

**Jacques Ellul**

## ***The Ethics of Freedom***

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

Translated and edited by Geoffrey Bromiley from the original *Ethique de la liberte*, (Geneve: Labor et Fides) Tome 1, 1973; Tome 2, 1975; Tome 3 (*Les Combats de la liberte*), 1984

**Re-viewed by Andrew Goddard**

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Ellul's *Ethics of Freedom* is the largest of his books in English and yet the English version (517pp) lacks much material that is found in the 3 volume French edition (totalling nearly 900pp). It is, therefore, impossible to do any justice at all to the book(s) in so short a space and so I hope here simply to locate it within Ellul's writing as a whole, explore the complexities of the inter-relationship between the different volumes and note some of its themes.

Within Ellul's ethical writing project, *Ethics of Freedom* follows the earlier publication of an introduction to his ethic in *To Will and To Do* (1964, ET 1969). It represents, in fact, an early example of the recent recovery of virtue ethics, explicitly rejecting the division between general ethics and special ethics (discussing different issues and areas – sexual, medical etc) in order to explore what it means to live life as a Christian in relationship with Christ.

Ellul's plan was to write an ethic corresponding to each of the three theological virtues – an ethic of freedom relating to hope, an ethic of holiness relating to faith and an ethic of relationship relating to love. Two of these virtues were also explored more fully in other books – *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (1972, ET 1973) and *Living Faith* (1980, ET 1983). Ellul says he resolved to begin this trilogy with the *Ethics of Freedom* back in 1960 (though the seed ideas are evident in articles in the early 1950s on necessity and freedom in Paul, in ET in *Sources and Trajectories*). It remains, to date, the only volume to appear although a manuscript is in existence for *Ethics of Holiness* and may soon be published.

The nature of the relationship between the French and English editions of *Ethics of Freedom* is particularly complex and confused. While the exact inter-relationship will never be totally clear and different and inaccurate accounts have been given (including by Ellul himself and Geoffrey Bromiley, the English editor and translator), it now appears that the situation is roughly as follows. Volumes 1 and 2 of *Ethique de la liberte* appeared in French in 1973 and 1975 with the latter confusingly claiming to have

appeared originally in English as *Ethics of Freedom* in 1973.

When *Ethics of Freedom* did finally appear in 1976, Bromiley repeated this account and claimed that Parts I-III in the English edition were Ellul's volume 1 and Part IV was volume 2. In fact, Part IV bears no resemblance to volume 2 in French which is, in fact, unavailable in English. It was only with the appearance of *Les combats de la liberte, Ethique de la liberte Tome 3* in 1984 that the origins of Part IV of the English translation became clearer. In the opening to volume 3 Ellul refers to earlier versions of the material in the book. It was, he says, originally written in 1966, proofreading and modifications occurred in the 1970s and final revision took place in 1980-82.

On comparison it becomes clear that the English Part IV of *Ethics of Freedom* must have been one of the earlier (and shorter) drafts of what appears in this French third volume. Contrary therefore to Ellul's claim to Darrell Fasching that "the English edition is the more complete" the three French volumes – as shown simply by their respective lengths – contain much (the whole of volume 2 and a significant amount in volume 3) that is not found in English translation. We will, therefore, sketch the book's content by reference to the 3-volume French edition.

Volume 1 – parts I-III of the ET – offers a Christologically focussed account of Christian freedom in a world of bondage and necessity. This both illustrates the truth of Ellul's words that the ethics 'has to some extent been inspired by the theology of Karl Barth' and provides the fullest account of one of the central dialectical features of Ellul's theological ethic – that of being called and liberated to live the life of freedom that flows from communion with God in Christ and to do so in the face of the different forms of necessity that dominate and structure life in the fallen world (and are examined in other of Ellul's works, most famously *la Technique*).

Volume 2 opens with a quotation from another major influence on Ellul's ethics – Dietrich Bonhoeffer – and proceeds to offer descriptions of the characteristics of the life of Christian freedom. Here we have fascinating discussions of the law of freedom discovered through wisdom, the useless, provisional and relative, non-absolute character of lived Christian freedom, the nature of human works, and what it means to be human through non-conformity to the present age. The second chapter focuses on the freedom of the individual and explores such phenomena as living without covetousness, obedience, spontaneity and hypocrisy. We are offered here a portrait of the virtues and character of freedom in the life of the disciple of Christ.

Finally, volume 3 (and its earlier version in part IV of the ET) explores in more depth the implications of Ellul's eschatological ethic and the forms of expression for the life of freedom rooted in hope. It opens with further biblically based explorations of the features of this life – being strangers and pilgrims committed to lives of risk and contradiction – before providing even more concrete discussions of the shape of Christian freedom in various areas of life such as politics and the state (including early discussions of Ellul's anarchist thinking), religious freedom, work, sex (including contraception and homosexuality) and marriage.

*Ethics of Freedom* is not an easy read and far from being a standard ethical text as it resists the usual categorisations and methodologies of much ethical discourse. For those who persevere with it, however, it provides numerous fascinating insights and offers a stimulating, theological and biblically inspired vision of the life of Christian discipleship and of the characteristics to be found in human lives that faithfully seek to live out the good news that it is for freedom Christ has set us free.

## Book Notes & Reviews

**Daniel Cérézuelle**

### *Écologie et liberté: Bernard Charbonneau précurseur de l'écologie politique*

[*Ecology and freedom: Bernard Charbonneau as a precursor of political ecology*].

Lyon, France: Parangon, 2006.

**Reviewed by Carl Mitcham**

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“Over the course of his long adult life, from when he turned 20 in 1930 to his death in 1996, Bernard Charbonneau reflected on the dangers that resulted for nature and for freedom from what was called the *Great Break*, that is from the rise in power of technical, scientific, and industrial progress. Some specialists in the history of ideas have considered him a precursor and a founder of French political ecology.

For a long time this perspective gave him at least a marginal place in the intellectual world. Yet today his work is very little known by the public and is totally ignored by philosophers, although his radical questioning is incontestably philosophical. However, with the passage of time his work appears more pertinent and contemporary; the ecological and political problems that Charbonneau set forth in the 1930s before a generally uncomprehending audience have only increased.”

Thus begins Daniel Cérézuelle's important new book on the work of a life-long friend and intellectual companion of Jacques Ellul, one to whom Ellul himself gave credit for much of the originality of his own thinking. As far as I know this is the only monograph in any language to be devoted to some aspect of the life and thought of Charbonneau. Cérézuelle, himself a friend with one of Charbonneau's sons as well as one of Ellul's, has written an analytic appreciation of Charbonneau's major but largely unrecognized contribution to the development of environmental philosophy — in a book that calls strongly for an English translation.

Following a brief introduction (chapter 1) and biography (chapter 2), Cérézuelle presents the central intuition of a “Great Break” (chapter 3) and summarizes Charbonneau's existential approach to social change (chapter 4). The core of the book considers in more detail some of Charbonneau's key analyses: the difference between totalitarianism and social totalization (chapter 5), the disdain of nature by industrial society (chapter 6), the dialectical relation between system and chaos (chapter 7), the reversal of freedom (chapter 8), and the de-incarnation of the spirit (chapter 9). By way of conclusion, Cérézuelle considers Charbonneau's perspective on the “faire société,” a term of richer connotation than “social constructionism” (chapter 10), and provides a brief bibliography of works by and about Charbonneau (chapter 11).

Of Charbonneau's 22 books approximately half were issued privately or semi-privately, five after his death. Eight more books remain unpublished. Because of his access to and close knowledge of the full complement of this work, Cérézuelle's book exhibits an authority that is, in addition, a deftly crafted volume. Until the French book is translated into English, readers may wish to consult his “Nature and Freedom: Introducing the Thought of Bernard Charbonneau,” published as one of a collection of six lectures by Cérézuelle in the *Colorado School of Mines Quarterly*, vol. 100, no. 2 (2000), as the result of Cérézuelle's residency as the Hennebach Visiting Professor in the Humanities, 1999-2000.