Heidegger's and Dewey's Views on Modern Technology

I. Introduction

In this paper, I will compare and contrast Heidegger's and Dewey's views on modern technology. It seems to me that though Heidegger and Dewey hold diametrically opposed philosophical views on modernity in general, they share a great deal of concern about modern technology. Due to the limitation of space, after briefly introducing their basic philosophical attitudes, I will show their disagreement and agreement only with respect to the subject of "technology."

II. Basic philosophical differences between Heidegger and Dewey

The differences between the views of Heidegger and Dewey on modern technology may stem from the fundamental philosophical differences of these two men. Hence, to
outline the basic philosophical differences of these two thinkers might be worth the while. Whereas Dewey would endorse "democratic society," Heidegger may well understand mass democracy as one symptom of the decline of the world. We can see this when Heidegger says that "the world is darkening. The essential episodes of this darkening are: the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the standardization of man, the pre-eminence of the mediocre" (Heidegger, 1959: 45). Heidegger may think Dewey's ideal world the world of mediocrity.

Heidegger believes that the complex of culture - the art, science, technology, politics, etc. - has been based on philosophy, specifically on the old metaphysical thinking. Heidegger thinks that since most of the important phenomena in history can be directly attributed to traditional metaphysics, the solution to current problems of all kinds is a new form of meditative or philosophical thinking that has an affinity with poetry. For Heidegger, the philosopher or poet, in whom the greatness of humanity resides, is more important than mere ordinary man.1) Thus, "to treat the great philosophers as stepping stones" is unbearable to Heidegger (Rorty, 1982: 50), while for Dewey, if "the great philosopher" does not do any good for society or people, then "the great philosopher" maybe no longer great. Therefore, as Rorty points out, to Dewey, Heidegger's position might seem like "academic parochialism."

To Dewey, human "growth" is one of the most important things, and is more significant than principles. Principles exist for the sake of man and not the other way around. If Dewey ever endorses modern technology, it is only because he believes that modern technology may contribute to human "growth." Here, I think that Dewey hopes for the growth of "every member" of society, regardless of social status or sex or cultural diversity. I also think that if Dewey truly believed that technology could prevent humans from "growth," he would denounce technology. In fact, Dewey endorses the good use of technology and denounces the miss use of technology. Again, for Dewey, whether the use of technology is "good" or "bad" depends on its contribution to the "growth" of every member of the society, without discrimination.

1) I think Rorty would agree. Rorty says that "one of Heidegger's strongest feelings, and one which places him very far from Dewey indeed, is that ages, cultures, nations, and people are supposed to live up to the demands of philosophers, rather than the other way around" (Rorty, 1982: 47).