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Existence and Machine

The German Philosophy in the Age
of Machines (1870-1960)

 Springer

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Introduction

The aim of this work is to provide a partial, preliminary account of the findings of a much more far-reaching investigation into the relationship between technology and philosophy conducted by the author in the context of two international research projects funded by the European Union.¹

As part of this research effort, the author aimed to apply the methods typical of the historical-philosophical approach to a setting – relating to the issues posed by the enormous development of the *techno-sciences* – that has come to be virtually monopolized by fields of study such as moral philosophy and applied ethics. Contrary to expectations, it soon became clear that – even in research areas apparently far removed from the classic topics of the history of thinking – there are advantages to be gained from applying the historian’s skills to revive a tradition in the world of philosophy that, right from its early days, has often taken an interest in the problems of all things technical.²

Contemporary thinking is clearly no exception, and so much attention has been paid to this topic in recent times that it has sometimes seemed to exclude all others. The present study aims to step back a little from these recent developments, as concerns its starting point at least. Today’s “philosophy of technology” and the related

¹EPOCH (*Ethics in public policy-making: the case of human enhancement*), an international partnership forming part of the European Union’s 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (in which the author served as scientific coordinator of a research project on human enhancement), and SYNTH-ETHICS, which focused on the philosophical, ethical, and regulatory implications of synthetic biology (the author being concerned with the related epistemological aspects).

²See, for instance, the work by Giuseppe Cambiano (Cambiano 1971), who explains how Plato’s continuous references to *techne* in his works were decisive in the very constitution of philosophy. On the Italian scene, but no longer on the specifically historical front, the works by Emanuele Severino (Severino 1979) and Ugo Galimberti (Galimberti 2000) are worth mentioning. For a general historical overview and a selection of texts, see Antonella d’Atri (D’Atri 2008). A special mention also goes here to Prof. Paolo Rossi, whose *I filosofi e le macchine* (Rossi 1962) paved the way to a line of investigation that also inspired the present author. Finally, two other works are indispensable for their utility and broad scope, i.e., Anton Hermann and Carl Schonbeck (Hermann and Schonbeck 1993, et seq.) and Ian Mcneil (McNeil 1989).

historiographical reconstructions are dominated by the idea of technology as a sort of compact, totalizing phenomenon with no internal distinctions, something that can be interpreted as a sort of general “world view” capable of pervasive effects and invariably classified as a “hazard”. This is a historiographical hypothesis on which Heidegger’s great lesson has had a huge influence, but – without detracting in any way from the “greatness” of Heidegger’s contribution – the attentive historian cannot fail to see that his is just one testimony among others.

If we take a closer look at technology with an open mind (without first reading what the philosophers have already said on the matter), it becomes evident that we are looking at an area of such complexity that it can hardly be encompassed by such a generic name. “Technology” does not exist, neither as an essence, nor as a set of entities with a common denominator. If anything, there may be many different “technologies”. In our day-to-day experience of the technical world, we all have to do primarily with “objects”, “tools”, “machines”, and “devices” that can be used according to different rules and within clearly defined contexts of relations, interests, and expectations. Driving a car, and thereby reducing the distance from one place to another with the aid of a combustion engine, is a very different matter from sending an email while sitting comfortably in front of a computer. These two actions differ particularly in the way in which they can induce changes in our attitude to and relations with our living environment.

Of course, there may be points of view from which the combustion engine and the computer can be seen as one and the same thing, but taking such an approach undeniably fails to accurately grasp the general meaning of specific phenomena that always occur as a result of technological innovations. The extent of the changes induced by the latest media technologies in our way of experiencing the world can hardly be expressed effectively by looking at the effects of the invention of the motor car engine. The philosophers’ analysis of the artificial worlds will have to cope increasingly with differential considerations and expect results that are not immediately generalizable. This is essentially what the future has in store. As for the past, the idea of taking a plural view of the fields of technology prompted the choice of a specific topic – that of the *machine* – as a starting point for approaching the pages written by contemporary German thinkers particularly interested in the topic of technology.

The reader might object that the meaning of the term “machine” has just the same “indeterminate” quality as we attributed earlier to the term “technology”, but “machine” is used here (together with such synonyms as mechanism, apparatus, machinery, and so on) to mean a fairly clearly defined “object” that appeared on man’s living horizon a little over two centuries ago, and it has continued to have profound consequences on our way of inhabiting the Earth ever since.

The term “machine” is used precisely to mean that complex material device assembled in the last quarter of the eighteenth century as a result of the definitive modern refinement of certain fundamental technologies, i.e., metallurgy, precision mechanics, and hydraulics. The “machine” discussed here arrived on the scene of man’s history when the processes of spinning and weaving were entrusted to semi-automatic means; when the water wheels used in mills, hitherto always made of

wood, were supplanted by the metal levers of the steam engine; and especially when the steam engine was connected to the weaving frames, to the metalworking hammers, and to other machines used to manufacture other machines ... in an endless reiteration of assemblies and applications, the enormous outcome of which is what subsequently came to be described as “mass production”.

The philosophers discussed here were also dealing with the type of machine described above. More importantly, when they speak of technology as a general phenomenon, they are actually thinking of precisely this specific object, which goes to show that any analysis aiming to define “essences” is ultimately always obliged to refer to “accidents” that can only be confused with universal matters because of their massive, but always nonetheless contingent, invasiveness.