular set of issues in question. However, because the Whole is so essential a concept for Grant, experientially and intellectually, it must be understood by anyone who seeks to engage his thought and its rich legacy to us. (Angus, Dart, Peters: 2006, 270)

McCarroll emphasizes the fact that the Whole contains a radical separation between the order of necessity and the order of God. While the Whole is held together by love, the distance between necessity and God is unbridgeable by the human intellect. Like Forbes, McCarroll asserts that Grant is aware that the order of necessity is “indifferen[t] to the Good” (Angus, Dart, Peters: 2006, 274) and that one can only approach knowledge of the divine through embracing the contradictions that emerge in the withdrawal of God from the realm of necessity. Contradiction represents the locality of what McCarroll dubs Grant’s theological *via negativa*. Grant’s theological understanding resists all modern attempts to overcome contradiction through dismissing or explaining away the reality of affliction:

For Grant, of course, the most blasphemous lie of modernity is the conceptual collapse of the distance between the two realms and the implied scrutability of God. In modernity, [Grant] recognizes the ethical consequences of the conceptual eclipse of the eternal order. The Good has been emptied of content and collapsed into necessity. (Angus, Dart, Peters: 2006, 274)

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<sup>108</sup> Pam McCarroll, “The Whole As Love,” in ed. Ian Angus, Ron Dart, and Randy Peters, *Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant’s Theology, Philosophy, and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) 270-285.

As does Forbes, McCarroll discusses several theoretical categories that illuminate Weil's theological influence on Grant. The infinite distance between God and the order of necessity is illuminated for Grant by Weil's explanation of force, gravity, and affliction. Force is the inexorable tendency in nature to master and control objects. McCarroll relates Grant's understanding of technology to the concept of force: modern technology is the most visible manifestation of the sovereignty of force within the order of necessity. Likewise, Weil's conception of gravity is important for Grant, because gravity constitutes the content of sin. Sin is the effect of gravity on the human soul, which is constantly being pushed to acknowledge the order of necessity as the ultimate reality. Thus, "[w]ith God having been collapsed into the world, the transcendent horizon is obscured from view...In modernity we gaze only at the horizontal plane of necessity and assume this is all there is" (Angus, Dart, Peters: 2006, 276).

Grant interprets affliction and human suffering to be the result of the constant pressing down of amoral natural processes like force and gravity. The ultimate site of affliction is found in the cross of Christ, where Christ suffers the utter abandonment of God. Again, McCarroll's analysis is similar to that of Forbes in its emphasis on the seminal place of contradiction in Grant's theology. Yet McCarroll asserts that in the crucifixion, God's love is manifested as the ultimate source and fabric of the Whole. The loving connection between God in the order of necessity and God as wholly transcendent constitutes God's revelation to the order of necessity. Although positive knowledge of God is absent from the order of necessity, the connection between the two orders that is

located in the cross provides a glimpse of the love that underlies both the order of necessity and the order of God. McCarroll concludes by asserting that, for Grant, “the contradiction between God and the world must remain a contradiction to human thought,” but that contradiction is divinely superseded by “the oneness of the all in all” (Angus, Dart, Peters: 2006, 281).

For all their theoretical similarities, Forbes and McCarroll offer differing accounts of the significance of Weil’s dualism for Grant’s theology. Forbes offers an illuminating account of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of Grant’s thought, and he also rightly points out the interconnectedness of Grant’s understanding of technology with the development of his political, philosophical and theological views. On the other hand, Forbes overlooks important aspects of Grant’s thought, particularly the influence of Ellul on the development of his understanding of technology. McCarroll also appears to overlook the importance of Ellul’s concept of technological necessity for the development of Grant’s theology. However, McCarroll seems to be much more willing to examine Weil’s influence on Grant in terms of radical dualism. Although McCarroll does not discuss the fundamental importance of Grant’s understanding of technology to the development of his theology, her description of the radical separation of the order of necessity and God is helpful because it represents a significant and sustained attempt to examine the radical nature of his dualism, in contrast to the scholarly orthodoxy that prevails in Grant studies. McCarroll points to Weil’s radical dualism as the theoretical space in which Grant formulates his theology.

Both Forbes and McCarroll interpret Grant's understanding of technology as symptomatic, rather than causal, in the order of necessity. Technology is examined as a profound symptom of the modern mindset. This appears to underestimate the decisive place technology holds in Grant's thought. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that technology is not merely a profound symptom of modernity, but both the fundamental catalyst and the pervasive manifestation of modernity. Without recognizing Grant's understanding of the fundamental, ontological significance of technology in the order of necessity, neither Forbes nor McCarroll can perceive the gnostic elements that are present in his appropriation of Weilian theology. For Grant, technology is not merely one facet of the modern experience among others, that can be overcome through an appeal to God's unifying but supra-rational love. Rather, he sees technology as the ontology of the modern age. The separation that McCarroll so persuasively discusses, when analysed in the context of Grant's understanding of technology, contains all the requirements of a gnostic dualism between the unredeemable order of technological necessity and God.

The dissertation argues that Weil's repeated emphasis on the radical separation between the order of necessity from God leads Grant's theology into a gnostic dualism in which God is conceived as infinitely distant from the order of necessity. Ellul's continuing influence on Grant is significant in this context, because it is from Ellul's conception of technology as pervasive and inescapable that Grant articulates the technological civilization as "darkness." While it is true that he considers the notion of

substantive justice to be operative in the order of necessity, justice is not presented by Grant as a *practical* remedy for the ravages of technological civilization. For Grant, the claim of otherness is merely an intimation of the radical Otherness that exists beyond the order of necessity. Justice, lived within the order of necessity, is destined to fail because the order of technological necessity is removed from God. However, the radical separation between the two orders does not absolve human beings from responsibility for their actions in the order of necessity. We are called to witness to the reality of God, particularly because the transcendent order is real and imposes obligations on human action in the realm of necessity. Justice is the practical manifestation of the claim of the utterly transcendent God that exists beyond being.

The dissertation will hopefully be useful for clarifying the importance of several formative influences on Grant's understanding of technology, particularly the often underestimated influence of Ellul. Furthermore, the dissertation emphasizes the profound importance of Grant's changing understanding of technology for the development of his theology. Attempting to re-examine the relation between Grant's fundamental concepts has the potential to open up new avenues of interdisciplinary research into his thought, and thus spark a renewed interest in Grant across academic disciplines. The dissertation has painted a decidedly dark portrait of Grant's understanding of technological necessity and the inevitable victory of modern ideas over all attempts to explain the world in the context of Plato's philosophy and Christian theology. Nevertheless, the dissertation is not an attempt to answer the question as to whether Grant is finally an optimist or a

pessimist. Indeed, Grant has already answered such questions in his assertion that ultimate reality is fundamentally oriented toward the Good. Attempts to find a political solution to the growing darkness in the technological civilization may be doomed to failure, and Western Christianity may be doomed by the pervasiveness of the doctrine of radical freedom it helped to create; however, ultimately the inevitabilities are submerged, for Grant, in the more fundamental truth that Weil's theology uncovers: the inexpressible mystery of God in silence and withdrawal from the order of necessity.

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