The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in Technological Civilization

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reflectiveness suspends and re-directs organic life, a theory of the interplay of these ontological realms is possible and necessary, but not in the direction marked by these authors.

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By now Barrett's book has been reviewed in nearly twenty popular and learned periodicals. Apparently Barrett has the attention of the larger intellectual community in this country. In this regard he belongs to a very small group of contemporary American philosophers which is comprised of such thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Thomas Kuhn, Herbert Marcuse, and John Rawls. Barrett's thought does not have the seminal force of his well-known colleagues. Still the tone of most of the reviews shows that Barrett enjoys not only attention but also respect. It is noteworthy, however, that the reviews that have been written by noted colleagues of Barrett's show some reserve and occasionally scorn. That suggests that Barrett's book is of interest not only for the sake of its theses and arguments but also as a focus of the question how contemporary American philosophy is related to the intellectual character and direction of this country.

The title of the book which seems to promise an essay in the philosophy of technology may be misleading since the avowed purpose of the book is to present "a study of contemporary philosophy" (xvi) which is at the same time "an attempt at a connected argument for freedom" (xvii). Barrett has chosen Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and James as representatives of contemporary philosophy, and in this choice he is remarkably close to a colleague of a very different temperament, Richard Rorty, who calls Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey "the richest and most original philosophers of our time." 5

Let me begin with a brief survey of Barrett's presentations. The book is divided into four parts. The first, entitled "Technique," begins with a chapter that sets forth the origin and dissolution of "The Illusion of a Technique," i.e., the rise of symbolic logic and its application as a technique for solving all philosophical problems. Barrett points to the diverging developments of the founding fathers of this project, Russell, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein, as evidence of the failure of this technique. This leads in the second chapter to general remarks about "Technique, Technicians, and Philosophy." Technique is first defined as ritual and then, in the modern case, said to be assimilated by technology. "Technology is embodied technique." (18) The tie
to logic is established by calling a machine "an embodied decision procedure" (20). The relation of technique and technology to philosophy is twofold. Technology on the one side "is the late, and maybe the final offspring of philosophy" (22). On the other, philosophy despite the failure of technique outlined in chapter one remains in the thrall of technique. The lesson has not been learned and requires further consideration. Chapter three therefore gives an exposition of the *Tractatus* and argues that the claim made for logic (that it mirrors the structure of the world) is unfounded and that the atomism to which the *Tractatus* is committed must lead to a denial of genuine freedom. But as the fourth chapter points out, "Mysticism" is as much part of the *Tractatus* as logic and rigor, though silence is all that Wittgenstein suggests as a response to the mystical side of the world. The later Wittgenstein breaks through the confines of the *Tractatus* and acknowledges "Open Language" though he still remains bound to simple and austere aspects of the world and sheds little light on the problem of freedom as chapter five presents it. In the sixth chapter, "Mathematics, Mechanism, and Creativity," Barrett proceeds to Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics. He argues that Russell's attempt to reduce mathematics to logic was misconceived and failed. Gödel's theorem and similar ones show "that human creativity exceeds any mechanism in which it might seek to contain its own constructs" (93). Wittgenstein recognized the openness of mathematics and suggested that it be looked at as a network of human norms and conventions though he fails to ask what should determine these conventions.

The arguments so far, Barrett says, have shown the inherent limitations of technique. He now proceeds to place technique as embodied in technology in the context of "Being," the title of part two. In chapter seven, Barrett departs from "The Two Worlds," the one disclosed by science, the other the one we live in and experience. Descartes is said to have established the diremption of the two worlds for the modern era. Husserl tried to reestablish the unity of the world by exploring the intentional acts through which things come to be present. But holding to the division of essence and existence and making consciousness the highest court of appeal, Husserl bars himself from being and from the force of existence as it thrusts itself upon consciousness. Chapter eight, "Homeless in the World," develops its topic by presenting a discussion and close illustrations of the notions of being-in-the-world, truth, and being as put forward in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. "The Cash Value of Being" is argued in chapter nine by pointing up how in Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's treatment of language being is at issue. Chapter ten outlines modern history of philosophy as the prelude and institution of "Technology as Human Destiny." In the final chapter of part two, "Utopia or Oblivion," Barrett urges that the metaphysics of technology is enacted and accepted in everyday life as is the radical subjectivity which is part of that metaphysics.

Part three, entitled "Freedom," begins in chapter twelve with the argument that "The Moral Will" and religion are at the center of a personality and that Heidegger in spite of his reflections on freedom and death was unable to reach that center. Chapter thirteen introduces James as the thinker who asserts the freedom of the will and is willing to acknowledge the force of religion. Yet James, as chapter fourteen

Barrett’s systematic concern is with technique and freedom; his historical concern is with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and James. These concerns are interwoven, of course; but an initial division will be helpful for the critical part of this review. Technique is first introduced and defined by Barrett in connection with logic and mathematics. Technique in this case is the attempt to reduce (areas of) mathematics, language, and philosophical problems to axiomatic systems. Gödel and others have shown that this enterprise has inherent limitations in regard to certain formal systems. From this generally accepted fact Barrett draws two conclusions. First, Gödel’s result is evidence for human freedom. To appreciate Barrett’s position one must look at his procedure.

Barrett throughout his book converses with the great figures of modern and contemporary philosophy. But he quite ignores or is ignorant of the details of the philosophical discussions that are now going on in this country or elsewhere. His sweeping dismissals of contemporary philosophy are therefore unconvincing (12, 23-24, 171, 215). What is more disturbing is the fact that he repeatedly rests his case on arguments or theses which appear doubtful, to say the least, in light of present controversies. Serious objections have, e.g., been raised against the claim that Gödel’s theorem shows that man is more than a mechanism.6

Barrett’s second conclusion says that technique has inherent limitations. But what is technique, generally speaking? In the chapter that begins with the question “What is a technique?” Barrett starts with the general notion of technique as ritual, then restricts it in the modern case by saying that technique is here absorbed by technology. Technology seems to be the ensemble of machines that surrounds us. The logical essence of the machine, in turn, lies in its being “an embodied decision procedure.” The point is suggestive, but it remains vague. In what sense is a machine an embodied decision procedure? “When your car starts up in the morning, it is solving a problem by going through a number of prescribed steps,” Barrett says (20). The point that he seems to emphasize is that one certain input will always result in one certain output. One can certainly think of an embodied decision procedure as an input-output system. But unlike a motor that is being started, such a system accepts and produces infinitely many different inputs and outputs of a certain sort. There are also machines, embodying negative feedback loops, which produce one and the same output in response to different inputs of a certain kind. Does Barrett want to exclude those? Or does he merely want to say that machines are problem solvers? Then how do they
differ from plants and animals? Or from lakes considered as thermal systems? Again there is a large body of contemporary writings on the topic under the titles of functionalism and systems theory. It has not left a trace in Barrett's book. Presumably it belongs to the "so-called technical publications of philosophy" where the philosopher "immerses himself in hair-splitting debates" (23). Yet along with the sterility of much of technical philosophy Barrett dismisses features which would be necessary to give his theses force: rigor and coherence. Rorty who also considers much of modern and contemporary philosophy fruitless, has furnished many pages of closely reasoned arguments to establish his claim. Barrett sometimes assures us that he could provide details and evidence for his grand theses (198, 216). But his book contains no sustained argument in support of a controversial or original point that would extend over more than two pages.

Two of the four parts of the book end with conclusions which apparently are intended to bring the direction and force of the foregoing chapters into relief. They illustrate the shortcomings of Barrett's style. The "Conclusion to Part I" advances the relation between freedom and techniques as the governing concern of the book. Immediately the problem of the technology of behavior and the claims made by its proponents are brought up. This is followed by "a small story" of a page and a half that "may be to the point" (101). After two pages of various comments on behaviorism, Barrett says: "The Business of conditioning people, however, has been a subsidiary issue in this first section." (105) In fact it has hardly been an issue at all. The "Conclusion" then comes quickly to an end when Barrett announces that in the next part technique will be considered in a broader context (105-6).

In the "Conclusion to Part II," Barrett acknowledges that the first two parts are at odds with one another since the first claims that technique has inherent limitations whereas the second argues that the technical order "seems to brook no inherent limitations to technique" (222). The inconsistency is not as stark as it might seem. Even if one were to accept the theses of part one, they would not yield anything like a clear and fruitful paradigm of technique which could be applied to and tested against the social order. And it is not really true that "Part II has dealt with technique as it is factually and concretely embodied in our actual technology," as Barrett claims. Part two consists of the usual sequence of aphorisms, stories, and sketches only one of which intermittently gives an account of a concrete situation (135-54). Still, to the extent that the first two parts have a discernible direction of arguments, there is the inconsistency that Barrett notes. But if one expects the "Conclusion to Part II" to resolve the inconsistency or to set the stage for a resolution in a later part, he will be disappointed. Barrett at once gets diverted into an elaboration of the second conjunct of the contradiction. This leads to a discussion of Heidegger's method of analyzing the framework of technology. Barrett then notes that the framework is threatened by nuclear destruction and that it is a moral question whether or not that danger is met. But Heidegger's thought does not enter the realm of ethics and religion according to Barrett. This prompts the turn to James. The book gives an appearance of connectedness because the end of a chapter as a rule takes explicit note of the title and beginning of the following chapter. But the materials within each
chapter are loosely assembled.

Barrett's other and chief systematic theme is freedom. He defends human freedom against all endeavors to coerce and enslave man and urges that he be provided with the fullest opportunities to develop his abilities. So far Barrett is clearly in accord with all philosophers and social scientists in this country if not in the world. The crucial philosophical question is whether the theoretical underpinnings of the practical program require a notion of free action understood as uncaused action. Barrett clearly thinks so and he is partly aware that the determinist does not. But to an important side of the determinist position he is often blind. Barrett draws support for his libertarian view from alleged practical differences with the determinist. Barrett, so he says, wants the individual to flourish whereas the determinist debilitates, deceives, and wants to coerce him (xv, 115, 297, 302, 308). If coercion means forcible or punitive action, one will nowhere find support for it in Skinner's writings. The determinist does not want to fight or repress freedom. His point is rather that there simply is no such thing as freedom if by that we mean the ability to act against or independently of causal determination. What the determinists fight against is the persistent illusion of freedom as uncausedness. Some do it because they think this illusion bespeaks a theoretical confusion, others do it because they believe the illusion to be practically pernicious. And among the latter, Skinner is one of the most vocal. One must remember however that there is a large area of agreement between libertarians and determinists about important practical matters such as social justice, the police powers of the state, foreign policy, the arms race, and others. And in most cases where there is disagreement, it is not in any strict sense traceable to different views on freedom and determinism. The determinist would explain his large practical agreement with the libertarian by arguing that most libertarian views and programs are deterministically reconstructed rather than dissolved or refuted. There is of course controversy also about the limits and the practical force of such reconstructions. But the controversy can be fruitfully entered and advanced only if one is ready to undertake the necessary conceptual and theoretical analyses. When Barrett attempts this, he acts as though certain theses against determinism need only be stated and illustrated to be incontrovertible, e.g., the thesis that the "determinist has secured an unassailable position for himself at the expense of making it empty" (260) or the thesis that the determinist must somewhere presuppose a free, i.e., undetermined choice (299-300). Having thus convicted the determinist in general and Skinner in particular, he feels entitled to claim that it "is surely harmful, particularly in the present climate of opinion, to deprive people altogether of the notion of moral autonomy" (302) and to brand the behavioral scientist's attitude as "callous cynicism" (308). But to one who is familiar with the philosophical debates about freedom and determinism Barrett's arguments must seem naive, ineffective, and merely rhetorical.

I now turn to Barrett's discussion of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and James. On Wittgenstein, Barrett presents the standard view of the turn from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*. He takes note also of Wittgenstein's writings on mathematics, but I am not competent to put Barrett's discussion in the context of the philosophy of mathematics. And, perhaps most distinctively, Barrett draws on the personal back-
ground and circumstances of Wittgenstein’s life to reveal in his writings the work of a “modern” whose life is a point of convergence of the conflicts of modernism (14). Heidegger is the most prominent thinker in Barrett’s book. From him Barrett adopts three positions. The first is the view of history as a conversation among the great thinkers and of the thoughts so articulated as a circumscription of an epoch and a prefiguration of what is eventually acted out in practice. The second is the claim that the unacknowledged but always decisive theme of the epochal conversations is being. Third, Barrett like Heidegger, sees technology as the shape that being has taken on in the modern era.

The first of these positions is the least conspicuous. Barrett gives a sketch of Heidegger’s position (203-4), but he makes no issue of his adoption of that position (though he is usually very explicit about his relation to Heidegger and others). It is also the most pervasive and consequential attitude since it gives the book its temperament. I will come back to it. Regarding the second point, I think Barrett, claiming that Heidegger was intent “on the single theme of Being” (242), misjudges the significance of being in Heidegger’s thought. Being in Being and Time is best understood as the watchword of a call to radical philosophizing, and being in this sense surely has disclosive power. But what is disclosed in the pursuit of being remains ambiguous. This is borne out by the passage in chapter eight where Barrett presents the course of a day in the conceptual framework (the existentialia) of Being and Time (135-54). The result is inconclusive. The application of Being and Time to everyday matters often amounts to nothing more than the addition of a rhetorical exclamation mark to the trivial, ambiguous, or banal. Barrett himself remarks on the incompleteness of Heidegger’s analyses of human existence. “Dasein has no soul,” he says (234). But this intuition is not tested and worked out. I am not sure it is enough for a philosopher to leave it at that, conceding that “even now I find no more concise and compelling way in which to put my judgment” (234). ‘Being’ remained a questionable vocable for Heidegger throughout his career. He went from one spelling (Sein) to another (Seyn).9 He crossed the word out.10 Finally he remarked: “... I do not like to use the word anymore ...” 11 This is more than a fine point of doxography. The word ‘being’ became dispensable as the enterprise of Heidegger’s thought turned from radicality to simplicity, to the concreteness of such essays as “The Thing” or “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” 12 In Barrett’s use, ‘being’ is opaque. He uses the term to castigate philosophers and ordinary folk who are concerned merely with beings (xix, 175, 183, 291). But what precisely is being neglected by such people remains as clouded as the meaning of being itself. To be sure, in the last essay that Heidegger published, it seems, as the title “Time and Being” suggests, that he takes up again the question of being.13 But the concern of the essay is with what gives time and being. Here the question of God arises.14 And it does so in a much more systematic and central way than in the asides of Heidegger’s that Barrett considers (244-45). The question of God had to be close to Heidegger whose attachment to the tradition in which he grew up is well-known. That tradition was thoroughly Christian. And there are enough documents to show how Heidegger slowly found his way back into the vicinity of that tradition.15 As Barrett tells us, he has been through Being and Time many times.
But of the later Heidegger he seems to have a fragmentary knowledge only and none, it appears, of the secondary material which throws light on the religious dimension of the later Heidegger’s thought.

Finally, Barrett often states and makes use of Heidegger’s thesis that technology is today’s dominant character of reality (xiii, 8, 177-219). But he does nothing to discuss and resolve the liabilities of that view, and he finally discards it when he notes the danger of a nuclear catastrophe as evidence of the primacy of politics and ethics over technology as understood by Heidegger (233-24). But in so doing Barrett surely misses Heidegger’s understanding of technology. Heidegger says expressly that technology is much more uncanny and perilous than the danger of a nuclear catastrophe. Heidegger may be wrong; but his point should not be ignored.

The least one would learn from Heidegger (and not from him alone) is that in a technological age the questions of politics, morality, and religion must be raised in a new way if they are to be raised fruitfully. But Barrett turns to these questions in a traditional and abstract and finally inconsequential way. I have mentioned the bald transition that Barrett makes from the problem of technology by way of politics to that of morality. Having arrived at the moral issue, Barrett has little more to offer than the insistence that “the moral will is the center of the personality” (233). He then escalates what he mockingly calls the odd, simpleminded, tame, prosaic, stodgy, hackneyed, and old-hat character of this position to the status of the great and saving simplicity of our age (245-46). And finally, although he has made so much of the simplicity of this position and of Kant’s influence in establishing it, he urges that we “have to burrow into the foundations that Kant, unknown to himself, really took for granted” (246). What in fact follows is another quick transition from morality to God, faith, and James (246-47).

James is repeatedly said to have a crucial place in the book because “his bold adventure into religious belief” gives us access to an area that remains closed to Wittgenstein and Heidegger (xvii; cf. ix-xx and 247). Yet finally Barrett admits that James “never speaks from within faith” (272). He questions the helpfulness of James’ findings (274) and argues that James misunderstands the mystic dimension of faith (288-94). The discussion of James turns out to be pointless.

But do not all these criticisms press Barrett’s thought into the professional mold that he is at pains to explode? And does not the wide and respectful reception of the book show that it is illuminating beyond the power and limits of most professional philosophizing in this country? I think it is at least true that Barrett’s book aspires to a concreteness, versatility, sparkle, and largeness of vision that set it off favorably against the work of most of his colleagues. Perhaps the need for such philosophizing is so great that even a book that professes but falls below these aspirations is well received. I am not sure, however, that The Illusion of Technique will leave an imprint on the spiritual and intellectual development in this country or anywhere else. Its reception has been largely respectful, but the respect has the character of a mild and vague approval. No one seems to be profoundly struck, disquieted, enlightened, or encouraged. A philosophical book of real consequence will have to manifest the rigor and resourcefulness that come to fruition when one tests and elaborates his intuitions.
against the work of his colleagues as for instance Rawls did in his *Theory of Justice*. If one thinks of such professional work as sterile and distracting, his attitude should be warranted by a vision as incisive and fruitful as for instance Heidegger’s. Barrett speaks courageously of his religious practice and of the strength he draws from the commerce with nature (154, 276-79, 337-40, 345). But as far as they go, these professions seem impotent and inconsequential in the face of technology.

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Notes

1 For a list see the Index of Reviews.
2 In 1970 Charles Kadushin found Arendt and Marcuse among the 20 most prestigious contemporary American intellectuals (Sidney Hook was among the 70 intellectuals so designated). See “Who are the Elite Intellectuals?” The Public Interest, no. 29 (Fall, 1972), 209-25.
4 Parenthetical numbers are page references to Barrett’s book.
8 The same is true of a brief outline in the “Prologue” (xviii-xx).
10 *Zur Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main, 1959).
14 This has been argued most carefully by Bernhard Welte, “Die Gottesfrage im Denken Heideggers,” in Auf der Spur des Ewigen (Freiburg, 1963), pp. 262-76. On Heidegger’s reaction see Welte’s “Erinnerung an ein spätes Gespräch,” in Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger, ed. Günther Nesper (Pfullingen, 1977), pp. 249-52.
15 See Martin Heidegger zum 80. Geburtstag.