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
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