

Paul Durbin and the Legacy of the Society for Philosophy and Technology

Carl Mitcham, editor

Introduction

Paul T. Durbin, February 26, 2019 (age 86) RIP. From the modest obituary posted on the University of Delaware Department of Philosophy web site:

Paul Durbin (1933–2019) was an early advocate of interdisciplinary research and teaching before it gained the prominence it has today. A pioneer in the field of the philosophy of technology, he collaborated with others in assembling the research in this new and distinctive discipline that has become neither traditional philosophy of science nor the history of industrial progress. Paul edited and published several large volumes of work on the philosophy of technology, in a major enterprise supported by large research grants. He knew how to foster the collaborative efforts of scholars at the University of Delaware and elsewhere (including Europe, and Germany in particular) to bring together insights spanning the gamut from the history of technology to the interpretation of technology's impact in works of literature. Paul was a very active contributor to the intellectual life of the University, as well as to the State of Delaware and most especially to community, civic, and political affairs in Wilmington, where he resided. (University of Delaware 2020)

From a more personal perspective, John Byrne (Director, Center for Energy and Environmental Policy, University of Delaware) wrote:

Paul Durbin taught what began as a small group of faculty and graduate students at the University of Delaware to think beyond the conventions of academic disciplines about the social, political and ethical nature of our relations with energy and environment. A founder of Delaware's interdisciplinary Center for Energy and Environmental Policy (with faculty colleagues John Byrne, Daniel Rich and Young-Doo Wang), Paul encouraged

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and challenged the initiative to reach beyond the widespread belief that energy and environmental questions are largely matters of science, engineering, and economics. Instead he and his colleagues built a community that connects today with over thirty universities and civil society organizations and has guided more than 100 dissertations via a doctoral program it created. The community is engaged in a commons effort to explore the contradictions of a modern life built on ubiquitous commercial energy supply that likewise threatens the breathability of air, the drinkability of water, and the viability of forests, plains and rivers. The challenge of the center he helped to found and motivate is to ask the question he asked about the sustainability of the web of life because of a modernized atmosphere and social structure that together may heat the web beyond tolerances that enable biological and cultural diversity. And, most important, as Paul relentlessly hammered his colleagues to address, its purpose is to answer what will we do about it? Thank you, Paul, for sustaining hope in the initiative, and demanding that we do something about the problems we uncover.

Paul was also the founder of the Society for Philosophy and Technology (SPT). He organized and hosted the first philosophy and technology conference at the University of Delaware in Summer 1975. During academic years 1975–1977 he further initiated philosophy and technology symposia at annual meetings of related professional societies such as the American Philosophical Association and the Philosophy of Science Association, began editing a small group newsletter, and signed a contract with JAI Press for publication of an annual series *Research in Philosophy and Technology* (1978–2002, which was eventually folded into *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*). When difficulties arose with JAI Press about the RPT-SPT relationship (vols. 1–8, from 1978 to 1987, were the “Official Publication of the Society for Philosophy and Technology”), Durbin began a second official SPT publication series with Kluwer-Springer, *Philosophy and Technology*, that produced eleven volumes (1983–1995). In 1995 he became a founding editor of still a third SPT serial, *Society for Philosophy and Technology Quarterly Electronic Journal* (vols. 1–4, 1995–1999), which was reorganized in 2000 as *Techné*. No single person has edited more SPT publications, published more in them, or written more about SPT.

Like anyone of high productivity, Durbin has tended to repeat himself. But unlike many he has been quite frank about it, often explicitly cannibalizing earlier publications. When describing the ideas of others, he has likewise consistently quoted them at length and, when criticizing, has done so with little rhetorical fanfare. He was one of the least bloviating of academics. He always kept within time

limits when giving talks and seldom if ever interrupted, although he did not shy from expressing disagreement and criticism.

The present symposium grows out of an informal round table discussion that took place during the 2019 SPT meeting (May 20–22) at Texas A&M University. It seeks to revisit Durbin's legacy and that of SPT as he interpreted it, especially in his quirky (and very no-nonsense, Durbinish) book, *Philosophy of Technology: In Search of Discourse Synthesis (PTSDS)*. The book was self-published on his University of Delaware home page (which has since disappeared) with a copyright date of 2005 and then as a special issue of *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* in 2006 (Durbin 2006).

PTSDS is a narrative covering thirty years of controversy in SPT linked to a series of comments on SPT presidents and other significant figures in the society. Its 320 pages of twenty-five chapters plus extended introductory and concluding essays is full of such extensive quotations that it can also function as an eccentric anthology. Here is Durbin's own statement of his theme:

This issue of the social utility (or lack thereof) of philosophy has been around almost since the beginning of philosophy in the Western tradition. In my view, it has been one core issue within the SPT community throughout its short 30-year history. There are, moreover, a number of other key issues that will show up in these pages again and again. It is my hope that this book will show that—in opposition to many critics of the philosophy of technology (and as we will see there are many)—the discipline (and I do not, at least not yet, call it an academic field) has much to offer that will be of interest not only to the broader community of philosophers but also to our culture. (Durbin 2006, 5)

This volume deserves more attention than it has received. I submit that a republication (perhaps, with some minor copy editing) in the Springer Philosophy of Engineering and Technology series, along with contributions by a number of those on whom Durbin himself commented would be well justified. Such a publication could serve as a posthumous *Festschrift* and a useful historical document.

For the SPT round table, I invited brief comments from as many as could be contacted of past SPT presidents and others about whom Paul had written. Following are the responses received, only a few of which were able to be shared *in vivo* at SPT 2019, supplemented with a significant number of further commentaries solicited since. The order of the authors largely follows the order in which Durbin

discusses them in *PTSDS*. In a few cases I have tried to fill gaps with notes of my own.

Before turning to the contributions themselves, it should be noted that they are quite varied, some responding much more directly than others to Durbin's assessments of their work. They also range from a paragraph to short article length with references. Sections 1–3 are responses from those on whom Durbin focused in *PTSDS*. I also invited post-Durbin SPT presidents to add their perspectives. These can be found in Section 4 of this symposium, which has four responses, with that by Philip Brey constituting the most detailed. Finally, Section 5 includes two contributions on Durbin's legacy beyond SPT.

Section 1. Staking Out a Territory

PTSDS is divided into three parts. Part One, "Philosophers of Technology Move Away from Philosophy of Science," covers the period 1981 to 1989 (that is, the 1980s) and includes discussions of the first four SPT Presidents (Carl Mitcham, Alex Michaelos, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, and Marx Wartofsky).

The Illusion of Discourse Synthesis

Carl Mitcham (SPT President, 1981–1983)

Paul Durbin was a Thomist become pragmatist. He was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and raised in a Roman Catholic milieu of the Ohio River valley, was ordained a Dominican priest, and received his higher education at the Aquinas Institute in River Forest, Illinois (PhD 1966). His first book publication was a bilingual Latin-English version of the *Summa Theologiae*: vol. 12, *Human Intelligence*: 1a. 84–89 in 1968 (Aquinas 2006). In his introduction to this volume, Durbin notes how Thomas's "treatise on human knowledge [summarizes] the Aristotelian *via media* between Platonism and pre-Socratic sensism" but focuses primarily on avoiding "the extremes of Plato himself."

The experience of knowing, and indeed of intellectual knowledge, is simply assumed. The purpose of the treatise is analytical, an analysis of the data of cognitive experience in Aristotelian terms. . . . There is, moreover, a further, culturally-determined purpose, that of defending genuinely natural knowledge from absorption into some supposed higher mode of knowing. (Aquinas 2006, xxi)

Since for Aristotle "body and soul are an interrelated composite unity" knowing "can have no activity that does not involve a bodily contribution" and