

Reply to Dahlstrom and Scharff

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I

Daniel Dahlstrom's and Robert Scharff's comments on my book, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, open up a wide range of issues for discussion. I am grateful to them for their positive comments on the book and also for their sharp criticism. I am not convinced by their attempts to show that my interpretation of Heidegger is "ill advised" or "flawed." Their substantive criticism of my approach challenges me more deeply and in more interesting ways. Although I am not convinced by these criticisms either, responding to them advances the argument and so I will focus primarily on that task.

The Greeks. Most of Dahlstrom's criticism of my readings concerns Heidegger's relation to the Greeks. For example, Dahlstrom claims that I claim that Heidegger's thought is based on Greek thought. This reverses my take on the flow in the relation between Heidegger and the Greeks. I do not claim that Heidegger follows the Greeks but rather that he interprets the Greeks as predecessors who, *in his interpretation of them*, anticipate his theory. This is a very different and more plausible proposition from the one Dahlstrom attributes to me.

I am also supposed to have under-emphasized the Christian influences on Heidegger. The quotations proving this are all from quite early in Heidegger's career. There is no doubt that Heidegger started out as a Christian thinker, but he turned against his origins during the 1920s. This is well documented in various biographies and contemporary letters. In the *Four Seminars* Heidegger says, "To restore philosophy to its own essence means to purge it of its Christian element, and to do this out of concern for the Greek element" ([Heidegger 2003](#), 25). John Caputo has written an interesting book called *Demythologizing Heidegger* in which he shows how Greek influences replaced Judeo-Christian influences as Heidegger's thought matured.

Productionism. Dahlstrom's claim that Heidegger had already rejected productionism quite early, long before the mid 1930s, is conceptually more significant. I argue that production serves as an ontological model for the early Heidegger and continues to influence Marcuse's thought long after Heidegger abandons this approach. Their interpretation of the difference between premodern craft and modern technology, and especially between the ontologies associated with these ways of making, goes to the heart of my argument. If production is unimportant to Heidegger throughout his career as a thinker, my argument falls.

Dahlstrom proves his case with a quotation from the 1927 *Basic Problems in Phenomenology* in which Heidegger asks, "But the interpretation of the being of beings as something produced, does it not still contain an unbearable onesidedness within itself?" ([Heidegger 1982](#), 115) But this turns out to be a rhetorical question. In the next

paragraph Heidegger returns to the problematic status of production and argues that it always already includes a reference to a material that is not itself produced. This allows him to conclude that "The understanding of being in production is so far from merely understanding beings as produced that it rather opens up precisely the understanding of the being of that which is already simply extant....Productive comportment is not limited just to the producible and produced but harbors within itself a remarkable breadth of possibility for understanding the being of beings, which is at the same time the basis for the universal significance assignable to the fundamental concepts of ancient ontology" (116).

Scharff also objects to my interpretation of Heidegger's relation to Greek productionism. He insists that Heidegger's critique of the technological age extends back to his early writings and includes in its range the thought of the Plato and Aristotle. While this is good late Heidegger, Scharff appears to deny the well known periodization of Heidegger's work into an earlier phase in which he views instrumentality positively, at least in its everyday forms, and a later phase, following the famous "turn," which culminates in the critique of technology. I think this periodization is right and cite remarks by Kisiel and Gadamer that support my understanding of the role of the Greek productionism in Heidegger's thought.

But these authorities are not needed. Here is Heidegger himself in his 1931 course on Aristotle's concept of *dynamis* in its relation to techné: "We have to clarify for ourselves what it signifies that man has a relation to the works that he produces. It is for this reason that a certain book called *Sein und Zeit* discusses dealings with equipment, and not in order to correct Marx, nor to organize a new political economy, nor out of a primitive understanding of the world" ([Heidegger 1995](#), 117).

Essence and Science. Both Dahlstrom and Scharff object to my interpretation of Heidegger's concept of essence and its relation to scientific truth. Dahlstrom thinks I have overlooked Heidegger's interesting reconceptualization of essence altogether, but in fact I cover Heidegger's main point, namely, the idea of an active "essencing" rather than a mere conceptual "whatness." The problem for Heidegger, and for us, is that the enframing reduces everything to fungible raw materials and system components, dissolving essences in the traditional sense.

Natural scientific discoveries cannot play the role of essential insight as Dahlstrom claims. Heideggerian essences belong to the revealing which grants a world, not to ontic understandings of particulars within the world such as science provides. The issue is not simply that essences are normative unlike scientific truths. Essences are original meanings not scientifically explainable mechanisms which themselves presuppose a meaningful world.

Scharff's critique is the opposite of Dahlstrom's. He wants a more rigorous distinction between Heidegger's ontological project and science. According to Scharff, Heidegger's basic objection to Husserl, Dilthey, and Jaspers was their failure to question the status of their own inquiry. The "who" of knowing is not a Cartesian cogito because it is historically situated. Beyond this there is the question of the nature of that historical situation which, in a technological age, both obstructs ontological knowledge and in a curious way makes it possible on a margin of science Heidegger himself intends to occupy. In sum, Scharff understands Heidegger's version of phenomenology to be historically self-conscious in a way that science is not. As Heidegger wrote in his early critique of Dilthey "it is possible to emancipate the past so that we can find in it the

authentic roots of our existence and bring it into our own present as a vital force" ([Heidegger 2002](#), 175).

But Scharff complains that I offer little more than a Diltheyan, or worse yet, Rortyan tolerance for different modes of knowing, all equally objective. For these thinkers, and presumably for me too, natural and human sciences can coexist peacefully because they presuppose a neutral and ahistorical concept of knowledge. But I nowhere say any such thing. My willingness to accept the validity of science in its own sphere is no different from Heidegger's. It implies neither the neutrality of science nor the privileging of scientific knowing.

Recognition that science is historical and biased as such need not imply a rejection of its correctness. The contrary view, that science is simply wrong, leads to some fairly disastrous consequences as Scharff would surely agree. The key issue is one Heidegger addresses in his discussion of truth in *Being and Time*. He writes, "the contention that there are 'eternal truths' and the jumbling together of Dasein's phenomenally grounded 'ideality' with an idealized absolute subject, belong to those residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as yet been radically extruded" ([Heidegger 1962](#), 272). I will have more to say about this issue in the next section.

II

Dahlstrom's and Scharff's substantive criticisms make four key points, first, that I misunderstand Heidegger's critique of the privilege of theoretical knowledge over practice, second, that I both posit a sharp distinction between lived experience and scientific truth and claim that technology overcomes that very distinction—an apparent contradiction or confusion—third, that Marcuse's concept of life affirmation lacks criteria and justification, and fourth, that I follow Marcuse in substituting a dangerously amoral and utopian aesthetics for ethics. These interesting criticisms have obliged me to rethink my position.

Practice and Theory. Scharff thinks I have simply reversed the privilege of theory over practice for political reasons without understanding why this is an issue for Heidegger. I am supposedly unaware of his historical ontology. I find this puzzling but perhaps I have misunderstood Scharff's rather complicated commentary.

I argue that at issue for Heidegger is not simply the question of which standpoint—theory or practice—is more basic, but also the relation of each standpoint to the dominant technological prejudice of the age. Theoretical science is not pure but is thoroughly complicit with technology and blind to its bias. Where science is uncritically accepted as the privileged access to being, the knower's self-understanding is distorted and being appears as the sort of thing that can be represented by a detached, spectatorial subject.

In this representation nothing has an essence in the premodern sense, that is, a potential for being that strives to realize itself in existence and knowledge. Instead each thing appears as a component in a groundless plan or project. This is the ultimate meaning of the technological enframing. The situatedness of knowing is inaccessible from this modern standpoint that splits subject irrevocably from object.

By contrast, phenomenologically-grasped everyday practice reveals an original unity of subject and object as being-in-the-world. Theory is founded in this original unity. In my book I argue that Heidegger's early work up to the mid 1930s presents

Aristotle's productionism as an objectivistically distorted way of expressing this insight. The ancients discovered scientific rationality but they avoided modern nihilism by interpreting the world in essential terms rather than mechanistically. The essences they discovered were in fact projections into objectivity of the forms of their own practical relation to the world in lived experience. We have lost the naïveté that made this peculiar hybrid conception plausible and protected the Greeks from the catastrophe of meaninglessness. This "Eden of reason" is such only ironically.

Heidegger gradually realized that his retrieval of ancient thought had a peculiarly complex relation to his own situatedness in modernity. On the one hand, technological thinking undermines the idea of eternal essences which had prevented the Greeks from recognizing being-in-the-world. But on the other hand, technological thinking also occludes awareness of being-in-the-world by privileging detached knowing over everyday practice.

Once we understand that essences are not objects of science but articulations of situated practices, we are on a path leading to fundamental insights. Unfortunately, from Kant down to the present, this insight has been obscured by objectivistic assumptions, to which correspond subjectivist and relativist understandings of the relation of subject to object. Heidegger breaks with these assumptions and reconceptualizes the whole problematic of knowledge on a practical basis. This is the import of the first part of *Being and Time*. The analysis there aims to reconstruct the creative role of Dasein in the emergence of meaning without falling into subjectivism.

I think it is this point, which I go over in several different ways, that Scharff has missed. In one passage I explain it by showing that cultural relativism involves a reflexive paradox. The constructive power of the subject, first clearly identified in Kant, implies a relation to a sensible material on which meanings are imposed. This model of knowing exactly reproduces the structure of modern technology, which imposes arbitrary plans on inherently formless raw materials. Hence cultural relativism is culturally relative to a specifically technological culture and cannot pretend to absoluteness. I write:

Here we reach the point where we can recognize the "saving power" in technology, the way in which our very nihilism can liberate us....Instead of seeing our world as mere raw materials and system components, we can see it as a particular way in which being appears. But this way, like all others, is partial, incomplete. Being conceals its other possibilities in revealing one of them. Our common sense cultural relativism is the expression of this truth of being in the language of technology. Only in the very different language of Heidegger's "history of being" can we grasp the nature of revealing itself and so free ourselves from the limitations of our own time. This history begins with the Greeks. To understand Heidegger's thought we must therefore return to his interpretation of Greek philosophy, specifically the philosophy of Aristotle ([Feenberg 2005](#), 24).

Given that all this is to be found in my book, how different is my understanding of Heidegger's ontological project from Scharff's? Not very, in my opinion.

Lived Experience and Technology. This leads me to Dahlstrom's critique of my understanding of the relation of lived experience to cognition. I seem to be saying two contrary things about this relation, on the one hand that experience and knowledge are the disparate sources of irreconcilable truths, and on the other hand that they come together in technology. Dahlstrom finds a contradiction here which Scharff assumes I

avoid only by imagining some sort of newfangled technology. In fact I do not fall into contradiction or make implausible predictions, but the connections between experience and objectivity are indeed complicated.

Heidegger understands experience as practical engagement with our surroundings in terms of operative meanings enacted in a world. Scientific representations of the world rely implicitly on the operative distinctions made in experience.

This is an issue that comes up in philosophy of mind. When we say that memory is lodged in a certain part of the brain, we presuppose a notion of memory that articulates our first person conscious experience. The scientific representation of mind as brain depends on our pre-scientific understanding of mind as the first person activity which we are. (I do not, by the way, agree with Scharff that the first person standpoint is merely subjective in the bad sense.) The third person approach of science attempts to explain its own foundation in first person experience. This raises questions about ontological priority. Sartre identified a reflexive paradox here. Heidegger, more simply, asserted the incommensurability of the objectivistic account and the experience it pretends to explain.

My book does not contribute to this deeper discussion but remains at the descriptive level. I show that technology brings the results of cognition into our lived experience in a unique way that resolves the antinomy of experience and objectivity *practically*. The barrier between experience and objectivity is not absolute at the practical level because our world is structured technologically and technology itself is a product of cognitive representations implemented as a life environment, a *Lebenswelt*. The particular value orientations and meanings found in lived experience are fused in the course of implementation with technically rational solutions to the practical problems that arise in that experience.

A continual process of translation shuttles back and forth between technical rationality and experiential contents. Experiential meanings guide technologists in selecting among technically underdetermined problems, designs and materials. Once technologies are released on the world, their technical rationality is apprehended practically in experience and so translated into symbolic terms. I call the specific rule of this process of translation the "technical code" of technology. The antinomy of experience and objectivity is overcome only practically, not theoretically. I do not propose a reconciliation of the practical truth of experience and scientific truth. Rather, translations between them yield a particular technical universe congruent with a quality of experience within that universe.

This is not precisely Marcuse's account, but he did argue that what he called "technological rationality" expresses the project of a social subject. Each technical universe can be interpreted not only in terms of the causal logic of devices but also in terms of the social logic that presides over their design. The concept of technical code introduces a more concrete and socially specific approach to understanding the selection from among a host of possible designs of just those that conform to the requirements of a social subject. Enframing, or technological rationality, must be reinterpreted as a particular, socially conditioned implementation of technology rather than as the inevitable destiny of modernity.

Affirmation of Life. These considerations form the background to my response to Dahlstrom's complaint that Marcuse's concept of life affirmation is empty. I regard the concept as useful for distinguishing the normative significance of different technical

codes. In Marcuse and in my own book too there are appeals to our intuitions about what is life affirming. These appeals are intended to show the compelling force of the concept despite our difficulty supplying it with a philosophical rationale.

By contrast, Heidegger does not appear to take these intuitions seriously. In one infamous passage he compares the holocaust with industrial farming. It would be cruel and unusual commentary to suppose that he intended a moral equivalence between these phenomena. But what kind of discrimination is possible for a critique that condemns technology for storing up and mobilizing energy and materials? By contrast, at the end of *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse attempts to define criteria of civilizational advance based on a notion of affirmation of life. Social and technological arrangements that contribute to the exercise and fulfillment of human capacities figure among these criteria.

The notion of life affirmation cannot be reduced to a set of principles. It describes a certain way of being human, a sensibility, a culture, and a choice of technological environment rather than an application of philosophical abstractions. Any rational framework we introduce for justifying our intuitions about life affirming practices will serve more as an interpretation of them than as a legislation founding them. This is a Hegelian approach according to which values are embedded in social institutions and—from a Marxist perspective we must add—economic and technological systems, rather than floating free as pure ideals.

Ethics and Aesthetics. This brings me to Dahlstrom's and Scharff's rather harsh criticism of aestheticism in Marcuse and in my book.

Dahlstrom claims that like Heidegger and Marcuse I fail to address ethical issues. This may well be a flaw in Heidegger but I do not believe Marcuse and I are guilty of it. I carefully analyze a text of *One-Dimensional Man* in which Marcuse revises Heidegger's history of being. The revision concerns the normativity of essence in antiquity. Marcuse's critique of modern technological rationality focuses by contrast on its normlessness. I have reinterpreted Marcuse's critique of the neutrality of technology in social terms as a reduction of traditional constraints on technology under capitalism. Like Marcuse I aim at the recovery of a normative conception of the technical that can guide the reconstruction of modern technology.

Scharff claims that Marcuse and I advocate a politics of "the imagination... flying free of the entanglements of ordinary perception to see things in an utterly creative and extra-familiar way." But idealism of the imagination correlates with a deterministic and empiricist notion of reality and is no alternative to it. Here Scharff echoes a complaint of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* which has shaped my whole approach to philosophy since I was a student. But let us see once again what I actually argue.

In the preface to *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse wavers between two hypotheses: either the one-dimensional society has entered post-history by integrating all opposition, or subtle tensions still remain and permit the hope of change. So said Marcuse in 1964. By 1969 he had decided for the second hypothesis under the influence of the New Left and particularly the French May Events of 1968. It was in this context that he proposed the theories of aesthetics and the new sensibility I discuss in my book. Marcuse believed that the New Left exemplified or at least hinted at the possibility of a new mode of experience that would encounter its objects in the light of their potentialities rather than in the empirically flat—one-dimensional—manner of technologically structured perception.

This notion combines Heideggerian and Hegelian elements. Like Heidegger's Aristotle, Marcuse analyzed a unique kind of perception that is joined to action in pursuit of a form, an *eidos* that exemplifies the "right way" of doing and being. This mode of experience is associated with *techné* in Aristotle. The craftsman's percepts contain a negative moment insofar as they immediately compare the current state of the work with its perfected form and do so not merely intellectually but in action. In Marcuse, a similar negative moment shapes the radical perception not of artifacts but of worlds.

From Hegel Marcuse derives a progressive notion of history based on "determinate negation," that is, resistances emerging immanently out of the given historical life form. In Marxism this Hegelian approach is inflected economically and technologically. Forms of life are judged in terms of the contribution of "modes of production" to realizing human potential as the latter is defined by human beings themselves through the movements that express their aspirations. For Marcuse, experience rather than mere opinion must come to reflect the demands of such movements. Experiential resistance contrasts with individual moral exigency, ideology or utopia which, following Hegel and Marx, Marcuse sees as incapable of inaugurating epochal change.

Nevertheless, Scharff attributes to me and to Marcuse a moralizing utopianism that departs from these Heideggerian and Hegelian premises to present an arbitrary ideal in opposition to a reality that does not yield to mere private fantasies. Supposedly, we fall behind Heidegger's deeper insight into the tensions implicit in the enframing. Thus it is Heidegger who is the real radical, engaging with the real possibilities of experience, while Marcuse and I impotently complain about a reality we observe from the outside.

III

I have a hypothesis I will propose here to explain this misreading. When I first studied Heidegger as a student in the early 1960s, dystopian ideology was widely popular among intellectuals. Political opposition had been crushed in the McCarthy era and technocratic liberalism was riding high. The only resistance most of us were aware of was beatnik poetry, jazz and Zen. When Heidegger claimed that "Only a god can save us" he spoke directly to our mood of historical despair. I still read him that way and I think this is the correct reading. If Scharff has textual evidence to the contrary I would be interested to see it.

In recent years, dystopian anxiety has come to seem old hat. A more combative mood has emerged which George Bush has not yet succeeded in eradicating completely. Perhaps it is the rise of the Internet or the existence of environmentalist and feminist movements that has shaped this mood. In any case, recent interpretations of Heidegger attempt to bring him into the new consensus: history is not over, we can do something after all.

Some commentators find the basis for an environmental philosophy in Heidegger, others an ethic of care or an anarchistic politics, you name it. And some, like Scharff, detect a radical politics of experience. Reinterpreting Heidegger in this way is a dubious enterprise, as Marcuse himself argued throughout his career. Heidegger does not concretize *Dasein* beyond referring to its linguistic or national particularity. In his early essays Marcuse shows that this is insufficient and arbitrarily elides class and other social differences. Postmodern critiques of race and gender-blind universals recapitulate and

elaborate this sort of originally Marxist argument. Furthermore, Heidegger's revised concept of essence, while interesting, is empty of content. It specifies no potential to be realized in our own world. As a result the normative force of the concept of essence is expended in a vague discomfort with modernity in general. In his later work Marcuse granted essence normative power once again in a modern context through his notion of the affirmation of life, the critique of the separation of reason and imagination, and the concept of the new aesthetic sensibility.

Recent attempts to politicize Heidegger remind me of nothing more than Marcuse's own early struggle to extract the ground for a radical politics from Heidegger's thought. But Marcuse was there first and in my opinion did it better without misattributing his own innovations to his teacher. I suggest that rather than saddling Heidegger with implicit political intentions so very different from his stated positions, it would make more sense to look seriously at the thinker who developed the radical argument explicitly and more or less consistently.

Why is this so difficult? It is partly Marcuse's fault. His reference to aesthetics sharpens Dahlstrom's and Scharff's critical sword. Aesthetics introduces an ambiguity that can appear fatal in an unsympathetic reading. In some texts Marcuse argues that art conserves values denied by reality. What are these values? Do they have ethical content and are they grounded in anything more significant than individual fantasy?

It is true that in certain thinkers such as Jünger aesthetics erases ethics. When Marinetti praises the beauty of a flamethrower's blast we are rightfully disturbed. But there is nothing like this in Marcuse. Aesthetics is identified with love of life, a generalized erotics, rather than a pursuit of sublime shock. Ethics is not irrelevant in Marcuse's conception or my own but it is unable to anticipate concrete alternatives to the technological universe in which we live. For that we need to imagine and ultimately design a different way of life based on a different technology and not just apply moral principles to the world as it is today.

Scharff complains that this is mere utopian idealism, a departure from the experiential ground that alone can give meaning to resistance. But whatever the idealistic tendency of some of Marcuse's writings, it is literally aufgehoben in texts such as *An Essay on Liberation*, written in the period when the New Left was on the rise. In these texts we are presented with the notion of the aesthetic entering everyday perception in response to immanent tensions in the historically given form of life. This new sensibility, and not philosophical speculations, will someday inspire a reform of society. It is this argument which I highlight in my book.

I think there is a deeper historical problem in the current reception, or rather, rejection of Marcuse. Whether we acknowledge it or not we are living in the shadow of the New Left. The political movements of the 1960s form the horizon of our most radical aspirations today. When we think about progress what do we bring to mind? Equality of race and gender. Preservation of the environment. An end to imperialist war and all forms of discrimination and exclusion. Equal rights and sexual freedom. These are all themes of the 1960s. As Sartre's put it in 1968, the new forms of resistance have "enlarged the field of the possible." And yet the New Left is despised as immature, narcissistic, irrelevant, impotent, failed, and so on.

As the advocate of the potential of the New Left, Marcuse is viewed as naïve rather than prescient. It is curious that Adorno has become fashionable when he was the one who called the cops on student demonstrators. Now we have various Heideggers who

are better radicals than Marcuse. A bit more historical self-consciousness would steer us clear of such implausible distortions of the record. We need to take seriously *in our case* the question Scharff poses of the "who" of knowing and, in Heidegger's words, "emancipate the past so that we can find in it the authentic roots of our existence and bring it into our own present as a vital force."

The point is not that Marcuse was right about everything. He never claimed to be the greatest thinker of the age. Nor did he believe the revolution was around the corner. He analyzed the new sensibility of the New Left as an anticipation of the condition of revolutionary opposition in a society no longer fraught with class conflict. To charge him with naiveté one must attribute to him illusions he never entertained.

By a coincidence which surprised him as much as anyone, Marcuse was able to join several traditions of radical questioning of modernity with an unexpected political upsurge of considerable significance. This coincidence was in his opinion a precious opportunity to renew these traditions and to contribute to the self-awareness of a younger generation entering political life with remarkably generous hopes for change. Can we still learn from this extraordinary philosophical-political encounter? I believe we can and I hope to convince others to study Marcuse and the history of the New Left with more sympathy and understanding.

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