

Feenberg on Marcuse: "Redeeming" Technological Culture

Robert C. Scharff

University of New Hampshire

Introduction

In his new book, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, Andrew Feenberg argues for a critical assessment of contemporary technological culture, interpreted through the prism of Marcuse's phenomenological Marxism. To characterize Feenberg's book this way already points toward several of its valuable and provocative features among them, the very idea of reviving a "phenomenological" Marxism, of giving Heidegger a positive role in this project and claiming that even the late Marcuse is indebted to him, and of placing the evaluation of technology, not political economy, at the center of radical critical theory.¹In addition to being a provocative work in its own right, Feenberg's arguments also shed light from a new angle on his philosophy of technology, and all of this should be of great interest to current debates.

In my view, Feenberg is best seen here as advancing a three-part thesis. First, he explains what the young Marcuse got from the early Heidegger. He acknowledges, of course, the influence of *Being and Time*, but in a much more original vein, he argues that Marcuse was at least as impressed by Heidegger's earlier lecture courses on Aristotle and the Greek notion of *techné*. From these two Heideggerian sources, says Feenberg, Marcuse developed a phenomenological conception of the priority of practical/productive life that might ground his neo-Marxist critique of modern scientism and all its social, political, and economic consequences.

The second part of Feenberg's thesis is that in his eventual disillusion with Heidegger, Marcuse turned to Hegel—where he found the imagery of a dialectical logic of life that recontextualizes the whole phenomenological-Marxist project into one involving (i) the experience of technoscientific alienation, (ii) its radical political critique, and (iii) a vision of a humanized transformation of technoscientific culture. In other words, in the language of Feenberg's subtitle, Marcuse found in Hegel a model for conceptualizing the movement from life as a dehumanizing "catastrophe" to its humanized "redemption."

The obvious question, of course, is: What principles can guide this movement toward humanization, and how do we find them? And so there is a third part to the story. Marcuse, says Feenberg, grounded his utopian vision of redemption in an appeal to lived experience. It is true that many of Marcuse's arguments from experience—for example, regarding class struggle, Freudian eros, and New Left sensibility—all seem ultimately to fail. Yet in large measure, this is because they all depended less on experience than they did on someone's theory about experience. Feenberg's purpose in

revisiting this familiar territory is original. In his view, the most important outcome of all Marcuse's arguments from experience is that he worked his way toward the idea of a revolutionary "aesthetic dimension," already growing in contemporary experience, that might function critically in the technoscientific world at large with the same spirit of radical experimentalism as the modern avant-garde movements in art. Here, for example, Feenberg finds an explanation for Marcuse's seemingly naïve embrace of the New Left student movements of the 1960s. Where everyone else saw merely an immature display of radical opinions and unrealistic reform demands, Marcuse saw the emergence of "new needs" and a "new sensibility" ...[that] operated at a more basic level than politics, [i.e.,] at the level of the form of experience itself...in which the aesthetic qualities of objects are revealed immediately to [a more liberated and receptive] sensation ([Feenberg 2005](#), 94).²

With the entry of this "aesthetic *Lebenswelt*" into modern bourgeois life, it becomes possible to move beyond the impasse left to us by totalizing pessimists like Heidegger.

With this remark about Heidegger, Feenberg's commentary on Marcuse joins up with his own critical theory of technology. When it comes to our technoscientific culture, he says, we do not face a forced option. It is not necessary for us to either continue to endure the nightmare of further dehumanization or join Heidegger in the mystical idea of waiting for a new god. There is a third possibility--namely, to develop a "new [and more democratic] form of technological rationality." Here, then, is the book's punch line: For Feenberg, Marcuse was right: "The oppressive features of technological society are not due to *excessive* materialism and technicism....[R]ather [they lie] in the *arrest* of materialism and technological rationality" in a dehumanizing and undemocratic form (100, cf. 97). What Heidegger diagnoses quite well is the allegedly neutral and purely instrumental kind of technological rationality under which we now suffer. What he misses is the possibility of transforming it into a more holistic, politicized, and ontologically sensitive rationality—a rationality that would begin with the question of what technology is making of us and end with the open question of what we can make of it (99). As Feenberg argues elsewhere, technology is never neutral. Every technology has an internal "code"—a normativity that determines what it is, what it does, under what conditions, to what things and what people. There is no reason why our currently exploitive, dehumanizing, instrumentally coded technologies cannot be subjected to "democratic interventions" that would make them more life affirming (106-108).

In the present book, Feenberg tells us that he thinks Marcuse was already working toward precisely this position. The reason why so many commentators have missed this is that Marcuse's explicit efforts to distance himself from Heidegger got in the way of his implicit and sure-footed sense that Heidegger was right to demand a phenomenological treatment for experiential matters. "What confuses us in reading Marcuse today," he says, "is his reliance on objectivistic notions drawn from Marx and Freud to signify a dimension of human life he interprets in existential terms" (121).³ If the emancipation envisioned by critical theory is ever to be accomplished, critical theory cannot do without a phenomenological account of experience.

I think it is fair to say that about Feenberg's thesis, I am quite literally of two minds. On the one hand, I share his idea that technologies are never neutral, that no objectivistic account of technological culture can help us understand either what it is or how it might be transformed, that totalizing accounts of technological oppression are unnecessarily abstract and pessimistic, and that close-up accounts of how technological

culture currently operates—even if they are ostensibly phenomenological and reformist—are often too willing to settle for changes which, in the deepest existential sense, change nothing. Finally, I am sympathetic to both Feenberg's appeal to lived experience as the source of genuine critique and to his repeated calls for more democratic and humanizing transformations of present culture. On the other hand, I disagree with almost everything he says—in his own name or Marcuse's—about the philosophical machinery in terms of which these issues should be treated. I think that in the end, existential Marxists, Lukácsian Hegelians, and critical theorists are often excellent diagnosticians but much less helpful when it comes to treatment.

In what follows, I try to explain this claim by discussing two general features of Feenberg's book in some detail. First, I examine his revisionist reading of Marcuse, especially his analysis of what it is in the early Heidegger that still seems to make its presence felt long after Marcuse has explicitly rejected him. Second, I consider Feenberg's defense of the emancipatory potential of what he calls an emerging, radically experimental "aesthetic dimension" in contemporary life. To state my conclusion in advance, I believe that the early Heidegger could in principle never have prioritized practice over theory in the way that Marcuse and Feenberg assume that *Being and Time* does. Moreover, to understand why he could not have done this is to see the reason why Heidegger would necessarily also reject both the utopian impulse Feenberg praises in Marcuse and also the sort of pessimistic totalizing of which Feenberg accuses Heidegger.

I. Marcuse on the Priority of the Practical

Turning to my first point, Feenberg's book seems to me to be an importantly revisionist work of scholarship. According to the standard view, a disillusioned Marcuse gave up his early attraction for Heidegger in favor of a critical theory of modern Western society that is based instead on appropriations of Hegel, Lukács, and the early Marx. To Feenberg, however, this interpretation of Marcuse suffers from both superficial scholarship and political bias. He argues that if we want to profit from Marcuse's teachings, we must pay less attention to Marcuse's self-interpretation and more attention to what we actually find in his writings, and we should not let our dislike of Heidegger's politics kick in before we read what he has to say in his earlier works on about Greek *techné* and being-in-the-world, and in his later works about modern technology. Feenberg thinks that if we follow this advice, we will find that Marcuse never abandoned the idea that Heidegger's *Being and Time*—and especially its putting praxis ahead of theory/ideology—provides the key to an updated version of the early Marx's critique of experience in a capitalist world.

What, then, does the young Marcuse get from the early Heidegger? There is some interpretive difficulty here. Much of what Feenberg finds valuable in the early Heidegger is expressed in his own voice, not developed in terms of Marcuse's texts. Marcuse's 1930 doctoral dissertation on Hegel's ontology, which is said to be "couched in Heideggerian terms" (4), is presented as a neo-Marxist reinterpretation, not a Heideggerian critique of Hegel's concept of life in history (19). At one point, Feenberg even calls his interpretation of the influence of Heidegger and Lukács on the dissertation "conjectural" (50). Moreover, Feenberg gives no chronology of Marcuse's study of Heidegger, so it is difficult to know which works influenced him at what time. Nevertheless, if these difficulties might be serious hindrances on other occasions, for my purposes here I will simply assume that Feenberg's Heidegger is also Marcuse's.

Of one thing, however, we can be certain. The Heidegger known to Marcuse is not just the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, but the Heidegger who had already been a very creative appropriator of Aristotle for close to a decade. Others have stressed Heidegger's working out his notion of being-in-the-world as care in light of an interpretation of *phronésis*, and early commentators follow Gadamer in focusing on this.⁴ Feenberg points out, however, that the ontological significance of Aristotle's notion of *techné* as a kind of production (*poiésis*) is also crucial to Heidegger, and not just in his later thinking specifically about technology. Citing the famous "Aristotle-Introduction" of 1922, of which Marcuse had a transcript, Feenberg stresses the fact that when Heidegger raises the question about the being of human being, he turns to Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, not to the physical or metaphysical works. And if we look in the *Ethics* for Aristotle's basic sense of human being—i.e., "being in life," as [directly] experienced and interpreted"—we see that he understands human beings, not primarily as a kind of object placed in a world full of various kinds of theoretically knowable objects, but as an entity that produces, makes, and uses things.⁵ In Heidegger's early lectures, says Feenberg, Aristotle "is transformed into an existential ontologist *avant la lettre*" (4). Here we find the roots of Heidegger's phenomenology of human existence, and—in spite of the standard story and Marcuse's own later denials—two features of this phenomenology left a permanent mark on Marcuse's thinking. For him, after Heidegger, we can take as established the ontological priority of practical and productive life; and given that priority, we can begin to transform Heidegger's own hopelessly abstract and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to critically confront the currently inauthentic condition of this life—by turning his notion of authenticity into the Marxist-inspired idea of a "free appropriation of the human essence in a socially concrete form through the liberation of labor" (xiii).

Feenberg's treatment of *Being and Time* here is, I think, somewhat more generous than in his other works. Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world specifically his argument that existence has more than one mode, that the mode of theoretical engagement with objects is not basic, that there is a deep connection between *Being and Time*'s analysis of practical affairs and the later analysis of technology, that careful description of the nuances and varieties of experiences people actually have is a better source of existential ontology than natural and social scientific theory—all of these features of Heidegger's *Daseinsanalysis* are emphasized. Yet there is one glaring omission in Feenberg's interpretation. He never asks why Heidegger develops a *Daseinsanalysis* in the first place. Like other philosophers in the tradition of critical theory, Feenberg sees Heidegger's analysis primarily as useful to his own general project of sociopolitical emancipation, but he believes that without a link to some such project, this analysis leads only to bad ideology and fuzzy romanticism. I read Heidegger very differently, as I will briefly try to explain. Yet I ask indulgence for this. I am not interested in simply presenting better Heidegger. I want to argue that, by ignoring Heidegger's explanation of what the *Daseinsanalysis* is for, Feenberg has avoided facing several deeply problematic features of his own, and I assume also Marcuse's, position.

Famously, Heidegger says that his analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is a "preparatory" project—one that is required if he is to turn fruitfully to the question of the meaning of Being. As we now know, this idea of "preparation" was nourished by Heidegger's work over the previous decade, and especially by his perception of a central flaw in most of the philosophical debates he saw around him. He was, of course, deeply

sympathetic to the anti-positivist and antinaturalist arguments of those like Dilthey, Husserl, and to a lesser extent Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and others, all of whom spoke for some aspect of human experience that seemed ill-served by the reigning objectivist model of knowledge derived from mathematics and natural science. Yet Heidegger complained that, for all their promising descriptions of this or that aspect of what came to be called the *Lebenswelt*, none these otherwise admirable thinkers were ultimately able to give a satisfactory account of either how their descriptions fit together with the causal explanations of natural science or how we should understand the inadequacy of those traditional epistemologies that tend to elevate the standpoint of natural science to the standpoint of philosophy itself.

In other words, for Heidegger in the early 1920s, the real problem with, say, Dilthey's embrace of the standpoint of historical life, or Husserl's phenomenology, or Jaspers' philosophy of *Existenz* does not lie in what they attempt to *do*. It lies in their still very traditional understanding of *who does it*. The Dilthey who sees the need for a "Critique of Historical Reason" is still thinking like a kind of anti-positivist positivist, looking for a second sort of method, concerned with a second kind of objectivity, for a second set of sciences. The Husserl who speaks of the need for a radically new philosophical beginning still conceives himself as the founder of a movement, and still describes phenomenology as the ultimate positivism, the true guardian of the Western "scientific" ideal, and the source of the one, really rigorous method that finally gets to things as they really are. Even Jaspers, who says he wants nothing more than to observe with the greatest possible sensitivity "what life is," fails to make his own interpretive standpoint a part of his inquiry—with the result that his often insightful "observations" of life's experiences are expressed in the old objectivist language of subject and object, method and substance, the knowable and the ineffable, and so on.⁶

Heidegger is especially put off by the traditionalism of such philosophical self-descriptions because they seem to him to work at cross purposes with what these thinkers are trying to do. Many of Dilthey's, Husserl's, and Jaspers' actual "phenomenological" studies are clearly superior to those of the various positivists, neo-Kantians, and traditional metaphysicians of the day. Yet when it comes to the question of what it is to "be" a philosopher, their views and those of their opponents are strikingly similar. They all claim to speak for scientists who know not what they do; they all defend essential categories and principles not relative to place and time; and they all remain convinced that first we settle what *science* knows and then we figure out what else there is. In short, Heidegger finds himself surrounded by philosophers who—whether positivist, neo-Kantian, traditionally metaphysical, life-oriented, phenomenological, or existential—still speak as if they were modern reflective subjects—idealized meta-scientists at "third-person" remove from the circumstances not only of scientific practice, but of culture, society, and history.

It is especially Dilthey's investigations of historical life that taught Heidegger to find deep irony here.⁷ See all these detached and meta-scientific thinkers, quarreling among themselves about historical human life...in disregard of their own historicity! The proper conclusion is obvious—and double. Ultimately, we need to raise again—and in a much more pluralistic way than the dominant Western tradition succeeds in doing—the ontological question of just what it means for something to *be* natural, or vital, or psychic, or beautiful, or numerical, or object-like. Yet before we plunge into any more explorations of what there is and how we relate to it, there must be a preliminary

analysis, as Heidegger begins to say in the early 1920s, of what it means to "be" a thoroughly contextualized and historically determinate philosophical questioner of anything.

Here, then, is the importance of Dilthey's legacy for *Being and Time*. In the present situation, to consider the possibility of two kinds of science, it is not enough to talk about two methods for two subject matters, as Dilthey conceives it. Rather, if we trace all of his very traditionally described questions about methods and subject matters back to their experiential sources, we see that the ultimate question—the one that should actually be put first—is How is it possible to treat any of these issues phenomenologically in a technoscientifically understood age?⁸ And for Heidegger, this point is not just about Dilthey; it is utterly generalizable. It is a matter of what Irigaray describes as existential atmospherics.⁹ In our era's general ontological atmosphere—a space in which *everything including humans* tends to be pre-understood as enframed and at our disposal—we cannot just resolve to describe better whatever experience is currently marginalized. Whether this experience concerns sexual difference—as it does for Irigaray—or a second method of inquiry, or kind of science, or kind of object—as it does for Dilthey and Husserl and Jaspers—or concerns a critical rather than conformist take on technology—as it does for Marcuse and Feenberg—in all of these cases, we must begin by determining why and how these phenomena are handed down to us precisely as obscured and excluded, and then retrieve them precisely as something obscured and excluded.¹⁰ For the sake of articulating our own ontological possibilities—all of them, not just those we now most readily actualize—we must learn, Heidegger says, what it means to "be" historical.¹¹

It is the dominant, enframing, technoscientific sense of what makes something real for us—this basic ontological "eventuation" that implicates both ourselves and everything we encounter—to which even successful "phenomenologists" still too often give official recognition. Objectivism still feels like the only philosophically respectable attitude. Hence, when Heidegger announces near the beginning of *Being and Time* that he regards knowing (Erkennen) as a "founded mode" of being-in-the-world, he is not just identifying the mode of existence he wants to demote to derivative status so that he can prioritize the mode of making and tool-handling in its place. He is attacking the everywhere still dominant objectivist understanding of everything—an understanding that experience increasingly tells us does not deserve its hegemony, the same understanding that ruins Husserl's phenomenology by convincing him to correlate everything with a *methodologically* purified self-consciousness, the same understanding that even today encourages logical empiricists and their analytic progeny to arrogantly suppose that no phenomenon can be left to the phenomenologists.

Heidegger's "preliminary" question, then, is how to *become* phenomenological about anything—science included—in technoscientific times. And for him, the way to undermine the philosophical hegemony of theoretical being-in-the-world is to find beneath it another mode of being-in-the-world so different in its makeup that the contrast between the two modes will prompt us to ask, what then "is" it to be-in-the-world, such that existence has legitimately two and possibly many more forms? However, this is a question that Marcuse, and with him Feenberg—in their eagerness to enrich Marxism with a better take on human existence—do not ask. Instead they simply reverse the priority of the theoretical and practical, in light of the requirements of a socio-political project they already embrace. I see problems with this "existentialist"

move. In the space remaining, let me try to identify three of them. For the sake of brevity, I shall comment only on what Feenberg seems to say in his own voice or on behalf of both himself and Marcuse.

II. The Priority of the Practical? Problem One

On the issue of how to make room for phenomenology in a technoscientific world, Feenberg argues for phenomenology's first-person viewpoint as deserving priority over the third-person viewpoint of science (130). Of course, he is right— as Jaspers was right—to want access to such a viewpoint. For Heidegger, however, to think of it as "first-person" is a sure sign that Feenberg has not fully appreciated the urgency of the ontological question of what it is to "be" a philosopher "in" a technoscientific age. Consider how it sounds—in the current philosophical atmosphere—to defend the first-person perspective of lived experience—not only in its own right, but as the ontological basis of "all the concepts through which we understand objective reality." How persuasive is this defense likely to be? How does it sound to be told on first-person authority that although "there is no better explanation of objective things than science" gives us, "at the most basic level, the problem is understanding *the presence of a meaningful world*, and that is something science presupposes but cannot explain (131, my emphasis)? Why isn't the proper response to this, "...can't explain yet"? Why should phenomenology have the right to limit "the legitimacy and truth of science"? The question ignored here is how a first-person argument can possibly gain traction in a world of third-person understanding, and not be, in Feenberg's graphic phrase, "instantaneously devalu[ed] at the hands of scientific naturalism" (131)?

Feenberg's critique of objectivism resembles Anglo-American critiques like those of Taylor, Putnam, Rorty, and Nagel. Crudely put, they all say something like the following. There is nothing wrong with an objective, third-person point of view as such. Its adherents are harmless enough—as long as they are just *methodologically* resolved to "have" a world and only think of its "reality" in cognitively represented external confrontations. A problem arises only when this methodological resolve gets philosophically privileged.¹² Heidegger, however, shows us why this line of reasoning won't work. One cannot simply "make room" for a non-scientific perspective in an objectivistically understood world— *because objectivism has never been merely methodological*. Indeed it has never been what it conceives itself to be at all. It is neither neutral nor valueless, nor is it a product of any decision to look at things one way rather than another. Indeed, it is not even modern in origin. It is true, as Feenberg says, that in its current form, objectivism does express and formalize the dominant mood of developed, technoscientific life in the West. But for Heidegger, it only does so because it understands science and its applications to be a kind of global fulfillment of the quest for timeless cosmic knowledge which inspired Western philosophy from its start. This is why it has remained so easy—even after the official demise of positivism—to think of philosophy as "ending" in the analysis and defense of technoscientifically informed knowing and acting, and why the world tends to seem most "real" insofar as it is "for" such knowing and acting.

Feenberg is therefore quite wrong to see the early Heidegger as using Aristotle's idea of *techné* to juxtapose the alienating modern metaphysics of instrumental rationality against an ancient "productivist" ontology, in which the "belongingness of human beings and being in the making of worlds" is still sustained (40). On the

contrary, when the young Heidegger returns to Aristotle's *Ethics and Rhetoric*, he sees himself as retrieving something the Greeks themselves suppressed "onto-theologically"—by conceiving the productivity of human beings against the background of a superior cosmological version of the same process. It may be true that the Greeks did not yet think of technical action as the mere imposition of subjective intention on raw material; but this does not mean that they adhered to the reversed priority of practical and theoretical normativity that Feenberg wants. For Heidegger, a return to Greek metaphysics would merely be a return to an earlier version of that representationalist ontology of constant presence which has dominated the entire tradition. There never was, for Heidegger, what Feenberg calls a "lost Eden of reason" (136). What there might still be is a recovery of the phenomenological spirit one can see both at work in but also suppressed by the ancients. Yet to achieve such a recovery, the first order of business is to ask how we must "be," as ontological inquirers, such that the whole battle is not lost in advance by letting technoscientific understanding force upon us the undeserved authority of "third-person" claims. A "recovery" of Heidegger's kind—what he calls a genuine "repetition"—of Aristotle on practical life might be possible. But I will try to explain why I think Heidegger has a more promising conception of this recovery than Feenberg by turning to my second problem.

III. A Transcendent Aesthetic Vision? Problem Two

Feenberg is surely right to reject as "incoherent" any attempt to "reconcile" technological rationality and practical understanding from above—as if they were two "spheres" lying side by side, surveyed by an all-seeing epistemological mind (122). It might be tempting to assume that having made this point, Feenberg then uses his idea of a revolutionary aesthetics to develop a reconciliation from within life rather than outside of it. But if I read him correctly, this is not what he does. Instead, he appears to place another, still more "mysterious" dualism, inside the familiar one between everyday experience and scientific objectivity—a dualism he calls "the irresolvable duality between experience and *objectivity in all its forms*" (my emphasis, 132).¹³ By "objectivity in all its forms," he means not just the objectivity of natural science, but also the objectivity of what he calls "the concrete technical disciplines." I am not sure what these are, but he describes them as disciplines that "respond to both the nature of lived experiences and scientific nature, merging them seamlessly in a practical unity that guides action. In so doing, they embody social forces in technically valid forms." This means, I take it, that these disciplines are to be guided by neo-Marxist critical theory.

Let me say first that if I am reading Feenberg correctly, his conception of critical social theory represents at least in one respect an important advance over many other versions. Early figures like Adorno and Horkheimer are often accused of leaving no room for a politics of hope—if not on purpose then by implicit principle. Yet even Habermas, who does affirm the possibility of such a politics, still holds that everyday life is too systematically distorted to provide grounds for its own diagnosis. Hence, to clear a space for social progress, he defends an analogy between the authoritative distance of psychoanalysts from patients and critical theorists from everyday life. The famous problem, of course, is that this leaves the source and legitimation of critical theory itself problematic.¹⁴ Here, I think, Feenberg moves in a more promising direction. For like Marcuse, he argues that experience can in fact be a guide for social transformation—in

his language, a potential source of redemption as much as it is now the locus of catastrophe.¹⁵

To make this case, Feenberg distinguishes between two kinds, or perhaps better, two dimensions of phenomenology—one more familiar and Husserlian, the other less appreciated and, he claims, at least quasi-Heideggerian. The more familiar phenomenology provides non-naturalistic accounts of perception, embodiment, etc. The other phenomenology—what Feenberg sometimes calls "a phenomenology of the aesthetic *Lebenswelt*"—has revolutionary potential. Using Heidegger to argue for the ontological priority of human practical productivity, Feenberg depicts this second phenomenology as providing not just an account of productivity in its usual technoscientific forms, but also an imaginative vision of a sort of productivity that could activate existential possibilities that are ignored or suppressed under current techoscientific conditions. In short, descriptive phenomenology is not enough. For Feenberg, only the second kind of phenomenology is able to "explain the anticipated transcendence" of today's technoscientific culture.

My problem here is with Feenberg's conception of transcendence. I agree that there is a long-standing theory of art which depicts the imagination as flying free from the entanglements of ordinary perception to see things in an utterly creative and extra-familiar way. I find the notions of freedom, creativity, and imagination in this theory of art problematic enough—sounding, as they all do, like the obverse of the notions of causal determination, law-like behavior, and sense perception that go with the scientific outlook this aesthetic theory opposes. But Feenberg goes on to build a whole political theory on an extrapolated version of this theory—and to do so without examining critically either the theory itself or the warrant for expanding it. Here, I see again an incomplete consideration of the question of who is doing the philosophizing. "In a liberated society," says Feenberg, the "sensuous power of the imagination" will "become 'productive' in reality, like the imagination of the artistic creator, and would guide technical practice" (97). I can imagine unencumbered minds making such pronouncements about sensuous power, but never concrete, socio-historical determinate thinkers, living "in the midst" of things in an instrumentally technoscientific world.

It is on the basis of confident pronouncements like these, moreover, that Feenberg's makes his rejoinder to Heidegger's alleged "pessimism." I refuse to settle, he says, for a Heideggerian "reflect[ion] on the catastrophe of technology"; and I follow Marcuse in moving beyond this "earnest contemplation of the present to project a concrete utopia than can redeem the technological society...by formulating transcending demands and realizing the dream of freedom (88). Feenberg says he rejects any sort of objectivist position "outside" everyday affairs. Yet what of revolutionary aestheticism? From what perspective does it develop its "vision"? Somewhere between his claim that experience itself can be a source of inspiration for authentic possibilities and his defense of the power of the aesthetic imagination, Feenberg seems to step back from phenomenology in order to become a "utopian" visionary who "projects" a whole life of "liberated" possibilities. In this, he sees himself as Heidegger's opponent— as someone who sees "beyond" the technoscientific pall that now covers everyday life. Yet this opposition seems not only to be a regression to a new sort of objectivism, but also entirely unnecessary. In the end, Feenberg seems to hold—in the very traditional language of catastrophe and redemption, and with a very traditional understanding of

philosophy that draws strength for life from outside of life—that without his utopian vision, we have no hope of genuine existential transformation. Heidegger does not agree—which brings me to my third problem with Feenberg's Heidegger interpretation.

IV. Heidegger's Theistic "Pessimism"? Problem Three

So far, I have criticized Feenberg for failing to explain why his utopian optimism is any more justified than a Heideggerian dystopian pessimism. I now want to add that, whatever the status of his own vision, Feenberg's analysis of Heidegger's account is flawed, and this constitutes a missed opportunity.

For Feenberg, Heidegger's analysis of the current hegemony of the technoscientific way of being and understanding is justified. Yet it is one thing to complain about technoscientific excess. It is another to spin out "totalizing" condemnations of technology itself, and this is what Feenberg thinks Heidegger has done by dropping the promising but flawed analysis of everyday life in *Being and Time* for the sake of a later theory of technology's "essence." Now I agree that there should be more concrete phenomenologies of technoscientific practice—especially if, as in Feenberg's case, this includes a critical analysis of the socio-political injustices endemic to it.⁴⁶ Still more is this so if he also discourages speculative, dystopian meta-narratives in the process. But Heidegger's account of the rise and current dominance of technoscience is not one of these meta-narratives.

Let me put my point linguistically. Feenberg, it seems to me, still thinks in the language of representative and universalizing concepts. Consider his account of the dominant sort of technoscientific rationality. There is a truth, he says, that it cannot accept—namely, the truth that "what is is fraught with tension" between its empirical reality and all of its "potentialities" that are not variations on given empirical themes (87). Technoscientific rationality, he says, "sacrifices" this truth." It rejects

all reference to essence and potentiality...[and] admits no tension between true and false being....The empirically observed thing is the only reality, and truth and falsehood apply only to propositions about it....Modern reason flattens out the difference between essential potentialities of things and merely subjective desires....Arbitrarily chosen values are placed on the same plane as essences and no ontological or normative privilege attaches to the latter (87).

Passages like this—and Feenberg's book is full of them—can be read in two entirely different ways, *depending upon what one thinks the language of the passage is doing*. Ironically, if one follows the way Feenberg treats such passages, it would seem that to him, they are precisely a collection of *true propositions* in the modern rational sense. For if it is simply "true" that technoscientific practice affirms only an empirical reality and "flattens out" normativity into subjective choice, it is small wonder that immediately after concluding this "Marcusean recapitulation" of Heidegger, Feenberg hastens to "project a concrete utopia that can redeem the technological society" (88). Empirical language that "represents" catastrophe and transcendental language that "represents" redemption fit seamlessly together—as they traditionally, Heidegger would say "metaphysically," always have.

For Heidegger, however, such passages can be interpreted very differently if they are heard as ontological characterizations of how technoscience "occurs" and "gives" reality to us. This gift has, he argues, a double structure—such that it tends to make everything *empirically present* in a technoscientific way that, at the same time, is

everywhere experienced as *existentially intrusive and unsatisfying*.¹⁷ Heidegger, then, wants his descriptions of technoscientific life to be understood as what he used to call "formal indications"—as both descriptions of what is correctly said of today's technoscientific practices and also of what must already be understood in order for us to "be" uncomfortably correct.¹⁸ Hence, if Heidegger were to say what Feenberg does in the passage just quoted, we should listen with the awareness that the very point of the passage—that this is how things *unsatisfactorily* "are"—will be missed if we assume our experiences can be fully articulated in factual propositions, plus subjective value-preferences— or utopian alternative visions—tacked on.

Here, I see the most serious difficulty with Feenberg's Heidegger interpretation. Feenberg labels Heidegger's position pessimistic, but to me it seems more optimistic than Feenberg's own. For if one asks Heidegger what grounds he has for criticizing technoscientific hegemony, he needs to look no further than current technoscientific experience—where the very having of disturbingly marginalized sorts of experience provides clues, in this very disturbance, for what is in need of greater and more appropriate articulation. With Feenberg, however, it is as if he ultimately loses faith in experience. In precisely the moment he asks, "What is to be done?", he reverts to the old idea that this can only be effectively answered from outside the situation in which the question arises.

My complaint, however, is not that Feenberg should simply be more Heideggerian. What bothers me is the questions Feenberg consequently never asks—or even mentions. For example, what makes him so sure that a life in which technology is "democratically" liberalized could ever be a life in which *all* of our concerns and activities receive their due? To raise this question, one need carry no brief for Heidegger. Absent from Feenberg's analysis are the voices of those philosophers of science, technology, ecology, and gender who might object to his apparent willingness to treat issues of knowledge, race, gender, class, and species *through* the critique of technoscience—and not as phenomena that, if given their due, might displace precisely Feenberg's critical priorities. And what about the outlook of phenomenological Marxism itself? How would Feenberg respond to other neo-Marxists who might appeal to the very same experienced world of work as he does, but in order to reject Feenberg's technological displacement of political economy as the central issue?

In short, why is an optimistic and democratized idea of technoscientific practice a better bet for the 21st century than a more suspicious, or differently focused consideration of the same worldly "site"? If Feenberg were to say the answer lies in contemporary experience, I would follow him. When he says it lies in a transcending, utopian projection of revolutionary aesthetic consciousness, I cannot.

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END NOTES

- ¹Of Marx's original conception of the sources of revolt, Feenberg asks, "What happens when economic self-interest is no longer allied with critique but with conformism instead? At that point the revolutionary can turn to irrational sources of change such as nationalism or 'new gods,' as does Heidegger, or revise the concept of self-interest to enlarge its range beyond the economic sense it has in Marx" ([Feenberg 2005](#), 137).
- ²All quotations in the body of this paper are from Feenberg 2005, unless otherwise noted.
- ³"Without a phenomenological notion of being-in-the-world, [Marcuse] seems to be engaged in inflated rhetoric or, worse yet, a naïve metaphysical challenge to the modern scientific understanding of nature. It is clear that this was not his intent, but he failed to find a convincing way of expressing his intuition" ([Feenberg 2005](#), 119).
- ⁴See, e.g., [Volpi 1994](#), 195-211; [Kisiel 1993](#), 227-308; and [Brogan 2005](#), where Thomas Sheehan's important Heidegger-Aristotle pieces are also cited, 207. [Sadler 1996](#) is not especially reliable.
- ⁵Feenberg (who misidentifies the lecture's date as 1923) cites Kisiel's close paraphrase in his *Genesis*. See the English translation of the Aristotle-Introduction in [Heidegger 2002](#), esp. 126-28.
- ⁶See, e.g., "Comments on Karl Jaspers' *Psychology of Worldviews*," in [Heidegger 2002](#), esp. 97-102, and especially its last line: "If [Jaspers' findings] are to be capable of effectively stimulating and challenging contemporary philosophy, his method of mere observation must evolve into an 'infinite process' of radical questioning that *always includes itself in its questions and preserves itself in them*" (102, my emphasis). On Husserl, Scheler, and Dilthey, see, e.g., [Heidegger 1985](#), 17, 108-119, thesis summarized, 128-31.

⁷As I have argued elsewhere, a careful analysis of Heidegger's evaluations of Husserl and Dilthey reveals that it was his habit to criticize both Husserl's conception of phenomenology and his actual findings, but to criticize only Dilthey's self-conception and not his findings. See [Scharff 1997](#), esp. 123-24. Regarding Dilthey's findings, Heidegger says that because they take their point of departure from the perspective of an "active involvement in historical life," rather than (as with Husserl) from the perspective of "a field of conscious intentionality," these findings are already phenomenological enough ([Heidegger 1985](#), 117).

⁸It is therefore incorrect to say, as Feenberg does, that Marcuse and Heidegger "go back to Dilthey to reevaluate [their] concept of life," such that there follows Marcuse's post Hegelian "enlargement of the subject" on the one hand, and Heidegger's Dasein in the mode of practical being-in-the-world, on the other ([Feenberg 2005](#), 50). For Heidegger, Dilthey's descriptions of historical life lead above all to a critique of how one philosophizes, not just to an improved concept of what it is to be human entities.

⁹I confess I am giving Heidegger credit here for something Irigaray denies to him. She argues that Heidegger, especially in his later ruminations on and "exclusive love of" earth, "forgets" to treat air with equal dignity. However, Irigaray then goes on to suggest throughout that air should be understood as what is cleared at the site of the clearing, what in numerous other images she identifies as what "is at the groundless foundation of metaphysics," which, when "recalled," is the "ruination of metaphysics" ([Irigaray 1999](#), 5). It is impossible to read her first chapter without seeing (hearing? sensing?) Heidegger's late discussion of Ereignis between every line.

¹⁰For this account of difference, I rely here especially on [Irigaray 2002](#), 247-58.

¹¹[Heidegger 1989](#), 20 [cited from the bilingual edition, [Heidegger 1992](#), 20]. Cf., Heidegger's description of hermeneutics, in this same period (SS 1923), as "the self interpretation of [Dasein's] facticity" ([Heidegger 1999](#), 11-16).

¹²Numerous contemporary philosophers of science would, of course, also reject this argument because it implies a badly dated conception of natural science. One obvious alternative would be to do what feminist epistemologists and advocates of science studies who have been influenced by Heidegger do, namely, consider the natural sciences as themselves constituting a species of productive existence (in Heidegger's language, a mode of being-in-the-world) and then proceed to ask how it differs from and might be related to other modes such as artistic creation, socio-political action, democratic vs. instrumentalist technology.

¹³All the quotations in this paragraph and the following one are from [Feenberg 2005](#), 132.

¹⁴E.g., when Habermas was challenged on precisely the issue of whether this transcendental reflection *on* life might from the beginning itself be "interest-laden," in spite of Habermas' confidence in its capacity to simply get at the way things are, he replied that he will some day "have to come back to that question" ([Habermas 1982](#), 233). That day has never come.

¹⁵I would read in this light Feenberg's distinction—which he claims to find in Marcuse—between truth that is "revealed" in experience vs. truth that is allegedly "proven" by experience ([Feenberg 2005](#), 129). The implicit criticism here, e.g., of Habermas, is that he is still too wedded to the imagery of modernity to see that experience has a more powerful potential when it is not reductively regarded as simply the source of verifying ("legitimizing") what is already theoretically claimed. See also the connection between Feenberg's doubling of the task of phenomenology and his discussion of Marcuse's introduction of experience and objective representation as a "second axis," to be considered together with the theory-practice distinction ([Feenberg 2005](#), 111).

¹⁶An "empirical turn" and anti-totalizing objections like this have become quite common among philosophers of technology. See, e.g., [Achterhuis 2001](#), 6-8. The major weakness in treating Feenberg this way, however, is that emphasizing his "empiricism," as Achterhuis does, tends to obscure Feenberg's much greater stress on developing a critical socio-political perspective on

technoscientific life. In my language above, it makes too much of Feenberg's traditional phenomenological side and too little of his aesthetically revolutionary phenomenological side. ¹⁷Ricoeur says somewhere in *The Conflict of Interpretations* that "hermeneutics begins when, not content to belong to the historical world considered in the mode of the transmission of tradition, we interrupt the relation of belonging in order to *signify* it." The italicized word is problematic and, I think, shows where the difference between Ricoeur's more "conservative" sort of hermeneutics and Heidegger's (and to a less extent, Gadamer's?) more revisionist sort of hermeneutics lies.

¹⁸For this conception of formal indication, see above all, Part I of Heidegger's WS 1920-21 lecture course, "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," [Heidegger 2004](#), 38-45.