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IPFS Entry on “Modern Philosophy of Technology”  
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At the beginning of the second half of his lecture, Feenberg makes an important distinction between the Greek world view and the modern view on philosophy of technology. He points out the difference between the Greek and modern view of essence. The Greeks could not explain the essence of the natural world so they resorted to applying their knowledge of techne to it. This was the basis of Western philosophy for quite some time until the modern view reset by completely rejecting it as something man-made. As Feenberg notes, “The meaning and purpose of things is something we create not something we discover. The gap between man and world widens accordingly.” Having said that, the modern world still views its model of being through the lens of technology, but the conception of the natural world was now value free. This ordering untangled means from ends, making them independent of one another. The modern view rendered technology completely neutral and technological advancement flourished as a result.

Feenberg realizes that there is a problem with the modern view that needs to be addressed. The rejection of natural essence unmoored technology from purpose. Technology evolved rapidly and as Feenberg put it, “We know how to get there, but we do not know why we are going or even where.” He admits that this worldview was fine so long as it was relatively harmless, but that is no longer the case. The insistence that technology is neutral led to the atom bomb, climate change, and genocide. Because of that, it is time to turn to a new technological worldview in hopes that it can offer guidance going forward in our relationship with technology.

Feenberg sets the stage by introducing a graph. On the vertical axis technology is labeled value-laden or neutral. On the horizontal axis it is labeled autonomous or humanly controllable. The value-laden portion encompasses the debate of whether technology is a bunch or rearranged matter that produces a desired end or if technology can be assigned value beyond its components. The example from the lecture is a good one: Is a nuclear power plant a bunch material put together to create power with no other value judgements, or is it dangerous because it could possibly meltdown, or is it good because it is clean energy? The autonomous or humanly controllable question is summed by answering a question Feenberg poses. “Is the next step in the evolution of the technical system up to us?” If we can “determine the next step in its evolution in accordance with our intentions” the answer is, yes. If that is not the case the technology can be considered autonomous.

The intersections between the four components represent four technological worldviews. Human control and value neutrality produce instrumentalism. That is the belief that technology is a tool to be used for human ends. It holds no inherent value and represents “liberal faith in progress” or the idea that progress is important unto itself.

Determinism is the combination of value neutrality and autonomy. Humanity seeks knowledge of the natural world to fulfill quantitative and qualitative needs. It seeks better shelter, more food, easier travel, and extended abilities to communicate over long distances. Technological advances begin to propel themselves, i.e., computers becoming smaller and more complicated. This creates situations where technology is not adapting to humans, rather humans are forced to adapt to technology.

Substantivism is the intersection of autonomy and value-laden. In this theory, technology is autonomous because it is just there. In the substantive view the technology is a value choice in and of itself. The technology changes the value of the society that it permeates. It represents a

choice. On the one hand, it is possible to deny the technology because there is value in its absence. On the other hand, choosing to interact with the technology will alter your way of life due to the values inherent to it. Feenberg notes that substantivism intersects with determinism. The substantive view does not consider the needs technology serves. At its extreme it sees technology as a snowball that leads to technological totalitarianism.

The final intersection is critical theory. It is the combination of human control and value-laden. Substantivism sees technology running amok, taking over people's lives and making them worse. Critical theory does not disagree with this, but the added element of human control suggests that humanity can "devise appropriate institutions for exercising human control over it." Critical theory believes that technological progress is important because efficiency *is* desirable. Feenberg argues that efficiency "frames" every possible technology, but it does not determine values composed within that frame. It is imperative that we fill in the frame with positive values; social welfare rather than maximized corporate profit, healthcare rather than unfettered access to weapons.

Response

I had hoped that writing the summary would provide a eureka moment and plant the perfect example of autonomy in my head. It didn't and I am finding that extremely frustrating. The concept makes sense. Technology gets on a roll, proliferates, and becomes so intertwined it feeds off of itself. The inventors and engineers become tools that produce something that wasn't quite what they had in mind. Maybe they had nothing in mind and something odd appeared through trial and error. I have now sat in front of this keyboard for twenty-five minutes trying to come up with something, but still nothing. I hope to be able to remedy this before the semester ends.

I found the end game of critical theory to be a little disappointing and depressing. It was like Feenberg was saying, "Hey, Heidegger, we hear you, man, but don't worry people are going to get it together and collectively push back against an encompassing, oppressive worldview that has half a millennia of steam behind it." He even admits that he doesn't believe the public possesses the motivation or will to acquire the information to understand who they are choosing to legislate their daily lives. I always try to be optimistic but the further we have delved into this, knowing how few people are aware of the implications, it doesn't seem like we'll get out of this without some catastrophic catalyst.

I got the sense that Feenberg was admitting that the mechanical world view was an inflection point where the genie escaped the bottle. A sort of Pandora's Box. I remember reading the section about the philosophy of technology during the middle ages and thinking, wow, so this is where all of this started. I absolutely understand why it did, and that the intentions weren't ill, but it is still incredible to follow it to modernity. While I was somewhat disappointed with critical theory, it was nice to see that important thinkers have already been on the case. Even though this is our last assigned reading for class it is something that I intend to follow independently after this course.