

Uneasy Excitement

**'Technology and Subjectivity', Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy
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A few days before the 'Technology and Subjectivity' conference there was an item on MTV about 'surfing on the cyberspace' followed by a report on a surfers' convention organised to raise awareness of the problem of sea pollution. This uneasy mixture of technological excitement and ecological anxiety is, as the participants of this conference indicated, the symptom of an unsettled account with nature which has a long and complex philosophical history. In his opening remarks, Jonathan Rée already suggested that contemporary philosophical discussion need no longer carry its analytical and continental safety blankets, and welcomed the dawn of a 'European wide' philosophy (though I suspect that the European bit must be generously interpreted given that American pragmatism was, for many speakers, a constant point of reference).

Andrew Bowie stepped tactfully into that clearing with a paper on 'Romanticism and Technology'. In it, excitement about the possibilities of technological progress acquired the epistemic persona of the metaphysical realist for whom the success of science is sufficient evidence for the legitimization of scientific knowledge. This philosophical pagan who believes that truth inhabits the natural world is blissfully unaware that a conception of truth as a finite set of facts not only points towards the end of natural science, but also presupposes the very notion of truth. The epistemic equivalent of ecological anxiety is the problem of knowing, or better, of knowing that you cannot know the absolute either as substance or as a self-productive subject. This epistemic cul-de-sac suggests that nature is more than an object and therefore opens the possibility for a pragmatic-ethical approach such as Bowie wishes to defend. (It was interesting, by the way, to hear that American pragmatism, a direct descendent of Jena romanticism, is uncontaminated by Hegel.)

In his reply, which was also an apt introduction to Bernard Stiegler's paper later in the day, Simon Critchley queried the basis for Bowie's pragmatism suggesting that the untimeliness of reactions to technology can become the locus of our philosophical concerns. In 'Technology and Objectivity', Stiegler, going back to Aristotle, argued that technology is a unified phenomenon characterised by the functional use of objects. This phenomenon, which he termed 'technics', has undergone a modern mutation and become technoscience. This 'new mode of being' for both technology and science results in a reversal of the classical actuality/potentiality distinction. Discovery becomes invention. The genetician, for instance,

discovers a possible that was not there before. As a result, there is a lagging behind the actual which hides the fact that technological progress is after all finite. For Stiegler, therefore, the appropriate response is a Nietzschean decisionism of the type 'What do we want?'. Howard Caygill, who begun with a question on the relation between 'technics' and technology, wanted to know more both about the politics and the possibilities for thinking that follow from Stiegler's diagnosis.

For Peter Dews and Hauke Brunkhorst these possibilities can be articulated in the context of communicative ethics. In 'Lifeworld, Metaphysics and the Ethics of Nature in Habermas', Dews argued that the question of the ethical relation between human beings and nature poses considerable difficulties for Habermas, given his stress on the 'unique linguisticity' of human interactions. For Dews, the most promising approach goes via Schelling's notion of *natura naturans*. Although it puts Habermas' concept of nature under considerable strain (and caused some metaphysical commotion in the audience), the assumption of a *natura naturans* points to the limits of a scientized understanding of the world and can ground a 'post-technological ethics of nature'.

Being sadly finite, I was unable to attend the workshops held by Joanna Hodge, Nick Smith and Kate Soper though I did go to the plenary session led by Brunkhorst. In 'Decentering European Egocentrism: Heidegger's "The Age of the World Picture"', Brunkhorst stood by the ethical potential of the 'communicative experience'. He argued that although in 1924 Heidegger had defined the self-interpretation of Dasein as a dialogical relation, he was not able to exploit its intersubjective potential – a potential that was still there in the opening move of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger replaces the traditional question of being with the question of the meaning of being. Heidegger's turn sealed the fate of intersubjective discourse for it prioritised the event-like 'TRUTH' of world-disclosing poetry. By contrast, intersubjectively defined truth discloses a real public with different perspectives that make up the communicative community. To this, Jay Bernstein responded with eleven provocative fragments: the disenchantment of the world cannot be healed by shifting to the communicative perspective, for the more communicable a thought is, the more false it is. Solidarity is mimetic, it depends on an eloquent but unrepresentable somatic moment which has been silenced and whose voice needs to be restored. Needless to say, despite a very full day, lively discussion followed.

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