
ELLUL, BATAILLE, ZHUANGZI & TECHNOLOGICAL MAN

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ABSTRACT

The impact of modern technological society on the human spirit and on human values is undeniable. But the ability to philosophically engage with this impact and also to gain the means whereby we could evaluate it lucidly and soberly is a whole other matter. It is difficult for us today to find a place where we could stand outside the contemporary cultural matrix that has come to create our very selves, so as to identify and assess the aspects of our humanity that have always managed to outstrip the cultural conditioning and construction of our most basic senses of identity and self. This paper will take this as a central theme by briefly looking at three specific philosophers of culture and humanity, and will explore their insights on the concepts of technology, culture, utility, and efficiency. By extension, all the perspectives outlined here will also imply a philosophical portrayal of the condition of contemporary man therein. Through examining some specific writings of Jacques Ellul, Georges Bataille and the Chinese sage Zhuangzi, as they bring to bear on these aforementioned concepts, it is my contention that we will be in a better position to assess the relationship between the human spirit, technology and society in general, as well as explore the ways in which

we can reclaim the inalienable and fundamental existential sovereignty of the human spirit in particular.

Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*

Cultural philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul wrote in his 1964 work, *The Technological Society*, that one of the main principles upon which the trajectory of contemporary technological civilization rests is in the premise that any modern human undertaking can essentially be valued and assessed solely in terms of how efficiently it completes the task it was meant to do.¹ What this emphasis on utility implies is that ours is a modern society which is primarily and fundamentally oriented toward developing a series of technological solutions for as many problematic aspects of contemporary society as possible, as we are always already socially and personally engaged in *principles of technique*; and Ellul notes that this predominant emphasis on, “Technique presents man with multiple problems.”² For Ellul, the concept of *technique* can be summarized as follows:

“The term technique, as I use it, does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, 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*. Its characteristics are new; the technique of the present has no common measure with that of the past.”³

The problems this presents are manifold. Contemporary technological society presents itself today as a kind of cultural monolith in the sense that it demands from us a kind of totalized conformity to the need for all of our existential ends to be realized in the most efficient manner. It can be therefore characterized as a kind of “dictatorship of efficiency.” A primary part of its own efficiency lies in the fact that all other values are seen to be simply arbitrarily chosen personal values, and the supreme communal value, *efficiency*, then comes to subordinate

these more personal values to it in a wider cultural sense. Furthermore, *technique* serves to reinforce the instrumental thinking of contemporary human action, innovation, societal goals, and even our own basic desires, inasmuch as one must begin to think and act in a more mechanized and efficient way so as to appropriately and harmoniously function in a more mechanized humanly-altered environment. What is at stake here for Ellul is our freedom as sovereign, creative and autonomous *human* beings. This is because the contemporary search for the absolute heights of efficiency, through the refined development of technique as both a means and as an end in itself, is not ultimately subordinate to any other facet of the human intellect, desire, morality, aesthetic, or passion. The sum of our contemporary culture is absolutely and in every phase geared toward the development and sustenance of technique, technology, and of their marriage to the modern economic system. As such, Ellul states that technological progress “is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency.”⁴

As these contemporary forms slavishly follow their function aesthetically speaking, so too does human freedom and sovereignty become subordinate to the cultural necessity for the manifold advancement of techniques. Michel Foucault has elsewhere noted, that most of these contemporary techniques are largely situated in their application at the nexus between power and knowledge in modern society.⁵ For Foucault, as well as for Ellul, what this essentially means is that the contemporary emphasis on the value of *technique*, and the correlative cultural construction of technical efficiency as a preeminent value, are not only inculcated into modern humans as *the* most favored forms of thinking, but they also create *a kind of human being* that favors these forms of thinking above all else. That is to say, the power and primacy of technically oriented and overtly mechanized thought processes also become a primary mechanism of power’s transmission throughout society and human bodies at the same time.

“We need to see how these mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjuncture and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful...It is only if we grasp these techniques of power and demonstrate the economic advantages or political utility that derives from them in a given context for specific reasons, that we can understand how these mechanisms come to be effectively incorporated into the social whole.”⁶

For Ellul, technique, technology and efficiency are not all the same things, but yet are all similarly intertwined within an overarching and modern cultural value system. And, as this value system of contemporary emphasis on *technique* becomes more and more autonomous, and also more pervasive, human beings begin to lose their individual power to control it; and they therefore inevitably end up being controlled by it. This is precisely the point where elementary and fundamental human freedom and sovereignty become fully compromised. Jacques Ellul is clear that basic human existential freedom of choice and action runs counter to the mindset of contemporary technically oriented values.

“No technique is possible when men are free. When technique enters into the realm of social life, it collides ceaselessly with the human being to the degree that the combination of man and technique is unavoidable, and that technical action necessarily results in a determined result. Technique requires predictability and, no less, exactness of prediction. It is necessary, then, that technique prevail over the human being. For technique, this is a matter of life or death. Technique must reduce man to a technical animal, the king of the slaves of technique. Human caprice crumbles before this necessity; there can be no human autonomy in the face of technical autonomy.”⁷

So, For Ellul, just as for Foucault, to recapture our originary *human* autonomy means to firmly face the fact that individual human beings are for the most part socially constructed entities and primarily directed toward the goal of the perfection of the technological edifice that qualifies our modern society. That is to say, we now need to understand the true fundamental nature of contemporary culture and its relationship to individual freedom and sovereignty, so as to more fully understand our place in it, and thus perhaps where our existential freedom may lie on its furthest shore.

“The enormous effort required to put this technical civilization into motion supposes that all individual effort is directed toward this goal alone and that all social forces are mobilized to attain the mathematically perfect structure of the edifice. (“Mathematically” does not mean “rigidly.” The perfect technique is the most adaptable and, consequently, the most plastic one. True technique will know how to maintain the illusion of liberty, choice, and individuality; but these will have been carefully calculated so that they will be integrated into the mathematical reality merely as appearances!) Henceforth it will be wrong for a man to escape this universal effort. It will be inadmissible for any part of the individual not to be integrated in the drive toward *technicization*; it will be inadmissible that any man even aspire to escape this necessity of the whole society. The individual will no longer be able, materially or spiritually, to disengage himself from society.”⁸

As mentioned before, what is at stake here is our human existential freedom and sovereignty and as such, disengage we must; if we are to realize and maintain our fullest physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities as human beings. This presupposes that we can be something more as human beings; more than simply becoming just another social production. It also presupposes that we have more to our fundamental natures than what we have been culturally predisposed to develop. The loss of the full

range of our existential liberty is therefore the crux of the issue. There is an excess of humanity available to us that lies outside and beyond our civilization. And furthermore, “We see in this loss of liberty the downward path into which technique is leading us.”⁹ The fundamental forms of conflict for Ellul lie somewhere in between the spiritual and the material realms of human being. There seems always to be an excess of human spirit that lies beyond the cultural manipulation of the material basis of life itself. This is the reason why fundamental values and ways of thinking are so important in relation to human sovereignty and existential freedom. This is because, “The very assimilation of ideas into the technical framework which renders them materially effective makes them spiritually worthless.”¹⁰ What he means by this is that by placing a primacy on technique and efficiency, contemporary society has come to neglect our most basic and fundamental human impulses. These impulses do come to the fore and are at times given shape and form in the developments of various artistic and literary movements, but this too has already been anticipated and integrated into the overarching thrust of modernity it seems. “The basic human impulses are unpredictable in their complex social consequences. But thanks to “movements” which integrate and control them, they are powerless to harm the technical society, of which henceforth they form an integral part.”¹¹ So, it seems that even the harnessing of this existential spiritual excess whether through the forms of artistic or social revolution, has already managed to become little more than just another commodity in the end, and simply just another pre-calculated strategy of commodification and population appeasement which further strengthens the efficiency and the ubiquitousness of technological society. Ellul concludes,

“With the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of these 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 bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile.”¹²

Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1*

At first glance, Georges Bataille’s work doesn’t seem to be as direct nor as incisive as Ellul’s *The Technological Society*. However, this impression is a deceptive one. Bataille’s volume may be a self-professed treatise on political economy, but for all that, it is a philosophical work that also essentially describes in detail the manner in which the fundamental nuances of the human spirit not only manage to outstrip the basic cultural economy of regionalized technical efficiency, but also manage to escape Ellul’s pessimism by advancing a more holistic perspective on humanity’s modern emphasis on *technique* as forms of intellectual and social value. It also introduces a more metaphysical and biological perspective on human culture and individual sovereignty that serves to broaden our awareness of both our individual possibilities, as well as the inherent parameters of our contemporary existential paradigm.

Bataille begins his work by distinguishing between the *restricted economy*, the general societal economic perspective of most contemporary economic theory, and the *general economy*, which is the fundamental flow and movement of the sum total of available solar energy and its effects on the terrestrial globe. In this sense then, the *general economy* is nothing more than a complete “circuit of cosmic energy,” and as such, it realizes its nature as a naturally excessive and non-recuperable part of the economy. As a basic surplus or excess of cosmically conditioned life-energy, Bataille argues that this primary aspect of the *general economy* must in fact be uselessly squandered, by metaphysical necessity.¹³ What this means is, that a naturally occurring surplus of cosmic energy (or wealth), must be diligently spent without regard to consequent material gain or profit on various “luxurious” cultural episodes such as art, eroticism,

fashion, spectacles, or sumptuous monuments; or else, this same energy is destined to be spent or released in any case, now as a forced catastrophic outpouring, in a manner that threatens the prevailing system in particular, and humanity in general.

Bataille's emphasis is on the *excess* of energy, in sum total on the earth, which begins with the unrestricted outpouring of solar energy over the terrestrial sphere, and then with the existential surpluses produced by life's basic chemical reactions; and also the excessive pressures which are regularly put on the earth's various ecosystems by the life-processes of organisms themselves, in like manner.¹⁴ In terms of a more restricted economy, and of classical economic theory, organisms are motivated by scarcity and necessity, but when viewed from the perspective of the more general economy of the entire terrestrial plane of existence, organisms are rather burdened with the dispensing of an overall surplus. As Bataille puts it, burdened with *Le Part Maudite*, or the accursed share.

Any growth or expansion of life always eventually runs up against its natural limits, either in space, or through time; and it is there, at this point, that the focus of life turns toward the useless squandering and dissipation of energy. So, for Bataille, this expenditure of energy, which serves to form the complete and total movement of energy on the earth, is the most important focus of his work. His concern is, "that of excess energy translated into the effervescence of life."¹⁵ This is a focus on a point in life where energy meets its natural limit, where the "subject is at its boiling point," and it is this which in fact animates the entire globe.¹⁶

One primary consequence of this particular perspective advanced by Bataille is the shortsightedness and narrow mentality of the common utilitarian and calculative perspectives towards efficiency in economy and life. This is the domain of the restricted economy where humans manipulate energy for immediate and localized gains as well as immediate technological developments for immediate ends. The more general economic perspective shows however, that accumulation and profit reach their natural limitations organically which in turn, necessitate an adjustment toward extravagant energy expenditure, a natural overflow and

profit-less dissipation of energy (or accumulated wealth) which cannot be used for a system's growth (as it has reached its natural limitations), or, as Bataille puts it, "the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space."¹⁷ Both examples stand at the apex of energy confluence and dissipation.

This reality "...requires thinking on a level with a play of forces that runs counter to ordinary calculations, a play of forces based on the laws that govern us...it is not necessity but its contrary "luxury" that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems."¹⁸ So then, is *technique*, and efficiency as an ultimate value, and modern technology as a cultural reflection of these values, simply a natural predicated consequence of human luxury, or more succinctly, are these realities just needless and worthless luxuries themselves? Luxuries which lead us to disregard our true material basis in favor of illusionary ideological, or fantastic culturally constructed hyper-realities? According to Bataille, all terrestrial economic activity acts as a part of the cosmic movement of energy as gained from solar radiation as its source. It is the resultant movement that is produced on the surface of the globe by cosmic forces that come to be from the free circulation and flow of energy at this particular point in the universe. As he says, "Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe."¹⁹ In this sense then, the sum total of man's general economic activity naturally resists any specific form of cultural appropriation. One's particular cultural matrix can define one's particular mode of economic expression within a particular and limited regional system only. And nothing more.

Bataille's main line of reasoning in its most fundamental aspects, mirrors the developmental life-cycle of organisms and organic populations, and can be summarized in the following way: the living organism receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life, the excess energy (or wealth) can at first be used for the growth of a system or organism, if the excess cannot be absorbed in its natural growth, then it necessarily must be lost without profit; in the end, this excess *must* be spent, "willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically."²⁰ This wanton destruction or lavish

expenditure of excess unneeded energy is seen by Bataille to be the inevitable naturalistic *solution* to the problem of the accumulation of excess energy or wealth on the planet.

The reality of this proposed theoretical architecture is perhaps best shown in the cultural complex of the “potlatch” among the indigenous peoples of Vancouver Island in Canada. Here, we can see their culturally circumscribed and ritualized acts of sumptuous gift-giving on a large scale, and also the destruction of huge amounts of property and excess wealth (or cosmic energy) in exchange for non-materialistic cultural prestige and status. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss notes,

“We are here confronted with total prestation in the sense that the whole clan, through the intermediacy of its chiefs, makes contracts involving all its members and everything it possesses. But the agonistic character of the prestation is pronounced. Essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their own clans.”²¹

This cultural event of extravagant and conspicuous energy dissipation is by no means restricted to a single iconoclastic population historically situated on Vancouver Island, but rather it is also a salient characteristic of many human populations both ancient and modern, though it exists in varying forms and degrees worldwide. Reasons of brevity and space here prevent me from exploring some other culturally constructed examples of certain cultural forms of energy dissipation further however (such as human sacrifices among the Aztec and Maya for example). The main point to be made at this juncture is that, “a surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations: the final dissipation cannot fail to carry out the movement that animates terrestrial energy.”²² This is because Bataille’s conception of the general economy cannot be conceived of simply in terms of particular regional operations with limited ends as simply dictated by economic necessity or cultural prestige.

Through this then, we can come to understand with Bataille that both necessity and sovereignty must meet to compel the human being, in his position on the earth, towards the directive of useless consumption. Our own limited consciousness of restricted economic necessity amounts to nothing more than a denial of the sovereign naturalistic movements of the universe and of man's proper place within it. We can see that although individuals or local population systems may be driven by necessity to seek resource accumulation, the global movement of energy, *as a whole*, seeks nothing more than its own death and renewal, useless consumption, and the squandering of excess energy reserves. It is our basic existential ignorance then that, "causes us to undergo what we could bring about in our own way."²³ This ignorance deprives us of a most suitable dispersion of energy or wealth, which like the "potlatch" for the native peoples of Vancouver Island, is the most suitable one for a given particular cultural and ecological niche. Instead, by focusing only on the particular necessities of resource accumulation as dictated to us by the nature of the perspective of the *restricted economy*, we allow and even encourage a dangerous buildup of excess energy (or wealth) to occur where it will in turn, inevitably come to destroy the prevailing system of its own volition. What this means is simply that if we don't consciously excrete or squander the excess energy that we have managed to accumulate, then it in turn will come to destroy us. Bataille notes that all societies somehow manage to accommodate and dissipate the excesses of life force which,

"Locally block the poorest economies [and] are in fact the most dangerous factors of ruination. Hence relieving the blockage was always, if only in the darkest region of consciousness, the object of a feverish pursuit. Ancient societies found relief in festivals. Some erected admirable monuments that had no useful purpose, we use the excess to multiply "services" that make life smoother and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time."²⁴

Without developing a proper amount and intensity of these culturally sanctioned “release valves,” or likewise, with our unchecked and insatiable appetite for resource accumulation, the persistence and unthinking pursuit of accumulated excess dooms populations to war and destruction as organic forms of energy release. Soaring industrialized techniques and activities lead to the presence of ever more destructive forces. So, to avoid new and globalized forms of warfare we must divert our surplus production, “either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.”²⁵

The necessary movement from the perspective of the restricted economy toward the general economy of the whole terrestrial sphere amounts to a “Copernican revolution” in economics, as well as in human values. Here, basic self-interested calculative thinking, economics of accumulation, and emphasis on technique and efficiency run up against their natural limitations, and we face the stark realization that our precious commodities and wealth must simply be surrendered without return. A “margin of profitless operations” must come to be established in the exact same manner that “solar radiation results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe.”²⁶ The concept of self-interested calculative thought, and of pure resource extraction as a means to dominate the globe with an eye to profit margins, is at fundamental odds with the primary desire of life itself to organically exceed the natural given limits of growth and then again, to dissipate this excess. It occurs in any case. For us this becomes a matter of securing the acceptable losses over being forcibly subjected to catastrophic and unacceptable losses.

Unlike Jacques Ellul, Bataille does not assess our technological society in terms of its own internal and historical cultural morality and inherited values. Rather, he rejects the modern hyper-rationalized emphasis on technique, and the overvalued extension of technical praxis in our society which is unthinkingly employed in the name of a wanton accumulation of efficient techniques (a supreme value and highly desirable end in their own right), in the name of a naturalistic materialism

which, he says, is fundamentally opposed to our current contemporary mindset and value system. Ellul points to the fact that our technological society compromises our fundamental human sovereignty and freedom to self-determination. Bataille emphasizes the fact that the nature of our current contemporary political economy is limited and ignorant and it runs counter to the naturalistic flow of the universe, with inevitable disastrous consequences for us.

Zhuangzi and *Wu-Wei*

Zhuangzi also has written critiques of placing primacy on the mentality of calculation, efficiency and technique as fundamental forms of human value. This is slightly paradoxical in that over and above being books of philosophy, *The Zhuangzi* and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* are both books about technique themselves. The life techniques they espouse are existential for the most part and therefore are excellently situated to conclude this essay which has largely concerned itself with the existential implications of technical and economic thinking and of contemporary technological society in general.

Zhuangzi's doctrine of *Wu-Wei* (無為) refers equally to his notions of non-action, to effortless action, or more appropriately, to action-less action. Despite its paradoxical and multi-faceted nature, it is first and foremost a refined technique of action and a precise manner of engagement with the world. It is also quite difficult to simply describe although it has played a central role as a concept in the Chinese classical period of philosophy.

“...although the term *Wu-Wei* itself does not come into widespread use until relatively late in the Warring States period, the ideal that it describes – acting effortlessly and spontaneously in harmony with a normative standard and thereby acquiring an almost magical efficaciousness in moving through the world and attracting people to oneself - can be identified as a central theme in Chinese religious thought in texts as early as the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, and later Chinese commentators adopted *Wu-Wei* as a term to describe this ideal.”²⁷

Ellul highlights contemporary human activity as placing primacy on instrumental values and techniques of efficiency. Bataille sees human activity as being wrongly centered on restricted and limited interests for limited ends, and of contemporary man as being dangerously ignorant of our proper place in the universe. By contrast, Zhuangzi advocates Wu-Wei, “a technique of action without artifice...a type of action that does not impose artificial constraints, but that senses and follows things, events, and processes.”²⁸ This is advocated as a fundamental means for humanity to move through the world in a spirit of harmony with the natural flows of nature itself. As a kind of *general economy* of action. Whereas, Ellul and Bataille both offer carefully constructed critiques of modern technological society and economy, Zhuangzi simply offers us a way forward. This attitude of engagement with the world naturally follows from the establishment of a place without boundaries as providing the basis for one’s actions and thinking.

So it is that, *Wu-Suo* (無所) or literally “no-place,” is precisely the right place from which one can become familiar with *Wu-Wei* (無為). What I take this to mean is that the dissolution of both rationalistic and culturally constructed boundaries is the beginning point of elevating non-calculative, and non-technical thinking to a position of primary existential value. Wu-Suo is therefore the necessary starting point for “proper” human thinking, *proper* here simply meaning a form of being which is fundamentally harmonious with our place in the natural fabric; and therefore it provides an equally fundamental basis for the justification of transcending basic self-interested interpretations of reality. It allows us an existential space from which to assess our true human natures, and also to evaluate the most harmonious way to proceed in meeting our respective futures.

“If people were to sleep in a marsh, they would develop a deathly lumbago – but is this so of a fish? If they were to set up a home in a tree, they would shudder with anxiety, fear and dread – but is this so of apes and monkeys? Of the three, which knows the right place to live? People eat livestock; deer eat grass. Centipedes relish juicy maggots;

while owls and crows delight in rat flesh. Of these four, which knows the right taste? Apes take apes for their mates; deer mix with deer; fish prefer the company of fish...Of which knows the world's true beauty?"²⁹

This is less an argument for some sort of cultural relativism than it is an acknowledgement that each kind of organism has its own boundaries and limitations which circumscribe their existential "appropriateness," and senses of harmony, taste, and beauty in terms of their particular natures. In short, each organism has a place. But does each organism possess the capacity to evaluate that place? Wu-Suo is precisely no-place. And it is this "no-place" which can serve to ground our evaluations of the qualities of our own particular place and time, and give us new meanings to the way in which we choose to engage the world.

Simply engaging in self-interested pursuits of wealth accumulation and elevating techniques of efficiency above all else does not acknowledge that there is a place where we can stand outside of this rubric (Wu-Suo) and from which to assess the existential value of these same pursuits. It does not acknowledge the excess of energy (Bataille) and the qualities of authentic human being (Ellul) that exist beyond and outside the boundaries of our technological society and its particular restricted economic pursuits; and which serves to provide us a place from which to judge its worth to both ourselves and to the world. And it is a most fundamental existential *simplicity* of life which allows us to engage the world from the perspective of Wu-Suo.

Following from Ellul's critique, it becomes clear to us that it is a manner of being that clings to *simplicity* as a first principle, and as a means of retaining one's freedom and sovereignty not by subordinating one's self to techniques of efficient activity. Simplicity as a first principle of Wu-Wei emphasizes the restriction of one's activities and desires "to what is necessary and what is natural."³⁰ As simplicity dethrones efficiency of technique and self-interested calculations as a primary guiding principle of life, we can see that this becomes a matter of forgetting one's

culturally constructed desires and knowledge, of foregoing a reliance upon calculation, and also of relinquishing a slavish adherence to technical efficiency in favor of achieving the desired result of realizing what is natural in oneself in relation to the world. This is also the domain of Ellul's freedom, sovereignty, and self-determination.

There is a story in the writings of Zhuangzi of a particular country farmer who is irrigating his vegetable garden by carrying jars of water from a well, working very hard, and yet getting very little material results. A disciple of Confucius one day remarks to the farmer that there exists a machine that can make this work of watering the garden go much faster with little or no extra effort on his part. The gardener seems at first to be quite curious about the device, but after hearing of its design, he complains that such a machine would give him too many "machine worries" and "machine thoughts." Presumably, machine thought is instrumental thinking about means and ends in life, and machine worry is the natural concern for mechanical problems arising out of an increasing dependency upon technology to resolve basic life processes. Even though the machine would ultimately save him a large amount of time and effort, and get more work accomplished in the end, the gardener ultimately claims that *simplicity* would be ruined and his mind would become too unsettled. The gardener finally judges that there would be more lost than gained in using the machine.³¹

To achieve this kind of determination of the value of technology, technique and efficiency, as well as the value of unthinking wealth accumulation, one has to be able to achieve a manner of existing in a place outside of these undertakings. This requires that one be fully engaged with the world *in general*, as Bataille emphasized, not merely within the restricted, limited and narrow precepts of one's technological society. Zhuangzi's disregard for the particular ebb and flow of the political life of his time stems from "his conviction that the best government is no government."³² Similarly, Bataille sees the need for wealthy governments to bend their own restricted economic policies to the flow of the universe rather than to their own limited desires. "The industrial development

of the entire world demands of Americans that they lucidly grasp the necessity, for an economy, of having a margin of profitless operations.”³³ And the bending of one’s reality to the flow of the universal will, rather than imposing one’s self-interested desires upon it, is precisely the heart of Wu-Wei as a technique of action.

Zhuangzi also highlights the utility of uselessness as a way to understand how humans should engage in the world in accordance with nature rather than self-interest. Like Bataille who emphasized the value of the “useless” squandering of wealth and resources so as to fulfill a higher function of conformity to the universal order, so too does Zhuangzi emphasize the value of the manifestly useless as an integral aspect of harmony with nature. And yet, there is the mistaken contemporary perception of uselessness that is proven to be restricted and limited when seen from a more general perspective, as Bataille would also argue. There is a story of a man who has been given some enormous gourds, but he complains to Zhuangzi that he could not use them for containers because they were just too heavy to carry. He said that they were likewise useless as dippers because there was nothing large enough to dip them into. He decided that they were of no use at all and he simply destroyed them. Zhuangzi asked why he did not think of using them as boats to float around on the rivers and lakes, and he tells a story about a medicinal salve that allowed a poor family to make a small living bleaching silk. The same salve was bought later by an entrepreneur who made a fortune selling it to a king, who, in turn, used it to win a significant naval battle. So then, what produced a meager living in one case, made a fortune and saved a kingdom in another case. The first kind of instrumental thinking was limited to one form of usefulness whereas the other kind of instrumental thinking was open to redefining what was useful and seeing a new wider form of usefulness in what otherwise would be regarded as useless.³⁴

This story highlights that utility and usefulness depend far more on creativity and freedom of thought than on conformity to the contemporary values of technological society, its calculative thinking, and on its valuation of the efficiency of technique. In fact, all of these

latter existential realities actually serve to stultify and suppress the kind of creativity which is necessary for its fulfillment; which is precisely both Ellul and Zhuangzi's point. Furthermore, misidentifying what is actually most existentially useful for us can have disastrous consequences for us as Bataille has argued. Zhuangzi goes on elsewhere to tell the story of a tree:

“It is so large that ten thousand chariots might be sheltered under it and its shade would cover them all. A master carpenter walks by without stopping, remarking that the tree is quite useless as it has too many small, twisted, crooked branches: “This, indeed is a tree good for nothing, and it is thus that it has attained to such a size.” Later that night the tree speaks to the master carpenter in a dream: “Suppose that I had possessed useful properties – should I have become of the great size that I am... All men know the advantage of being useful but no one knows the advantage of being useless.”³⁵

This perspective also reinforces Bataille's arguments with respect to the profitless and useless expenditure of energy as actually having a supreme existential value that goes beyond the narrow and restricted conceptions of utility and efficiency. And it is this question of existential value that also throws into question the intellectual and ethical foundations of our own contemporary technological society, and our modern emphasis on the restricted economy and self-interested economic gain. Zhuangzi's Wu-Wei can be seen as a kind of existential corrective to the problems raised here by Ellul and Bataille. This is primarily because,

“It involves acting without desire, where desire is understood as the force that causes people and things to behave unnaturally. The natural is seen as being complementary to the Tao, while the unnatural is contradictory to it. Thus, Wu-Wei can be defined as: taking no action, loving tranquility, engaging in no activity and having no desires—all of which lead to natural transformation, correctness, prosperity and simplicity.”³⁶

This is not to say that Ellul and Bataille, (who in particular, had much to say on the topic of desire) would precisely agree with Zhuangzi on this matter, and perhaps they emphatically wouldn't in the end, but in effect, I am arguing that this is a most reasonable extension of their views, existentially speaking. Zhuangzi essentially places primacy on man's harmony with nature over the culturally constructed and rationalistic, self-interested engagement with the world that contemporary mankind is engaged in through his technologically oriented society and restricted economic concerns. This is the way to realize the full nature of human being in the world. The Tao simply has no fixed boundaries and just is; nothing that can be defined as being this or that thing absolutely and those who choose to follow the Tao cannot be said to have, or even not have, a fixed "this or that" quality.³⁷ Just as all qualities are fluid and in motion, so too is the doctrine of Wu-Wei a fundamental *process* of naturalistic engagement with the world, and at the same time, a most fluid means of overcoming its more dictatorial aspects as they relate to the over-valuation of technique, efficiency as an end in its own right, and the restricted economy in contemporary life.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ellul, J. *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage. 1964.

² *Ibid.* p.xxxii.

³ *Ibid.* p.xxv.

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 74.

⁵ Foucault, M. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*. Ed. By C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books. 1980.

⁶ *Ibid.* P.101.

⁷ Ellul, J. *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage. 1964. P.138.

⁸ *Ibid.* P.139.

⁹ *Ibid.* P.218.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* P.425.

¹¹ *Ibid.* P.426.

¹² *Ibid.* P.426-427.

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