

"Hope will die at last": an interview with Wolfgang Schirmacher¹

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Abstract

To Wolfgang Schirmacher philosophy is about *reading in the spirit of*, so that we may follow the logic of the phenomenon that shows itself to us. It is in this spirit of phenomenology Schirmacher asks whether Martin Heidegger's diagnosis of our age – that we live under a *Gestell*, or fix, of technology – is sufficient. Should we not consider the supplementary notion of technology as an event (*Ereignis*) of becoming into our own existence? We have an inborn character that is unassailable and yet unknown to us until the day we perish, and from such an ethical perspective – and in distinction to deontological views – Schirmacher rejects science's promise never to clone humans. He regards such a declaration as "only valid until it's possible." Rather, he regards our future as one in which humans will be allowed to procreate for as long as it doesn't interfere unambiguously with the functioning of the machines, "and during that interim the poor humans living there will still have hope."

Keywords: phenomenology; technology; Heidegger; ethics; cloning

Introduction

This interview with Wolfgang Schirmacher was conducted during two days in February 2018 in his apartment in Dresden, Germany. The conversation spanned a range of topics: Heidegger's thought –including discussions of concepts such as *Gelassenheit*, *Gestell* and *Ereignis* – truth and ethics, character and will in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, as well as commentaries from Schirmacher on phenomena such as philosophical tradition, artificial intelligence and his own notion of *Homo generator*. Many of the remarks from Schirmacher in this interview should be contextualised from the perspective of his professional trajectory. Born in Dresden in what was then the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR), or Eastern Germany, Schirmacher emigrated in his early teens to attend boarding schools in the West. After his university studies in philosophy he taught at the Military

University of Western Germany and the University of Hamburg before taking up positions as professor and Director of International Relations with the Polytechnic University of New York, which is today part of the New York University, and the New School for Social Research. In 1998 Schirmacher founded the philosophy and media

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studies programme at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. Attracting a range of world-class scholars, such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Paul Virilio, Slavoj Žižek, Mike Figgis, Judith Butler, Avital Ronnell, Catherine Malabou, Giorgio Agamben, Graham Harman, Jean-Luc Nancy, etc., Schirmacher stayed on as programme director, teaching his own classes and supervising graduate students, until 2015.

A note on transcription: The attempt here is to capture Schirmacher's speech in its authentic idiosyncrasy, including Germanicisms, quaint word order and insertions of German words and phrases directly into English. We should understand this kind of speech in its specific historical context, as utterances of a European thinker shaped by the division of Germany and the new alignments that was made possible with the fall of the former Socialist Republics.

Philosophy in our time

What is the role of philosophy and the philosopher in our world?

I always refer to Nietzsche – the peachy Nietzsche – here, in that the philosopher is the most dangerous person in the world. When the philosopher comes into the room everything can change. I am a philosopher in the tradition of Socrates and Diogenes. When they were asked to explain something, in the end they understood that they know nothing.

That is why it is not a problem to read [Martin] Heidegger. When another Heidegger crises came about, [and] everybody said “Never read Heidegger again!”, then [Jacques] Derrida's said, “No, the opposite! Read more Heidegger!” Because it is not actually Heidegger you are actually honouring when [you see that] a thing [he wrote] is right. [It is] if you also can see what the guy [Heidegger] said: only [then] is it right. That is why Heidegger is, no question about it, the most influential philosopher of the last century, and he became it because he was re-reading the entire history of Western philosophy. He was sitting in the Black Forest during the Nazi time. He was not in Berlin, he refused to go to Berlin, but he stayed in this hut in the Black Forest where he was reading Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and everyone.

But reading *in the spirit of*: not “how can I explain this [to some] person very well,” but “can I still see what these people have seen?” And if not, how can I change my gaze, my view, in order to get into the viewpoint of Plato? Obviously, we can never be Plato, but we can – and [Hans-Georg] Gadamer, Heidegger's student, said, that clearly we can – fuse our horizon with the horizon of Plato [when] we encounter his writings.⁴ And this fusion might not be a big deal. [However] it might be that just a different understanding of a certain Platonic dialogue makes all the difference in a world where people have already settled on answers, especially in an ideological world in which you are defamed and will be accused if you are not following what is now the spirit of the day.

This brings us directly to our next question. There is so much talk of the different demands of various bodies in today's institutions. In your view what are the social and institutional necessities of doing philosophy?

I think you are turning it upside down. It begins with that we are all born philosophers. That is the real basis of everything. The moment we ask “Why?” “What is blue?” “Why do you hate me?” We ask all the children's questions. We even have a field in philosophy called children's philosophy. It teaches with children how very basic questions are coming out of children's mouths. Because they don't feel anything, they just ask it. And when we say that things, well, it just *is* like that, they say, “*Why* is it like that?” So they can make you crazy. But that is what a philosopher does. We are born philosophers.

Then you have trained philosophers, [those] people who studied philosophy. But these are not the best ones, because that is their problem. When I was a young professor and had a class on Hegel I asked [the students] a

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002) studied with Heidegger and worked as his assistant from 1923 to 1925, but later broke with him, moving into classical philology. Gadamer's own philosophy is most well-known through his *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method, 1960), where he proposed the notion of a reading subject's “horizon of expectations” in the encounter with a work of art.

question. I would get an answer out of Hegel, a Hegel quote. My reaction was always “Don’t quote Hegel at me.” Tell me what you think. Say it in your words.

Or even with Heidegger: people came to Heidegger after the war when he was famous, and rang the bell and Heidegger came out and asked “What do you want?” And they would answer “We wanted to meet you.” Then Heidegger would say “You have met me,” and then he closed the door. And you know one of the worst things Heidegger could say in his class to a student was “Don’t Heidegger me.”

No, it’s about the moment when you get away from it. That’s why [to write] my own work, *Ereignis Technik*, I needed ten years, and in [those] ten years I had forgotten all of Heidegger.⁵ So the reviewer later wrote that he never knew where Heidegger ended and Schirmacher began because I did not know and I did not care. What I wrote was all Schirmacher. Later I made the joke that Heidegger had “stolen” this idea from me. But it wasn’t stolen, it was just that I had seen the same thing, and in phenomenology you don’t have to quote, you only have to follow the logic of the phenomenon that shows itself to you.

So that was OK, my inner thing was that I said in my dissertation that “I begin where Heidegger ended.” I never did what most dissertations on Heidegger did: [to] re-write again what Heidegger has written much better. [I had] to understand first where Heidegger had ended, in my case his philosophy of technology, the *Gestell*, the fix, which is the negative understanding of technology, of instrumental technology. My question was “Is that enough?” [to acknowledge] the *Gestell*, that everything is there already fixed in our world and we can see it? Heidegger said [that] it will be with us for a thousand years, instrumental technology. And when you look around, “Hallo Google” and “Hallo Amazon”, “Hello Microsoft” and whoever else you are, you are – and you are not – agents of the instrumental technology. But he said *ab*, there is another word called *Ereignis*, the event of becoming into your own existence, and don’t stay there, but open it up and go to new adventures in the process of living. Instrumental technology cannot stop this.

In [my] early years I was one of the philosophers of the Greens, in their first years. The Greens liked my criticism of technology, and I followed Heidegger here, but they did not like that I said that what can kill us can also keep us alive. It is the same technology that kills us and [damages] our environment [that] also must have another side which keeps us alive. There is no saving power except in the same power which destroys us. And this is something Heidegger never explains. There’s only one little reference in his texts, from a seminar with Eugen Fink, a private seminar, in which he claims the *Ereignis* is the negative of *Gestell*.⁶ And negative in such a way – which is very hard for young people today to comprehend in the age of iPhone photography – [that we get from] the old way of photography; the context shows that what he means is that what you did would be to make a negative first and then [from] the same film, after you put some stuff on it, turn [it] into an image.

As a student in my apartment in Hamburg I had one little room that I shared with another student there where I made my own images. Usually it was nude photos of my wife, because at that time one was not able to store images [laughs]. It was very innocent, but nevertheless, nude was nude, and at that time it was not allowed. This is the *Ereignis*. The *Ereignis* was a nude photo. And the negative of that is the instrumental technology.

In some ways it was Herbert Marcuse – [who experienced] Heidegger’s coming to him and [becoming] one of his best students, but spoiled and corrupted by Freud – who in the philosophy of technology was a bridge from Heidegger to me.⁷ Actually I met him once as a young student. At the University of Berlin there was an evening lecture with a German professor: [when] the door opened a blonde and brown Marcuse came [in] with a bottle of wine in one hand and in the other a blonde graduate student from California. That was the moment in which I

⁵ Wolfgang Schirmacher’s 1980 dissertation *Ereignis Technik: Heidegger und die Frage nach der Technik* (The Event of Technology: Heidegger and the Question Concerning Technology) was published as the two volumes *Technik und Gelassenheit* (Technology and Releasement, 1983) and *Ereignis Technik* (The Event of Technology, 1990).

⁶ In 1966-67 Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink held a seminar on the fragments of Heraclitus, published as *The Heraclitus Seminar* in 1970/1997 (trans. Charles H. Seibert).

⁷ While his first doctoral dissertation (1922) discussed the German novel, Herbert Marcuse was so moved by the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 that he returned to Freiburg to study philosophy with Heidegger and work as his assistant. Marcuse’s second dissertation, *Hegel’s Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit* (Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity, 1932) was never approved by Heidegger. Instead, they parted ways as Heidegger got involved with the Nazi Party and was elected *Rector* of the University of Freiburg in 1932. Marcuse started working for the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, first relocating to Geneva and then emigrating to New York in 1934.

understood that you can actually *live* as a philosopher. You don't have to be one of these academic idiots, "which comma in the third critique of this or that might be right or wrong." No, you can have a life, and that's why I'm very happy that this year Angela Davis, Marcuse's muse at the time, will be in the EGS faculty as Saas-Fee, finally.

Because, again, as a role model, it is not the content of what she is saying, I have no idea what she is saying today, but [it is] about her life [and what she has achieved] against all odds: that's what makes her a real teaching experience for our kind of students.

Artificial life

To return to your own philosophy, can you explain what you mean by the concept artificial life and how it is different from the more well-known notion of artificial intelligence (AI)?

Artificial intelligence is not artificial life. The one who is using artificial life in his work, the physicist, well, we found out that he had a totally different understanding of it. For him artificial life meant a computer that could generate its own kids so to speak, that it could generate new programs. That is what we now expect of machine learning and these other notions of self-programming, and this is what they promised us already in the 90s and it never came, but now they are coming, and there is no question about it.

But that is not artificial life. It is not a life to see that a program can design a different offspring programme. That is just a language cover. Because "living" and "life" – at least in our understanding, and we have a right to our antropomorph understanding of the word – we cannot escape it, it is a necessity. It has to do with the fullness of body and mind in an environment. The exact definition of what is a human being can never be just you and me and social stuff. "I am Dresden! I am Germany! I am everything, you see? I am the stars! It all has to be me." If you reduce subjectivity to this little guy here. That is totally... In phenomenological terms there is not the evidence for it here. The evidence is that there are differences in between our different forms of living, in our ways of being human, but they are all together. There is a totality, and that is actually what is connected to the term *Gelassenheit* [releasement].

Gelassenheit means letting be *into*, and this refers to everything. This is just hard to understand if you, say, must be in my power. So the stars, say, are not in my power. There is the power of the stars. Right? Because if only one iota, one little piece was missing then the entire universe would collapse. And that is very true. Take computer systems now: they are so primitive compared with the natural systems of the universe. We're only coming very slowly to this idea where we need to make the world green so that we can... It's changed so little! It is who we really are.

And this paper I gave at the Schopenhauer and Nietzsche conference – my first conference – there I made the point that it was Nietzsche who understood that everything and nothing is exactly the same. They are just different ways of recognizing and getting into the mood of it. But it's just an indication that all this – what with Schopenhauer we can think of as the principle of individuation – this suffering in the world: it's not us. You suffer and I'm a different person. This is the *Principium Individuationis*, so that it cannot happen to me. But in fact it will happen to me in the next moment or some other time. So there is no barrier, no protection, out there. That was Schopenhauer's negative understanding. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche is someone who shows that this will-to-power, the aesthetic will-to-power, to generate an entire world, well, anything is possible. If you *can* make it, but we are also very *ohnmächtig*, powerless, so it's not really that we *can* make all that, just that we...

So what is power, Wolfgang?

The definition of power, as you know, is that things happen the way you want them to.

So the power lies in the *will*: the will of the human or the will of the subject?

Yes, but what is will? How do you get to will and from whom?

What about self-mastery? Is that will, or is it lack of will, or is it will not-to-will? How are we going to link the notions of mastery and power?

This is an illusion. It works as it does with the media: its secret task is to play all the stuff – the newspapers – I’m waiting here to read my newspaper, it’s totally senseless, it only shows that nearly every article has some connection to something I have experienced before, so it’s a kind of self-enjoyment, if you want. It is what [Gilles] Deleuze referred to as self-enjoyment: it has no value in itself. It is just the process of it. But what has a value? Life itself? Well, I have no doubt that life has no value whatsoever, because you should not get old. It’s the next worst kept secret, the “golden age”, it’s just... [laughs]

Is this not the ultimate nihilism, though, when you say that life has no value?

No value *as such*. When you say value it indicates that somebody values something, what I want or what I like.

What you said earlier was that when someone puts a gun to your head and asks you what is important to you, your answer would be *life*. Doesn’t your answer here mean that life has value for that person and that life is the ultimate value?

Yes, but it is a life in which I do not get food and I do not get a good girl, it has no... It is just life *as such*. It is not a *need* in there. And it’s actually something that you don’t have any power over anyway. You have only power over death. That is why death is the last frontier. The State will not allow you to kill yourself. Well, they allow you now but nobody is allowed to help you. They cannot give you the right medication and things like that. Hopefully in a few more years it will be over.

But on the other hand all my life I have held that suicide is the only pension plan for a philosopher, for a living philosopher. And now I face this possibility and I don’t like it. It was a stupid idea, actually! [laughs] One should rob a bank at an earlier stage, so that at least... [laughs] Well, it’s like with the case of my mother who is now 100 years old. Her body is so fragile and she needs the help of other people, for everything, etc. Is that really a life worth living? But she does it. And she does it by not thinking about it. She is living day by day. When she falls down she just automatically rehabilitates. They will not give any operations to the old. Even at my age the doctors will not do anything. They say, “You’re too old now to get anything.” Well, what I’m saying is that you cannot say that life is a value because it has no... You don’t know what it is, really, we breathe... but there are so many bad things all the time and more and more.

And you know the *Homo generator*, I promised to my son there would be a book out called *Homo generator* dedicated to him, and he has waited now 26 years for it. Well, this will happen. [laughs] This is something I will have to think more about: power and *Homo generator*. When we consider Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* and the *Muselmann* – what happens when we have nothing left and we are confined to naked life – it is actually funny that *Homo generator* and Agamben’s project were started at nearly the same time.⁸ We did not know about each other at the time.

Homo generator

It is almost the opposite of each other isn’t it?

Yes, *Homo generator* is our power to [resolve] whatever happens: we can get out of anything. We can start anew. It is about natality, in the sense Hannah Arendt gives to it. And mortality, that is the good Agamben’s way into the question. What is left from that...? Mortality and natality have a connection. There is no question about it. And the connection is that they might be interchangeable. Every natality is a mortality; it’s a going-down. What is not really a problem, in my understanding of *Gedinge* and fulfilling-itself: you never fulfil yourself without breakdowns and failures, etc., that is what happens mostly. As I said once it is not our failures that kill us; it’s our successes. But that was at the time when I was a young philosopher and I said, “OK, you have to change your lifestyle! You people have to change or humanity will go down! It will go down with our species!” And I found myself very powerful. I could

⁸ Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo sacer* series has been a remarkable contribution to philosophy since the first volume appeared in 1995. Agamben was an important philosophy lecturer with the European Graduate School during Schirmacher’s tenure there.

threaten death on our species. Nowadays I'm thinking, oh, my god, how ethnocentric have you been at the time? [laughs] That is one of the things I have to turn down in my book when I republish...

But again, going back to this question of need, the easy way out would be Schopenhauer's. And unfortunately the older I am the more I become touched by Schopenhauer. Life is not worth living. But he still lived on, so at least it was one philosopher who did not commit suicide, even though he had everything, all his understanding of suicide. But his point was in his *Ethics* that "I fight this. I fight this evil will. I fight [the idea] that life is not worth living until my last breath. Because if I would kill myself then I would agree with what I ethically think is wrong." *Ach so*, he is not agreeing with the survival structure of nature.

To talk about Schopenhauer, then, isn't he also saying that it's impossible to kill yourself, when he's saying that after you die what is left is what is good in you.

That is one of the misreadings [of his work].⁹ Well, Schopenhauer is not holding the view of the *Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, there is no *Unsterblichkeit*.

But the stars remain, the universe remains...

Yes, but in Schopenhauer nature is the worst thing in ethical terms. And that is an interesting point, because nature in many ways will be like the technology coming, the second nature. It has the same total indifference to any human interest or lifestyles, etc. Like nature [it is] totally indifferent. My point is that we are here; our sexual organs are in the middle of the world; we are only here to procreate: that is all. And that is why he said we should stop procreating. If we could we would do that, but we have so many idiots in Islam and they want more and more babies. And besides babies are so fun, you learn so much about the world from being with babies.

But we should not, it's a very cruel move, certainly from the perspective of philosophy, it's a very cruel move to bring another human being able to suffer into this world. But on the other hand, who says that suffering..., *nicht*, Schopenhauer says that luck is just a moment between two sufferings. But you can also say that suffering is just a moment between two lucks. You know that's the same structure. So many sayings, you know, so many girls you had. It went bad, but then you had one and it went well. This is a metaphor for everything. And the other [statement] is just exercise, so to speak, to learn that. That is, I think, the only proof for [the assertion that] life is not worth living would be AIDS. And that is in some kind of way a *Selbsmitleid*, you know.¹⁰ You are feeling sorry for yourself. You forget how many good years you had, *nicht*? I had 60 good years. The last 12 years in Thailand with my Thai girl, she was 40 years younger than I am. So it was a good time every time I was able to go there.

OK, I am not able to do it anymore. But should I say that therefore everything that was good before, that I enjoyed, was nothing? That is a very stupid idea, but it is a typical idea for humans. When they have had a relationship to somebody and then a divorce then everything was bad! They forget that they lived [many] years very happily, or most of the time [they were] happy with this girl. No, no! It was bad! How come? How did we lose our ability to judge fairly our own existence? That is the reason why we are always so upset about our failures and so happy about successes. In fact they both should be more viewed in the way of the Stoics. Well, Schopenhauer was against the Stoics. The Stoics were not what we believe nowadays. The Stoics believed in a cosmic system. They were calm because it was just fate, and so on. That is one easy way out.

But again, [with regard to] Heidegger on *die Geworfene* and *Wurf*; we are thrown into the world, and then *Entwurf* becomes our project. It was actually not so much a project as such, it was [merely an] interest. But the first part [of Heidegger's approach, that] we are thrown into the world; that is the part of total coincidence, *nicht*, if you are Rockefeller or a poor boy in Africa, it's totally a coincidence. And it's not that our project can make up for a bad start, [that is the case] only to a certain degree, and only to a very certain degree. And so many people kind of blew it, even when they had a good start. They hate themselves for being privileged.

⁹ Schirmacher is the President of the International Schopenhauer Association.

¹⁰ *Selbsmitleid*, self-pity.

But I was raised in the workers' and farmers' paradise of East Germany so I have never any feeling that I owe them anything. Like it was in the West, you know, in '68 and '69, the student revolution, the leaders were all bourgeois, rich kids, and they had a kind of bad feeling that the poor worker kids, etc., had not the same chances, and so they became communist or just a leftist liberal. I always understood that the farmers and workers and the functionaries could become the same bad guys when they came into power. So power corrupts. Still, the only power you have is your life power; it's your creative power. That's why the will-to-power in Nietzsche is not a political power. It's a creative power, because there you create – not from nothingness, but from the material at hand – in your life situation. You generate something. And also if it does not work you have to live this, you have to accept it.

That would be the wrong way to see it. That is what media tells us. But the secret task of media is to lie about this, because the entire thing is a total lie. It's not that certain things, that, OK, this young girl gets this prince or not, this [kind of] obvious lie, some as-such. Everything that happens in front of us is what life looks like. And we have to say that, actually, we are lucky that this is not the case.

Isn't that precisely what Slavoj Žižek talks about with his notion of "outsourcing"? Isn't this an "outsourced" life what the media lives for us? Isn't it that our lives are outsourced in this sense?

My point is exactly that – for [by] outsourcing... You outsource, for example, accounting, because we don't want to do it, it's easier this way, but we certainly expect that the person we outsource it to does it right. So in this sense media would have an expectation to outsource correctly what humanity is about. But that Žižek cannot mean. What he would mean is that we outsource it and then we open it up to all the distortions and all these ways we are made to look at things, you know. If we had kept it closer to our own interests we might have done a better job.

Could you also say that when you outsource it you can see it as an object in a way you couldn't prior to the moment of outsourcing – that it enables you to see a lie that was always there?

Žižek is a very fast thinker. He always finds another way to... I met him in New York and I did not see how he could get out of my critique. But he got out of it, and that was not very good. After that I stopped criticising him outside of Saas-Fee. [laughs] But of course at Saas-Fee I could always use the power of the director! OK, stop now; you talk too long, no discussion. Now, well, the distance that outsourcing allows also allows for critical review, only [it is required that] we don't get involved directly. We always try to lie to ourselves. So we have a better chance now to criticise it. But still there is the idea that, firstly, there *is* something we can outsource, *nicht*, that there is a true human life, an authentic human life which can be described and can be understood. And then this [life] will be [transferred into] a different medium – a kind of *mimesis*, of the Greek – in there and [so] it can be criticised. Because we haven't forgotten the lesson from Aristotle that language is understanding: it is my understanding. And it's Heidegger's understanding. Language, the word, is already an outsourcing. Take "chair": it's not the chair. It is the word and then we sit on something which is a chair. So language in itself is always already different from the phenomenon, the evidence. With phenomenology we also know that evidence is not so easy to find.

Heidegger's famous remark in *Being and Time* was that what we see at a first glance is not the phenomenon. That is why real phenomenological work is very long in explaining. It is actually something machines can do better. Do you know this anecdote with Husserl? Husserl came to his lecture, nicely dressed, a conservative, bourgeois guy. And then the lecturer [Husserl] says, "OK, what is the topic? What kind of topic do you want today?" So he asked them for the topic. And somebody said, "Wedding." And then Husserl started for 90 minutes to give a phenomenological description of wedding. And actually, it is very funny, he asked that this will be stored because anybody who ever wanted to know what a wedding is will just go there and read it. It's like the Google of its time, the Wikipedia or Google, they give you all the different kinds, and you didn't pay for it. So Husserl really believed that – well, I'm not saying that this is the end of it, there could be other guys coming and adding to it, because [the description becomes] more and more *differenziert*, *ach so* more complex in there – but if this is described correctly then this will stay on for eternity. There is no other way to call this wedding. And for them it was not just a word. It was a word in which all the evidence possible [was gathered, such] as with, for example, this chair: I cannot understand this chair in phenomenological terms, as evidence, without going around it and look at what's behind [it]. How does the chair

look from there? How is the chair used in a poem by Baudelaire? It is all part of the phenomenon of chair. And not to forget that chair has so many other meanings, like chair at a conference or some such thing.

So what I am saying is that language always outsources our evidence to the medium of words. And in this outsourcing there is certainly all the lies [that] can come in to it. You don't have the intention of truth, or at least for *aletheia*, the revealing and concealing. Well, not at the same time: you conceal and then you reveal, and then you conceal it again. It's a process. You wouldn't call it dialectical but it is nevertheless dialectical in many ways. It's only if you are a sophist, if your *doxa* is that you explain to people that this piece of chair is the best chair ever bought, and you say "Low prices! Great colour!" What has the colour to do with the quality of a chair? In a doxaic way, well, most of the media is like that. But again, this is just a second discussion about the media. In itself media has a task, a secret task. We have given media the ability to create a world which has something to do with us, and some things do not, some things are fantasies. The form in itself claims independence, but it is not true. It is in a disguise of being independent. And only in a few forms of it [is it so], in a very, very few forms, because art sometimes discloses truth, although it has no intention to, it just happens. And all the other people, anyone who has an interest, let alone financial interest, *anyone* with an interest in that are kind of distorting the evidence.

And with [regard to] Habermas' notion of biases; well, biases are our concrete ways of living our lives. If we don't have biases we would not be able to sit here because we would not know that there is not a way for heaven to open up and the end of the world will come, or will this door ever open, or will your train really come, or... It's not possible; it is absolutely not possible to live without these biases. The problem for Habermas, and he knows this very well, the real problem with biases is that you are not able to criticise biases if you get new evidence. So the problem is not the bias, but your inability or your unwillingness mostly to accept new evidence because you are so used to the other evidence that you are using. You like the other evidence. You like the idea that god exists. And even if the worst thing happens, if no-thing happens and god wouldn't accept... Well, you still find a way around [it], that you slept at the time, or that the devil did it, or that the poor boy couldn't do anything [about it], or it's because Lucifer is the most powerful agent, and so on. There are so many nice stories.

Ethics and character

Christians, they love Nietzsche. There is no better philosopher, because Nietzsche is the true..., well, he proclaims Antichrist. So what better philosopher can there be. And you have talked a little bit about Nietzsche's derision of compassion. And compassion in Schopenhauer you feel is misread by Nietzsche. Can you talk a little bit about...?

Ach so, firstly, what I said, well, [let's begin from] Nietzsche's attack on Plato's idea of truth, because [to Nietzsche the prevailing notion of] truth would not fit to the will-to-power, to the aesthetic will. The artist generates the world; there is no world as-such. There is just a world in my imagination, etc. And Nietzsche didn't do that because of spite, but only because he understood that this idea of truth was also the opening for so many forces. [This was so] because in the name of truth, and because of God having written the truth in the Bible, etc., the name of truth there oppressed and killed so many people. So it is much better to say there is no truth; there is only invention, because every invention could be changed, etc.

You know Nietzsche's ethics is an aristocratic ethics. It is an ethics I live by, but not because other people tell you. God is dead and there is nobody else to tell me what I should do so I have to find it myself.¹¹ Or as [Mitchell] Feigenbaum said so nicely, just don't do it. When they asked, "What kind of ethics do you have?" I [answered that I] have *this* ethics: "Just don't do it."

You prefer not to?

¹¹ Mitchell J. Feigenbaum was professor of physics at Cornell University from 1982 and an important contributor to chaos theory. To Schirmacher Feigenbaum provided insights into the possibilities and limitations of the science of physics. Initially invited to teach at Saas-Fee Feigenbaum's and Schirmacher's approaches to artificiality turned out not to be commensurable.

Yes, and I have no reason for that. I just don't do it. I just don't murder people or cheat people, I just don't do it. And this is actually so simple in the end. And do we need all these complicated stories, and these biases, and some situations, situation ethics, it might be good to cheat and things like that? It cannot work if it is not you. But if you are a cheat, a born cheat, if anyone is born a murderer or born a cheat, perhaps one per cent, then [they will do that].

But anyway, compassion, Nietzsche's compassion, and Schopenhauer's, also, Buddhist and Christian, they are kind of forms of this understanding that the other, well, you are me. There is no difference between us in suffering. In luck we are all different, but not in suffering. But the Christian, or the conservative, understanding is still that I am the priest, I am the better off. And out of compassion I help you. I am not looking at you as in I am the same poor swine as you are. No, I am better, and even in the very unlikely case that I am ending up in hard [conditions] – torture, [questions of] security – well, it's not so unlikely for a philosopher, well, this kind of... It gives you power. Because you can give other people gifts, you can keep them alive. You are the master even when you don't call yourself so. And if you have a religion behind you then you are full master. And this kind [of compassion] certainly Nietzsche was not happy with.

But for Schopenhauer it was totally different. An ethics based on "should" was a no-no for Schopenhauer. He does not say what you "should" do. Ethics describe what humans are *able* to do. Your ability: that was the main thing. And for Schopenhauer, for example, every person is born with a certain character. And we say how can that be, etc.? But he also said that you cannot know your character until your last breath, because it's happened quite a few times that a very stingy person on his death bed has given his money to somebody, [and] so has done something *out of* character. But in effect it was not out of character. It *was* his character! So it means that he had the *ability* to do that and you cannot find that out just by looking at the person or see what he had done until the end: only *then* can you make a judgement based on [his] deeds. As Sartre says, existence [comes] before essence.

But what really attracted me to all [these debates] about Schopenhauer was [this]: [Do] you know Agnes Heller? She was at the New School – a philosopher – at the time when I was there too, and also a student of [Georg] Lukács.¹² At the end of her life she turned to Kant and his morality. She gave a lecture at the New School and I got to make her angry. I said, "Agnes, you are at the East Village" – this was at the time when the East Village was so dangerous [that] one could never cross Avenue B because you get mugged or... – "and you are on Avenue B and you get mugged, then explain, please, to the mugger the categorical imperative." [laughs] No way that you can get out of it. But Schopenhauer gives you a chance, because for Schopenhauer compassion is something I *do not want*. It is kind of a power – the power of compassion – that overcomes me and let me do things I don't want. I don't want [to help] this old lady, but somehow I cannot [*but*] do it. I could [help] a younger person, maybe, but not at this moment... I understand this old lady, and my old lady and myself: we're all in the same shitty world in there. With concern to caring everything is the same in there. But there is a chance: it happens that you don't do things that you really want to do because of something in you that does not allow you. And this I kind of liked, certainly. It was nothing that you follow or that you were a nice person or something like that. It was an emotion, a psychological power, which really stopped you from doing it. And you don't know if five minutes later it would still work, but it happens. We have this in our lives sometimes which is the compassion you have. Just don't do it.

Cloning humans

Can we just end with a quote from Daodejing (Tao-te Ching): "The work is done, but how it was done no one knows. It is this that makes the power not cease to be."¹³ It is through this not-knowing how the work was done that the power persists?

Oh, you go back to the beginning. Yes, certainly Tao-te is very near *Gelassenheit*, and very near my other insight that it's not that we need to accomplish anything, because everything is already accomplished, and that's why we have no

¹² Agnes Heller became Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in 1986 after many years of studies and work under Georg Lukács at the University of Budapest, Hungary. Heller is mostly known for her contributions to Marxist philosophy, although her later work also includes affirmative views of neo-conservative positions. Her current writing encompasses Hegelian philosophy, ethics, and existentialism.

¹³ Adapted from James Legge's translation (in *The Sacred Books of China*, New York: 1891).

needs. We are like the Greek gods, everything is already there. Everything we pretend we need or imitate that we need is just for entertainment value. Even if people die, who cares? You have to die anyway. So, it's true that the work is done, but we don't know how, so we cannot re-construct it. Because the real problem of science is exactly this: what they want in terms of prognoses and what they can achieve by it, and what other people can prove by doing it again, and that's the same precise... How boring! You get the same results! OK, I admit that I don't want a philosopher operating on my brain. An instrumental minded person should do that. But when he is done with my brain, "Get out of my room here and bring in my friends so we can talk about it. Was it really necessary? Wouldn't it be easier just to sleep a bit earlier?" Ask philosophical questions!

I am not saying instrumental technology is superfluous. They are necessary. But Immanuel Kant referred to the horizon we still live within as something [that] is necessary but not enough. Necessity in itself is not enough. There has to be something more than that. And this *more* is not something you can quantify; you can't prospectively say that it will be like that, so you will be surprised by it.

And my other experience in this respect happened at the Polytechnic University [later merging into New York University] where I was International Director of the Philosophy and Technology Studies Centre in New York. There many professors got funded for years because of Reagan's stupid idea to shoot [down] every satellite. You remember there was a time when they were so fearful of the Russians or the Soviets – not drones at the times, it was satellites, etc. – that Reagan tried to get a protection against that. So many scientists turned in very nice proposals for funding to help in this. None of the scientists as far as I understood believed [in] it. Even among the directors everybody agreed that it was just a scam. But by doing it you allowed people to do work, to play, to be like kids, to have the best playthings, and [they would] not [get] fired; because they don't find anything.

That is actually something we philosophers of science never have to fear, because you always find something. It's just that it is not always what we are supposed to find. That again makes us dangerous because we cannot be controlled. [One] can only – and that is what the smart people do in science – *pretend* that [one] can be controlled. But [one] never can.

So everything that they promise, like "We never clone humans," will only be valid until it's possible. You know there is a well-known Chinese experiment, the sheep, which I called a world historical figure with Hegel: Dolly. Well, she died shortly afterwards, so it was just a possibility. Now they have done it with sheep and with other species, so it will not stop. It will come back, and all their fears [with regard to] how we can clone humans, and how we can clone... Well, these fears are totally unfounded, because every kick you generate, every act of sex, will be different. The question is why we should do that. Well, the point of cloning would be if humankind will be unable to procreate anymore, and that is a possibility. And another, more likely possibility is that the machines will not allow us to do something like that because they might just instead of kill us let us peter on so we can age and age and then only a few exemplars will be for watching in the zoo and to play with the apes there.

In so far as the idea of the *Ereignis* – the event – of technology is concerned there is actually a text of mine "From the phenomenon to the event of technology," which I gave as a lecture to the circle of philosophers of technology, including Feigenbaum in there, it was in 1981 I think.

But the point now would be since we are looking for another event, [namely] the event where the machines, the artificial intelligence, comes into its own, the event of the AI. And it's not the AI we know of now, it's not self-driving cars; it is the A-G-I, the Artificial *General* Intelligence. It is not a certain artificial intelligence which knows a certain field. It is an artificial intelligence which covers everything which can be intelligently known. And only this kind will be the real challenge of our time.

Gene technology was a challenge, there was an article with the title "The challenge of Gene Technology," which started by saying "The earth needs new human beings, yes, but who can we trust to give us the right human beings? The people in the labs? You must be kidding! Franz von Assisi, maybe. Someone like Feigenbaum, maybe." So I called it "The kiss of the mentor." I said [if] only they would agree to certain procedures... But it never happened. The agreement is now just how much money you can make of it. It is totally money based. The money is the real world now. There is no question about it.

So this idea that every human being because of being a human being get a certain amount of money for doing nothing, for just existing, and there are enough nice apartments in which you can survive, and if you want you can

maybe earn a little bit more by inventing something. People would exchange favours or things like that. I can see a [future] time, say fifty years, in which this would be a bridge from today's world to a world where it is very open whether humans have any place at all. The only place might be that we are discoverers of what we know already, because the ecological crisis has not stopped at all – which I already said twenty years ago – it will only go underground. Everything which is so obviously bad, like polluted rivers, and so on, we will clean this up. But what is really the ecological catastrophe will go on in other ways, invisible ways or nearly invisible ways. Nobody can stop this as long as it makes money. And every destroyer destroying things and coming up with fakes makes money. Trump is just a very good example of that. A fake being president [who] can send other people to die is really not a good sign for what kind of future humankind has, if it has any.

There I have this problem: why should I care? Hopefully I will find a way to die without pain. But I still have a son who has to live fifty years after me. And he might have a kid, probably, because they are still so used to that. There is still a two hundred year scope [where] I would like to have a world in which people I care about will like to live. But is it possible? A world in which the artificial general intelligence rules, not even rules, because they will not rule. The whole idea is [exactly] that: who rules? There will be made some programme that allows us to rule on, so that we just can do that. But it makes no difference whatsoever, because the machines do not rule. They function. Their only interest is actually to function. And for functioning you need to eliminate everything which is a threat to the function itself. Certainly it is a question of what makes more trouble, the human being or what else? There will be a long time – well, a hundred years or so – in which the trouble humans make are not outweighing, are not worse, than the trouble it is to get rid of the humans. And during that interim the poor humans living there will still have hope. Hope dies at last, the Bible said so. This will happen.

Hope will die at last.

Authors' contributions

This article was conceived as a cooperation between the authors. Schirmacher generously agreed to the interview, and has received a draft for approval.

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