What’s Wrong with Being a Technological Essentialist? A Response to Feenberg

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In Questioning Technology, Feenberg accuses Heidegger of an untenable ‘technological essentialism’. Feenberg’s criticisms are addressed not to technological essentialism as such, but rather to three particular kinds of technological essentialism: ahistoricism, substantivism, and one-dimensionalism. After these three forms of technological essentialism are explicated and Feenberg’s reasons for finding them objectionable explained, the question whether Heidegger in fact subscribes to any of them is investigated. The conclusions are, first, that Heidegger’s technological essentialism is not at all ahistoricist, but the opposite, an historical conception of the essence of technology which serves as the model for Feenberg’s own view. Second, that while Heidegger does indeed advocate a substantivist technological essentialism, he offers a plausible, indirect response to Feenberg’s voluntaristic, Marcusean objection. Third, that Heidegger’s one-dimensional technological essentialism is of a non-objectionable variety, since it does not force Heidegger to reject technological devices in toto. These conclusions help vindicate Heidegger’s ground-breaking ontological approach to the philosophy of technology.

I. Introduction

Questioning Technology is Andrew Feenberg’s third major work on the critical theory of technology in a decade, and it confirms his place as one of the world’s leading philosophers of technology. In an earlier examination of this important text, I traced out some of the philosophical and political tensions in the legacy of technology critique leading from Heidegger through Marcuse to Feenberg, and concluded that the critical theory of technology Feenberg elaborates in Questioning Technology remains much more conceptually indebted to Heidegger than Feenberg’s own Marcuseanism had allowed him to admit. In response, Feenberg forthrightly acknowledged Heidegger’s great influence on his work, but then went on to stress what he took to be the most important outstanding difference between his own critical theory of technology and Heidegger’s critique of our technological understanding of Being, namely, Heidegger’s ‘untenable’ technological essentialism.

I would like to follow up on our previous exchange here by asking, What is at stake in Feenberg’s claim that Heidegger is a technological essentialist?
pursue this question not only in order to vindicate much of Heidegger’s ground-breaking ontological approach to the philosophy of technology, but also to clarify Feenberg’s conceptual cartography of technological essentialism. Doing so, I believe, will help orient the approach of future philosophers of technology to one of its central theoretical controversies.

II. Technological Essentialism

In our previous debate, the fundamental philosophical difference between Heidegger and Feenberg’s understandings of technology emerged in deceptively stark terms. Feenberg argued that Heidegger’s ontological understanding of technology is untenably essentialistic, while I maintained that ‘Feenberg’s reading is never so hermeneutically violent as when he accuses Heidegger of being a technological “essentialist”’. On closer inspection, however, things are not quite so simple; as we will see, technological essentialism turns out to be an extremely complex notion. Indeed, if we are to evaluate Feenberg’s critique of Heidegger, the first thing we need to do is establish the criteria which determine what counts as technological essentialism. To minimize potential objections, I will stick to the criteria set forth by Feenberg himself.

The necessary criterion seems obvious; to be a technological essentialist, one needs to believe that technology has an essence. This criterion is not sufficient for our purposes, however, because it does not tell us what makes technological essentialism objectionable. A radical constructivist like Baudrillard or Latour might maintain that there is no technology, only particular technologies, and thus that all technological essentialisms are unsound; but whether or not this is a coherent position, it is clearly not one that Feenberg shares. Feenberg proposes his own ‘theory of the essence of technology’ (p. 17), so the mere belief that technology has an essence cannot be sufficient to qualify one as the kind of technological essentialist to whom Feenberg objects. Thus, despite Feenberg’s rather incautious claim that ‘[t]he basic problem is essentialism’ (ibid.), it seems that the problem is not with technological essentialism as such, but rather with particular kinds of technological essentialism. In fact, if I understand him correctly, Feenberg objects to technological essentialists like Heidegger, Ellul, Borgmann, and Habermas because each commits himself to at least one of three particular claims about the essence of technology, claims which render their technological essentialisms unacceptable: ahistoricism, substantivism, and one-dimensionalism. Our next task will be to unpack these three essentialist claims with the goal of understanding what they are and why they are objectionable. We will then come back to each claim in turn and ask whether Heidegger holds any of the objectionable doctrines in question.
1. Historicism

What is ahistorical technological essentialism, and what is wrong with it? According to Feenberg, an ahistorical technological essentialist is someone who interprets the ‘historically specific phenomenon [of technology] in terms of a transhistorical conceptual construction’ (p. 15). Thus, for example, Weber and Habermas understand the essence of technology in terms of ‘rational control [and] efficiency’ (p. vii), while Heidegger understands it as the reduction of ‘everything to functions and raw materials’ (p. viii). What does Feenberg think is illegitimate about this? The problem is that in an attempt to ‘fix the historical flux [of technology] in a singular essence’, ahistorical essentialists abstract their understandings of the essence of technology from the ‘socially and historically specific context’ in which particular technologies are always embedded (p. 17). As a result, not only do these ahistoricist theories fail to understand ‘the essence of technology as a social phenomenon’ (ibid.), but their complete abstraction from socio-historical context yields an ‘essentially unhistorical’ understanding of the essence of technology which is ‘no longer credible’ (p. 15) and so needs to be replaced by Feenberg’s own ‘historical concept of essence’ (p. 201).

We will hold off on evaluating this objection and asking whether or not it really applies to Heidegger until the two other objectionable forms of technological essentialism are on the table.

2. Substantivism

Let us turn, then, to substantivism, the second form of technological essentialism Feenberg seeks to vitiate and surpass. What is substantivist essentialism, and what is wrong with it? Feenberg characterizes substantivism as the claim that the essence of technology comes from beyond us and is thus out of our control. Substantivists from Marx to Heidegger understand technology as ‘an autonomous force separate from society, impinging on social life from the alien realm of reason’ (p. vii). For the substantivist, the essence of technology is shaping history from outside, imposing itself as though from a metaphysical realm that entirely escapes human control. We can easily understand why Feenberg finds substantivism so objectionable if we remember that he is a critical theorist who believes that ‘[t]he fundamental problem of democracy today’ is the question of how to ‘ensure the survival of agency in this increasingly technological universe’ (p. 101). The substantivist’s belief that the essence of technology is beyond human control seems to entail a fatalistic attitude about the historical impact of technology, a fatalism which runs directly counter to Feenberg’s attempt to preserve a meaningful sense of agency in our increasingly technological world.
3. One-Dimensionalism

Finally, Feenberg objects to those technological essentialists who subscribe to what he calls one-dimensional thinking, the belief that all technological devices express the same essence. What is wrong with claiming that the myriad diversity of technological devices all express a common essence? The problem, Feenberg contends, is that one-dimensional technological essentialists must either reject or embrace technology wholecloth. There is no room within one-dimensional conceptions of technology for a fine-grained analysis capable of appreciating both the positive potentials and the deleterious effects of the ever more pervasive rule of technology in our everyday lives. For the critical theorist of technology, an uncritical embrace of the totality of technological devices is just as unsound as a technophobic rejection of technology tout court.

In sum, then, Feenberg’s objections go not to technological essentialism as such but rather to three specific kinds of technological essentialism: the ahistoricisms which illegitimately elide technology’s embeddedness within socio-historical currents that continue to shape it, the substantivisms which adopt a politically dangerous fatalism by viewing technology as a force completely beyond our control, and the one-dimensionalisms which treat all technological devices as of a kind and thereby preclude any balanced critique of technology’s benefits as well as its harms. With these three objectionable varieties of technological essentialism laid out before us, we are ready to evaluate Feenberg’s critique of Heidegger’s technological essentialism. So let us ask: Is Heidegger’s conception of the essence of technology unacceptably ahistorical, substantivist, or one-dimensional?

III. Heidegger on the Essence of Technology

What exactly is Heidegger’s understanding of the essence of technology? Heidegger’s most famous claim, that the essence of technology is nothing technological, may not initially seem to be of much help. But as I explained in our earlier debate, ‘essence’ is an important term of art for Heidegger, a term which he painstakingly explains in his famous 1955 essay on ‘The Question Concerning Technology’. Drawing on these careful remarks, I argued that Heidegger’s claim that ‘the essence of technology is nothing technological’ is best approached in terms of the paradox of the measure: height is not high, tree-ness is not itself a tree, and the essence of technology is nothing technological. If we want to understand the ‘essence of technology’, Heidegger contends, we cannot conceive of ‘essence’ the way we have been doing since Plato (as what ‘permanently endures’), for that makes it seem as if ‘by the [essence of] technology we mean some mythological abstraction’.
Instead, we need to think of ‘essence’ as a verb, as the way in which things ‘essence’ [wesst] or ‘remain in play’ [im Spiel bleiben]. So conceived, ‘the essence of technology’ denotes the way in which intelligibility happens for us these days. In short, the referent of the phrase ‘the essence of technology’ is our current constellation of intelligibility, ‘enframing’ [das Gestell], the historical ‘mode of revealing’ in which things increasingly show up only as resources to be optimized.

According to Heidegger, enframing is grounded in our metaphysical understanding of what-is, an ‘ontotheology’ transmitted to us by Nietzsche. In Heidegger’s history of Being, the great metaphysicians articulate and disseminate an understanding of what beings are, and in so doing establish the most basic conceptual parameters and standards of legitimacy for each historical epoch of intelligibility. These metaphysicians’ ontotheologies function historically like self-fulfilling prophecies, reshaping intelligibility from the ground up. Nietzsche, on Heidegger’s reading, understood the totality of what-is as eternally recurring will-to-power, an unending disaggregation and reaggregation of forces without purpose or goal. Now, our Western culture’s unthinking reliance on this nihilistic Nietzschean ontotheology is leading us to transform all beings, ourselves included, into resources to be optimized and disposed of with maximal efficiency. As I explained in my earlier piece, Heidegger is deeply worried that within our current technological constellation of intelligibility, the post-Nietzschean epoch of enframing, ‘[o]nly what is calculable in advance counts as being’. Our technological understanding of being produces a ‘calculative thinking’ which quantifies all qualitative relations, reducing all entities to bivalent, programmable ‘information’, digitized data, which increasingly enters into what Baudrillard calls ‘a state of pure circulation’. As this historical transformation of beings into resources becomes more pervasive, it seems to elude our critical gaze; indeed, we begin to treat ourselves in the very terms which underlie our technological refashioning of the world: no longer as conscious subjects in an objective world but merely as resources to be optimized, ordered, and enhanced with maximal efficiency (whether cosmetically, psychopharmacologically, genetically, or even cybernetically).

With this brief recapitulation in mind, let us now evaluate Feenberg’s objections.

1. Ahistoricism?

First, ahistorical essentialism. Feenberg alleges that Heidegger’s ‘ontologizing approach’ to the history of technology entirely ‘cancels the historical dimension of his theory’ (p. 16). This objection seems to me to be the least plausible of the three. It is true that Heidegger understands technology ontologically, but he understands ontology historically. Remember that for
Heidegger the essence of technology is nothing other than an ontological self-understanding which has been repeatedly contested and redefined for the last twenty-five hundred years. This is why I contended in my earlier piece that Heidegger’s historical understanding of the ‘essence’ of technology may actually put his position closer to the ‘constructivist’ than the ‘essentialist’ camp, and it becomes clear that Feenberg shares a similar view when he advocates ‘a historical concept of essence’ in Questioning Technology’s concluding chapter (p. 201).

It was Heidegger who gave us the first historical conception of the essence of technology, and I think Feenberg should acknowledge this important conceptual debt while continuing to build on this tradition, rather than seeking to distance himself from Heidegger where there are no good philosophical reasons for doing so.

If this is right, how can Feenberg possibly think that Heidegger has an ahistorical conception of technology? It is instructive to pinpoint just where his reading goes wrong. Critics like Derrida have long questioned Heidegger’s epochal account of the history of Being. They were not persuaded by the way in which Heidegger’s account divides the history of our ontological self-understanding into a series of unified constellations of intelligibility. Where Heidegger sees a series of overlapping but relatively distinct and durable ontological epochs, his critics claimed to observe a much greater degree of ontohistorical flux. Feenberg too questions the ‘periodization’ of Heidegger’s history of Being (p. 15), but his objection is more precise. In order to ‘deny all [historical] continuity and treat modern technology as unique’ (ibid.), Heidegger introduces an untenably ‘sharp ontological break’ (p. 16) between modern technology and pre-modern craft. I contend that Heidegger does indeed claim that our contemporary technological understanding of Being is unique, but that he does not deny all historical continuity in order to make this point.10

If we understand, as too few commentators do, what exactly Heidegger thinks is unique about our contemporary historical self-understanding, then it becomes clear that Feenberg has bought into a widespread misreading when he attributes to Heidegger the ‘unconvincing’ claim that the contemporary age is ‘uniquely oriented toward control’ (p. 15). According to Heidegger’s understanding of enframing, the ontological ‘reduction to raw materials’ is not ‘in the interests of control’ (p. 178). Why not? Because in our post-Nietzschean age there is increasingly no subject left to be doing the controlling. The subject too is being ‘sucked-up’ into ‘the standing reserve’!11 This unprecedented absorption of the subject into the resource pool makes our contemporary world unique in Heidegger’s eyes, but he still explains this ongoing development historically; put simply, it results from the fact that we post-moderns have turned the practices developed by the moderns for objectifying and controlling nature back onto ourselves.12
In fact, despite this misreading of Heidegger, Feenberg now seems to have taken the basic Heideggerian point on board. In a recent essay on ‘Modernity Theory and Technology Studies’, he observes with grim irony that ‘[m]odern societies are unique in de-worlding human beings in order to subject them to technical action – we call it management’. As Feenberg here seems to recognize, Heidegger presciently described an alarming ontological trend which now appears disconnected from our actual socio-historical reality only to those who are not paying attention.\textsuperscript{13} It should be clear, then, that Heidegger’s technological essentialism does not suffer from the ahistoricism Feenberg attributes to it. Let us turn to one of Feenberg’s more telling objections, his claim that Heidegger’s understanding of technology suffers from a politically dehabilitating substantivism.

2. \textit{Substantivism?}

Earlier we saw that Feenberg is moved to reject technological substantivism, the belief that the essence of technology is outside of human control, because of the politically dangerous fatalism this seems to entail.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, a philosopher cannot reject a philosophical doctrine solely because of its political consequences. Distressing political implications should lead us to subject a philosophical doctrine to especially relentless critical scrutiny, but ultimately such philosophical scrutiny must seek to determine whether or not the doctrine in question is true. And if a philosophical doctrine turns out to be true, then either we have to accept its political consequences, however disturbing, or else we have to work politically to bring about a change in the world which would subsequently falsify the doctrine.

The problem with Heidegger’s substantivism, as Feenberg presents it, is that the truth of the doctrine would seem to preclude the latter, activist option. For if Heidegger’s substantivism is right that it is simply not within our power to transform the essence of technology, then neither can we change the world so as subsequently to gain control over the essence of technology.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, if Feenberg were correct about Heidegger’s substantivism, this would place us before a strict aporia, since Heidegger recognizes that we cannot stop trying to take control of the essence of technology; the endeavor may be impossible but it is also unavoidable. As enframers, ‘the drive to control everything is precisely what we do not control’.\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, ‘this is a situation about which something can be done – at least indirectly’.\textsuperscript{17} This caveat, which allows for the possibility that our actions could \textit{indirectly} transform the essence of technology, is crucial, it seems to me, for vindicating Heidegger’s substantivism against Feenberg’s objection.

For Feenberg is right that if Heidegger thought we had no hope of ever transcending our technological understanding of Being, his insights would lead only to fatalistic despair. Fortunately, Heidegger’s position is more complex
than this. Let us recall, with Dreyfus, that ‘Heidegger’s concern is the human distress caused by the technological understanding of Being, rather than the destruction caused by specific technologies’. Heidegger thus approaches technology not as ‘a problem for which we must find a solution [which would be a technological approach], but [as] an ontological condition that requires a transformation of our understanding of Being’. From the Heideggerian perspective, then, the most profound philosophical difference between Feenberg and Heidegger concerns the level at which each pitches his critique of technology; Feenberg’s strategy for responding to the problems associated with the increasing rule of technocracy takes place primarily at what Heidegger would call the ‘ontic’ level. The problem with Feenberg’s strategy is that our everyday ontic actions and decisions almost always take place within the fundamental conceptual parameters set for us by our current ontology, otherwise these actions would not make sense to ourselves or to others.

For those of us seeking to synthesize Heidegger and Feenberg’s powerful critiques of technology, the crucial question is: Can ontic political decisions and resistances of the type Feenberg puts his faith in ever effect the kind of ontological change Heidegger seeks? Ontologically, Heidegger is more of a realist than a constructivist; our understanding of what-is is something to which we are fundamentally receptive. We cannot simply legislate a new ontology. As Dreyfus nicely puts it, ‘A new sense of reality is not something that can be made the goal of a crash program like the moon flight’. But does Heidegger deny that our ontic decisions could ever build up enough steam to effect an ontological transformation? No; in fact, Heidegger explicitly recognized this possibility. As he wrote in the late 1930s:

‘World-historical’ events are capable of assuming a scale never seen before. [The unprecedented magnitude of these events] at first speaks only to the rising frenzy in the unbounded domain of machination and numbers. It never speaks immediately for the emergence of essential decisions. But when, within these ‘world historical’ events, a coming-together of the people sets itself up – and partly establishes the people’s existence according to the style of these events – could not a pathway open here into the nearness of decision? Certainly, but with the supreme danger that the domain of this decision will be missed completely.

In other words, it is possible that a confluence of ontic political struggles could open the space for a reconfiguration of our ontological self-understanding, but only if we are aware of the true radicality of that endeavor, the fact that it requires a fundamental transformation in the nature of our existence, not merely the redistribution of power or the realignment of particular interests.

As Dreyfus’s famous Woodstock example is meant to show, it is possible that practices marginalized by our technological understanding of Being
could become central to our self-understanding, radically transforming our sense of what is and what matters. As I pointed out last time, though Feenberg’s own project clearly is inspired by the Paris events of May ’68 in which he participated, he is extremely wary of this revolutionary aspect in Heidegger’s thinking because of the political direction it took Heidegger himself. But how different are Feenberg and Heidegger on this point? Do we not have Feenberg’s own position if we simply replace Heidegger’s politically dangerous Nietzschean–Wagnerian hope for a revolutionary _Gesamtkunstwerk_, a work of art which would transform our entire ontological self-understanding in one fell swoop, with the more modest hope that a ‘convergence’ of differently situated political micro-struggles could evolve into a counter-hegemony capable of permanently subverting our contemporary technocracy?

If Heidegger steadfastly advocates the goal of ontological transformation, while Feenberg seeks to ‘reverse-engineer’ a possible means to achieving this goal (through a confluence of ‘democratizing’ ontic struggles over technological design), this should also lead us to wonder, I think, how much Heidegger and Feenberg really differ on the truth of substantivism. In our previous debate, I argued that Feenberg actually wavers back and forth on the substantivism question; this tension in Feenberg’s view reflects a fundamental difference between the Marcusean and Heideggerian positions he has synthesized. He vacillates between a voluntaristic, Marcusean, May ‘68, ‘Progress will be what we want it to be’ view which exalts the human capacity to control our future through strategic interventions in the design process (p. 22), and a more substantivist Heideggerian view which suggests that while we cannot directly _control_ the historical direction in which technology is taking us, we can nevertheless impact the future in small ways by learning to recognize, encourage, and support technological democratizations when they occur, while hoping that these ontic political interventions might yet indirectly foster an ontological transformation. The Marcusean position has the surface appeal of all heroic existential voluntarisms, but it ignores the very issue that led Heidegger to develop his ontological approach, indeed the very reason that Marcuse discipled himself to Heidegger before the war: However important, democratization without a corresponding ontological transformation will just end up replicating and reifying the technological understanding of Being.

Another thing this shows, I think, is that Feenberg’s projected democratization of technological design needs to be supplemented by a pedagogical project aimed at the level of what the Greeks called _paideia_, the Germans _Bildung_, that is, an educational formation geared toward recognizing and encouraging the development of certain specific world-disclosing skills, one species of which would be those skills necessary for making appropriate democratizing interventions in the design process.
will try to say a bit more about what sort of skills this pedagogical project should seek to inculcate as we evaluate Feenberg’s final objection.

### 3. One-Dimensionalism?

Is Heidegger’s technological essentialism one-dimensional? Does he believe that all technological devices express the same essence? In ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, Heidegger explicitly denies that ‘enframing, the essence of technology, [is] the common genus of everything technological’. That is, in seeking to understand the essence of technology, Heidegger is not trying to fix the extension of the term; he is not seeking to determine what is and what is not a member of the class of technological devices. Thus he does not conceptualize technology’s essence in terms of the commonalities shared by the hydroelectric plant, the autobahn, the cellular phone, the internet, etc., the way a Platonist might conceive of the essence of trees as the genus uniting ‘oaks, beeches, birches, and firs’. Strictly speaking, then, Heidegger’s understanding of the essence of technology is orthogonal to the question of whether or not all technological devices express the same essence.

Nevertheless, the question of whether Heidegger is a technological one-dimensionalist remains. And the answer, I think, is a qualified yes. Why? Because, as we have seen, Heidegger holds that the essence of technology is nothing less than the ontological self-understanding of the age. In so far as we implicitly adopt the ontology of enframing, everything in the contemporary world will show up for us as reflecting the essence of technology, technological devices included. In this sense, then, Heidegger does seem to be a kind of technological one-dimensionalist. But do the negative consequences Feenberg attaches to this position obtain in Heidegger’s case? Not unless Heidegger’s understanding of the essence of technology forces him globally to reject technology. This, then, is the crucial question: Does Heidegger’s one-dimensionalism force him to reject technology in toto?

Now, Heidegger is obviously no fan of technology; he seems, for instance, to have had a kind of visceral reaction to the sight of his neighbors ‘chained hourly and daily to their television’ sets. But even on the personal level Heidegger seems occasionally to have been capable of distinguishing between those technological applications which serve and those which undermine the cause of phenomenology, the endeavor to go ‘To the things themselves!’ For example, while watching a television show a friend put together to showcase the art of Paul Klee, Heidegger was appalled by the way the television moved over the paintings randomly and forced the eye away from one piece and on to the next prematurely, ‘hindering an intensive, quiet viewing as well as a lingering reflection, which each single work and the relations within it deserve’. On the other hand, Heidegger deeply appreciated
the way a televised soccer match revealed its subject, raving publicly that it showcased the ‘brilliance’ of Franz Beckenbauer. Of course, such anecdotes do not get us to the crux of the issue. For, however ‘techno-phobic’ (p. 151) Heidegger may have been personally, it is obvious to careful readers of his work that he does not advocate any monolithic rejection of technology philosophically. This should not be too surprising, since the philosophical implications of Heidegger’s thinking often far exceed the rather narrow conclusions he himself drew from them.

In our previous debate, I reminded Feenberg of Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the massive freeway interchange on the autobahn. Here in 1951, Heidegger treats the autobahn in terms of what he calls a ‘thing thinging’, that is, as a work of art reflecting back to us the ontological self-understanding of the age. In response, Feenberg acknowledged that in these passages on the autobahn bridge ‘Heidegger discusses modern technology without negativism or nostalgia and suggests an innovative approach to understanding it’. Nevertheless, Feenberg countered, Heidegger’s ‘defenders have to admit that the famous highway bridge passage is the one and only instance in his whole corpus of a positive evaluation of modern technology’. Feenberg may well be right about this; Heidegger’s brief phenomenological meditation on the autobahn interchange as a paradigm reflecting our ontological self-understanding may be the only ‘positive evaluation of modern technology’ to be found in his published work. But is not this single, carefully thought-out exception sufficient to prove that Heidegger does not reject technology wholecloth?

In his meditation on the autobahn interchange, Heidegger’s concern is not to valorize this technological paradigm, but rather to help us recognize that, as the internet now makes plain, we are increasingly treating our world and ourselves as a kind of ‘network of long distance traffic, paced as calculated for maximum yield’. Indeed, the only thing making this a ‘positive evaluation’ (as Feenberg puts it) is the fact that, in his phenomenological description of the autobahn interchange, Heidegger is attempting to get us to notice the presence of ‘the divinities’ which linger in the background of even our most advanced technological constructions. When he refers to the presence of the divine, Heidegger is evoking those meanings which cannot be explained solely in terms of human will, encouraging us to attend to that pre-conceptual phenomenological ‘presencing’ upon which all of our interpretations rest, a ‘presencing’ which Heidegger thinks will be a prime source of any ‘new paradigm rich enough and resistant enough to give a new meaningful direction to our lives’.

Like his mediation on the place of ‘earth’ in the work of art, Heidegger’s resacralization of the simple ‘thing’ reminds us that the conditioned has its roots in the unconditioned, the secular in the sacred, and thus suggests that we should adopt a very different attitude toward our world, a Grundstimmung
much more reflective and thankful than the thorough-going instrumental reasoning characteristic of our technological mode of revealing. Indeed, as Dreyfus has argued, Heidegger is convinced that we should be grateful for the essence of technology; for without this cultural clearing, ‘nothing would show up as anything at all, and no possibilities for action would make sense’.\(^{32}\) To recognize enframing as our current constellation of intelligibility is to recognize our ontological receptivity in addition to our active role as disclosers of what-is. If we can incorporate a sense of this receptive spontaneity into our practices, we can learn to relate to things with a phenomenological comportment open to alterity and difference (on the ontological as well as the more fashionable ontic level), a comportment through which Heidegger believes we may yet disclose the constituent elements of a post-technological ontology.

This may sound mysterious, but in his 1949 essay on ‘The Turning’ Heidegger unequivocally states that he is not advocating anything as ridiculous as the abandonment of technology. In the post-nihilistic future that Heidegger worked philosophically to help envision and achieve, ‘Technology’, he repeats, ‘will not be done away with. Technology will not be struck down, and certainly it will not be destroyed.’ Indeed, Heidegger can no longer be confused with a Luddite longing for a nostalgic return to a pre-technological society; in his final interview (given in 1966), he reiterates that the technological world must be ‘transcended, in the Hegelian sense [that is, incorporated at a higher level], not pushed aside’.\(^{33}\) Heidegger’s critics may object that he does not provide enough guidance about how practicing an open phenomenological comportment will allow us to transcend our current technological understanding of Being, but he cannot be accused of a reactionary rejection of technological devices, and even less of wanting to reject the essence of technology, which, he says, would be madness, ‘a desire to unhinge the essence of humanity’.\(^{34}\)

One further point is clear; Heidegger did not believe that our technological understanding of Being could be transcended though a phenomenological practice disconnected from socio-historical reality. It will doubtless surprise those who have been taken in by a one-sided stereotype to hear that when Heidegger was devoting a great deal of thought to the question of the relation between ‘the work of art and the power plant’, he spent ‘several days visiting power plants under the direction of professors from technical colleges’.\(^{35}\) The fruits of such phenomenological labors are undeniable. As I noted previously, when Heidegger looked out at the autobahn interchange and the powerplant on the Ister and found words which powerfully describe those fundamental transformations in our self-understanding which are only now becoming obvious with the advent of the internet, word-processing, genetic research, and cloning, his was not what Auden called ‘The dazed uncomprehending stare / Of the Danubian despair’.\(^{36}\)
IV. Conclusion

In sum, then, Heidegger appears to be a technological essentialist, but of a largely unobjectionable variety. For as we have seen, he rejects ahistoricism entirely, and the forms of one-dimensionalism and substantivism he accepts lack these doctrines’ usual negative implications. Heidegger’s substantivism offers an indirect response to Feenberg’s political objection, a response which rests on a much more thorough philosophical analysis than the voluntaristically-motivated objection, and Heidegger’s one-dimensionalism clearly does not force him into any global rejection of technology. Heidegger’s rather limited technological essentialism thus does little to discredit his profound ontological understanding of the historical impact of technology. Indeed, even where Feenberg’s rhetoric conceals this fact, his important critical theory of technology has obviously learned a great deal from the ontological and phenomenological subtleties found in Heidegger’s work, and there is every reason to suppose that Feenberg and future philosophers of technology will continue to find in Heidegger’s reflections a challenging and rewarding source of philosophical inspiration.

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association, Albuquerque, NM, 6 April 2000. I thank Bert Dreyfus, Andy Feenberg, Jerry Doppelt, Adrian Cussins, Wayne Martin, and John Taber for their helpful comments and criticisms.


4 When Feenberg criticizes technological essentialism, he is not thinking of the Kripkean claim that an essence is a property a thing possesses necessarily. (See Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980].) He is simply using essentialism as a descriptive term to characterize a fairly wide range of theories about technology with which he disagrees.

5 It is not clear that the radical constructivist’s sloganistic claim – that there is no technology, only technologies – makes sense; in virtue of what are all these different technologies ‘technologies’? There are, of course, other affinities between Feenberg and the constructivist camp (see esp. pp. 83–85).

6 Feenberg appropriates this term from Marcuse, then applies it back to Marcuse’s own ‘one-dimensional’ conception of our ‘fully administered’ society.


11 See Heidegger, ‘Science and Reflection’, *The Question Concerning Technology*, op. cit., p. 173. In Feenberg’s recent ‘Modernity Theory and Technology Studies: Reflections on Bridging the Gap’ (unpublished, available on Feenberg’s web page), he again attributes to Heidegger ‘the familiar complaint about modernity’s obsession with efficiency and control’. Of course, Feenberg would be right if he were distinguishing ‘modernity’ from ‘post-modernity’, rather than using modernity to designate the contemporary age, as he does here.

12 Heidegger’s claim is that when modern subjects dominating an objective world begin to transform themselves into objects, the subject/object distinction itself is undermined, and these subjects thus put themselves on the path toward becoming just one more resource to be optimized, i.e. ‘secured and ordered for the sake of flexible use’. See Charles Spinoso, Fernando Flores, and Hubert L. Dreyfus, ‘Skills, Historical Disclosing, and the End of History: A Response to Our Critics,’ *Inquiry* 38 (1995), 1–2, p. 188 (my emphasis).

13 The passage from modernity to post-modernity was, for Heidegger, already clearly visible in the transformation of employment agencies into ‘human resource’ departments. (See 1955’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, op. cit., p. 18.) Our contemporary reduction of teachers and scholars to on-line ‘content providers’ merely extends – and so clarifies – the logic whereby modern subjects become postmodern resources, a logic which (as we have seen) Heidegger traces philosophically back to Nietzsche’s metaphysics.

14 According to Feenberg, Heidegger is fatalistic because he ignores the bottom-up perspective of those ‘enrolled’ within technological networks and so misses their ‘subjugated wisdom’: technologies can be appropriated from below, diverted away from the fixed ends for which they were originally designed. But Heidegger would not deny that specific technological designs can be subverted in this way. The crucial question is whether such ‘ontic’ subversions could ever culminate in an ontological transcendence of the technological mode of revealing. As I show below, Heidegger did believe in just such a possibility, but he did not believe that it could be accomplished simply by steering the course of technological development from within. Thus, in 1940, Heidegger bemoans our contemporary age’s call for the Nietzschean Übermensch, our sense that ‘[w]hat is needed is a form of mankind that is from top to bottom equal to the unique fundamental essence of contemporary technology and its metaphysical truth; that is to say, that lets itself be entirely dominated by the essence of technology precisely in order to steer and deploy individual technological processes and possibilities’. Feenberg himself can be understood as advocating precisely this voluntaristic, Nietzschean strategy. See Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume Four: Nihilism*, ed. David Krell, trans. F. A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 117.

15 If substantivism is right that we cannot control the essence of technology (and clearly this is meant as the time-independent claim that the essence of technology is out of our control now and forever – otherwise it would not be objectionable), then there is no non-question begging way to say that we could change the world such that we could control the essence of technology.


Pace Winograd and Flores, then, we are not ontological designers. We are, rather, ontic designers. See Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1986).

20 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, p. 68/GA65, p. 98. The context of this passage is philosophically and politically problematic: philosophically, because here Heidegger is still naively committed to the metaphysical project of establishing a new historical ground for beings (by ‘deciding’ a new understanding of the Being of beings); politically, because Heidegger not only connects this metaphysical project with the ‘people’ (Volk), but even asserts the ‘singularity’ of this folk’s ‘origin and mission,’ grounding this ‘destiny’ in ‘the singularity of Be-ing itself’ (ibid., p. 67/p. 97). This nationalistic philosophical appropriation of the Jewish trope of the chosen people, sometime between 1936–37, is especially troubling.


22 There are, of course, important differences between the revolutionary and evolutionary perspectives. Indeed, Heidegger’s own adoption of the revolutionary view seems to have desensitized him to the real human suffering ushered in by the pseudo-revolution of 1933. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s critique of the evolutionary view is right about at least this much: the mere fact that the hands of the clocks keep turning, so to speak, does not mean that history is moving toward any sort of ontological transformation.

23 Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores, and Hubert L. Dreyfus’s ground-breaking work, *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997) closes by issuing a similar call (see esp. pp. 171–3), and Feenberg has recently recognized this affinity in his ‘Modernity Theory and Technology Studies’.

24 See Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, op. cit., p. 29. This, I take it, is what Dreyfus means when he says: ‘when he asks about the essence of technology we must understand that Heidegger is not seeking a definition. His question cannot be answered by defining our concept of technology.’ See ‘Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics’, op. cit., p. 305.

25 The Platonist conceives of the essence of the different species of trees in terms of the abstract idea of ‘tree-ness’, but Heidegger does not analogously conceptualize the essence of the diversity of technological devices by abstracting toward a kind of ‘technicity’ [Technik] or ‘machination’ [Machenschaft]. Indeed, by 1938, he has recognized that ‘Machination itself is the essential swaying of Beyng [die Wesung des Seyns]’, i.e. that what technological devices share in common is their ontological mode of revealing (which is rooted in Nietzsche’s metaphysics of ‘constant overcoming,’ his ‘onto-theology’ of ‘eternally recurring will to power’). Thus Heidegger writes: ‘The bewitchment by technicity and its constantly self-surpassing progress is only one sign of this enchantment, by which everything presses forth into calculation, usage, breeding, manageability, and regulation.’ See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 89/GA65 p. 128; ibid., p. 87/p. 124.


(‘gods’) like the Greek temple. (See my ‘The Silence of the Limbs: Critiquing Culture from A Heideggerian Understanding of the Work of Art’, Enculturation 2:1 [1998]). At one end of the continuum, things gather a local world, at the other, artworks reconfigure the worlds they bring into focus (in the extreme case, the ‘god’, inaugurating a new onto-historical epoch).


31 Dreyfus, ‘Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics’, op. cit., p. 311. As possible sources of such a new paradigm, Dreyfus stresses those ‘marginal practices’ which have not yet been completely ‘mobilized as resources’, ‘such as friendship, backpacking in the wilderness, and drinking the local wine with friends’ (ibid., p. 310). I would add that for Heidegger a crucial role will be played by ‘presencing’ [Anwesen], which I understand as a pre-conceptual phenomenological givenness and extra-conceptual phenomenological excess that existing practices never exhaust.

32 Ibid., p. 307. See also Dreyfus, ‘Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relationship to Technology’, op. cit. I am indebted to Julian Young for the former point.


34 See Heidegger, Nietzsche, Volume Four: Nihilism, p. 223. For more guidance about how Heideggerian ‘world disclosing’ takes place concretely, see Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus, Disclosing New Worlds, op. cit.


36 For a persuasive argument to this effect (one which Feenberg does not yet seem to have taken the full measure of), see Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, ‘Highway Bridges and Feasts: Heidegger and Borgmann on How to Affirm Technology’, Man and World 30 (1997), p. 2.

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