SPT and Social Progress

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This essay has two parts, with the first further subdivided. The first part has to do with my recollections about early difficulties getting SPT organized and the bold decision to move into Internet publishing with *Techné*. In Part Two, I then talk about the theme of this set of essays: past and future directions of SPT, with my special focus on what the society has to offer for the betterment of society, within academia or in the broader culture.

Ia. *Reminiscences about early organizational difficulties*

I begin with reminiscences about the difficulties of organizing SPT because that offers me the opportunity to introduce the themes I want to develop in Part Two. And I begin at the very beginning, in 1977, when a small group of philosophers brought together by myself with much help from Carl Mitcham – together with a few historians of technology – started talking about the founding of a professional society to deal broadly with philosophy, technology, and our technological culture. It was the second of two foundational meetings held at the University of Delaware (the first had been in 1975), and when I told the chairperson of our department at UD at the time, Frank Dilley, what we were thinking about, his response was totally negative: "You can't just start a professional society!"

But we were lucky. One of the historians of technology who helped us out in significant ways from the very beginning was Melvin Kranzberg, and he had, some twenty years earlier, been the moving force behind the initiation, by a similar small band of historians, of the Society for the History of Technology. He had then become the editor of SHOT´s journal, *Technology and Culture*, which had published both the first major symposium on the philosophy of technology in the USA (Bunge, 1966) and the "Bibliography of the Philosophy of Technology," edited by Mitcham and Robert Mackey (1973).

Kranzberg not only helped Mitcham and myself with lining up the invitees to the two Delaware conferences, but he continued to offer sage advice from the sidelines as we moved ahead with our venture. He was a funny man in addition to being a true pioneer, and when I asked him about the choice of a name for our fledgling society – and told him we were thinking of naming it the Society for Philosophy *and* Technology (rather than "of"), he told me, "That´s perfect, SPAT. Philosophers love to argue. I can never get two of them to agree when I ask them to review a paper for our journal." And when I was chosen as editor of our first publication – an annual with the title *Research in Philosophy and Technology* (JAI Press, headed by Herb Johnson, building on the old Johnson Reprints series) – Kranzberg told me I should always be ready with a third reviewer for our blind refereeing, in case the first two flat out disagreed on publication or not.

We were similarly lucky in finding our publisher, JAI Press, as Johnson was at that time just starting his series of annuals; and Eugene Ferguson, a UD historian of technology with a significant reputation worldwide, urged Johnson to accept our fledgling group. Ferguson had been impressed by the Mitcham-Mackey bibliography, and had recommended to Kranzberg that he publish it as a special number of *Technology and Culture*. Then when we produced our first

annual volume in 1978 we were again lucky, getting a very positive review by Langdon Winner in the prestigious journal *Science.*

 That did not end doubts about our early organizational efforts, however. In the early 1990s, with 15 years under our belts – and a move to Kluwer Academic Publishers with a series they insisted on referring to as Philosophy of Technology (to build on their very successful series, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science) – , we tried to get the National Science Foundation to support a conference we hoped would eventuate in a summary of work to date to parallel the one they had supported for the Philosophy of Science Association. I won´t name names here, but a famous Harvard philosopher with a nasty tongue and a penchant for 10-line negative critiques of NSF proposals, wrote that ours was "not a professional society; just a bunch of buddies who want to get together again!"

We were turned down by NSF for that venture, but our luck continued to hold up in other ways.

A big step forward came when I was approached by a joint NSF/National Endowment for the Humanities committee to produce the volume, *A Guide to the Culture of Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1980, paperback update 1984), and no one objected to the logic of including philosophy of technology alongside more established fields. (4S, the Society for Social Studies of Science, was also accepted, in its infancy stage – though it had been preceded by much prior work in sociology of science.) Similarly, the fact that the editors at Kluwer wanted to add philosophy of technology to their successful philosophy of science series (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science), just when some SPT leaders wanted a better outlet than JAI Press, was another lucky break. (See Durbin and Rapp, 1983.) As would be, later, Virginia Tech´s openness to an online journal – it would later become *Techné* – because organizers there wanted to add new professional societies to its online journals just when we decided to ditch hard copy for online publication.

Nor can I forget a wonderful set of hosts for sites for our international biennial meetings, beginning with Fritz Rapp´s lining up and gaining funding for the first international meeting at Bad Homberg, a famous German resort town near Frankfurt. Four years later we were welcomed for the first time at Twente, then Bordeaux, then Puerto Rico (back on the New World side of the Atlantic), Peniscola in Spain, Puebla in Mexico (in 1996, our only non-biennial venture), on to Aberdeen and Delft – not to mention less exotic sites in the USA.

Before and after 1997 – when it seemed our luck had run out with a poor showing at our international conference in Duesseldorf in Germany – three things happened that bailed us out, though on the condition of changing directions. First, there was a good showing of interested Dutch philosophers at Duesseldorf. Then in 1995 Andrew Light and others had spearheaded a conference on the thought of Albert Borgmann at Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies, out of which came *Technology and the Good Life?* (2000), with its call for a more academically respected society.

But, third, even before 1997, we had decided to go digital with our major publication.

Ib. *Techné* (1995)

That decision was as serendipitous as any other in our series of lucky breaks. The Kluwer Philosophy of Technology series had won us no more respectability in academia – at least no larger number of readers or members – than *Research in Philosophy and Technology* (the JAI

series). That series had continued, under the editorship of Fred Ferre and Carl Mitcham, so there were now two – one under the auspices of SPT, the other not – which had the odd effect of providing broader visibility for the field. Technically, these two publications are now combined, as shows up in the name that currently appears online for *Techné*.

The motivating force in SPT for the move was Larry Hickman, who felt that electronic publication was the wave of the future for all professional societies. (That has never become the norm, but after we were one of the first to go digital – under the auspices of Virginia Tech – a great many societies have done so, including some of the most prestigious even in fields like physics.) And of course we were again lucky, because Joe Pitt headed SPT´s publications committee and was at Virginia Tech to run interference for us. And, once again of course, he has stuck with *Techné* right up to the present, as SPT moves to another venue.

II. *Philosophy and technology or philosophy of technology?*

In my "Philosophy of Technology: In Search of Discourse Synthesis" (*Techné* 10:2, 2007), among the dozen or so significant controversies in the first three decades of SPT, I describe one of the earliest controversies as "and versus of," 'philosophy and technology' versus 'philosophy of technology'. The range of views I intended to include under that heading does not just cover an academic society in the narrow sense all the way to an open set of philosophical discussions of whatever kind, related to technology in general or particular technologies or the role of technology in our so-called technological cutlure. Another significant view in the mix was my own view, that whatever else SPT was to welcome, it ought to include contributions explicitly aimed at *improving* technological society.

If we pursue this thread a little further, there is also a marked contrast between the two foundational meetings – at the University of Delaware in 1975 and 1977 – and, say, the two most recent international meetings in the Netherlands: Delft in 2005 and the second meeting at Twente in 2009. By the time of the two Dutch-hosted meetings, there was broad attendance from many countries, contributions were by refereed submission, and the "feel" of the two meetings reminded me very much of the kinds of meetings associated with the Philosophy of Science Association in the 1970s and 1980s that I and some others in SPT were fleeing from. (The last PSA meetings I attended regularly were in the 1990s.) By contrast, those first two meetings at Delaware were by invitation and neither involved more than a few dozen attendees at the most.

In addition, our very first meeting included an overt appeal by Joseph Agassi, "Technology, Mass Movements, and Rapid Social Change: A Program for the Future of Phiosophy of Technology" (1978), a plea for our fledgling philosophers of technology to get involved in mass movements to avert the "technological apocalypses" of technology-related destruction, best represented in worldwide ecological catastrophe. Agassi´s model was Bertrand Russell and the "ban the bomb" movement after World War II. That sort of thing would probably not have been accepted by the referees for the 2009 meeting. (When it came time to publish the first volume of *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, in 1978, I had Kranzberg´s predicted difficulty in getting two referees to agree to publish it there.)

Another version of this sort of disagreement is included in my *Techné* book. It involves Andrew Light arguing for the "professionalization" of SPT, using the work of Albert Borgmann as a touchstone, versus Borgmann himself. In his reply to his critics at the end of *Technology and the Good Life?* – the volume in which Light made his proposal – Borgmann says, "As regards our position within academic philosophy, there is not much reason to lament insignificance within an

enterprise that is itself insignificant" (p. 342). Light, for his part, had in his proposal tried to avoid an either-or formulation of the future of such a professional society: "Borgmann´s reform program advocates a set of issues that any political system must address if it is to be effective in a social sphere dominated by technology. The work is therefore [not purely academic but] potentially of interest to a great variety of political positions" (p. 13). (I treat these opinions as coming from Light, though in *Good Life?* they are presented as the views of all three editors; see Light, Eric Higgs, and David Strong, 2000.)

As to Borgmann´s opinion that contemporary academic philosophy is "an enterprise that is itself insignificant," I addressed that issue at the 1999 SPT meeting, under the heading, "At the End of a Quarter Century, What Have We Accomplished?" (*Techné* 5:2, 2000). I started that essay with a reference to answers to a question posed by reporter Sarah Boxer, of the New York Times, from the leading philosophers of the day attending the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston in 1998. Her question had to do with what philosophers had accomplished in the 20th century. In a nutshell, from W. V Quine to Peter Strawson to Donald Davidson to Marjorie Grene and Karl-Otto Appel, they all said *nothing* – at least nothing that would be of any use to society. Boxer did interview one non-analytical philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who said "spirituality and reflection" might have something to offer. By contrast, I suggested, SPT philosophers had achieved a good deal – as I expanded on later and to which I turn next.

I addressed the question again at the end of my *Techné* book (10:2, 2007) on 30 years of controversies in SPT. I did so under the heading, "The Significance (if Any) of the Project." There I mention at least 10 accomplishments – however unheralded by the mainstream academic philosophy community – that philosophers associated with SPT had achieved, whether to the benefit of academia or to the broader society.

In my summary of the significance of the accomplishments of philosophers (and some others, engineers, historians, social scientists) in SPT, I concentrated – as had the book as a whole – on controversies. Summarizing them here, I instead highlight particularly successful contributions to those controversies by individuals. Here is my list:

1. Joseph Margolis´s "new pragmatism" (see especially Margolis, 2002), was well received in academic circles, even by those he opposed. Major parts of it were first sketched out at SPT meetings – partly in opposition to the applied-science view of technology espoused by Mario Bunge (1985), the latter being a forerunner of SPT but also an early supporter of the organization.

2. Joseph Pitt (2000) on technological explanation, among other things on technologies as aiding advances in science: though Pitt often seemed, in the early days, to say that there were few others in SPT worried about this sort of approach, in fact a number of contributions to the SPT literature were in broad agreement with his approach – and in recent years, as Dutch philosophers have become more prominent in the society, those contributions have multiplied. I count both of these first two as contributions to academic philosophy.

3. Carl Mitcham (1994) and others have from the beginning defended the continued relevance of traditional metaphysics (in a variety of guises). For those who oppose religion, theology, and metaphysics in the name of science, this may not seem to be a good thing. But after a few heated exchanges, this opposition has become muted in SPT, as many, even defenders of science and engineering objectivity, recognize a need for discussions of worthy goals of science and technology; and, as one example, Albert Borgmann´s critiques of technological society have

received wide acceptance in the broader culture. (See Borgmann, 1984, 1992, 1999, 2006; Higgs, Light, and Strong, 2000).

4. Kristin Shrader-Frechette (e.g., 1991, 1993) – and later Paul Thompson (1998) – on working with technology assessors and other regulators: this has been at least a minority theme from the beginning of SPT right down to the present. One of the forms that this has taken, most notably with Shrader-Frechette – who once even proposed it as a requirement for all large-scale technological enterprises, in the form of a Technology Tribunal – has been to work with technology assessment teams and commissions. Others preferred to work with environmental assessment teams – as have Shrader-Frechette and Thompson themselves. Both of them are as technically competent as any of the regulators with whom they have worked, and this can easily be seen as a way of doing academic work that serves to improve society.

5. Don Ihde´s claim (see especially 1979 and 1983) to have produced a Husserl-based mode of analysis better than the standard analytical mode in anglophone philosophy, was clearly aimed at improving academic philosophy. But his later work (e.g., 1990 and 1993; see also Selinger, 2006) has also broadened his original focus, including applications to the solution of environmental and intercultural or international problems. Ihde did much of his writing and public speaking outside SPT, but he was on the governing board for a time and attended many SPT meetings, right down to the most recent.

6. Like traditional metaphysics (number 3, above), its arch-enemy, neo-Marxism (best represented in SPT by Andrew Feenberg; see his 1991, 2002) has been a persistent thread from the very first University of Delaware meeting on. The way I see this as a contribution is in terms of answering the question whether mere reform is enough to save technological society from ruin, or whether something more radical is needed. Here again, not all see this as a contribution to the improvement of society, and many point to the fall of Russian Communism as evidence. But for me, the radicals – and I include Langdon Winner (1977, 1984) under that heading – are extremely helpful even to reformers by highlighting the odds they are up against. The radicals themselves, on the other hand – and Feenberg is again the best example – believe they are providing a concrete outline for a better world of the future.

7. The next contribution I emphasize comes not just from philosophers and others in SPT, but from the other organizations that entered the academic scene (principally in the USA, but worldwide) at about the same time as SPT and with which many of our members came to be associated. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy is one of the most successful, and Larry Hickman (1990 and 2001) has been the most outspoken leader in both societies, emphasizing the importance of technology to philosophers in SAAP and of American philosophy (especially that of John Dewey) for philosophers in SPT. The other major group that developed at the same time and alongside SPT can be summarized in terms of the so-called 4S society – the Society for Social Studies of Scientific Knowledge, with its journal, *Science, Technology & Human Values*; although members of SPT were, from the beginning, interested in the body of knowledge emanating from this group (see Mitcham´s edited volume, 1995, in RPT), the group has always been dominated by historians and sociologists, with only a handful of prominent philosophers (though I was on the editorial board of STHV for many years). The same is true for other groups developing alongside SPT, such as the Popular Culture Association or the Humanities and Technology Association – or even the many bioethics and other applied ethics associations. So under this heading, I see philosophers in SPT as part of a wider movement to open up academia to broader concerns than those that had preoccupied academics before these

groups, including SPT, came along. (See Andrew Light, 2003, and, with Jonathan Smith, 2005; Hickman, 2001; Borgmann, 1992; and Rafael Sassower, with Gayle Ormiston, 1989.)

8. A particularly important version of number 7 for SPT has been environmental philosophy, championed within SPT especially by Light (see his1996, with Eric Katz), but also by Shrader-Frechette, both of whom have also been presidents of the International Society for Environmental Ethics. In short, members of SPT have contributed in significant ways to the environmental movement.

9. In the past few years, SPT has joined with others in the pursuit of a philosophy of engineering, but long before that I had edited a volume on philosophy of engineering (Durbin, 1991), which couldn´t have been put together without support from SPT members; and engineering ethics had also long been a concern within SPT, from Mitcham (2000) to Deborah Johnson (1991 and, with Helen Nissenbaum on computer ethics, 1995). At the very least, this would emphasize the longstanding commitment of engineering to the betterment of society as a so-called "paramount principle."

10. For all these so-called "applications," there has been from the beginning a persistent call to go beyond academic contributions to *activist* involvement with social reformers – from Joseph Agassi at our very first meeting in 1975 right down to the present. (See chapters 7 and 17 in my *Techné* survey.)

11. As an add-on, I also noted that there have been echos of all these in Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands – indeed, throughout the world where SPT has had connections.

Conclusion

In my *Techné* book, in order to be comprehensive, I recognized that SPT philosophers have tended to put themselves in four broad groups, from those favoring a science-like academic respectability, through metaphysicians, to radical critics, all the way to explicit social reformers. In reply to my personal challenges to them, even the academic advocates have defended themselves as doing "service" work to improve society. Metaphysicians of whatever stripe, with their belief that ideas lead society, champion better ideals for a better future society. And the politically inclined, whether reformers or radicals, clearly aim to improve society.

So I would conclude that everyone in the history of SPT has aimed at improving technological society, even if some have championed doing so in "academically respectable" ways. And in my opinion, they have succeeded, in various ways, to improve both academia and our technological culture – to a far greater extent than those leading philosophers at the 1998 World Congress were willing to admit that philosophy in general had done in the whole history of the twentieth century.

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