# Comments on Andrew Feenberg's *Heidegger and Marcuse*[1]

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The aim of Andrew Feenberg's ambitious and intriguing study is to demonstrate the importance of Heidegger's early work for Marcuse's thinking, early and late ("even against Marcuse's explicit self-understanding"), and, more importantly, to project its undeveloped promise as a philosophy of technology. Feenberg argues that "Marcuse remained true at some level to an earlier Heidegger the later Heidegger rejected and concealed" (xiv).[2] Marcuse, we are told, shared the early Heidegger's "crucial conviction that the notion of being is modeled on productive activity in Greek thought and the thought of Aristotle in particular" (85; see also 53, 88, 100). Opening chapters on the Greek understanding of techné and Heidegger's early and later reflections on techné and technology give way to four chapters recounting Marcuse's early work on Hegel and later works on Freud and aesthetics, but always with the purpose of demonstrating the persisting valence of that "crucial conviction." The result is a lucid and forceful argument for retrieving the insights of the Greek understanding of techné, as Feenberg sees them interpreted by the early Heidegger, in order to develop the unrealized potential of Marcuse's thinking as the prototype of a needed phenomenological Marxist approach to technology in the present. The argument is not above reproach in my view and, in the interest of stimulating discussion, I would like to offer a few criticisms, suggestions, and pleas for clarification. My remarks are divided into two parts. In the first part, I raise some objections to Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger's thought. In the second part, I express some reservations with the project that Feenberg derives from the phenomenological promise of Marcuse's philosophy of technology.

## I

According to Feenberg, Heideger and Marcuse agree that "the source of the uniqueness and tragedy of modernity" is the value-free or neutral character of technology or, equivalently, "the obliteration of humanity's special status and dignity as the being through which the world takes on intelligibility and meaning" (2). The hidden source of their common approach is, Feenberg contends, the early Heidegger's interpretation of the constructive character of Greek techné and its contrast with the destructive character of modern technology. One of the basic, recurrent contentions of Feenberg's interpretation is that Heidegger's view of the productionist metaphysics developed by the

Greeks was primarily positive "until the mid-1930s" (36). Indeed, with their appreciation of the way beings reveal themselves, Feenberg submits, "the Greeks discovered the basic premises of Heidegger's philosophy" (38). Yet Feenberg also registers how Heidegger presumably changed his views in this regard. Feenberg writes: "In the latter Heidegger productionism is treated negatively," Feenberg writes, "as the fundamental error of Western metaphysics. Although Heidegger begins his analysis with production, it ends in existential and eventually quasi-religious themes far removed from these beginnings" (80). Moreover, he seems to regard Heidegger's appropriation of these Greek insights not only as Heidegger's major achievement, an achievement upon which the early Marcuse, drawing on Hegel, Marx, and Lukacs, effectively builds, but also as the legacy of Heidegger's thinking with the most potential for addressing central aspects of contemporary problems.

But this interpretation of Heidegger strikes me as ill-advised. Though Heidegger contrasts Greek and modern views of technology, it does not follow that he thereby endorses the Greek view or takes from the Greeks, as Feenberg puts it, "his own theory in *Being and Time* according to which everyday instrumental activity offers the basic access to reality" (5). The idea that Heidegger embraces the Greek conception of techné is suspect given the destructive purposes of Heidegger's historical studies from very early on. In the years immediately following WWI, it bears noting, Heidegger takes aim at the Greek and especially the Aristotelian influence on Christianity. Thus, in a lecture draft from 1918 he writes: "The predominance of the theoretical lay already in the staunchly natural scientific, naturalistically theoretical metaphysics of Aristotle and its radical suspension and mistaking of the problem of value in Plato, a metaphysics that was renewed in medieval Scholasticism, such that scholasticism, within the totality of the medieval Christian world, strongly endangered the immediacy of religious life and forgot religion over theology and dogmas" (Heidegger 1995: 313f; see, too, ibid. 306). Midway through lectures in the summer semester of 1920, he pleas for a Christian theology "free of the Greek world [*Griechentum-frei*]" (Heidegger 1993: 91). Shortly thereafter in a letter to Löwith, he famously characterizes himself as a Christian theologian. Moreover, his difficulties with Greek thought and its Scholastic appropriation are due in large measure to the consequences of a productionist metaphysics for religion and the historicity of revelation. He regards those consequences as equally deleterious for philosophy. The early Heidegger, for all his respect for classical Greek thinkers, has fundamental misgivings about the quasi-pragmatic way they think of or, better, came to interpret being, in his view a key source of the Western obliviousness to

being. Taking the ability of things to be used, their availability and accessibility as their most fundamental reality is, in Heidegger's view, a Greek legacy. In other words, to use his own shorthand here, he objects to the Greek identification of being with presence. Moreover, while Heidegger emphasizes the manner in which everyday instrumental activity *inter alia* constitutes the overlooked supposition of theory, the second half of the published text of *Being and Time* amply testifies to the fact that he hardly considered such activity without further ado "the basic access to reality"–i.e., without consideration of the difference between existing inauthentically and authentically. The fact that Feenberg is largely silent on the themes of the second half of the text of *Being and Time* is probably telling, since it is difficult to see how the themes elaborated there can be understood along the lines of a productionist metaphysics. In that second half Heidegger takes up, among other things, various themes from his phenomenological investigations of religious experience, recasting them in terms of the project of fundamental ontology and the methodological a-theism that he adopts in the interim, but with a similar intention of demonstrating the need for dismantling (*Destruktion*) the Western metaphysical heritage, from its Greek inception, in order to understand what it is to be.

It bears noting that the early Heidegger's most extensive treatment of the metaphysics of production is to be found, not in the first half of the *Sein und Zeit*, but in the discussion of the second thesis about being in the 1927 lectures entitled *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*. There Heidegger traces the medieval distinction between essence and existence to the metaphysics of production, the basic concepts of which are a legacy of Plato and Aristotle (see, for example, Heidegger 1975: 149f, 154, 156). Heidegger is unambiguously critical, not simply of this metaphysical heritage, but of its failure to see the extent to which it is the stepchild of a conception of production: "But the interpretation of the being of beings as something produced, does it not still contain an unbearable one-sidedness within itself? Can every entity be conceived as produced and can the concepts of being be gathered and fixed with respect to the behavior of producing? Not everything of which we say 'it is' is brought into existence by productive existence" (Heidegger 1975: 162). In this connection, while emphasizing the "incompleteness and indefiniteness of ancient ontology," Heidegger proceeds to call into question the notion that productive behavior could have even been the "guiding horizon" for Greek ontology (Heidegger 1975: 156, 163). My hunch is that this treatment, suitably reconsidered, appropriated, and integrated with Heidegger's appropriation of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, could prove complementary to some of Feenberg's basic insights.

But it at least corroborates, I think, first, the complexity of Heidegger's early attitude toward classical Greek thought, precisely on the issue of its legacy, mistaken or not, as a metaphysics of production and, second, the need for more work to come to grips with this complexity.

There are other bothersome characterizations of Heidegger's thought, four of which deserve explicit mention. First, although it is true that Heidegger in 1925 gives mixed signals about the phenomenological reduction, he is excoriating it a year later. The way in which he sets aside the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and biology at the outset of *Sein und Zeit* bears only a faint resemblance to what Husserl understood by a reduction aimed, not at facilitating a self-explication of being-here (*Da-sein*), but at securing a residuum of consciousness (*Bewußt-sein*). Accordingly, Feenberg's talk of Heidegger's project in these phenomenological terms (ix, 16) is dangerously misleading. Second, Feenberg apparently sees no point in Heidegger's insistence on distinguishing existential analysis from philosophical anthropology. Fair enough but it would be nice to know why, given the considerable importance that Heidegger places on the distinction. Many of the themes that matter to Feenberg concern what Heidegger calls "philosophical anthropology," but that is also precisely what Heidegger insists is not his main concern. Third, Feenberg's remark that "the whole problematic of authenticity simply disappears from Heidegger's discourse" (xii) overlooks Heidegger's introduction of *Ereignis*, particularly in the *Beiträge*, and his insistence on the necessity of experiencing this appropriating event in order for Dasein and, ultimately, human beings to come into their own and, indeed, to achieve selfhood (*Selbstheit*). Fourth, although the notion of essence does heavy-lifting in Feenberg's study, he takes no note of Heidegger's distinctive account of essences (see *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, the *Beiträge*, etc.). This oversight is a pity but not only because of the importance that Feenberg accords to essences in some sense (revealed in a techné, supposedly along the lines of Heidegger's interpretation of the Aristotelian notion). Closer consideration of Heidegger's thoughts on essences could help clarify what Heidegger, Marcuse, and Feenberg variously understand by 'essence" and perhaps even fortify some of Feenberg's theses.

## II

But more important perhaps than issues of Heidegger-exegesis is Feenberg's thesis about the positive potential of Marcuse's thinking. Underlying his conception of this potential is a criticism of modern scientific rationality's

alleged obliviousness to what is essential and a conception of a technology capable of disclosing what is essential.  Thus, Feenberg declares that "abstention from any judgment as to what is accidental and what essential … is the original violence of modern reason, which places it in the service of the status quo" (87). He apparently assumes that natural science does not contend with or even countenance essences and, hence, "a new technological logos must include a grasp of essences, and technology must be oriented toward perfecting rather than dominating its objects" (89). But is it true, as Feenberg apparently supposes, that science does not acknowledge and respect intrinsic qualities, essential features? One could argue, to the contrary, that science at its best is a self-correcting, institutional attempt, however imperfect, to determine in self-consciously historical terms what is essential, to revisit "ceteris paribus" assumptions, to minimize the role of bias, etc.  Even Descartes worked with the supposition of essences and of essential and accidental differences.  No doubt Feenberg has a different (perhaps more strongly axiological?) conception of essences but if so, his argument would be considerably strengthened not only by presenting and arguing for this distinctive conception more clearly, but also by demonstrating its efficacy, however diminished, *within* science.

In chapter five ("Aesthetic Redemption") he turns to the conviction driving Marcuse's later work: with the collapse of the revolutionary proletarian consciousness, the opposition to the reifications of one-dimensional thinking and its technologies must emerge from another source, namely, an aesthetically transformed experience. Given what Feenberg deftly calls the "Marcusian enigma," i.e., the fact that transformation cannot be based on completely new technical principles and cannot be a mere change of goals, Feenberg proposes a deflationary but realistic interpretation according to which "his concept of technological rationality cannot be identical with the formal concepts of efficiency and control, but must have a content as a socially specific pattern of goal orientation" (100). Feenberg provides an illuminating outline of how Marcuse's thinking converges with and contributes to contemporary technology studies, especially via Feenberg's notion of "technical codes" which help specify Marcuse's general contention that "life affirming values are actually internal to technology" (105).

As to what the "affirmation of life" means more concretely, Feenberg "only sketch[es] some points for reflection" (106).  Though criticizing a mere sketch would be unfair, it raises questions.  For instance, hearkening back once  again to Heidegger's alleged interpretation of the Greek techné, he speaks  repeatedly

here, as elsewhere, of a harmony between human beings and nature, "harmonies that appear most obviously in the aesthetic relation to nature" (107; 99, 126, 130). But what precisely does this harmony mean and why should we think that aesthetics (be it the aesthetics of Disney or hip-hop, high modern or postmodern aesthetics) provides a key to it? Feenberg cites a difference between violating and disturbing nature, claiming that "from the standpoint of Marcuse's theory, a criterion based on the affirmation of life distinguishes these responses" (108). But it is hard to see how this talk of the affirmation of life is not yet another promissory note. Does the affirmation of life tell us–to name just a few examples –not to eat meat, not to abort fetuses, not to develop transcontinental pipelines, not to develop atomic energy? By itself the notion of affirmation of life is inadequate to answer these questions. Nor does the elaboration of Marcuse's "fourfold," as we might dub his illuminating account of goods and their specific privations, suggest a way to answer this inadequacy. These remarks are merely a plea for clarification; below I return to a similar issue, framing it as a criticism.

In the sixth and penultimate chapter ("The Question Concerning Nature") Feenberg returns to the central thesis of his study, as he argues that Marcuse's late philosophy, precisely as it concerns technological, scientific, and phenomenological concepts of nature, involves both a recollection and a repression of basic Heideggerian themes. Recognizing that Marcuse's conception of an aestheticized technological rationality can only be sustained by a suitable conception of nature, a conception other than the natural sciences' concept of an objectified nature, Feenberg contends that Heidegger's recovery of Greek techné in his account of being-in-the-world provides Marcuse with the resources to develop the desired alternative. Feenberg attributes Marcuse's failed attempts in this regard to his reliance on the objectivistic (nonexistential) approaches of Marx and Freud. "The result is an incoherent attempt to transcend the opposition of biology and history from an objectivistic standpoint that supposes their separation" (122; see, too, 126). At the same time Feenberg finds in Marcuse's late work clear hints of his phenomenological roots that provide the key to the wanted conception of nature. What is necessary in this connection, Feenberg maintains, is a differentiation of natural scientific abstractions from concrete technical disciplines. "These disciplines respond to both the nature of lived experience and scientific nature, merging them seamlessly in a practical unity that guides action. In so doing, they embody social forces in technically valid form" (132).

The expression "technically valid form" in this last remark is unclear to me. In any case, however, the remark sounds utopian to a fault because it promises a resolution of what Feenberg himself otherwise calls an "irresolvable duality between experience and objectivity," a duality that reflects phenomenology's proposal of "a kind of double truth," i.e., the truth of lived experience and the truth of science (131f). These final pages of Feenberg's interesting study thus give mixed, if not contradictory signals. While the proposed phenomenological turn, on the one hand, cements a duality, claims are made for technology's capacity to overcome that duality, on the other. Each of these aspects of what I have here called "Feenberg's mixed signals" deserves separate comment.

As for the phenomenological turn, Feenberg's plea for taking a second look at Marcuse turns precisely on appreciating the possibilities of "an explicit phenomenological Marxism," one that presumably entails phenomenology's "methodological dualism." But as far as I can tell, the familiar claim that phenomenology–as a kind of philosophical avant-garde–is somehow more fundamental than science, that it understands something that science presupposes but cannot explain, is made but not justified. Moreover, it is hard to see how the phenomenologist, Marxist or not, keeps from painting herself into a familiar phenomenological corner, cutting herself off, thanks to the phenomenological reduction, from any means of elaborating the relation of the truths of her lived experience to those of science and, presumably, technology. I say "presumably" because Feenberg's contention is precisely that technology in some sense–and not just "a revised concept of technology" or a "new technology" (see 132, 136f) –reconciles the two truths. But at the very least more needs to be said to establish as much especially since it is not clear how a phenomenological understanding of technology, as proposed by Feenberg, does not duplicate the duality.

To be sure–and herein lies the other aspect of the mixed signals mentioned above–Feenberg affirms the possibility of an understanding and execution of concrete technical disciplines that resolves the poles of that dualism, indeed, "seamlessly," as he puts it. Interpreting the promise of Marcuse's work, he writes: "The underlying totality of human beings and things the Greeks discovered in the objective structure of the world now depends on the human being as the principle of world creation" (136). The practical realization of this totality is a matter of a "new technology based on aesthetically informed sensations [that] would respect humans and nature rather than destroying them" (137). The notion is fortified by what he takes to be Heidegger's appropriation of Greek techné, discussed above. Analogously, in the course of elaborating

Marcuse's "innovative approach to the politics of technology," Feenberg touts a so-called "progressive [in contrast to reactionary] aestheticization of politics" (95). As he puts it: "Once metaphysics and tradition are ruled out of order, it is only through the imaginative grasp of reality that reason can go beyond mere cataloguing and quantifying of objects toward an appreciation of their essential truth. Reflection on aesthetic experience supports a type of judgment that can identify the significant 'Form' of reality, distinguishing essence from accident, higher potentiality from limited empirical existence" (97).

The references to aesthetics here and elsewhere are admittedly programmatic, yet Feenberg repeatedly finds it congenial to invoke, as noted above, a conception of harmony in these connections. Feenberg apparently subscribes to the notion that the Greek world, for all its subjugations and "narrowness" from a modern perspective, is in some sense "the lost Eden of reason" (136; see also 87f). These sorts of appeals to aesthetics strike me, however, as not only nostalgic but dubious. The phenomenological corner into which we seem to have been painted earlier turns out to be an aesthetic corner, somehow painted with pleasing colors, to be sure, but pleasing to whom? In plainer language: if there are any constraints on the heralded imaginative reason in this connection, it is difficult to see where they would come from.

In this regard, the iteration of the term 'harmony' throughout Feenberg's study is tellingly misleading, given its jointly aesthetic and ethical connotations, much like *kalos* as the Greeks' term for the beautiful and the fine. For Feenberg's Marcuse and perhaps Feenberg himself proposes a notion of the aesthetic dimension that displaces the ethical. (As an aside, it bears noting that Schiller at least formulates a rudimentary ethical theory within his plea for an aesthetic education of mankind.) Aesthetics and not ethics, we are told, "would support a constructive engagement with political and technical possibilities" (137; see, too, 89, 95, 97: "beauty is the symbol of the good"). Feenberg contends that the miracle of the New Left was "the emergence of a sensibility adequate to the real horror and possibilities" of the world at that historical juncture (138). Yet, as the construction of these sentences themselves suggest, the sort of aesthetic possibilities mentioned depend upon criteria of what is constructive and what is horrifying; it does not supply them.

Of course, one might argue that, despite Heidegger's best efforts to dispel the notion, he remains an aesthetic thinker and that Feenberg's Marcuse-project is continuous with the spirit of Heidegger's subordination of ethical considerations

in his thought.  I am less sympathetic to the former argument since I think that the case for the aestheticism of Heidegger's philosophy after the turn is overly tendentious.  From Heidegger's perspective, appeals to the primacy of aesthetics–in contrast to some art–merely cement the misguided pretensions to world-subjugation by modernity, in the form of both its subject-centered philosophies and its technology.  However, I would agree that there is an important way in which Marcuse remains faithful to Heidegger by subordinating ethics, though this agreement is, in my view, to the detriment of both thinkers.

It is interesting in this connection to note that Heidegger, at the conclusion of his first Marburg lectures of 1923, distinguishes two needed avenues of research and does so in Aristotelian terms.  He explains that the aim of those lectures has been to pursue the first avenue of research, namely, the theme of truth (*alethes*) and its connection to the knower as a caring existence, i.e., a way a human being is.  He then observes: "A far more important stretch of research refers to the *agathon*" (Heidegger 1996: 278).  Heidegger follows this observation by noting how both lines of research need to be conducted anew within the context of existence.  Yet, it is striking that there is no evidence of him pursuing that "far more important stretch of research," *at least by name or under that description*, during this period.  Critical examination of the true and not the good dominates both Heidegger's existential analyses and his studies of Aristotle throughout the 1920s, even arguably when the subject turns to intellectual virtues.  Herein perhaps lies a clue to a central deficiency of Heidegger's philosophical approach and that of Marcuse, his student.  That deficiency is not simply that he never returned to the question of the *agathos*, at least not in anything like the systematic way that he addressed *aletheia*, but that he saw fit to separate the two avenues of research at all.

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[1] Portions of this essay can be found in my review of Feenberg's book in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (http://ndpr.nd.edu), entered January 2, 2006.  I want to thank John Farnum, Andrew Feenberg, and Robert Scharff for their helpful, critical discussion of the issues raised in this paper.

[2] All references are to Feenberg 2005, unless otherwise noted.