

Attitudes Toward Technology/Technology's Attitudes

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Keynote Speakers



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Compulsion and “Transcendence Sideways”: Burke’s Technological Attitudes

Burke makes no bones about his fear and loathing of the symbol-using, symbol-used animal’s “technological psychosis.” Unless remediated by symbolic action in the form of the comic frame and perspective by incongruity (something to which he arguably devoted his entire lengthy career), Burke believed, the pervasiveness of the technological attitude would, by the logic of entelechy, bring a bad end: in the form of an Earth made unlivable by contamination from technological processes or in nuclear destruction.

While Burke argued that all things related to humans could be categorized as either symbolic action or nonsymbolic motion, it’s clear that technology presented an unusual and troublesome case, belonging comfortably to neither realm. As he wrote in one of his attempts to apply a comic corrective to the potential harms of the technological attitude, “the compulsiveness of man’s technologic genius, as compulsively implemented by the vast compulsions of our vast technologic grid, makes for a self-perpetuating cycle quite beyond our ability to adopt any major reforms in our way of doing things” (“Helhaven” 19). Here it’s

clear that Burke sees technology as having its own sort of agency, one that might rival symbolic action; he would certainly have appreciated Donna Haraway’s observation that “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (*Simians, Cyborgs, Women* 152). This language of compulsion (which crops up frequently in reference to technology in his works) also aptly characterizes Burke’s own attitudes toward technology. In a different essay, he confesses that for years he had been “compulsively taking notes on the subject of technological pollution,” even as he loathed the notes and wanted to “get shut of the whole issue. . . . But it goes on nagging me” (“Why Satire,” 312).

Yet at points within Burke’s corpus appear signs of a different attitude toward technology, one characterized by an appreciation for the strange not-quite-agency of machines themselves that he himself wryly names “transcendence sideways” (*ATH* 381). Here, along with Burke’s published theoretical work, I read his poetry, fiction, and archival materials to flesh out this somewhat hidden attitude toward technology. Ultimately, I argue, the notion of “transcendence sideways” is an attitude appropriate for an era where the machines have become livelier than ever.

Making Hope Out of Nothing at All: *Amechania* in Burke, Nietzsche, and Parmenides

Nietzsche once remarked that despite centuries of belief in the basic idea that God is truth, and truth is divine, it may be that the divine is nothing but error, blindness, and the lie (*GS* 344). The stakes of this statement are as profound and timely now as ever, and not simply for the humanities. A recent article argues that the fundamental belief in science’s ability to deliver truth and self-correct may not be justified—that science, and technology alongside, is always at the mercy of other forces.

The basic thematic here is that nothing humans do or produce offers escape from our foibles and errors—we are fundamentally amechania, without metis. I explore this thematic in Nietzsche and Burke, in particular on the tragic and comic attitudinal frames that they offer as hope. I then offer a third attitudinal perspective, that of the ancient Greek thinker Parmenides, who also had a profoundly pessimistic view on human capability to achieve truth and the good life, and cultivated this attitude through his philosophical poem on being. For Parmenides, hope was predicated on the utter acceptance of our entrapment in illusion and the cultivation of a profound attitude of metis emerging from this acceptance. Parmenidean thought is timely because science is fostering doubts within in its own ranks as to the hopes and technological solutions it can offer, in part because science cannot offer the “remedy” for our emotional, moral nature it was long believed to provide. Lastly, Parmenides offers a revelatory frame that seeks the nonhuman divine within the human, a point that bears exploration in contrast to Nietzsche’s cultivation of new values and Burke’s “complete sophistication” allowing for new vocabularies. Each of the attitudinal stances bears on the issue of media, for the question of what initiates a change in praxis is inseparable from the question of the means to do so.

We shall see that Parmenides demonstrates even more than Nietzsche and Burke an attendance to the performative dimension—predicated not on the hope to overcome human nature but rather on absolute acceptance of our utter helplessness, our amechania, that is, our lack of metis without appeal to revelatory aid.



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