

DEMANDING DIFFERENCE By

JUSTIN BIGGS

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Dr. Greg Salyer

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Capstone Director:
Dr. Greg Salyer

This cultural critique employs the philosophical concept of *potentiality* to interrogate the relationship between economic and ontological processes of production - that is, how does our material infrastructure both arise from and shape our nature as socially-imbricated individuals? The reigning neoliberal ideology presents capitalist relations as the final formula for human happiness, suggesting that material surpluses guarantee the fulfillment of our needs and desires. But this elides the possibility of any “ontological surplus” accruing to human communities, the sense of increased degrees of freedom to reorganize social life. It is obvious that extreme material deprivation confines an individual or community’s efforts to the pursuit of necessities, but why, in an age of vast material excess, do we continue to put our time and talents primarily into work-related activities instead of self-work? I argue that the answer hinges on a narrow understanding of potentiality (*dynamis*). This key concept derives from Aristotle, as do those of economics (*oikonomia*) and the political life (*bios politikos*). Putting these ancient ideas in dialogue with events that exemplify our present and discourses that seek to define it, I am to develop a discourse that could effectively subvert the dominant “post-political” neoliberal paradigm and actualize creative resistance to our present conditions. To think this project through from theory to practice, I draw from a set continental philosophers beginning with Marx, Heidegger and Arendt, then progressing to Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek and Catherine Malabou. Each of them has applied philosophy to social conditions, not to develop a “political philosophy” in the old prescriptive and normative sense, but a sort of template for improvisational *praxis* rooted in conceptual reevaluation of current conditions. I attempt to apply this template to our own situation and expand it into a program of discursive action geared toward breaking the ideological deadlock enabling the constant reproduction of an ontologically limiting social order.

Introduction: Necessary Economics, Possible Potentials, Contingent Politics

The present study is guided by philosophers, including Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Zizek and many more, but it is not a work of philosophy. It is a cultural critique which uses the concept of philosophical notion of potentiality to question whether we are living well, or just surviving. This means inquiring into what is necessary and what is possible for us, the gap between what we must be and could be. I contend that necessity, represented by economic production, has swallowed possibility, which we access through ethico-political means. This limits our ontological freedom - that is, our potential to become *different* than we are. Foucault stated as much in 1970s interview that still rings true: "Our problem," he writes, is "too *little*: channels of communication that are all narrow, almost monopolistic," governed by a "protectionist desire to stop 'bad' information from invading and stifling the 'good'" (Foucault *EST* 329). The discourse which monopolizes our collective conversation, defining and disseminating a set of "shoulds," impels us to devote our lives to *growing the economy*. Work, hire, sell, buy, buy the new version, take out loans, go to college, invest in home-ownership, vote for this or that economic policy, get this credit card and that high-interest bank account and these free trial offers, guaranteed or your money back ...

Is this it? Drawing on Ancient Greek concepts of economics, politics and potentiality, I suggest it is not; material production is a means to the end of continued existence, not the purpose of existence. It is the most basic category of existence, but we have made it central. Why shouldn't we work to produce what is necessary, and then do something different and better? Why not pursuing excess intensity-of-living instead of excess consumer goods? I argue our cultural conception of life itself allows the capture of human potential in circuits of profit, where even billionaires devote most of their time to work.

We need, as Foucault says, *more* - not more gadgets or YouTube channels or social media services, but *more potential modes of human existence*. The dominant discourse claims we fulfill our potential through our career, and become ethical subjects through the right habits of consumption. As long as we believe this, we remain *subjected*. We need, as Foucault says, a new kind of critical thought, a "critical ontology of ourselves" which examines who we are today in order to discover who we might be

tomorrow. This kind of criticism would seek to “bring an idea to life,” to “multiply not judgments, but signs of existence” which “bear the lightning of possible storms” enabling us to circulate new, transformative human energies and intensities (xx).

In this spirit, I undertake a critical ontology of contemporary *homo economicus*. First I examine the existential “attitude” that underpins this mode of being human together. Then I consider ethical/individual and political/collective possibilities for exceeding the present and revealing new potentials within our social world. This entails comparisons with the Greek *polis*, Karl Marx’s utopian vision of communism, and forms of spiritual *askesis*. Next I consider the implications of our near-religious faith in the present way of life. Finally, I consider the likelihood of environmental catastrophe under the current mode of production, weighing potential responses to find a strategy that would let us to economically *evolve*. Evolve into what? That is a question which requires us to ask another....

Demanding Difference

I. It’s a Girl

That was a trick question. For a newborn child, these words are meaningless, and identity – indeed, all structured distinctions depend on the acquisition of language. We are accustomed to think the world is “obviously” populated by discrete, stable objects and persons, but a baby knows nothing of these verbally-constructed categories. Even its own body is experienced as a depth of sensations without sense, pain and pleasure. With no frame of reference, it is bombarded from all sides by what psychologist William James dubbed the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” of unfiltered reality, its sound and fury signifying nothing. It is too cold, too bright, and especially too loud. The baby does not know that the sounds are the adults in the room talking about her every move and feature, labeling them - “it’s a girl! So cute - and look, she wants her mommy!” - according to pre-established ideas of gender, personality and baby behavior. These things are not wrong. But they cannot answer the question of who she is, because as of yet, she is no one: she just is. To “be someone” is not only to have a name and birth certificate; it is to possess unique capacities which, until they are disclosed through

idiosyncratic actions, remain unknowable.¹

At this point, the baby is primarily a complex of what Aristotle called “generic potentials,” mere undeveloped capacities to acquire particular abilities that all humans are born with. Any baby with intact hands “has” the unrealized potential to play the piano, but they do not have it in the more significant sense of a real capability to sit down and play “Ode to Joy.” This state of being- capable means having a “possible potential.” So who the child “is” will depend on which generic potentials she develops into in legitimate competencies, which themselves depend to some degree on inherited propensities.

Developing and expressing a set of capabilities reveals, not who she “really was” all along, but who she is really becoming based on her actions within the world that is beginning to take shape for her. That world shapes her too, revealing new potentials, more she can attempt to do. Their experiences are the beginnings of her subjectivity, of knowing who she is, not just in terms of her status, but her particularity. Since birth has been aware of herself as a passive complex of sensation; only now does she experience an active sense of being, and this spurs her to seek out more. She stands before the basement staircase, filling with thrilled anticipation as she wonders what else is down there. Soon, she will go find out.

II. Girl Meets World

A few years later, her parents begin to hear from others in the neighborhood that they’ve started their children learning musical instruments and foreign languages (Do you KNOW how expensive college is without a scholarship?). They buy one and put it in the basement. Once, it beckoned with possibility; now, she spends three hours a day down here, cut off from all other possible activities (Why, maybe she’ll go to Julliard one day!). Her potentiality, her capacity for learning and doing, is channeled toward an activity her parents have deemed worthwhile; her playing improves, but not her interest in it (You’ll

¹ I am drawing on Arendt’s concept of the “disclosure of the agent” here, which is one of many conceptual forms of “actualizing potentiality” I will discuss in this book. Others include Marx’s transformation of “labor-power:” into “value,” Heidegger’s “revelation” and “bringing-forth,” Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming-X,” and Catherine Malabou’s “plasticity.”

thank us later, they tell her).

She enters second grade, where they emphasize grammar, nonfiction reading, and extremely rigorous math concepts that consume hours of homework time after school. Her parents decide that, to ensure her academic success (I mean, this is her FUTURE we're talking about!) she needs daily private tutoring on top of piano and school. Under this regime of all-work-and-no-play, she begins to un-become the person who started emerging during those explorations of the house, when she began to develop and follow preferences - because what defines a subject if not the ability to desire and pursue those desires? Now routine has set in. habits have developed, and that sense of the openness of the world that she felt standing before the staircase evaporates. This, she assumes, is just what you do in life. And she becomes bored.

III. Impersonal Development

Every social system induces the bodies it interrelates to develop certain of their generic potentials and not others, as it must to perpetuate its existence and particular character. But there are varying degrees of control, and the movement in our society is clearly toward less latitude. We are making educational narrower and more standardized, introducing "professional development" workshops in more and more sectors, and increasing the scope of government's regulatory power in all areas. This brings about ever-closer collaboration between the State and Corporations - public education officials commissioning curricula from edu-corporations, Halliburton and other contractors running operations in post-war Iraq, the privatization of prisons, ObamaCare's health insurance mandate, the selling of surpluses to the increasingly- militarized police... In all cases, the justification is economic: yes, it's not perfect policy, but it saves government money, or it'll help our private sector grow, or it'll make people smarter and healthier workers. Whether it works or not is irrelevant; the problem is the idea that economic expediency does or should determine an action's value. That idea impoverishes all of our potential. In a culture dominated by the love of money, this is difficult to communicate without being dismissed as a "socialist." Do my complaints really imply the need to move to a state-run economy? Certainly not; socialists typically exalt work and labor as much as capitalists. The question is not about socialism vs. capitalism, but what combination of them would strike the right balance between productivity and

more-than-negative freedom, ontological freedom. But as absolutely crucial as the right policies are to creating the conditions for that kind of autonomy, the bigger problem right now is that most Americans do not think of freedom in positive terms, as the “possible potential” to act freely, but in negative terms, as a “generic” non-coercion that leaves many without the time, education and resources to actualize that freedom as a flourishing existence. This is like confusing the baby’s potential to play Piano with Stevie Wonder’s. The political task right now is making this clear to people through a new discourse of freedom.

IV. A Choice of Futures

In its simplest sense, potentiality is tension, and potentials are possible resolutions. Say our young girl from earlier is at a birthday party a friend offers her vanilla or chocolate cake. The struggle between her desire for both is a sort of inner turmoil shot through with anticipation: she will soon have cake - but which? Potentiality is the buildup of concentrated intensity that develops from the sustained co-presence of these “undecidable” options (hurry up, they’re melting!). This tension eventually builds to a threshold where it “releases” into a specific outcome: chocolate, please. She could have just let him choose and avoided the tension altogether. But that would mean surrendering the power of preference. Now she is 16, putting her college preferences into a search engine to see how many schools fit her specifications. That same nervous excitement fills her as the screen floods with results. She might not go to any of these, but she also might - she is finally in a position to escape her parents’ management of her life. The feeling from the staircase comes back, the sense of world’s possibility. 12 years heavy-duty studying gave her the real potential to get accepted to these schools, and now she can actualize it. Finally, at 29, she asks her partner about having a child, a potential made possible by her physical fertility and their ability to afford a sperm donor. At first they disagree, creating tension between two contradictory, but coeval futures which is experienced as frustration: why can’t I convince her? But then relaxes an actual event: They choose a donor, a general potential (these indeterminate sperm) which, through the resolution of sperm-egg tension, leads to one specific outcome of out of millions of

possibilities (this baby girl with those big brown eyes!). ²With this birth, and as with her mother's and all births, unknown potentials accrue to the world's store of potentiality, for no two humans can actualize their share of it in the same way. Right now, this child's potentials are all generic, waiting to ripen, but soon enough she will be exploring their house, wondering what is at the top of the staircase.

V. Beyond Good and Bad

My examples make potentiality sounds inherently positive, but in truth it not necessarily good or bad; it simply refers to determinable indeterminacy, a compressed, tensed multiplicity of possible-but-exclusive changes straining against each other to be born. However, potentials are good or bad for particular beings who those changes affect. It is up to us to take responsibility, not for outcomes which we can't control, but at least for the potentials we contribute to actualizing. Despite the emphasis I have placed on positive, ontological freedom, the "formal freedom" we have under the law is far from nothing.

Slavoj Zizek writes, "In order to demand 'actual freedom,' I have to already have experienced myself as basically free: only as such can I experience my actual servitude as a corruption of my" ontological freedom" (Zizek FAT 11). If Zizek is right that "formal freedom precedes actual freedom, creating the latter's conditions," then the potential might exist among our people to soon demand difference in regards to the way we structure our lives. What would that look like? It would have to combine the spontaneous organization of markets with the real positivization of freedom that is impossible without preventing both extreme concentration and extreme deprivation of wealth.

This is why it might seem that I treat potential as inherently "good" throughout this book - my objective is to increase, intensify and diversify it in a time when, at least from an ontological viewpoint, it is scarce. We are no longer babies with totally untapped reserves of potential, and none of us are getting any younger. Acquiescence to a collective lifestyle of hard work damns us to wasting our time, and thus is unacceptable. It is time now to actively expand and improve our lives by dismantling the ideological boxes that bind what we become to repetitions of the same, and let human difference flow forth.

² As I said: no two humans will actualize their potentiality in the exact same way.

VI. Difference Distorted

Of course, difference too can be taken negatively, with predefined differences preferred over freely-developed ones. A recent Time magazine cover depicts a man lying beneath a life-size Scantron test, making it appear that the bulk of his body has been converted into a huge multiple-choice grid. Inscribed on the backdrop is an endless litany of personal questions, everything from “Are you shy?” to “Do you hate opera singing?” Above him is the title, “HOW HIGH IS YOUR X.Q.? YOUR NEXT JOB MIGHT DEPEND ON IT.” The accompanying article by Eliza Gray describes how American employers are increasingly requiring applicants to complete protracted self-assessment surveys designed to identify an elusive quality Gray labels the “X-Quotient.” Gray employs this cryptic term because “there is no name yet for this indispensable attribute, (whose) qualities are so murky that often not even the employers chasing it are able to define it” (Gray 42). How then is this X-factor determined? It turns out the employers “simply know that an algorithm has discovered a correlation between a candidate’s answers (such as an expressed preference for classical music) and responses given by some of their most successful workers” (Gray 42).

So the variable “X” is relative to the hiring business’s needs, the position in question, and finally, the results of statistical analysis of employees thriving in similar positions. These investigations employ the methodology promoted by “Big Data,” a corporate trend which preaches “the value of collecting as much information as possible about practically everything so that it can be mined for lessons” through pattern-seeking analytics, which uncover associations between small differences and large-scale effects (43).

Within this nascent field of “people analytics,” the relevant differences concern what the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) would call ways of being-in-the-world: of reacting, responding, and relating. As Dr. Andy Biga, “director of talent acquisition and assessment” for Jet Blue Airlines, told Time, “it may be more important for a flight attendant to be ‘helpful’ than ‘nice,’” and all he needs to identify one or the other in a potential hire is a 12-trait “personality inventory” (42). These personality traits are approached less as qualities of a cohesive “person” and more as reproducible functions, human algorithms that can be repeatedly deployed to please customers (input: helpfulness) and convince them

to choose Jet Blue in the future (output: profit). The goal for any business is to perpetuate that cash-flow circuit, eliminating contingency and imposing regularity wherever possible; X.Q.

tests allow companies to extend that regulative stratagem to the selection of workers.

Jobseekers are obliged to cooperate with this intrusive system to find employment, but for many younger applicants, it probably seems natural to have your worth determined by a fill-in-the-bubbles exam. For decades, U.S. schools have been increasing the amount and importance of standardized testing, which has reached new heights with the adoption of the national Common Core Standards, largely through the efforts and expenditures of Microsoft mogul Bill Gates. The standards establish skill-based checkpoints throughout each student's academic career which, Gates says, will "make sure graduates are ready for college or jobs" (Layton 2).

The impetus behind the overhaul came from widespread concerns that American education was not preparing young people for the demands of the global economy. To quote a representative editorial, "China and India have implemented strategies that invest in their next generation of workers to produce millions more college graduates than the U.S. over the next two decades," especially in science, technology, engineering and math, where the highest-paying jobs will emerge (Tanden and James 1). Gates funded research to figure out "how we (can) educate the next generation of American workers to ensure our continued economic competitiveness well into the 21st century," and the consensus was "more rigorous" national standards backed by much, much more testing (1). The website of one Common Core-aligned test, the PARCC, ³claims it can "ensure that every child is on a path to college and career readiness by measuring what students should know at each grade level,"

³ PARCC, which I administered as a New Jersey high school teacher, stands for "Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers." See www.parcconline.org. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan claimed this test and others like it would be "game changer(s)" in American education, despite continuing to rely almost entirely on multiple-choice items like the old tests. This is a perfect example of the technological "attitude" Heidegger will describe, the desire to reveal as much information as possible and attain mastery over a natural process, in this case, human development.

echoing the grandiose predictive claims of the X.Q. gurus who have extended these strategies to adults in the workplace. (But they have to exaggerate like this - this is how they make their living, after all.) Both instances of testing, as well as every other acronymic standardized exam that tries to predict someone's potential to perform some predefined task, are attempts to ensure the reproduction of particular social structures and institutions. The army has its ASVAB test, colleges rely on the SAT and ACT, the State uses civil service exams The list would go on endlessly, but what matters is the common approach to temporality, the being-in-time that, for Heidegger, is the fundamental nature of finite human existence. Normally, we are stranded in the present, constantly negotiating between now and not-now with our recollections and anticipations, but ultimately the not-yet is concealed from us. The men behind these supposedly-prescient tests would escape that human finitude and behold the future now, with a spreadsheet as crystal ball. But all their models are based on the past: the tests are designed with a pre-determined ideal subject in mind, such that a person's score represents their quotient of similarity to the model. The worker is a means to the end of bringing the abstraction alive with as few deviations as possible, to ensure the company or country retains future access to capacities which perpetuate their profits. That way, the uncertainties of change are kept in check, and time becomes tamed.

These regulatory trends might seem overwhelming to the point of inevitability. But philosophy, which as the least profitable and most abstract of human activities has been largely forgotten, can contest this standardization of living beings under the aegis of material productivity. Philosophy asks questions: not the yes/no or even multiple-choice kind, but open-ended ones which can open up future possibilities rather than narrow them down. Philosophical questioning, Heidegger said, "builds a way," one which cannot be plotted in advance. In his poetic idiom, high-stakes tests constitute a "sending," "destining" us down this-or-that "proper" path, while philosophy is a "wandering," eschewing the "right" direction and embracing the freedom of "error." As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts it, "in its deepest intentionality, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality" against those who would "drive all experience of possibility from the world" through the algorithmic administration of human life (Agamben

“BOC” 248-9). Philosophical thinking, as this experience of possibility-as-such, can help undermine the channeling that confines human potential to pre-programmed circuits of profit. All it takes is a question.

VII. The Necessity of Contingency

One question that might open these problems up for more concrete investigation concerns necessity. If this new regime of constant human measurement helps ensure our economic vitality by guaranteeing the best workers and the most efficient businesses, isn't it a necessary evil? That would be true if the alternative was mass starvation, but there is no reason to think this is the case. No one, not even a billionaire businessman, can predict our economic future, because we cannot factor as-yet-unrevealed outcomes and events into our calculations⁴. In such circumstances, we should not jump to action, but pause to consider what is at stake. We should heed America's greatest philosopher, John Dewey,⁵ who wrote, “there is a kind of passivity, a willingness to let experiences accumulate and sink in and ripen, which is an essential of development... External answers and solutions, may be hurried,” but not “processes, (which) take their own time to mature” (Dewey 78). Like Heidegger, Dewey shows us that reality is essentially temporal: it is never “complete,” but always in the process of becoming different, untamable. It is when we accept conditions as inevitable and unchangeable, rather than incomplete and unstable, that allow would-be prophets to “send (us) upon one way or another,” like hikers following a

⁴ To name a few such unforeseeable REAL game-changers: innovations in sustainable energy production, destructive or displacing effects of ongoing climate change, the un-sustainability of intellectual property rights in the face of the internet, the possibility of wars involving Israel and Iran, India and Pakistan, Russia and NATO. Standardized students are not being well prepared for such eventualities, which would upend the current global reality and demand the self-guiding “adaptability” Dewey describes, as opposed to the

⁵ Dewey earns my nod for the title of our greatest philosopher because he recognized thought, as well as

the evolution that produced it, as inventive responses to the ineradicable instability of existence. His methodological pragmatism, which deeply informs both my pedagogical and philosophical approach, is a far cry from the economic expediency often given the name today, which again entails the “flexibility” of reacting to market developments in multiple ways, but not the “adaptability” of changing the market itself by creating new conditions. Dewey describes this flexibility when he remarks that “an education could be given which would sift individuals, discovering what they were good for, and supplying a method of assigning each to the work in life for which his nature fits him” (Dewey 23). This book can be taken as an extended critique of an apolitical social order promoting flexible economic cooperation as a substitute for political action.

pre-marked trail through the park instead exploring the “freedom of the open” future (Heidegger “QCT” 112 - 13).

Dewey⁶ understood that, since the only constant in life is change, we must educate individuals who are happy straying from the path, promoting “personal initiative and adaptability” through experimental problem-solving without clear answers (67). Without a dynamic, imaginative culture, we could get stuck in the kind of intellectual and cultural rut that leaves a society unable to perceive new possibilities and adapt. This is in direct opposition to the homogenizing reformers in today’s educational and corporate establishment. They seem to think that, since we can and do know what challenges are coming, exploring “possibility” is a whimsical waste of time. Before they decide our collective future, they should consider the case of South Korea, which on paper looks exactly what they want the U.S. to become.

According to Forbes magazine, South Korea “has become the world leader in patent activity and information and communication technology,” and its ultra-rigorous education system was ranked number one in the world in 2014, making it the “new tech start-up powerhouse on the horizon” (McGlade 1). Unfortunately, it is also number one among OECD countries in suicides, an epidemic involving both adults and youth. Korean author Young-Ha Kim lamented in the New York Times that “no matter what the age, too many South Koreans see suicide as a viable escape from the stresses of modern life” (Kim 1). Data shows that adult suicide rates skyrocketed during the 1997 Asian financial crisis and have not come down since due to persistent “uncertainty about the economy” (Kim 1). Meanwhile, the stellar education system’s extreme rigor proves a fatal stressor for many students. An N.P.R. story on the crisis opens with a typical case: “Recently, two 16-year-old girls in the city of Daejeon jumped to their deaths, leaving a note saying, ‘We hate school!’” (Hu 1) The high school day ends at into 4 p.m., but “can drag on until 11 pm at private cram institutes” to prepare for the all-important Suneung college-entrance exam “since, (with) as few as three colleges considered top tier by future employers, the competition is fierce and the stakes are sky high” (1).

Economic downturn is not fatal; why then would South Korean workers choose death over its mere prospect? Similarly, missing out on the most lucrative jobs does not mean the one's life is over; why then would students choose to end their lives, rather than relax and just go to a low-tier college? One South Korean researcher, Kim Mee Suk, blames it on an intense pressure to succeed stemming from a "national drive to keep the economy humming" (2). With few natural resources, the prevailing sentiment is that prosperity depends on developing the country's "human resources" to their fullest capacities through universal higher education. Having each individual go to college would "best for the country," says Kim "but not good for their own selves" (ibid). It is a vicious paradox: the system seems economically unavoidable, yet it is consuming the lives of the people who make up that economy. Kim fears that, barring major change, "our future will be dark," concluding, "we have really a big dilemma" to solve (ibid).

This tragic predicament can only be solved by South Koreans themselves. But in a sense, their dilemma is ours as well. We too struggle to reconcile the needs of economic structures and the needs of real people, which too many of us still consider identical. South Korea's situation belies this. Despite a trillion dollar economy, the 12th largest in the world, a poll found that 50% of students have suicidal thoughts consistently, and almost 10% of elderly people die by their own hand (see Wikipedia). Clearly, "making a living" and actually living well grow more in tension with each other as the global rat-race intensifies. What if they are in tension with each other by nature? This would not occur to the people in charge of American education and business, as it did not occur to the architects of South Korea's system, because their prevailing philosophy axiomatically associates a healthy economy with a happy populace (and a "happy" populace with a fulfilled and docile populace). This is why Bill Gates gets quite testy when activists accuse him of promoting Common Core solely so Microsoft can make money off the new computerized assessments. "I believe in the Common Core because of its substance and what it will do to improve education, and that's the only reason," Gates told the Washington Post, and he was not lying (Layton 3). Yes, he also told them that "one of the benefits of common standards would be to (make) it easier for software developers — including Microsoft — to develop new products for the country's 15,000 school districts" (3). But it is only by grasping the perceived unity of these two claims that we can

understand the detrimental ideology⁷ which, despite their cultural differences, Gates and South Korea's social planners share.

In *the Human Condition*, German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) defined modern society as an entity which "demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest" (39). This totalizing understanding of communal life, where improving society and improving the economy appear indistinguishable, makes standardization inevitable. Arendt points to the fact that statistics-based economics, which has become "the social science par excellence," could "achieve a scientific character only when men had become social beings (who almost) unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal" (43) Where Dewey proposed a "mobile democracy," "full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere," our leaders offer a mobile economy, but a static society, a post-democracy where experts plan out the channels in advance. But they are not nefarious. In their minds, economic growth is always good for everyone, promoting the "one interest" of material prosperity (even if the distribution of that wealth is highly uneven. There is no difference between educating and selling products - both are means to keep money flowing, as are we. This is why Slavoj Žižek⁸, probably the most famous philosopher alive today, asserts that the supposedly-sovereign citizen of today's democracy is more like a king in a constitutional republic, "a monarch who decides only formally, whose function is to sign off on measures proposed by an executive

⁷ In using this concept, I am mindful of Michel Foucault's objection, "Ideology always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as Truth" (118). I do not mean to suggest that ideology conceals some true, "objective" reality that we could access if its scales fell from our eyes in the old Marxist sense. Nor is ideology a fantasy consciously force-fed to the masses to justify capitalism; Gates and men like him fully believe what they say. I mean instead the intersection of what Foucault would call dominant discourses, including those of techno-optimism, statistical analysis and neoliberal economics which I have described here.

⁸ Žižek's ability to simply express complex philosophical ideas in ways that are immediately applicable to our immediate political circumstances is a major inspiration for my own writing. I am nowhere near as funny as him, but I have attempted to follow him in using a broad variety of examples, many from popular culture. Nonetheless, the third and fourth chapters will contain critical engagements with his thought.

administration” (Zizek FAT 39). The big decisions, the ones about how our society defines “making a living” relative to “living,” have already been made⁹. Even Bernie Sanders, the most economically “progressive” candidate in a generation, proposes an increase in the minimum wage rather than any kind of radical rethinking of how we structure work and compensation. This does not mean we should give up on organized politics, especially on the local level, but we must realize our democratic process will remain impoverished without new ideas, options outside the needs of the current “neoliberal” economic model. Those we are offered do not exhaust the possibilities of being-in-the-world-together. We must find our voice as a people and demand something different. Properly articulated and disseminated, such ideas might lead to opportunities worth voting for – though we cannot say what they will be in advance. They are another “X” to solve, down the road. For now, the important task is to demonstrate that difference is even possible, because the Gates ideology has placed blinders on our people as much as our leaders.

VIII. Potentiality is linked to the notion of perspective.

Consider the phrase “personality inventory” deployed by the X.Q. gurus. Inventory usually refers to a stock of consumable or saleable items, but here describes the contents of a person’s “essence” (not a fixed Cartesian substance anymore, but a dynamic and abstract set of possibilities). How do people’s capacities start appearing as something to be inventoried, as they do in this psychometric discourse? This appearance, like all appearance, is dependent on a perspectival “frame,” a subjective lens which

⁹ Even The Common Core, for example, was promoted primarily by American liberals and centrists. The New York Times editorial board warned that “if the country retreats from the Common Core reforms, it will be surrendering the field to competitors that have already left it behind in math and science education, which are essential to participation in the 21st-century workforce” (“Moving Ahead with Common Core,” April 2013). Conservatives largely opposed it, but not because of the philistine careerism inherent in the standards. Instead, as an article on Glenn Beck’s website claimed, the standards were supposedly “being pushed by the Obama administration” in collusion with “several leftist organizations” (“The Whole Story on Common Core” April 2013). It is difficult to say which critique is worse. The first openly declares that we must do what is good for business, while the second blames government and “leftists” when the Core was promoted by Bill Gates and various educational corporations, especially Pearson, which received multimillion dollar contracts to design the Common Core-based assessments and is now developing curriculum for teaching to those tests.

presents things to us in a particularized way. When someone administers a personality inventory, they grasp the subject from the perspective of their potential to reliably perform certain actions - not what they are or even could be, but how they can function. It is hardly surprising to find this instrumentalist attitude toward individuals in, say, the dynasts of Imperial China, who used an ancestor of X.Q. exams to select the most efficient bureaucrats. But how did it become so widespread in a country that purports to value individual freedom and self-determination above all?

One possible answer can be found in Heidegger's important 1954 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," where he argues against the common view of technological development as simply the emergence of more effective means to pursue obviously desirable ends. Instead, he claims our technologies also alter the fundamental "frame" through which we encounter the world as a world, thus shaping the very ends we consider desirable. This frame is not some illusion imposed on us that philosophy could dispel; it is a constitutive condition of our being, an enabling limitation generating order and meaning. Without what Žižek calls "coordinates of reality," a subject would experience only William James's blooming and buzzing confusion (Žižek E 4). Only such coordinates establish a navigable, meaningful milieu with which the subject can interact productively.

Here both Heidegger and Žižek follow Immanuel Kant (1724-1802), an earlier German philosopher who developed a crucial distinction between things-as-they-are, noumena, and things-as-they-appear to a perceiver, phenomena. Things "in-themselves" are inaccessible, because our limited five senses and evolved brains necessarily present, or rather re-present, whatever is "there" in a particular way. This is true for all sentient beings: an entity only perceives certain aspects of its surroundings. A feline body and a human body extract different sensible qualities from the same environment, and their divergent physical capabilities allow them to pursue very different responses to it¹⁴. We must all filter the vast excess of noumenal stimuli, just as we would need to filter out chemicals from polluted water so our human bodies could safely drink it. Thus, "direct," objective

perception of reality is impossible, because the subject automatically “structures” what it sees. In his epistemology (theory of knowledge), Kant thought this structuring activity drew on innate concepts universal to humans, but his successor Georg Hegel demonstrated that any person’s frame is culturally molded and liable to change through the collective development of new ideas. He supplemented Kant’s epistemology with an ontology, a theory of what exists, by showing that both ourselves and what we see are the products of a historical process much bigger than us, yet to which we fundamentally belong.¹⁰

At the same time, our actions contribute to that ongoing development, such that we make history even as it makes us. As Karl Marx put it in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” This “dialectical” division/connection transforms the unbridgeable abyss between perceived object and perceiving subject in Kant’s philosophy into a dynamic complementarity, enabling them to grow together. When Heidegger sought to revolutionize ontology a century later by re-asking the question of what it means to “be,” he also employed a dialectical relation: the “ontological difference” between “Being and beings,” which corresponds to the objective/subjective gap. Being, “What-Is,” encompasses everything that exists, whether it is perceived or not, while “a being” is a limited existent that only perceives some of it.¹⁶ From its subject-position, an individual being encounters Being as a set of phenomena which offer possibilities for action.

Elizabeth Grosz of Rutgers University explains that “life can only exist and perpetuate itself to the extent that it can extract from (the) experientially overwhelming chaos that is nature (those particular) elements and substances it requires” (Grosz 6). Thus, we have evolved senses “attuned” to “what is of

¹⁰ Kant speaks of the mind rather than the brain, but this physicalist assertion must be made in light of the discoveries of contemporary evolutionary biology and neuroscience, not to mention the theoretical insights of Kant-influenced materialist traditions (e.g. Marxism and psychoanalysis). For example, a mouse in a dark room appears to a cat as visible prey to be seized in its claws, while to a human, it presents only scurrying sounds which represent a nuisance and require the supplementation of bodily capacities with equipment to deal with.

use to us," which "bracket out" most of the "vast profusion of forces"¹⁷ that make up the Real (Grosz 5-6). These specialized perceptual schemata enable beings to reorganize regions of the world according to their species-specific needs and desires (which for humans are culturally specific as well). The individuation of Being, a Whole, into the partial perspectives of variegated life forms, introduces tremendous potentiality into the world¹¹. Now, "the earth can be infinitely divided, territorialized, framed," allowing endless ways of interacting with and transforming it, such that being and Beings ripen together" (6). A bird, for example, finds the right tree branch, gathers appropriate twigs, and constructs a cloistered nest to safely raise its young. Wolves form packs, framing a social world which encompasses miles of territory they then patrol daily to defend against intruders. And most importantly for our purposes, human beings demarcate a cultural sphere of our own. This has practice evolved to the point where "calculable, measurable and mappable features" emerge, allowing nature's "openness to scientific and technical manipulation," the basis of our global civilization today (19).

IX. Imposing Form or Revealing Form?

Here we rejoin Heidegger's point about technology's effects on our modes of living. Hegel showed us that each human culture is unique, and that our subjective frames are inescapably conditioned by the "spirit¹⁸" of our milieu. Without doubt, each of us perceives the world from our own subject-position, which is why the internet recently exploded into controversy over a picture of a dress that looked white and gold to some, and black or blue to others. But many ancient cultures didn't even have a word for blue, usually considering it green (though Homer calls the sky "bronze" and the sea "wine-colored"), until the Egyptians isolated this light-frequency and named it. Culture mediates the relationship of

¹¹ As a physicist would tell you, the world consists of forces; they are the actual stuff of Kant's *noumenal* or objective reality. Forces, as strange as it sounds, *have no appearance* until there is a sensing body with the the right physical "equipment" to do so (eyes to "download" sense-data, brains to "process" it into coherent images) . What is seen depends entirely on the nature of this equipment. THIS means that, to answer the age-old question, a tree that falls in a forest emits soundwaves of force, but unless there is someone there to "hear" it, those forces do not become "sound."

object (here, the spectrum of light) to the subject (the blue or green or wine-color of the sea). But if culture acts as a screen between us and the world, filtering out aspects considered uninteresting or unimportant, then technology is a solid-glass window, revealing features of reality we'd never known were there, but at the price of cutting us off from it. Under its influence, things begin to appear as means to material ends, revealing themselves primarily in terms of their potential to be transformed through scientific and technical means.

To unpack this insight, Heidegger return to the Ancient Greek root-word of technology, *techne* and its relation to another of his concepts, "revealing," which is Heidegger's concept of potential, refers not just to instruments, but to "arts" in the sense of productive techniques. This means the in its "essence," technology is a way of revealing things' potentials. Here he draws upon Aristotle, the philosophical giant who developed the notion of potentiality as a counterpart to actuality. Aristotle described four "causes" or aspects which defined any existing thing: it has a material, a particular form, some functional purpose, and a "moving cause" which brings the materials together in a form that initiates this functioning. When we create, we become the moving cause, selecting a new way for things to cohere, as when a carpenter chooses pieces of wood and reconfigures them into a chair for the functional purpose of sitting. As a result, a potential form becomes an actual one, adding new potentials to the wood (to be placed outside on the porch, painted different colors, given as a gift). The proper *techne* enables *poiesis*, making, through a double revelation of potential: First, the carpenter's knowing of the *techne* of woodworking enables him to see the "potential table" in a set of wood; then, using the *techne* actively, he reveals the "hidden" or latent table to all by making it an actual object. In Heidegger's poetic idiom, *poiesis* is a "bringing-forth (which) brings (potentials) out of concealment into unconcealment" (23).¹² On this subject, our culture diverges from the Ancient Greeks even more than color theory. Heidegger

¹² We can speak of philosophy, or indeed any academic discipline, as a *techne* for revealing new possibilities, not yet materialized in objects (as in the example of using the *techne* of carpentry to physical "reveal" the potential chair in the wood), but in the form of theories that give us a (what Heidegger calls a "free relationship.")

argues that the Aristotelian way of thinking, which attributes potentials to things themselves, leads us to work with them, not simply on them. But the incredible efficiency and power of modern technological instruments inculcates certain habits of both perception and poesis, seeing and making, which conceal the particularity of things (their unique, unified four causes) in favor of their utility (their value as pure material for use or exchange).¹³ Today we do not view making as revealing a form that was latent in a material or participating in a four-factor causal event, but imposing a form of our own design on a totally passive substance. Instead of respectful working-with, “we put to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such,” as anyone who has seen pictures of the Appalachian mountaintops cut off to extract the coal inside will understand (Heidegger 14). Knowledge, the philosopher-historian Michel Foucault said, is also for cutting, and our tests slice open the mystery of individual potential to extract only the “useful” qualities. In educational terms, this is the movement from Dewey-style and Common Core-type education; in occupational terms, it is the disappearing commons and the rising corporation; and in both cases, it is advances in technology that have made the shift possible.

This does not mean we should see technology as “bad,” though in many circles, questioning its absolute value can get you called a Luddite. But it is easy to see why people are convinced technology is our salvation. It opens up life-improving and life-saving potentials in medicine, fabrication, travel, even art, and what better definition of “good” is there? In his novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig proposes that goodness, quality, is not an explicable concept, because it is the most elementary experience. It is the “the event at which awareness of both subjects and objects is made

¹³ Heidegger died decades before the smartphone, but watching people look at the world through the frame-like screen of a device which causes them to see their surroundings in terms of the potential to provide a capturable image which, once correctly manipulated, can amass quantified praise on Instagram

– it simply makes his point for him. An excellent example of the tendency of social media technology to reveal people as digital *Bestand*, i.e. potential “followers/likes,” comes from the South Park episode “You Have Zero Friends.” The character Eric Cartman dresses up as *Mad Money*’s Jim Cramer to host an analogous program, *Mad Friends*, about how to maximize one’s Facebook friend count, directly connecting the two acquisitive behaviors.

possible,” and in this sense it mirrors Heidegger’s revelation of potential, the emergence of a new, “freer” relationship to Being (Pirsig 121). The “ugliness” of life today is due to a vague sense that our relationships are not free; as Pirsig puts it “the real problem is the relationship between the people who produce the technology and the things they produce, which results in a similar relationship between the people who use the technology and the things they use” (134). Despite its tremendous potency, technology primarily reveals potentials for manipulation through means-end relations, filtering out the Quality-of-Life question that should be paramount.¹⁴

Pirsig concludes that “our current modes of (technological) rationality are not moving society forward into a better world,” but creating the opposite (Pirsig 76).” Those modes work “as long as the need for food, clothing and shelter is dominant,” because they privilege the stockpiling of utility goods, without which there can be no quality of life (ibid). But now that “for huge masses of people these needs no longer overwhelm everything else, the whole structure of reason... is no longer adequate”; we now need a way of thinking about what is “good” for society that is not entirely economic (88). But we continue to think that what we need is higher productivity, so instrumental rationality continues to grow in influence, overtaking our cultural frame to the exclusion of most immaterial values. To emphasize its totalizing nature, Heidegger calls this process En-Framing (Ge-stell).

Within the Enframed worldview, Heidegger says, all Being appear to us as a vast economic “standing-reserve” (Bestand) of “potential energy and commodities” (McCumber 160). Forests become “lumber,” goods become their price-value, and humans become energy-stores to power the planetary economy. Potentiality becomes the central category of concern, only to be immediately narrowed down to those capabilities which can augment our reserves. Approaching the world in such a mechanistic way, how

¹⁴ The commons refers to anything that belongs to us all and must be preserved for popular use. The activist journal Commons Magazine includes in its definition “all the things we inherit and create jointly, and that will (hopefully) last for generations to come,” including “gifts of nature such as air, oceans and wildlife as well as shared social creations such as libraries, public spaces, scientific research and creative works.” For more, see <http://www.onthecommons.org/about-commons>.

could we not end up developing “people analytics”? How could we not end up framing even ourselves as Bestand?

X. Things Could Be Better

Slavoj Zizek suggest we think of Enframing as an attitude, one which we “we assume toward reality” when we engage with the “complex network of machines and activities” that define so much of modern work (Zizek E 29). But we also assume it in lesser degrees when we scroll through Facebook posts, or binge-watch shows on Netflix, or buy pre-frozen mass-produced food, or rack up points in video games, or go to the bank, or... The list goes on, so much that it might impossible for us to overcome this attitude. But this is not true. Zizek illustrates this with a final Heideggerian concept, Ereignis, an Event. This concept “designates a new epochal disclosure of Being,” the rise of a new collective Frame which reveals new potentials for our lives, which for would mean alternatives outside of free market ideology. In “(contemporary) capitalism, where things have to change all the time” only to stay the same - that is, Enframed - “the true Event would be to transform the very parameter by which we measure the facts of change (the) entire field in which facts appear,” making X.Q. tests, Common Core, South Korean education, and cutting off mountaintops all look rational and beneficial (159). The overthrow of Gestell through the rise of a new Frame would be a specifically political Event, allowing a radical restructuring of social life.

This might sound impossible, and perhaps it is - right now. But the potential is still there. How can that be true? Recall that, as I explained in the introduction, Aristotle’s original definition of potentiality distinguished between “generic” and “possible” potentials, those which something possesses in an abstract sense, and those which it can readily make-actual. As a society, we have the dormant potential to live differently, much like wood has the potential to reveal a chair; we await the carpenter-like catalyst that will allow us to actualize these hidden forms. Pirsig suggests that we can be this catalyst: the way to make the world “a better place to live in,” the way to do it is not with talk about relationships of a political nature,” because political programs “can be effective only if the underlying structure of social

values is right, “and “the social values are right only if the individual values are right” (Pirsig 144). So, if the social values are wrong, which they clearly are, then “the place to improve the world is first in one’s own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there” (Pirsig 144). Even if no one else follows our lead, we can free our own attitudes from Gestell and break the window separating us from the world, so that we can care about, and for, it again. Both Heidegger and Pirsig see care as fundamental to human existence and well-being, for “a person who cares about what he sees and does is a person who’s bound to have some characteristics of quality” of life (Pirsig 172). Instead of dualistic, dominating means-ends relations, relations of care are dialectical: the two elements “grow toward Quality or fall away from Quality together” (178). But we live in an the age of the internet, where not only is spreading one’s individual influence easier than it has ever been, but technology has become to overflow the expedient bounds of Enframing (what is the use-value of endless cat photos and Nicholas Cage memes?) Perhaps we can become models of what Hannah Arendt called Amor Mundi, love and care for the world to compete with the “model students” and “model workers” the powers-to-be want us to endlessly reproduce.

We should do this sooner rather than later, for as Heidegger also reminds us, there is one possibility “not-to-be-outstripped”: death, the one guarantee in a temporal world. As “born” beings, we are “already dying, in the sense of being-towards-death” (Heidegger BT 133). But existing as “the between” of these two endpoints, our “being is itself an issue”; it is not a given, but a question, and the answers we choose are guided by what we can about in life, and concern for making the most of it. Our lives can be better, and if they are limited, we should never, ever give up on that potential for betterness. “Things could be better” is often meant as an understated complaint, but it can also be read as an affirmation: Things can get better, both personally and politically. Every present contains the seeds of all sorts of breaks with the past that produced it, which is why standardized testing exists: it is a prophylactic measure, preventing those seeds from blooming and revealing potentials that could overgrow the present way of being-together. How to bring this revelation about, of course, is a subject which transcends the present work.

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