BETWEEN REASON AND EXPERIENCE

ANDREW FEENBERG

Simon Fraser University

Introduction

Everyday experience has a teleological character that ancient science raised to the level of an ontological principle. In modern times the new mechanistic concept of nature shattered the harmony between experience and scientific rationality (Whitehead, 2004: 30-31). The world split into two incommensurable spheres, a rational but meaningless nature and a human environment still rich in meaning but without rational foundation. In the centuries since the scientific revolution no persuasive way has been found to validate experience or to reunite the worlds despite the repeated attempts of philosophers from Hegel to Heidegger. This is not just a theoretical problem. Experience teaches caution and respect for people and things. Experience brings recognition that the Other has its own powers, limits and goals. Once the lessons of experience no longer shape technical advance it is guided exclusively by the pursuit of wealth and power. The outcome calls into question the viability of modernity. The genocidal 20th century is now followed by a new century of environmental crisis.

Technology stands at the crossroads of all these developments. It is both an application of scientific-technical rationality and the background of the world of experience. Communication between the two realms ought to be possible around technical problems if nowhere else. Philosophy of technology thus has a unique vantage point from which to consider the modern dilemma. This vantage point has been occupied fruitfully by Heidegger, whose concept of world is deeply implicated in his notion of technical practice. Yet Heidegger himself failed to draw out the most important implications of this coincidence. In Marcuse a more socially concrete formulation of a similar approach opens the way to a solution which I will sketch in the conclusion of this paper. Accordingly the paper is divided into three main parts, a first part on the relation of technique and world in Heidegger, a second part carrying the story further in Marcuse's Marxist reformulation of the Heideggerian approach, and a third part in which the concepts of technique and world are reconsidered in relation to environmental crisis.
The philosophical issue concerns the relation of norms derived from concrete experience to rationalized technical practice. The expulsion of teleology from scientific-technical rationality stripped it of most normative elements. So long as ethical and aesthetic principles remain external to technique they appear to intrude impotently on a self-sufficient domain with its own laws and logic of development. Thus nothing is more urgent today than rooting these principles in the structure of technical disciplines as restraints on the deployment of their overwhelming destructive power. Can this be accomplished in a progressive framework? Can normativity be restored within the technical realm without regressive re-enchantment of nature or general impoverishment? These are the questions to which this paper is addressed, not with final answers in hand but programmatically, in the hope of suggesting a new approach.

Technique and World in Heidegger

The place to begin is Heidegger's ontological account of experience, which he calls "worldhood" in an attempt to avoid any hint of subjectivism. Worlds emerge in the human encounter with reality, but that encounter cannot be understood in causal terms because on those terms no world appears but only isolated stimuli and response. "World" must be understood instead as the existential enactment of meaning, not the object of perception. But despite the rejection of a causal account, Heidegger describes the encounter with world in more or less passive terms as a revealing, a disclosure, an opening, not a construction. His language struggles to evoke this enactment, which is taken for granted and indeed must be taken for granted, for everyday life to go on.

These are familiar aspects of Heidegger's early thought, but it seems to me that insufficient attention has been paid the nature of the enactment in which worlds emerge. This relative neglect is I believe due to the entwinement of Heidegger's argument from the very beginning with a phenomenological concept of the technical that challenges philosophy to leave its ivory tower and engage with concrete social reality. His work promises a new basis for understanding human life through a radical reevaluation of the structure and relevance of everyday experience in its technical aspect.

That Heidegger himself failed to fulfill this promise, that his attempts to concretize philosophy are still excessively abstract, that his early vision of the technical later degenerated into a global critique has authorized much evasion and obscurity. And where philosophers attempt to fulfill the promise of