

Freedom and Destiny in the Philosophy of Technology

David Lewin

It is generally understood that Martin Heidegger's reflections on technology did much to initiate a philosophical discourse known as the 'philosophy of technology'. Rather than illuminating Heidegger's approach, however, this literature has contributed to the concealment of its primary insight, namely, that in the modern age being is conceived technologically. Heidegger is not interested in technology *per se*. It is because in the modern age being reveals itself technologically that Heidegger takes up the question concerning technology. If we approach technology as a discrete problem among other philosophical questions, then we will fail to see the continuity between the question of being and the question of technology. Consequently, the question of technological agency is raised apart from the general philosophical problem of human freedom. This paper argues that the incapacity of the philosophy of technology to enter into the fundamental problem of human freedom reflects a technological tendency to conceal the fundamental mystery behind the unity of freedom and destiny. It is only by way of hermeneutics, and finally theology, that we catch sight of this unity. Let us begin with a question that explicitly fuses the concerns of the theologian and the philosopher while remaining implicit in the work of the philosophy of technology.

What is the nature of freedom? This question seems too broad, too deep for a humble philosopher of technology. Such a philosopher seeks to focus their concerns and analyses on new problems raised by new technologies such as stem-cell research and genetically modified organisms. But, of course, philosophy of technology must assume a concept of agency and human subjectivity in order to consider the question of technological action. The notion that we can do philosophy of technology without being exposed to the open plains of interminable philosophical inquiry has always seemed a present absurdity in the philosophy of technology. Yet this notion seems to be assumed by the very attempt to demarcate a domain within philosophy – as if we could be lovers of only the bits of truth that interest us.

'Primary philosophy' – an obviously absurd term, though perhaps no less absurd than any other philosophy of... – has something of the insoluble about it. Its grounding principles are not proved or

established, though perhaps a certain heuristic consensus forms around fundamental understandings which suggest they express their cultural value as much as their axiomatic nature. It is part of the crisis of the modern age that these values are at once grounding our culture, and yet ungrounded in themselves. For this reason Alasdair MacIntyre calls contemporary moral discourse literally interminable.¹ Not only does it go on and on, but it can reach no ultimate terminus, no final closure. The insolubility of philosophy does not sit well with the general view of science and technology as establishing understanding, and maintaining control over the earth. Philosophy of technology all too often seeks to avoid exposure to the interminable discourse of philosophy. Rather it tends to seek the opposite – to secure a moral ground that validates or challenges technological action. In this sense we can see that the philosophy of technology itself is in danger of becoming technologised: it seeks a secure ethical ground for either the thoughtless continuation of technological development, or the equally thoughtless rejection of modern technology as the negation of the human spirit.

Thinking Being

But we have conceded too quickly the notion that philosophy is interminable. In saying this we have unwittingly adopted the modern view of a philosophy of representation. This is to identify the thinking of philosophy with the discursive cultural representations; the ‘philosophy of’ Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, or whoever. If philosophy is the love of wisdom or the birth of wonder, then we might be hesitant to identify it with these historical figures and what they have written. Rather we enter into the stream of concerns and concomitant discourse that they move in. For Socrates this philosophical spirit calls us not to adopt one position rather than another, but to remain in dialogue, a dialogue that ensures an enduring openness to the mystery. Thus a conclusion to philosophy would seem more like an expedient termination than a final consummation.

In the case of ethics, this confusion is expressed by the notion that morality is defined by its cultural representations rather than an ontological ground in the good mediated by virtue. Hence the perpetual conflict between moral relativism and absolutism, generally resting in a bland emotivism. For Plato, to know a thing, the virtue of justice, for example, is to be it, to be just. Here Plato is distinguishing and prioritising the participatory understanding in which something ultimate is known in being. The very usage of the word

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2004), p. 6.

virtue is evocative. It has an ontological depth that points to a ground that sustains proper cultural participation. It delivers a presence that guides and draws us towards our own destiny. It is the star to this wandering bark. The concept of morality, by contrast, is generally regarded as a socially constructed entity, a representation of the good from a historical point of view. Philosophically speaking the partition between so-called constructivism and ontology appears to be substantial. However being is conceived – an all-too interminable problem – it is not simply constructed. It is given, disclosed, other, transcendent. However we wish to speak of being, we resist reducing it to what is socially constructed, and thus it naturally subverts the subjective will. Nor is this to give way to a naïve absolutism – the choice between relativism and absolutism is itself misconceived. The possibility of the disclosure of being, mediated through social construction, is described by dialectics since traditional dialectics refers to a grounding ontology. The infinitely open trajectory towards God in dialectical theology, for example, must assume some grounding givenness that structures dialectical ascent. This structural relation between givenness and active ascent forms the basis of a challenge to the radical division between invention and discovery, human creativity and natural emergence, speculation and revelation, which itself is reflected in the false choice between the relative and the absolute.

Thus the inexorable progress of technology need not, in fact, cannot avoid philosophical commitment to principles that defy positivist definition. The apparent interminability of philosophy is not a call to abandon thinking in preference to those less elusive technological tasks, since some kind of thinking goes on whether or not we attend to it. The debates within the philosophy of technology provoke us to ask about the nature of action, of subjectivity, and of freedom of the will. These discussions cannot be confined to the philosophy of technology. Or, rather, philosophy of technology cannot avoid its own philosophical ground.

Physis and Technè

The question of technological agency all too often assumes a simple division between technè and physis that we neither wish to fully dismiss nor uncritically assume. Technè refers to what is created by man, including technical and creative artefacts, while physis refers to that which is self-making, not requiring the hand of man. The distinct modes in which physis and technè bring beings into being must be acknowledged, but where technè and physis present relatively neutral descriptive categories, our corresponding concepts of the natural and artificial are burdened with a strong evaluative sense. Indeed the ‘industry of nature’ where supermarket products assert

their natural qualities or harmony with nature is indicative of a curious association whose ground is somewhat obscure. Is not technè part of the created order?

While we may argue that there is a strong sense in which human beings and human creativity might be counted as part of the natural world, we may miss something essential if we do not recognise the uniquely human dimension of technè as opposed to physis. Despite certain philosophical and theological difficulties with this distinction, C. S. Lewis maintains its practical significance:

What keeps the contrast alive [...] is the daily experience of men as practical, not speculative, beings. The antithesis between unreclaimed land and the cleared, drained, fenced, ploughed, sown, and weeded field—between the unbroken and the broken horse—between the fish as caught and the fish opened, cleaned, and fried—is forced upon us every day. That is why nature as ‘the given’, the thing we start from, the thing we have not yet ‘done anything about’, is such a persistent sense.²

We must acknowledge this persistent sense and the distinction it seeks to articulate, though a thoughtless division between nature and culture need not be the result. This distinction seems to have dried into a stale dichotomy that allows for a simplistic notion of human agency: since man is the agent of technè, all things derived from the hand of man are products of man’s agency and can be used or not according to human will. Langdon Winner characterises this conventional view of instrumentalism as follows:

Behind modernization are always the modernizers; behind industrialization, the industrialists. Science and technology do not grow of their own momentum but advance through the work of dedicated hard-working, creative individuals who follow highly idiosyncratic paths to their discoveries, inventions, and productive innovations. In the process of development, active, thinking agents—James Watt, Thomas Newcomen, Thomas Watson, Alfred Sloan, the Du Ponts—are clearly present at each step, following distinctly human ideas and interests. Societies, furthermore, do not yield passively to the ‘thrust’ of modernization. Political and economic actors of the world’s nation-states make conscious decisions about what kinds of technological development to encourage and then carry out these decisions in investments, laws, sanctions, subsidies and so on.³

In some sense these observations are trivially true, but the initial impulse for the philosophy of technology came from the fundamental insight that this instrumental view of technology is inadequate to

² C. S. Lewis, *Studies with Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 45.

³ Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 53–4.

account for the nature of modern technology. The perception emerged that technology itself is bringing about its own development, a development which human beings facilitate but do not control.⁴ This so-called technological substantivism appears to collapse the distinction that is made between *technè* and *physis*. Substantivism challenges the simple notion of technology as a neutral tool available to serve the human will, by revealing the manner in which technology regulates and controls human life in unexpected ways.

But is there not a danger of transposing an inadequate concept of agency from human beings to technology itself? To be sure the prevailing view of technological instrumentalism is limited by a particular anthropology. Do we clarify matters if we simply project the features of a questionable anthropology onto a hypostatized notion of modern technology? It would seem not. Consequently, the attempt to identify philosophers of technology either as instrumentalists or substantivists may be a useful, even marginally accurate exercise, but an actual understanding of technology and our relation to it, does not necessarily follow. The hermeneutical approach of Martin Heidegger is not contained within this duality, although Andrew Feenberg attempts to identify Heidegger as a substantivist.⁵ Thus Feenberg fails to distinguish the ongoing structure of interpretation implied in the hermeneutic approach, which certainly confounds a modernist conception of subjective will, from the determinative structure of interpretation which finds its ideological root in the one-dimensionalism characteristic of modern technology.

What the foregoing discussion suggests is the continuity between the problem of agency in the philosophy of technology and the general philosophical question of human freedom. Despite recent attempts to formalise the discipline of the philosophy of technology and to clarify precisely where agency lies, a persistent ambiguity remains. More than any other thinker within this domain, Heidegger is able to characterise that ambiguity while remaining faithful to its fundamental complexity. This is in part a consequence of Heidegger's concern for the question of Being out of which questions of freedom and technology emerge. Thus Heidegger's nuanced account of technological agency is a reflection of the complexities of the question of the meaning of Being, rather than an obscure Romantic flight as has

⁴ This view is well known. The classic form is expressed for example in Weber's notion of the iron cage of rationalisation (Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York, Dover Publications, 2003), p. 181), and in Ellul's statement that technique has become autonomous (Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson with an introduction by Robert K. Merton (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p. 6). See also Winner *Autonomous Technology*, and Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, pp. 2–3; Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991), pp. 7–8.

been suggested.⁶ To understand how these questions arise together, we shall consider the insufficiency of contemporary philosophy of technology and how that insufficiency is related to the specialisation of this domain within philosophy as a whole. Feenberg's work in this aspect of the philosophy of technology has been extensive, but his attempt to organise the domain has concealed at least as much as it has revealed.

Feenberg

In his *Critical Theory of Technology*, Feenberg extends the critique of modern technology from a political perspective. He accepts the basic view that technology embodies a set of values and regards those values as fundamentally undemocratic. Substantivism goes some way in recognising the determining power of technology, but Feenberg is committed to eschewing the notion that technology is wholly deterministic for human culture. For Feenberg the autonomy of technology is seriously overstated by Ellul who says, 'Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its determinations.'⁷

Not wishing to be too simplistic in his analysis of the substantivist position, Feenberg distinguishes between substantive cause and correlation; '[n]o one claims that the rise of fast food 'causes' the decline of the traditional family, but the correlation is surely significant.'⁸ Nevertheless, this correlation is indicative of a general asymmetry between technological progress and subjective will – technology being understood as the controlling agency over subjective will – which provides the ground for a critique of substantivism. For Feenberg substantivism fails to allow for the democratic transformation of technology which would ensure that technology comes within the purview of the democratic will. Consequently, Feenberg is critical of both instrumentalist and substantivist approaches to the problem of technology since the former assumes a false notion of neutrality, while the latter denies the possibility for an active program of reform.⁹

But Feenberg's analysis can hardly be seen as a development from the impasse of instrumentalism and substantivism. The concept of agency that Feenberg assumes is common. He draws out the logical

⁶ See for example; Don Ihde, *Instrumental Realism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), chapter 3; Roger Waterhouse, *A Heidegger Critique: A Critical Examination of the Existential Phenomenology of Martin Heidegger* (New Jersey: Humanitas Press, 1981).

⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. 134.

⁸ Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*, p. 7.

⁹ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 184.

implications of this assumption by arguing that human agency must be protected from the anti-democratic tendencies of modern technology. We must ensure that we remain free democratic subjects despite the technological imperative to systematise and regulate modern life. It follows from this overview that Feenberg is unhappy with the notion that technology has an autonomy that we can do nothing about.

The debate between instrumentalism and substantivism is reminiscent of a specific philosophical problem, namely, that as individuals we express free choices, make decisions and take responsibility, but, as market researchers, advertisers, and technology product developers know, this apparent free agency becomes increasingly predictable the greater the number of individuals considered. Likewise, contingent scientific and technical discoveries combined with individual and policy decisions can make the movement of technology appear contingent upon the complexities of history. But the broader the perspective we are able to take on the trajectory of the whole of technological society, the more it begins to look like an ant colony seeking to create as big a hill as it can. Is it the ants that create the colony, or the colony that creates the ants? In technological society, certain laws of progress and efficiency seem to function despite the apparent freedom at the micro level.

At this point we might choose to introduce a discussion of actor-network theory as developed by Bruno Latour, Michel de Certeau and Michel Callon.¹⁰ This theory describes something of the distributed agency of technological systems and projects. Those systems include human beings as well as the technological devices and processes and thus the prevailing concept of subjectivity and agency is undercut. While this development represents an interesting aspect of modern philosophy of technology, I am not convinced that it is capable of overcoming the tensions that the language of agency inherently introduces into the discourse. Of course that is the language we have tended to use thus far, and so it is time to introduce a fundamental shift of perspective by considering a hermeneutical approach.

Substantivism versus Hermeneutics

This area will continue to seem confused as long as we are unable to distinguish the substantivist conception of technology from hermeneutics. It is because Feenberg is unable to make this distinction that he mistakes Heidegger's hermeneutics with substantivism.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive bibliography of actor-network theory literature, see <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/css/antres/antres.htm>> (viewed on 24th August 2005).

Philosophical hermeneutics begins with a recognition of what is already underway. Heidegger's approach regards technology itself as a mode of interpretation since we are already apprehending the world in technological terms. Hermeneutics acknowledges the variety of pre-understandings or pre-judgements that structure our understanding and existence. Hans Georg Gadamer restores the concept of prejudice as the structuring element of understanding to develop his hermeneutical method.¹¹ It is only on the basis of its capacity to ground understanding that prejudice can take on its pathological aspect and consequently prejudicial misunderstanding can occur. Likewise, tradition provides the institutional horizon for understanding the world. The root metaphor of the horizon as the revealing/concealing dimension of prejudice and tradition is most illuminating.

What we see is dependent upon the horizon which provides the scope for our vision. This structuring horizon is dialectical in the following two-fold sense: firstly, it reveals what is within the horizon which simultaneously conceals what is beyond the horizon; secondly, its horizontal nature can sometimes be seen but tends to withdraw. This two-fold structure of understanding and interpretation form a single moment within the apprehension of the thing, since the perception within the horizon presupposes what is beyond, the separation of which rests upon the assumption of the binding presence of a structuring horizon. This complex dialectic is referred to more simply by Paul Ricoeur where he considers the question of perspective; 'All perception is perspectival. But how could I recognise a perspective, in the very act of perceiving, if *in some way* I did not escape from my perspective.'¹² Nevertheless, the structuring capacity of the horizon and the perspectival nature of the point of view are not come upon directly.

I anticipate the thing itself by relating the side which I see to those which I do not see but which I *know*. Thus I judge of the entire thing by going beyond its given side into the thing itself. This transgression is the intention to signify.¹³

It is this intention to signify which forms the structuring capacity behind perception. For hermeneutics, such intentions and significations provide the possibility of interpretation and thus ground our capacity to know. This dialectical epistemology is able to escape the dichotomy between perception and understanding, between radical empiricism and absolute idealism. Where the Kantian

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, revised trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 277–99.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, revised trans. by Charles A. Kelbley with an introduction by Walter J. Lowe (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), p. 26.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, p. 26.

overcoming of this dichotomy resulted in radical Nietzschean perspectivalism, Ricoeur's hermeneutic ontology is able to keep its feet on the ground. That is to say, Ricoeur is able to transform this dichotomy into a mediation in which the hermeneutic circle of understanding and perception is always turning and never closed. The problem for Kant's transcendental synthesis, on the other hand, is its tendency to drive a wedge between our structuring capacities and ontology. The mediating representation which attempts to soften the division between idealism and empiricism is all too easily dissociated from its grounding presence. This duality, then, is not truly mediated, but rather collapsed into its representational aspect whereby phenomena alone can be known.

In consideration of the modern technological age, these hermeneutical insights begin to reveal the structuring moment of technological seeing especially when allied to a phenomenological approach. Heidegger's famous essay, 'The Question Concerning Technology' is partly an illustrative account of precisely this hermeneutic developed out of phenomenology. Everything shows itself within the horizon of technological enframing. But that enframing process, that mode of seeing, withdraws from view. The fact that everything in the world shows itself in terms of its utility to human being is not noticed. Heidegger calls this manner of disclosure an 'event' since it is a very particular mode of disclosure that is essentially historical. In the technological epoch, an epoch that, for Heidegger, can be traced back to ancient Greek thought, the disclosure of things in terms of their productive utility is a specific, historical event.

How, then, does this hermeneutical understanding of technological enframing differ from the substantivist label that Feenberg applies? In what way does this distinction impact upon the question of agency in technological action?

Our criticism of substantivism was based upon its tendency to project a thoughtless concept of agency from the human subject (as is taken up by instrumentalism) onto technology itself. It is as if technology becomes a huge ugly monster threatening the future of the planet. Technology seems to have a power and a will of its own to which human beings become subject. Indeed, it is not inconceivable to read Heidegger's account of technology in this way, but it is unhelpful. If we do not see Heidegger's discussion of technology in the light of his general philosophical reflections on freedom and being, then such misunderstandings are all too easily made.

An equal and opposite misreading of Heidegger can also be made. It is to suggest that Heidegger argues that modern technology is characterised by a exceptionally powerful impulse to gain control over the world. Such a view likewise fails to undercut the conception of the enlightened rational subject, this time seeking control rather than attempting to avoid being controlled. Iain Thompson's

excellent essay ‘What’s Wrong with Being a Technological Essentialist?’ characterises this misreading as follows:

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 towards control. According to Heidegger’s understanding of enframing, the ontological reduction to raw materials is *not* in the interests of control. 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! This unprecedented absorption of the subject into the resource pool make our contemporary world unique in Heidegger’s eyes, but he still explains this on-going 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*.¹⁴

On the one hand Feenberg wants to challenge the notion that we are any more oriented toward control than previous ages,¹⁵ while also criticising those who would recognise the sense in which technology has power over us. In either case, Feenberg’s adherence to the free rational subject goes unquestioned.

Heidegger’s Concern for Agency

It is true to say that Heidegger speaks of the destining of technology as the supreme danger to man. But that destining is a revealing in which man plays a part, albeit an ambiguous one. ‘Does such revealing happen somewhere beyond all human doing? No. But neither does it happen exclusively *in* man, or decisively *through* man.’¹⁶ Heidegger goes on to distinguish the notion of a binding fate from the possibility of freedom within destiny:

Always the destining of revealing holds complete sway over men. But that destining is never a fate that compels. For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey.¹⁷

¹⁴ Iain Thompson, ‘What’s Wrong with Being a Technological Essentialist?’, (viewed on 24th August 2005), <<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/feenberg/symp4.htm>>.

¹⁵ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with an introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 24.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 25. It is interesting to compare the translation of ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ by Lovitt with the revised translation by David Farrell Krell. Krell alters the last line to read: ‘For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens, though not one who simply obeys.’ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 330.

Thus we are faced with the radical incongruity between the common conception of freedom as the autonomous expression of the will, with Heidegger's statement that freedom belongs to a realm of destining. A proper understanding of freedom occupied Heidegger's thought throughout his career from his discussion of the constrictions of 'the One' (das Man) in *Being and Time*,¹⁸ through his conception of the one-dimensionality of traditional metaphysics in *What is Called Thinking?*,¹⁹ to his reflections on releasement (Gelassenheit) to be found in much of his later thought. Whether in the realm of thinking, being, knowing, or technology, Heidegger has questioned the prevailing view of the rational subject who makes free choices.

Heidegger's challenge to over-bearing rationality, to freedom and to Cartesian and Kantian subjectivity belong with his concern for the manner in which being is. Indeed, the question of modern technology, of freedom, of knowing and of thinking, become inseparable from the fundamental and inescapable question of being. As long as thinking is a representational act by a thinking subject then it remains within the purview of the human will. Thought then appears to be something that I do, as opposed to something that occurs (as in, 'it occurs to me...'). Kant accounted for the activity of the human subject in perception and understanding but in so doing he also opened the door for the notion that human thinking was constituted by projection. The logical conclusion of this representing subject is the radical nihilism of Nietzsche for whom any assertion of truth is simply a projection of value and thus a fiction. It is the will to truth which expresses a will to power. Schopenhauer likewise faced the implications of Kantian epistemology in *The World as Will and Representation*. Here Schopenhauer considers the manner in which the subjective will determines the reality that is seen. Of course, in such circumstances what sense does it make to speak of 'reality' – or indeed of 'seeing' – at all? The consequences of the modernist programme are an inevitable pressure upon any conception of reality or of seeing. Post-modern relativism dissipates rather than diverts this pressure. Philosophical hermeneutics provides the orientation toward ontology that fully accepts the historicity of being, while retaining a trajectory towards the real.

Plato's cave analogy may have articulated the principle manner in which appearances are distinguished from the real in philosophy, but Plato's conception was firmly rooted in the grounding presence of the real with the analogy simply expressing a manner in which we might imagine the ascent of the mind to truth. Modern

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1996).

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

epistemology, on the other hand, developed from the assumption of radical Cartesian doubt, from which nothing could ultimately be safeguarded. Nietzsche's conclusion seems an inevitable consummation of Kantian epistemology. For Heidegger, however, Nietzschean nihilism consummated not only Kantian thinking, but Kant himself was only a part of the extension of Western (Platonic) metaphysics, which begins with the differentiation of the sensory and the supersensory:

The realm for the essence and coming-to-pass of nihilism is metaphysics itself—provided always that we do not mean by this name a doctrine, let alone only one particular discipline of philosophy, but that we think rather on the fundamental structuring of that which is, as a whole, insofar as that whole is differentiated into a sensory and a supersensory world and the former is supported and determined by the latter. Metaphysics is history's open space wherein it becomes a destining that the suprasensory world, the Ideas, God, the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, civilisation, suffer the loss of their constructive force and become void.²⁰

Whatever the ground of this representational metaphysics that culminates in nihilism, it is fundamentally correlated with the subjective will. This subjective will sets upon the real to uncover its secrets and take command over its course. The Baconian attitude makes explicit this intent with the recognition that 'knowledge is power'.²¹ Knowing then drifts away from the so-called realist metaphysics in which the mind and reality are directly linked by, for example, the medieval concept of *species*.²² To know becomes a willful act of human subjects who elect what it is they will and will not know.

This subjectivist epistemology defines the Enlightenment quest for objectivity, as the assertion of human power over reality. The philosophy of representation that provides the metaphysical ground for both modernity and post-modernity assumes that thought cannot rest in the infinite openness of being as such. Thinking is an activity of the human subject, after all. This displacement of ontology must be limited. What we will to know does not necessarily correspond to what is given to be known. What is given to be known does not come within the purview of the human will and so cannot be actively sought. This point is repeatedly underscored by Heidegger in recognising the manner in which thinking gives itself to be thought, language gives itself to be spoken, and reality gives itself to be known.

²⁰ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 65.

²¹ Francis Bacon, 'Meditationes Sacrae'. *De Haeresibus*. (1597).

²² See Louis Dupré *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), esp p. 40: 'In the *species* the real is united with the mind, and turns its potential intelligibility into actual understanding. Being the very union of the mind with its object, it is neither a copy nor a representative of the known object'.

What calls to be thought, spoken or known? That something is given at all implies that what is cannot be circumscribed by the subjective will. That what is given, gives itself to thought implies that the initiative rests ultimately with what is. The attitude of technological enframing expresses the will of technology as the extension of the subjectivist will. Arthur Kroker suggests something of the closedness of this subjectivist mentality:

The will to technology folds back on itself – a closed and self-validating universe of thinking, willing, judging and destining – that brooks no earthly opposition because it is a will, and nothing else. As Nietzsche reflected in advance: ‘it is a will to nothingness.’²³

If nihilism is the consummation of the subjective will to technology which cannot escape the one-dimensionality of its own representations then are we not doing this to ourselves? Is not the subjective mentality developed by Western metaphysics brought about by us through our own cultural and metaphysical tradition? Of course it is tempting to think so. But such a thought would be a repetition of the notion that we are in control of technology. Furthermore, it reflects the assumption of a philosophy of representation. It would seem obvious that our thinking emerges out of the metaphysical tradition as much as it directly forms it. It thus requires us to enter into the ongoing hermeneutical circle that inquires into the origin of thought, speech and knowledge. The hermeneutical approach subverts the circumscription of the philosophy of representation by entering into an understanding of the infinite depth of the unity of truth. This unity is silently operative though, as Ricoeur says, remains elusive;

The unity of the ‘world’ is too prior to be possessed, too lived to be known. It vanishes as soon as it is recognised. This is perhaps why a phenomenology of perception, which would try to furnish us with the philosophy of our being-in-the-world, is a wager akin to the quest for paradise. The unity of the world against which all ‘attitudes’ stand out is merely the horizon of all these attitudes.²⁴

We do not seek a passage to paradise but merely to catch sight of the structuring horizon of our world. It is in the nature of the horizon to remain at the periphery of vision.

Perhaps most challenging to our notion of the autonomous subject is the idea that our freedom is constituted by our capacity to enter into the destining of technology. This challenge arises in particular because of the fact that we have lost any sense in which freedom belongs to destiny. Our modern notion of freewill, that freedom is

²³ Arthur Kroker, *The Will to Technology & the Culture of Nihilism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 8.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* trans., with an introduction by Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 194.

expressed as a freedom from constraint and freedom to do whatever, contradicts the ontologically grounded notion that destiny suggests. But our modern conception of freedom can be quickly undermined. Are we slaves to food because its absence leads to hunger and death? Is the family a cage because it provides its members, young and old, with conventions and prohibitions? Ontology is not a cage but the free space in which we move just as the truth is said to set us free. For Kant the ideal of freedom became reduced to a matter of intention; of being without motive.²⁵ That human freedom became a matter of individual motivation reflects the general move away from ontology and towards subjectivity that we have sketched. Indeed for Louis Dupré the privatisation of freedom should be contrasted with the Ancient and Medieval view of freedom pertaining to a broader role within the *polis*. But this narrowing of the sphere of morality to the individual only reflects the broader development towards an autonomous subject that we have outlined. Dupré comments on the implications of the development that thinking and knowing come within the grasp of the representing subject:

Once meaning and value become constituted by a sovereign subject, the source from which morality draws its concrete content dries up. This moral privatization removes the ethical from what for the Greeks had been its center—namely, political life—and reduces society to an inter-individual, contractual structure.²⁶

From the point of view of society and culture, freedom and ontology cannot be separated, since freedom is always a freedom towards. Is this not reminiscent of the political rhetoric that places freedom beside responsibility? In a sense it is. But that responsibility does not arise as a social convenience or even a public demand. Rather freedom is directly constituted by responsibility in the sense that responsibility speaks of an *ability to respond* to the calls made by life. In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger speaks directly of a freedom that is constituted in a freedom toward something (for-the-sake-of).²⁷ Freedom is not an arbitrary spontaneity, but the ground and possibility of commitment.

[W]e can also remove freedom from the traditional perspective where emphasis is placed on self-initiating spontaneity, *sua sponte*, in contrast to a compulsive mechanical sequence. But this initiative ‘from itself’

²⁵ See Gavin Hyman, ‘Disinterestedness: The Idol of Modernity’ in Gavin Hyman (ed.) *New Directions in Philosophical Theology* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 35–52.

²⁶ Dupré, *Passage To Modernity*, p. 131.

²⁷ In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger repeatedly uses the term ‘das Umwillen’ which is translated as ‘for-the-sake-of’. See Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. by Michael Heim (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984).

remains indefinite without selfhood. And this means that one must take transcendence back into freedom; one must seek the basic essence of transcendence in freedom.

In other words, the world described primarily by the for-the-sake-of is the primordial totality of that which Dasein, as free, gives itself to understand. Freedom gives itself to understand; freedom is the primal understanding, i.e., the primal projection of that which freedom itself makes possible. In the projection of the for-the-sake-of as such, Dasein gives itself the primordial *commitment* [Bindung]. Freedom makes Dasein in the ground of its essence, responsible [verbindlich] to itself, or more exactly, gives itself the possibility of commitment. The totality of the commitment residing in the for-the-sake-of is the world. As a result of this commitment, Dasein commits itself to a capability of being toward-itself as able-to-be-with others in the ability-to-be-among extant things. Selfhood is free responsibility for and toward itself.²⁸

The attempt to seek transcendence in freedom emerges out of the understanding that freedom and destiny are not polar opposites, but are, as Paul Tillich says, interdependent.²⁹ The problem of human freedom is not met as the choice between the constraint of mechanistic determinacy or the ‘liberty’ of indeterministic contingency. Only within a broader structure of being and of destiny can freedom be in any way meaningful. I must be free to pursue my given projects and talents. The givenness of those projects and talents provides the structuring capacity for freedom, not the restrictive denial of possibility. We are confronted with the tension between givenness and construction and the difficulty we have thinking this duality as a single moment. The givenness of talents is a good example.

Talents and Projects

A talent does not bind us but lets us into our freedom to take up the call. That I am a musician and not a ballet dancer is a freedom that calls for a response – a responsibility. I notice and rise to that call or

²⁸ Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, pp. 191–2.

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1956), ‘Man is man because he has freedom, but he has freedom only in polar interdependence with destiny. The term ‘destiny’ is unusual in this context. Ordinarily one speaks of freedom and necessity. However, necessity is a category and not an element. Its contrast is possibility, not freedom. Whenever freedom and necessity are set over against each other, necessity is understood in terms of mechanistic determinacy and freedom is thought of in terms of indeterministic contingency. Neither of these interpretations grasps the structure of being as it is experienced immediately in the one being who has the possibility of experiencing it because he is free, that is, in man. Man experiences the structure of the individual as the bearer of freedom within the larger structures to which the individual structure belongs. Destiny points to this situation in which man finds himself, facing the world to which, at the same time, he belongs.’ pp. 182–3.

I do not. But in any case, the freeing claim of destiny to bring forth my musicality is in no way experienced as a denial, a burden or a slavery. The concept of talent suggests that some things are experienced as given (whether by accident or providence),³⁰ and while it must be acknowledged that there are contingent circumstances to my call towards music (my mother was a pianist, or whatever), we do not therefore reduce the call of a talent to that contingency. We may say that the talent acquires a contingent historicity that does not displace the transcendent dimension of freedom. Again this unity of historicity and transcendence is received as a single moment. Thus we are in the vicinity of the unity of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics affirms our historicity while simultaneously recognising our escape from a narrow perspectivalism, a point which Ricoeur eloquently repeats; 'the very inadequacy of perception as always being in process (and not its mere receptivity, taken as such) discloses the finitude of my point of view.'³¹

Talent, then, is not to be isolated from its historicity or contingency. The dissociation of talent from historicity and contingency polarises the flash of inspiration from the work of perspiration, the givenness of the talent from its historical working out. Consequently, in a disenchanted world, the rich ambiguity of the concept of talent becomes reduced to a function of contingent opportunity and wilful creativity. To overcome this duality we can then move towards a more ambiguous understanding of talent which seems closer to the idea of a project – something we contrive to do or achieve. If talents have a contingent historical moment drawing them from heaven towards the earth, then projects have a transcendent aspect drawing them from earth to heaven. In fact, we begin to see that talents and projects occupy a middle ground between givenness and construction, between human will and divine call, each with their own particular emphasis.

What is crucial here is the necessity of a concept of givenness whether speaking of talents or projects. These notions are not fully secularised in the sense that they cannot operate without what is given. The givenness of talent is direct and obvious. Projects also refer to a givenness since they presume an 'ultimate concern', which may appear to be fully defined by the projector (hence 'projection') but ultimately rest upon a given telos that energises those projects.

That we invoke givenness or transcendence to articulate the interdependence of freedom and destiny should not indicate a flight into traditional metaphysics. It is simply the acknowledgement that man lives within a world that is given. The nature and meaning of that

³⁰ While we tend to regard accident and providence as two wholly separate descriptions of how things befall, we might regard the word 'fortune' as revealing a complex interaction between these ideas.

³¹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, p. 308.

givenness need not be assumed. The illuminating work of Jean-Luc Marion on the phenomenology of givenness is instructive.³² It indicates the necessity of seeing things as given without becoming entangled in the over-determinations characteristic of a traditional theology of gift by remaining scrupulously phenomenological. Whether, indeed, the theological tradition is quite guilty of these over-determinations is beyond our scope. In any case, givenness provides a neutral category for understanding the insufficiency of the human will in knowing, acting and being. We may, then, hold to the Thomistic distinction of philosophy and theology; the philosophical task indicates *that* God is, while the theological concern takes up the question of *what* God is. Our commitment to givenness remains in the philosophical realm of the *thatness* of God without committing ourselves to account for the *whatness* of God. But this distinction is made within the context of the attempt to articulate what Marion calls the 'separation that unites'³³ theology and philosophy. The concept of the phenomenology of givenness provides the essential ontological ground that structures the notion of freedom within a greater whole.

The Freeing Claim of the Destiny of Technology

Having considered the ontological ground of freedom, perhaps we are now in a position to see Heidegger's claim that only by entering into the destiny of technology can we become part of its freeing claim.

We saw that the philosophy of technology has reached something of an impasse. The question of who is in control, technology or man, is limited by its adherence to a particular constellation of ideas; of subjectivity, agency, will and freedom. With this constellation in play we seem bound to ask whether man is the subject exercising free-will – the instrumental definition, or whether technology itself expresses its own will – the substantivist position. Heidegger often appears to confer a substantive identity to technology by showing our impotence:

No single man, no group of men, no commission of prominent statesmen, scientists, and technicians, no conference of leaders of commerce and industry, can brake or direct the progress of history in the atomic age. No merely human organisation is capable of gaining dominion over it.³⁴

³² See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).

³³ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies*, trans. by T. A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), p. 199.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse On Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 52.

And yet Heidegger's approach to technology is complicated by a context in which the very notion of the rational subject who makes free choices seems entirely misconceived. That the destiny of technology does not necessarily deny human freedom requires us to question the prevailing view of subjectivity that Feenberg assumes.

Heidegger's *Discourse on Thinking* develops the sense in which the common notion of will does not attain to an understanding of action, technological or otherwise. The dialogue wanders through different conceptions of willing in the effort to come within the vicinity of a releasement. The conversation moves through understanding release-ment as being released to a higher will, to a point beyond the distinction between activity and passivity, and finally to waiting. This waiting assumes the presence and givenness of things as has been suggested and it is only in the light of this ontological source that releasement can be in any way coherent. While speaking of givenness in this way seems appropriate, we should be aware of Heidegger's reticence to be so direct. This is not for no reason. Rather, the subtle dialectic of the discourse functions to evoke waiting in the reader. To state this givenness too directly may bring about yet another representation of transcendence. For the present discussion we can avoid this tendency by being simply concerned with the necessity of a ground-ing givenness – the thatness, while remaining agnostic concerning the nature of that ground – the whatness.

Thus, the Heideggerian attitude of releasement is not the 'resignation and passivity'³⁵ that Feenberg at one point suggests. Feenberg's commitment to an 'active program of reform'³⁶ leads him to reject this Heideggerian caricature and the fatalism he associates with it. Feenberg's prejudices are revealed where he says, 'Heidegger's out-right rejection of agency is not a true alternative to instrumental control but merely its abstract negation.'³⁷ This statement is indicative of a failure to distinguish the hermeneutic mode of understanding freedom and agency from the prevailing view. It is not a matter of accepting or rejecting agency (alternatives which uncritically accept the prevailing view of it) rather of deconstruction so as to reveal the insufficient anthropology and ontology that lie hidden within it. What is left is not a new agency that somehow arises with the deference of human will. Such a new agency would carry with it the subjectivist baggage on the prevailing view. The notion that technology itself becomes the determining agent of modern life carries with it those assumptions of the rational subject. It should be obvious, then, that Heidegger cannot be a substantivist in this sense.

³⁵ See Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 184.

³⁶ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*.

³⁷ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 105.

In the attempt to draw Heidegger's arguments out of the dynamics of their context they lose their persuasive force – we should be bear in mind that Heidegger repeatedly reminds us that his thinking is a way that we can follow, not ideas that can be formally represented.³⁸ The rigours of modern academic discourse demand a propositional clarity. But this does not mean that the infinite presence of things can be determined by proposition.

In attempting to recover a sense of the silent operation of truth and being we have considered philosophical hermeneutics as the most promising path. This path has led us through the impasse of the philosophy of technology to the interminable questions of human freedom. What happens when we arrive there? Do we have answers to the ecological, social and existential crises that attend technological advance? Will these problems dissolve once we attend to the unfathomable?

We are not ready to answer such questions because we know not what we do; we are faced with an uncanny incapacity to conceive of what technology can produce or do. Thus Guenther Anders asks,

What does this discrepancy between conception (*Vorstellung*) and production (*Herstellung*) signify? It signifies that in a new and terrible sense we 'know no longer what we do'.³⁹

Then we have a greater incentive to call for *thy will to be done*. But we must not polarise human will and divine will as if the assertion of one is the denial of the other. Rather we must recognise that in an uncanny sense we can and must know what we do. Only then can our will and God's will become the will beyond will.

Dr David Lewin
School of European Culture and Language,
University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF
Email: dave@davidlewin.co.uk

³⁸ See Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*.

³⁹ Guenther Anders, 'Endzeit und Zeitende: Gedanken ueber die atomare Situation', translated and quoted by Alfred Nordmann, 'Noumenal Technology', *Techné* 8:3, Spring (2005).