Chapter 17

The Last Hoorah for Philosophy and *Technology: Paul Durbin*

This is a transitional chapter, in much the same way that I was a transitional president of SPT (1997–1999). The society was in danger of falling apart after a poor showing at the 1997 conference in Dusseldorf, Germany. We had bad luck there; poor planning led to a head-to-head conflict with a major German national philosophy meeting, and relatively few German philosophers of technology showed up, on their home turf! Only six months before, Hans Lenk had hosted a major philosophy of technology conference in Karlsruhe, where the Germans had shown up. (See Chapter 13 above.) So the nominating committee, remembering that I had been instrumental in getting SPT started—both in Delaware in 1975 and putting together (along with Fritz Rapp) the first international conference in 1981—and reflecting that I had never been president, asked me to run. I won, but it was clear to me that the handwriting was on the wall. We had to have a new generation take over. As we will see in Part 3, they did, but it was a new generation with new ideas about what SPT should become.

A little background on myself—perhaps unfairly giving more detail than I have managed to for others: I had begun my apprenticeship at the Aquinas Institute of Philosophy, outside Chicago, where the emphasis was on Thomistic philosophy of science. Already something of a rebel, I did my thesis—which ended up as a book, *Logic and Scientific Inquiry* (1968)—on a topic that challenged both Thomistic philosophy of science and the positivist views of Rudolf Carnap, with his so-called inductive logic. My focus was heuristic plausible reasoning (see Koen in Chapter 15 above, as well as C.S. Peirce's abduction or retroduction).

The Aquinas Institute allowed me to do most of my course work at the University of Chicago, where I encountered the thought of G.H. Mead, with his emphasis on the social dimensions of the discovery process in science. (I had read a good bit of Dewey before, but didn't then make the connection.) Reading Mead led me to abandon Thomism and take up the banner of American Pragmatism. And the whole rethinking process that this involved led me to focus more and more on real-world science; this in turn led to technology, scarcely distinct from science in the pragmatic view. This also happened to be a time in the USA (and worldwide) when technology was being widely criticized for its negative influences on contemporary society, not least with respect to the Vietnam War.

Everything then fell in line for me to take one more step, to work toward the institutionalization of philosophical discussions of technology, and the beginnings of the Society for Philosophy and Technology—the focus of this book.

I feel that my most important contributions (if any) to scholarship in the field are to be found in the volume I edited for the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, *A Guide to the Culture of Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1980, 1984); as well as in my edited volume, *Critical Perspectives on Engineering and Science in R&D Settings* (1991); and in my *Social Responsibility in Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1992).

Other essays are collected on my website:
www.udel.edu/Philosophy/pdurbin/durbin.html.

The essays can be found under the heading, "Activist Philosophy of Technology: Essays 1989–1999." The crucial essay there is "In Praise of a Social Work Philosophy of Technology," which is adapted from the lead essay I did for a volume on philosophy of technology and activism in *Research in Philosophy and Technology* (1999), edited by Carl Mitcham.

If I have any disagreements with fellow pragmatists, it has to do with the relative importance of activism as *part of the professional work of a philosopher.* (See a mild version of this disagreement in Chapter 14 above, on Hickman.)

Finally, as long-time editor for SPT, I also pioneered in putting its publications online, in the electronic journal, *Techné.* Ours was one of the first professional societies to go that route. (The journal is now in the capable hands of Davis Baird; online, see www.spt.org/journal.)

But this chapter is not about my work as such. It's about how the first 25 years of SPT had a great deal of diversity. This did reflect my vision, but I thought it also reflected the vision of many members of the society—a vision of philosophy *and* technology as a kind of anti-discipline in academic terms. In Part 3, we will see how it has since come a long way toward becoming a subfield in academic philosophy—philosophy *of* technology.

The conflict over this issue has been around in SPT for a long time; see Chapter 9 above, on Pitt's criticisms of SPT. But around the turn of the twenty-first century

it took on a new urgency. It isn't that the new leaders are no longer interested in real-world issues. (See the long quote about a new beginning that opens the next chapter.) But they feel that a strong subdiscipline within academia can spread its message far and wide, influencing critics of technological culture in many different ways.

So here in Part 2 we have seen how Joe Pitt tried to start a philosophy of technology academic discipline. Nonetheless, from Ihde to Winner to Feenberg to Goldman to Verene and Ferre and many of our international collaborators—among others—the old non-analytic ways persisted. And Pitt continued to be disappointed. It wasn't that these philosophers are not academically respectable. Many of them hold prestigious positions in well-known American universities; a few have even been chairpersons of their departments, where presumably they were pressured to "maintain standards" in hiring and publications. But none of them saw—even today none of them sees—philosophy *and* technology as a narrow professional academic subspecialty. But, neither separately nor in concert, could they—we—hold the society together without taking a new turn. In Part 3 we can judge the extent to which the new beginning(s) is (are) successful—especially when judged against a major challenge to science-like hegemony, in academia and in the culture more broadly, that has been mounted (more or less in parallel with the rise of SPT) by so-called social constructionists, often in the name of "postmodernism." (See Chapter 25.)

So what I see as the *controversies* associated with my presidency and with SPT at the beginning of the twenty-first century would simply sum up the controversies up to this point in this book.

Pitt, and Bunge before him (and European followers like Quintanilla), wanted philosophy *of* technology to parallel academic philosophy of science. Shrader-Frechette can be seen as sympathetic to the philosophy of science/philosophy of technology view. Margolis elevated this kind of view to its highest point, turning technology into the new clue to an adequate pragmatic version of analytical epistemology.

Mitcham and Verene (following Ellul) and Ferre weren't worried much about the is/of issue, but they argued, against all of the above, that the primary philosophical emphasis should focus on a metaphysical and historical *locating* of technology (and engineering) within a broader critical framework that would "take the measure of technological society" as a whole. Ihde, influenced by

Heidegger and other phenomenologists, also resisted the philosophy of science orientation, but in the name of a kind of analysis that he argued is superior to analytical philosophy Anglo-American style.

Marxist radicals, here represented by Wartofsky and neo-Marxist Feenberg, also argued for a radical critique, including a critique of academic analytical philosophy, but along very different—and opposed—lines. Winner, equally radical but not specifically Marxist, echoed the call for a radical critique.

This triangulated set of opponents was, in turn, opposed by philosophers I would label as "progressives" in various forms: Michalos argued in favor of social responsibility on the part of all technical professionals, including engineers as well as scientists; Byrne reflected labor union concerns but opposed much of the recent labor movement; and Hickman injected a Deweyan Pragmatist view into the mix.

Philosophers of technology in Germany and Spain reflected to an uncanny degree a parallel set of viewpoints. The minority of SPT philosophers who discussed philosophy of engineering as one, and maybe the most important, part of philosophy of technology fell into the same pattern.

Only Agassi joined with me in favoring activism over academicism, Agassi reflecting his Popperianism and myself reflecting what I interpret as Deweyan anti-academicism.

So there we were, poised for the new millenium with a laundry list of old controversies—and no satisfaction for philosophers like Pitt who wanted to see a true academic discipline emerge. I turn next to the "new generation" of SPT folk, who agree with the need for a new academic subdiscipline, but who turn to one of Pitt's foes, Albert Borgmann.