

Technology, Time, and the Conversations of Modernity

Lorenzo C. Simpson



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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

Published in 1995 by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Simpson, Lorenzo Charles.

Technology, time, and the conversations of modernity / by Lorenzo C. Simpson.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-90771-3 (hb) — ISBN 0-415-90772-1 (pb)

I. Technology—Philosophy. I. Title.

T14.S553 1994

601—dc20

94-19289
CIP

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data also available

To those who have made possible, and who will doubtless sustain, productive repetitions:

To Lorenzo, Sr. and Bessie, for past enablements; to Marsha, for present sustenance; to Gail, for modeling resolve; and to Sean, with hope for the future.

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Preface

This work emerges from my long-standing attempt to understand and assess modernity. It bears the mark of two intersecting sets of concerns: on the one hand, that of discerning the price exacted by modernity in its scientific and technological guises; and, on the other, that of responding critically to particularly important efforts to take the measure of our modern or, arguably, postmodern condition. Accordingly, this book poses the question of technology in the context of a range of issues and themes of current concern; for example, hermeneutics, Critical Theory, rationality and relativism, narrative theory and postmodernism.

The impetus for this book was the idea that technology is an embodiment of our uneasiness with our finitude, of our uneasiness with time. Technology's success in granting our wish to *domesticate* time has encouraged an attitude towards time that is increasingly pervasive in our culture. This book addresses the consequences of this attitude for our self-understanding.

By confronting issues raised in the various theoretical discourses concerning modernity with those engendered by a critical assessment of technology, I hope to elaborate a systematic critique of technology that does justice to our contemporary cultural and intellectual situation. I hope that this essay will prove helpful to those trying to understand some of the recent debates about technology and modernity, many of them inscribed in some of the most important intellectual issues facing us as this century of technological progress draws to an end.

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Acknowledgments

My earliest work in planning this book was supported by a year-long Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Southern Fellowships Fund, sponsored by the Mellon Foundation. During the course of its writing, I enjoyed the support of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend and another year-long grant, this time a Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship awarded by the National Research Council. I would like to express my appreciation to those granting institutions. In addition, the research support and collegial stimulation afforded by my appointment as a Guest Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars during part of the year of the Ford Foundation grant was invaluable. I am also thankful to Jude Dougherty for the hospitality shown me by the Catholic University of America's School of Philosophy during that year, and to Karsten Harries, who served as my host during stays at Yale University. I acknowledge with gratitude my home institution, the University of Richmond, for granting the two years of leave that allowed me to take advantage of the national awards, for occasional released time, and for a number of its Summer Research Grants.

I have read portions of this book in a number of places. Various versions of Chapter Three were presented to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Virginia; at the invitation of Richard Bernstein, at what was (it saddens me to have to use the past tense here) the Inter-University Centre of Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia; and at the Stevens Institute of Technology. Versions of Chapter Four were presented at a session of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, where I benefited from a perceptive commentary by Albert Borgmann; at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; and to the Department of Philosophy of James Madison University during my enjoyable stay there as Commonwealth Visiting Professor of Philosophy in 1988–1989. Portions of Chapter Seven were presented to the Department of Philosophy of the State University of New York at Stony Brook; to the Department of Philosophy of Howard University as the ninth annual Locke Lecture; to the Ford Fellows Conference at the National Academy of Sciences; and at various sessions of the

American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division Meetings. I extend my thanks to all of these organizations for their invitations to present my work and to the respective audiences for helpful discussion.

A number of individuals graciously and generously offered sage advice at various stages of this project. Thomas McCarthy made helpful suggestions early on. I have greatly benefited from comments, suggestions and criticisms made on earlier drafts of various chapters by Seyla Benhabib, Vloděk Gabara, Robert Gooding-Williams, Karsten Harries, and my colleagues Neale Mucklow, Gary Shapiro and Hugh West. Sabina Lovibond provided a very generous response to my discussion of her work, and Richard Rorty was especially gracious in his detailed response to my criticisms of him. My wife, Marsha, in addition to providing serendipitous inspiration, read the entire manuscript, helping to espy stylistic infelicities. I also found useful the comments of Routledge's anonymous reviewers. I am truly indebted to all of these individuals. Needless to say, I bear full responsibility for the final content.

In addition, I need to acknowledge my remarkably patient, supportive and canny editor, Maureen MacGrogan. My secretary, Beverly Griffin, deserves thanks for the word processing, copying, typing and so forth necessary to get the manuscript into final form. I would also like to thank Professor Randy Pausch of the Department of Computer Science at the University of Virginia for providing the opportunity to experience Virtual Reality technology.

Finally, I must acknowledge with deep gratitude the unearthly patience and support of Marsha, Adelaide and the rest of my family.

An earlier version of Chapter Three was published in *Man and World* 16 (1983), pp. 25–41.

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I

Introduction

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The Question of Technology

It is a commonplace that ours is a technologically saturated culture. For how many of us has not the microwaved dinner or the “fast-food” meal substituted for the time, care and commitment required by the family dinner? Or the brief, purely functional message left on an answering machine for a conversation? And how many of us have not waited impatiently as our word processors whirled away, no matter how powerful their microprocessors?

These are all examples of our being concerned to achieve an end, and to do so quickly and efficiently, but at what price? There are in the literature discussions of such end-oriented or what I shall call value-oriented thinking,¹ but the theme of the involvement of the temporal in technology has received insufficient attention. And when it is addressed, technology’s ability to shrink space and time is often viewed only instrumentally, that is, as being merely the ability to decrease by degrees the “distance” separating the desiring subject and the object of desire, and to do so without in any significant way altering the subject or the object.²

I claim in this essay that this time-contraction is not only instrumental for, but is also constitutive of, our subjectivity. It is the contention of this book that technology’s resources for time-contraction have profound implications for how we experience our subjectivity, for our understanding of who we are as subjects. But technology is not, of course, an independent force, alien to our humanity. As Jürgen Habermas noted some time ago, the concern to control the material conditions of our existence is one of humanity’s basic interests. The question becomes one of *measure*, of what place this interest is allowed to assume in the constitution of our experience. The general questions that orient my thinking are: What is the relationship between our allegiance to technological rationality and our options regarding the ways in which we can talk about ourselves, the kinds of stories that we can tell about ourselves, in short, the shape of the human conversation? and Given the technological nature of our culture, how is it possible to reclaim for the concept of who we are sufficient content for us to see the legitimacy of technology and, at the same time, put it in its proper place?

I make my case by focusing on how technology informs our understanding of the meaning of action. I argue that technology, through its emphasis upon efficiency and control, effects a “domestication” of time, a reduction of time to manipulable, dispensable units geared toward future goals. As technology’s functional paradigm assumes increasing authority for us, our understanding of the meaning of action is thereby distorted.

My discussion of value is inspired by Heidegger’s understanding of the concept developed in his Nietzsche interpretation:

Value means that upon which the eye is fixed. Value means that which is in view for a seeing that aims at something. . . . The aim in view is value. [Further,] value is posited at any given time by a seeing and for a seeing [and] it is only through this positing . . . that the point that is necessary for directing the gaze toward something, and that in this way guides the path of sight, becomes the aim in view.³ . . . Values are the conditions of itself posited by the will to power.⁴

From this, I take the idea that, in our age, what matters most is “distortedly” understood as a value, itself understood within an ocular metaphors as an end, target or goal. Further, there is packed into this account the voluntaristic view that such goals are products of or are rooted in our freedom. By ‘value,’ then, I mean an end in view that is understood as an arbitrary product of the will. One can find such an understanding of the concept not only in the tradition of Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche, but also in the work of Max Weber, insofar as he also understood values in the modern world as subjective posits.

In keeping with this orientation, and despite their somewhat different connotations, I use ‘nihilist’ and ‘relativist’ to refer to the standpoint that professes the arbitrariness of structures of meaning and of canons of rationality. I call this standpoint the values-perspective, the perspective from which structures of meaning and canons of rationality are, in an invidious sense, understood to be arbitrary products of the will. I take technological rationality or the technological world picture to be consonant with this. Insofar as from within the technological attitude the world and worldly relationships come to be understood exclusively as resources, I tend to agree with Heidegger that nihilism and the technological attitude towards the world are aspects of the same phenomenon.

I oppose to the values-perspective a notion of the meaningful. By the “meaningful” I refer to contexts of significance that are not mere items of choice, but that, despite having no transcendental validity, are orders with which we must come to terms. Accordingly, the distinction between meaning and value is central to the argument of this book.

The point of this book is to offer a critique of technology by way of a sustained critique of the values-perspective and its associated temporality. In so doing, I

pursue three interrelated projects: (1) to give a phenomenological account of the technological and scientific life-worlds in modernity; (2) to argue that the technological worldview is incompatible with other sources of action, which are also part of our life-world (communication, friendship, love, parenting and so on), and which have a meaning and significance transcending the values-perspective, a meaning and significance that provide us with the conceptual and moral resources from which to criticize technology; and (3) to develop the rational basis of the kind of cultural and social critique of technology which I deploy.

In pursuing the first project, I point out that the technological world picture sanctions certain ways of being-in-the-world and that, by reducing all relations of meaning and significance to the means-ends scheme, such a picture produces the perspective that I call the “values-perspective” and an approach to time that I call the “domestication of time.” The second project concerns itself with how moral life and moral reasons can and do arise from *praxis*, and how morality is possible in the wake of what have come to be known as the death of God and the demise of Western metaphysics. I ask: How can a nonsubjective ordering of value emerge from practices and from practical commitments in which we find ourselves already engaged; that is, How can ethical norms be generated from experience or practice? In particular, I seek to show that embedded within my critique is a kind of normative ethics or perspective that enables one to distinguish a good and a bad attitude toward and use of technology, and so to make a distinction between a meaningful and an empty life. In the process I try to reconstruct the notion of *praxis* in a way that is sufficiently rich to highlight the thinness and inadequacy of the modern reception of *techne* and to demonstrate how values emerge from and have their place in meaningful practices. The third project consists in justifying my critical perspective on technological rationality, in establishing the philosophical possibility of critique.

In pursuing these projects, I am led to bring various contemporary discourses into conversation. By drawing a distinction between meaning and value (and their attendant temporalities), I bring a critical discourse about technological rationality into conversation with what Habermas has called the “philosophical discourses of modernity.” The latter include, for me, hermeneutics, Critical Theory, the so-called rationality debates and what gets called postmodernism. The discourses of modernity can all be characterized as postmetaphysical discourses in that not only postmodernism, but also both Critical Theory and hermeneutics, as well as the highly influential Anglo-American blend of late Wittgenstein and pragmatism represented by Richard Rorty, mount penetrating critiques of the metaphysical tradition. In Chapters Three to Five, I develop a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach to the critique of technology; in Chapter Six, I give an account of an important Critical Theoretical approach; in Chapter Seven, I examine the philosophical legitimacy of these two approaches, given the post-structuralist or postmodern challenge; and in Chapter Eight, I look at how technology and the postmodern are co-implicated. In the end, I hope to have shown

that the philosophical critique of technological rationality (or, for that matter, of rationality in general) need not land us in postmodernist despair.

I should now like to characterize briefly some of the discourses of modernity and their relationship to the question of technology. The rationality debates have primarily to do with the question, Is rationality singular or irremediably plural? Are there structures of rationality that are binding on all of humanity, or are there only structures of merely local validity? The connection between the technological worldview as I have described it and nihilism, relativism and perspectivism invites a response to this worldview that does justice to this rationality discussion, a conversation in which the Habermas-Gadamer debate is also inscribed. The actual dispute between Habermas, the leading exponent of Critical Theory, and H. G. Gadamer, the principal proponent of philosophical hermeneutics, has been over for a while now, though its echoes are still very much with us in current discussions of rationality taking place within both Anglo-American and Continental philosophical settings. It principally concerns the status of epistemic and normative claims in the social and human disciplines. To what extent, if any, can such claims be accorded an objective and universal character, or must some or all of them be viewed as relativistic, that is, as relative to contexts of historical and cultural meaning? Are there critical criteria or mechanisms for resolving disputes within these areas of inquiry that are not "compromised" by context?

Gadamer emphasizes that there is an ineliminable boundary from which any understanding must proceed and which is not itself a product of reflection, but which is rather the effective working of our historical context, a working that is a precondition of knowledge and meaningful experience. He refers to this ineliminable boundary by the term 'authority.' Further, he argues that modern technology and its underlying rationality conspire to deny to human practical life and to human self-understanding that basis of legitimation that is drawn from interpretations of norms and principles yielded by tradition.

Habermas, suspicious of such appeals to authority and to context, is primarily concerned with insuring the possibility of maintaining and justifying critical perspectives on tradition and authority. If Gadamer criticizes technology because it *undermines* authority and traditional contexts of meaning, then Habermas criticizes it because it has *become* authority. Habermas argues that, in our time, science and technology have become self-legitimizing in such a way that practical questions, those concerning the nature of the "good life," are being subordinated to and, indeed, even replaced by, technical questions, questions concerning the most efficient means for the realization of ends, where those ends appear to him to be increasingly beyond our *reflective* control. For him, our challenge is to find ways to preserve, and protect from the encroachment of instrumental imperatives, a space for an autonomous, rational and communicatively achieved consensus about issues of practical life.

Much has already been written about the Habermas-Gadamer debate itself,

and I do not intend to address myself to the debate *per se*, so much as to speak to its implications for the critique of technological rationality by viewing it within the context of the rationality discussion. I attempt to do so while doing justice to the tensions between, on the one hand, the two positions in the debate and, on the other, both those positions and what might be called the poststructuralist or postmodernist stance, the latter bearing important affinities to what I have called perspectivism or the values-perspective.

I have spoken of the postmodern challenge. Postmodern sensibilities in many ways sanction an acquiescence to modern technology, and on two levels: (1) those sensibilities and the possibilities ushered in by high technology exhibit elective affinities (the editors of one collection of essays speak of "postmodernist celebrations of the technological sublime"),⁵ and (2) technological rationality and postmodernism share a suspicion of critique that, in the case of postmodernism, can be connected with an "end-of-history thesis."⁶ The implications of this thesis are that radical critique is dismissed as just another perspective, that the metanarrative of *social* progress has lost credibility, that the idea of alienation, an important cornerstone upon which such critique was to be based, has been discredited as an outmoded modernist notion, and that the only distance on existing social configurations that is sanctioned is the indeterminate negation of irony, not genuinely critical distance.

Our postmodern spiritual situation has been forged in the wake of the "death of God" and of the demise of Platonism and the so-called "metaphysics of presence." It is a context expressive of a world of pervasive and unregulated perspectivism; it thereby threatens to undermine any *critical* understanding of technology by derisively charging that such a critique is just another perspective. Such a perspectivist view I have called "the values-perspective." I emphasize that technological rationality, in its tie to limitless making and its commitment to a homogeneous vocabulary limited to the notions of effectiveness, efficiency and their cognates, reinforces this suspicion of any attempt to privilege values as constraints that would fetter an understanding bent upon control.

There is embedded within this essay an important subtheme, the idea of what I call "humanity as a negotiated, unfinished project," an idea motivated by my response to Richard Rorty in Chapter Seven's rationality discussion. This notion will be seen to provide a critical touchstone for the human conversation, an "outside" measure that would prevent such a conversation from degenerating into a sequence of question-begging monologues. The idea here is to highlight standards that can prevent such a conversation from becoming objectionably provincial and ethnocentric, criteria that would enable a truly rational commitment to an admittedly contingent form of life. My discussion of humanity as an unfinished project is, therefore, the adumbration of an account of a *critical* relationship to our practices that is responsive to historicism, one where contestable, revisable, criterial properties of the "good life" serve as the "outside" measure. This discussion has clear implications for the so-called multiculturalism

debates, but the pursuit of such implications is, of course, beyond the scope of this essay.

There are a number of other things that I do *not* seek to do in this book. My primary interest is in the implications of technology for our experience of time and its threat to our continuing ability to find our practices meaningful, not in other aspects or implications of technology except insofar as they relate to my central concerns. I have sought to abstract a general feature of technology in its Western cultural setting (time domestication) and to highlight some of its consequences with an eye to developing (and justifying) a normative standpoint in terms of which our engagement with technology can be assessed. As a consequence, until Chapter Eight I address myself more to technological rationality and to what I have called the technological world picture than to what might be called the technological differentials within our larger technological culture, that is, the differing ways in which that rationality and picture are and have been embodied in material technologies. While the latter would doubtlessly be an extremely important inquiry to pursue, I must content myself here with noting that *insofar as* differing material technologies and technological processes function in instrumental means-ends settings of temporal domestication, my analysis applies to them. And I would claim, further, that such settings are quite pervasive indeed. Lastly, while I devote some attention to the social and political aspects of our relationship to technology, especially in Chapters Two and Six, my concern with hermeneutic questions of meaning places in the foreground what might be called the existential dimension of that relationship.

This introduction has thus far offered a general overview of the book and a delimitation of its scope. A more detailed chapter-by-chapter summary of the book's argument follows.

Chapter Two, a general account of technology and of technological rationality, provides a context for the book's discussion. By 'technological rationality,' I refer to that view of reason which focuses its attention exclusively upon the adequacy of means for the realization of ends, where those ends are not themselves subject to nonstrategic rational adjudication, and to the notion of progress that is consistent with this view.

I briefly take up the conflict between instrumentalist and substantivist views of technology, and consider the relationship between technology and society, politics and the economy. I seek to do so in a way that is responsive to the emerging social constructivist account of technology. The inquiry here also takes up the relationship between science and technology. Though the institutions of science and technology have in common the tendency to neutralize the cultural and historical contexts in which they are inserted, I point out that important differences between them are marked by technology's *practical* concern with altering the world and science's *cognitive* concern with knowing it. This distinc-

tion is reflected in the differences between science's and technology's attitudes towards space and, of particular importance for my argument, time.

Chapter Three, in offering a general account of the conditions necessary for the possibility of meaningful experience and self-understanding, concerns itself with the nature of human experience and with how that experience becomes meaningful. It provides an analysis of experience and proposes a way of understanding modern science—a way that is critically responsive to the postempiricist consensus forged by Thomas Kuhn, Mary Hesse, Norwood Hanson et al.—that allows us to see that scientific rationality is unable to do justice to the meaningfulness of experience. In showing the inadequacy of scientific rationality in this regard, the chapter highlights the centrality of the meaning-enabling cultural and historical networks in which we are embedded. In thus connecting meaning with our finitude, the chapter points out that only in light of our concerns does the world and our experience in it become meaningful and make a claim on us.

The hermeneutic of experience developed in Chapter Three—which elaborates the way in which we put prereflectively acquired cultural meanings into play in action and experience—prefigures Chapter Four's discussion of the human experience of time, wherein the "always already" of our cultural and historical insertion gets carried and repeated forward as it informs action and experience. And, through its discussion of the idea of hermeneutic horizons being risked in action, Chapter Three also has implications for the idea of "humanity as an unfinished project" to be proposed in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Four begins with a discussion of the striking and pervasive tendency of our instrumentally saturated culture to fail to distinguish the notion of meaning from that of end or goal, that is, its inclination to collapse talk about structures of meaning into talk about means and ends, into instrumentally rational discourse. I go on to argue against the hypostatization of values or ends-in-view, an hypostatization effected by according values an autonomy or self-subsistence *vis-à-vis* structures of meaning. It is suggested that values understood in this way are worldless, and that a proper understanding of the relation of value to meaning in the context of a life reveals there to be an internal relation between the two.

Chapter Four, by deploying a temporal articulation of the analysis of experience offered in Chapter Three, goes on to motivate the central thesis of the book: technology, in its attempt to subdue time's characteristic flux by harnessing the future predictably and reliably to the present, tends to "domesticate" our experience of time. I argue that technology's means-end rationality projects a self-effacing temporality.

Contrasted with technology's means-ends structure, where significance lies in the end to be achieved, is symbolically meaningful activity or *praxis* which can be understood as an actualization of sociocultural norms, as a more or less creative continuation or repetition of possibilities shaped by our historical past. It is argued that repetition, by rendering explicit the prereflectively acquired interpretations discussed in Chapter Three, reveals itself to be an embodiment

of an attitude towards time where time is fully acknowledged as the field of action, not as its alien other, and where the time of repetition is recognized to be productive of meaningful effects.

Chapter Five develops further the consequences of allowing the attitude towards time characteristic of technology to inform our understanding of ourselves. I argue there that that attitude stands as a threat to the continued presence of meaningful differences in our lives and to there being meaning in a life as a whole. Technology's will to contract time, I argue, threatens to marginalize those practices that make a meaningful difference, practices that we engage in for what they are, for what they tell us about ourselves and for what they make of us, rather than for what they achieve. Recent studies of narrative are deployed in this context to explore the issue of "the meaning of life." Departing from such studies, I argue that technological rationality's commitments with regard to time and value stand in tension with the requisites of a meaningful, connected life. The temporality of repetition, through gathering up and giving a meaningful order to our dispersed aims, value orientations and so on, and through restoring the time of action, is claimed to restore connectedness and coherence, thus enabling meaningfulness and a unified sense of self. I close the chapter by briefly raising epistemological and ontological questions regarding the current tendency to identify life and narrative.

Chapters Four and Five present a case for the hermeneutics of repetition. Chapter Six presents an alternative critical approach to the question of technology and meaning, the approach of Critical Theory. It departs from the recognition that attention to coherence and meaningfulness cannot be sufficient, that they cannot have the last word. For the call of the meaningful can be the call of the good or the tempting solicitation of evil. We are thereby challenged to discriminate rationally between the meaningful that is good and that which is not. This chapter and the next purport, then, to examine the possibility and justification of critical perspectives upon meaning and coherence while remaining mindful of the aporetic status of the "values-perspective." In Chapter Six, this concern directly motivates a consideration of Habermas's project and the implications for it of some of the themes sounded in the Habermas-Gadamer debate. Habermas receives focus because his is the most important post-Heideggerian project that critically addresses both the technological and nihilistic problematics. An account is provided of his work, with its hermeneutic weak spots highlighted. Through a discussion of the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, the parallels between technological or functional rationality and the perspectivism of poststructuralism are pointed out. This allows us to see how Habermas's critique of technological rationality is at the same time a response to nihilism and postmodernism. I argue that, though Habermas's attempts to furnish his notion of communicative ethics—the basis for his response—with rational foundations is beset by hermeneutic or interpretive moments, inviting accusations of unfounded universalistic pretensions from a number of thinkers, there remains considerable critical force in his