

## **An Aristotelian Virtue of *Prévoyance*: Taking Responsibility for AI Developments**

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### **Abstract**

For philosopher Jacques Ellul, the understanding of technology revolves around what he calls "*Technique*". It is not exactly technology, nor machines nor science per se, it is "*the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity.*". Efficiency is an instrumental principle: the best solution will be the quickest and thus most "productive" solution to a problem, and the quest for improving that efficiency becomes a moral imperative under productivism (characteristic of capitalism). This constant growth of *Technique*, grows a form of uncertainty, with its growing rapidity, its growing complexity, its growing systemic ramifications. Behavior and effects of a technique are uncertain, and human control seems limited. It makes it nearly impossible now to predict how one evolution or failing of one subcomponent will impact the wider structure, or its own inherent psychological and environmental harms. In this uncertainty, a quality intrinsic to *Technique*'s dynamics, lies unpredictability, and thus unforeseen risks, harms, and accidents. They require preparation, which is the purpose of Safety Science.

However, he analyses a wide permeating of "technical thinking", an ideology that suspends critical thought or interrogation of what is, in the mythology of productivism, considered "progress". That scientist ideology and narrative, endorsed by technicians and technocrats, is unchallenged, and reveals a bigger issue: it forbids the reflection on *Technique* itself, that would allow us to ethically address our problems from where they stem: their concealed technological roots. That is why, when predicting is necessary but seems theoretically nearly impossible in face of uncertainty and technician thinking, Ellul advocates for "*Prévoyance*".

I would like to argue that *Prévoyance* is an ethical approach, quality and endeavor for the domain of safety science, making it an even more urgent investment to deepen, in the wake of AI developments. This ethical practice of *Prévoyance* he recommends, is essentially calling for us to come to terms with the technological determinisms that escape our control, to reclaim the status of a subject, in a technical world order that thrive on our alienation, submission, and the objectification of our consciousnesses. That theoretical philosophical understanding, recovered over passive determinisms shall allow active freedom from them, in a path for emancipation that will be materialized in a political praxis.

Jacques Ellul simply states that *Prévoyance* is a "virtue", I have taken the liberty to map it as a possible Aristotelian virtue for safety scientists and AI designers. Assuredly one can draw parallels with *Phronêsis* (Prudence), the intellectual, but resolutely practical and constantly renewed pursuit for the wisdom needed to act morally in practice, for oneself's happiness and toward the collective or the *Sovereign Good*.

Contingency, as a determining factor of uncertainty, in particular calls for *Phronêsis*, just as it calls for Ellulian *Prévoyance*; both are a deliberative examination, action-oriented, that assumes moral responsibility when it is most commonly overlooked by AI designers and their safety experts.