

1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Godzinski, Ronald Jr. (2005) "(En)Framing Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2005

(En)Framing Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology

With a few possible exceptions,¹ Martin Heidegger is arguably one of the first philosophers to explicitly discuss the implications of a philosophy of technology. In fact, some have argued that the germ of Heidegger's critique of modern technology can be found in an inchoate form in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*.² Others think that it was not until a few decades after the publication of *Being and Time* that Heidegger was able to refine his project regarding the philosophy of technology. Many scholars contend that Heidegger's later works are actually more representative of the core of Heidegger's thought concerning the philosophy of technology. Yet the later works of Heidegger are not bereft of their own idiosyncrasies. For instance, even though Heidegger's references to technology are prolific, a fully systematized explication of his conception of technology cannot be located in any one particular work. Similarly, when we do see evidence of Heidegger philosophizing over technology, we find that his thoughts are typically abstruse when they are at their best, and when they are at their worst, they are virtually impenetrable.

Two of Heidegger's later essays, "The Question Concerning Technology"³ and "The Turning,"⁴ interpreted in conjunction with one another, embody the essence of his philosophy of technology. Heidegger intended both works to serve as phenomenological descriptions of the way *Dasein* comports itself towards technology. As phenomenological essays pertaining to Heidegger's understanding of technology, both are meant to be merely descriptive and should not be taken as prescriptions that advise us to act in one way or another.

Perhaps one of Heidegger's most celebrated and well-known essays, "The Question Concerning Technology," contains his critique of modern technology in addition to his views concerning the possibility for a genuine philosophy of technology. Even though Heidegger specifically addresses the true nature of technology within this essay, his ideas pertaining to a philosophy of technology are anything but prosaic. Heidegger is primarily interested in how we, as *Dasein*, can have a free relationship to technology:

We shall be questioning concerning *technology*, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it. The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology. When we can respond to this essence, we shall be able to experience the technological within its own bounds.⁵

The expression of *Dasein* choosing something freely does not adequately define a free relationship to technology, for it involves much more than a simple act of the will. Furthermore, Heidegger envisions a free relationship with modern technology as one that will require a completely different way of being in the world. If *Dasein* is able to have a free relationship to technology, then

Heidegger tells us that it will be one that is rooted in an entirely new “attitude.” Heidegger calls this new attitude or uniquely different way of being in the world, “releasement” [*Gelassenheit*].

In order to understand what this type of free relationship with modern technology entails, we must first understand the distinction between technology and the technological. Heidegger maintains that the essence of technology is not reducible to the technological.⁶ According to Heidegger, technology is distinct from what we do with tools, instruments, equipment, or the way of thinking about those things. Likewise, modern technology is not reducible to technological artifacts, devices, or the techniques that produce those things. Heidegger is very explicit about this reductionistic turn that others have taken. In “Overcoming Metaphysics,” Heidegger points out that technology can be contrasted with “the production and equipment of machines.”⁷ If this interpretation is correct, modern technology in essence is Heidegger’s designation for the way in which things give themselves in and through an epoch. Technology, or what also can be referred to as “technicity,” concerns itself with the ontological way in which things reveal themselves via a “sending” [*Geschicht*].

In spite of the demarcation between technology and the technological, Heidegger admits that there is still something which is “correct” about the traditional interpretation that has been ascribed to technology. The “manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve,”⁸ are all part and parcel of the traditional but truncated sense of the term, “technology.” What makes the standard or correct definition of technology fundamentally deficient with respect to our own epoch rests with the fact it stays within the mode of “presencing” and does not get to presencing itself—that is, Being as epochally given.

Heidegger recognizes a connection between the purely instrumental view of technology and the domination of nature. This particular association is identified in “The Question Concerning Technology,” where Heidegger says that as long as we perceive “technology as an instrument, we remain held fast in the will to master it.”⁹ A similar theme is taken up and examined by Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking?*¹⁰ Within this text, Heidegger pronounces that Nietzsche’s overman represents the embodiment of pure technological being, insofar as the overman’s will is a will that strives to dominate and master anything that is other.¹¹ Heidegger feels that the overman is not an anomalous phenomenon in the modern technological age. All those who live under the sway of modern technology have to confront this reality. Within the periphery of the epoch of modern technology, “the only thing we have left is purely technological relationships.”¹²

Despite this pessimistic tone, Heidegger believes that we need to understand the correct or standard definition of technology before we can grasp the “true” definition of technology.¹³ Before we make our way to the true definition of technology however, Heidegger says that we must understand modern technology from a different perspective that is not constituted by straight-line instrumentalism. In this sense, modern technology is Janus-faced. On the one hand, Heidegger sees modern technology as a “challenging” [*Herausfordern*]. As a challenging, modern technology “puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such.”¹⁴ On the other hand, Heidegger also views modern technology as a form of revealing. Accordingly, in and through its revealing, modern technology has a tendency to unlock, transform, store, and

distribute the resources that nature has to offer.¹⁵ To put it differently, modern technology has a proclivity to treat nature as standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. Heidegger quickly points out that man, *Dasein*, is never transformed into mere standing-reserve.

Throughout “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger provides examples that expose the Janus-faced character of modern technology, contrasting the meaning of sophisticated modern technological devices with that of older, more primitive ones not completely under the epochal sway of modern technology. He illustrates how modern technology sets itself apart from more primitive technological devices. In one instance, Heidegger compares the hydroelectric power plant on the Rhine River with the sawmill in a secluded valley of the Black Forest.¹⁶ This illustration demonstrates how each technological device has its own form of revealing that is peculiar to the epoch in which it was originally given. Since the old sawmill’s meaning was originally constituted by a matrix of relationships that were contextually grounded in a different epoch, the old sawmill cannot be given in the same way that the hydroelectric plant is given under the dominion of modern technology. Subsequently, they are not commensurate in what they reveal as well. This happens to be the case when all older and more primitive technological devices are compared with more sophisticated and modern technological devices.

In a related vein, the previous claim that everything within the natural world gives itself over to us, as standing-reserve is, for Heidegger, a phenomenological claim. As a purely phenomenological claim, Heidegger is not making an evaluative assertion about the status of modern technology and our comportment toward things that are treated as standing-reserve. Perhaps following the regressive method that Husserl used in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Heidegger presents us with a purely descriptive account of modern technology that seems to be value neutral. In truth, he acknowledges that technology is not intrinsically dangerous or evil.¹⁷ Even Heidegger’s infamous “Memorial Address”¹⁸ supports this idea:

For all of us, the arrangements, devices, and machinery of technology are to a greater or lesser extent indispensable. It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil.¹⁹

When understood within this particular context, Heidegger is neither praising nor demonizing modern technology. Of course the same would have to be said about technological objects that were purported to be intrinsically good, as well. Hence, the potential value that any technical device might have would be contingent upon its context of use. From a Heideggerian standpoint, it would be inappropriate to claim that any technical device is intrinsically good or evil.²⁰

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger makes the phenomenological observation that we master nature because we respond to nature’s call to requisition it. We do this primarily because this is how we have been *called* by Being. We use things as standing-reserve since they give themselves as standing-reserve—everything gives itself to be used. Even when we are not openly trying to master nature, Heidegger would nonetheless contend that we are still responding to its call. The revealing is not something that we do strictly on our own accord, without first hearing nature’s call. In this sense, we cannot be held accountable for modern technology, since this is something that just happens in the context of western culture:

When man...reveals that which presences, he merely responds to the call of unconcealment even when he contradicts it. Thus when man, investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve. Modern technology as an ordering revealing is, then, no merely human doing.²¹

The challenge which directs us to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve, is nothing other than what Heidegger calls “enframing” [*Gestell*].²² Enframing, or *Gestell*, is the essence of modern technology. From Heidegger’s perspective, enframing is the way in which truth reveals itself as standing-reserve. We simply cannot avoid its influence or sway. One is already in a relationship with it, so it is not a matter of whether or not I will respond to it. Rather, it is a matter of *how* I will respond to it. More importantly, our response to the challenge that enframing emits, is neither completely predetermined nor free.

Heidegger recognizes that an authentic notion of freedom will be open to the essencing of technology. Thus, a genuine and free relationship to technology will be one that is open to the essencing of technology. This type of openness to the presencing of technology is called *Gelassenheit*, or releasement:

We can use technical devices, and yet with the proper use also keep ourselves so free of them, that we may let go of them at any time.... We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature.... I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses “yes” and at the same time “no,” by an old word, *releasement toward things*.²³

In the movement of *Gelassenheit*, one enters into a free relationship with technology which is not founded upon domination and mastery.²⁴ On the contrary, an authentic relationship to technology is one that is simply beyond our control.²⁵ Paradoxically, a relationship which is exemplified by releasement continually uses things as standing-reserve, while avoiding the danger of being taken as standing-reserve, although Heidegger certainly keeps a watchful eye out for the ultimate danger that rests within the ordering of standing-reserve. That is, if we, ourselves, get ordered or dominated by the things that we in turn are trying to order and dominate, then we will encounter the danger, to the extent that the sending or presencing of Being gets closed off and concealed from us.²⁶

Within the enframing lies both the danger and saving power. Near the end of “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger cites Hölderlin:

But where danger is, grows
The saving power also.²⁷

Once again, we encounter the Janus-faced nature of technology. It is not until “The Turning” that Heidegger gets a chance to analyze and fully unpack the contents of this theme.

“The Turning” serves as a complementary philosophical piece to “The Question Concerning Technology.” Unlike “The Question Concerning Technology” which begins with the technological

and moves to technology, it starts with technology or technicity and finishes up with the technological. Even though both essays touch on similar themes, the primary point where both essays converge can be found in Heidegger's treatment of enframing [*Gestell*]. For instance, the last pages in "The Question Concerning Technology," dealt with the mystery of *Gestell* in terms of its danger and saving power. It is precisely this same theme (The danger is the saving power.) that Heidegger chooses to reexamine in "The Turning." In effect, Heidegger is continuing right where he left off in the "The Question Concerning Technology."

In Heidegger's phenomenological description of enframing, he points out that there is a peculiar phenomenon that takes place within the movement of enframing or *Gestell*. More specifically, he maintains that a double movement of concealment can be observed within the overall movement of enframing. Heidegger says that there is a concealment that is intrinsic to the very nature of Being itself. Being conceals itself in order to presence. Similarly, nothing would be able to come to presence without this concealment. In the process of presencing or coming to be, things necessarily conceal themselves. Furthermore, in order for something to come to be, it must hold itself back, hence the concealment. This first type of concealment is eidetic or essential to the very movement of presencing itself and thus, cannot be undone.

Heidegger discusses a second type of concealment that is not an inevitable consequence of enframing. Heidegger informs us that the second concealment is nothing more than the concealing of the first concealment. Accordingly, the second type of concealment occurs when we take a thing for granted and presuppose its meaning and existence, rather than seeing it as a result of the movement of presencing:

The coming to presence of Enframing is the danger. As the danger, Being turns about into the oblivion of its coming to presence, turns away from this coming to presence, and in that way simultaneously turns counter to the truth of its coming to presence. In the danger there holds sway this turning about not yet thought on.²⁸

The process of the concealing of concealment is rooted in the experience of taking things as standing-reserve or utility. In "The Question Concerning Technology" Heidegger phrases it as "the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve."²⁹ In contrast to the first type of concealment that simply cannot be undone, the second kind of concealment can be undone. Even if we are able to undo the second form of concealment, however, the first always remains. Neither act of concealment is a human action. In fact, the second kind of concealing (the concealing of the concealment) is merely our response to the first type of concealment, insofar as Being gives itself as enframing.

The danger and the saving power are both contained within enframing. Both are two different moments of the same process. Nevertheless, the primary danger that Heidegger perceives relative to enframing is that the first concealment, which is inherent to Being, will be concealed from us. This can happen when we do not see being as presencing or a sending. The danger also arises when we become dominated or ruled by the technological while being concerned with it. Furthermore, it can occur in those situations where we treat the presencing of Being simply as standing-reserve, raw material, or utility. Yet in spite of these problems, Heidegger points to the saving power that is also contained within the danger.

The saving power to which Heidegger refers can be understood from several different, albeit related, perspectives. The saving power can be viewed as that which genuinely enables us to find a passage out of the second form of concealment back to the first. The unconcealment of the concealing of the concealment is none other than *Gelassenheit*. Releasement allows us to see Being as a sending while living with technicity. Heidegger concludes that the saving power also resides in Being's ability to send itself differently. In order for this to become a real possibility, Heidegger thinks that we must act like "shepherds" and actively prepare the way for a new sending.

Only when man, as the shepherd of Being, attends upon the truth of Being can he expect an arrival of a destining of Being and not sink to the level of a mere wanting to know.³⁰

When Heidegger was asked if he knew of a possible solution to the potential threat that modern technology presented, he responded by saying; "I know of no paths to the immediate transformation of the present situation of the world, assuming that such a thing is humanly possible at all."³¹ In terms of everyday, concrete experience, Heidegger's idea of technology appears to remain silent. Could this be due, in part, to Heidegger emphasizing the ontological aspects of technology over and against the ontic ones? Perhaps the ontological characteristics that are part and parcel to the movement of modern technology need to be related more to lived experience and the life-world in order to make Heidegger's concept more meaningful—at least in terms of its link with political, social, and environmental realities. At any rate, this is where Heidegger's philosophy of technology might benefit from the ways in which pragmatism has dealt with these very problems. Until Heidegger's project can extend itself and make sense of everyday technological experience, it may only have the status of a metaphysical exercise.

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Notes

1. In some sense, it is correct to say that Ernst Kapp, John Dewey, and Ernst Jünger were some of the first philosophers which inquired into the nature and techniques associated with technology. However, it might be said that the effects of Heidegger's writings on the subject of technology influenced a greater number of people in the 20th century.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962).
3. Martin Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). Cited hereafter as *QCT*.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-49.
5. *QCT*, pp. 3-4.
6. *QCT*, p. 4. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us: Der Spiegel's Interview with Martin Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 20 (1976), no. 4, p. 276. The latter will be cited from this point on as *Der Spiegel*.

7. Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 93.
8. *QCT*, p. 4.
9. *QCT*, p. 32.
10. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray and F. Wieck (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-87.
12. *Der Spiegel*, p. 277.
13. *QCT*, p. 6.
14. *QCT*, p. 14.
15. *QCT*, p. 17.
16. *QCT*, pp. 5 and 16.
17. *QCT*, p. 28.
18. Martin Heidegger, in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). Hereafter cited as DOT.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
20. This is an important point that many pragmatic thinkers have raised. For an excellent pragmatic account of this issue, see Larry Hickman, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Hereafter referred to as *PTTC*.
21. *QCT*, p. 19.
22. See *QCT*; footnote 17, p. 19 for a detailed account of Gestell.
23. *DOT*, p. 54.
24. Cf. *Der Spiegel*, p. 276.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 278. Cf. Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 210.
26. Heidegger believes that it poses an even greater threat than weapons of mass destruction. Cf. *QCT*, p. 28 and *Der Spiegel*, p. 277.

27. *QCT*, pp. 28 & 34.

28. *QCT*, p. 41. Cf. *QCT*, p. 36.

29. *QCT*, p. 23.

30. *QCT*, p. 42. The shepherding of being, Dasein's activity of preparing for the possibility of a new sending of being, is associated with what Heidegger calls the "four-fold." Heidegger's cryptic treatment of the four-fold can be found in the following essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 145-161. Cited hereafter as PLT.

31. *Der Spiegel* 280.

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