
Questioning Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers over the years have pondered and continue to reflect on the meaning of technology. However, one can hardly engage in a philosophical reflection on the relationship between the human person and technology without giving a considerable attention to the classic philosophical reflection by Martin Heidegger on technological development. This paper, therefore, focuses on his philosophy of technology, which is his critique of technology, in precisely the way he calls our attention to the ontological and social crisis brought about by modern technology's new, albeit distorting, ways of ordering the world and hence also the reorganization of our cognitive perception of reality. He, seeing the rise of modern technology's dominance as tantamount to the sundering of man's essential relation to being, undertook a questioning of technology in order to trace back a more primary meaning that has

been lost and forgotten in technological modernity; while focusing on his lecture note on: The Question Concerning Technology, this paper would go further to question his questioning of technology. This critique notwithstanding, his concept of being, which is at the heart of his philosophy, the relationship between his concept of being and technology, and critique of technology would be discussed so as to position this paper for a better questioning of his questioning of technology. This paper has discovered that his work draws humanity's attention to is the fact that effort must be made to safeguard the dignity and integrity of the human person. Historically, he is among the first to raise technology to a central concern or philosophy and to see to it a genuine ontological issue.

INTRODUCTION

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of philosophy reveals a couple of responses to the questions: is technology good or calamitous? Do we control the development of technology or does it control us? Responses to these questions have emerged from the content of the school of thought that the particular responding philosopher belongs. Various perspectives have emerged from the works of recent figures who have pondered on the meaning of technology, figures like Jean Baudrillard, Andrew Feenberg, Jacques Derrida, Paul Virilio, Sherry Turkle, among others. However, one can hardly engage in a philosophical reflection on the relationship between the human person and technology without giving a considerable attention to the classic

philosophical reflection by Martin Heidegger¹ on technological development.

Heidegger's philosophy of technology is a critique in precisely the way he calls our attention to the ontological and social crisis brought about by modern technology's new, albeit distorting, ways of ordering the world and hence also the reorganization of our cognitive perception of reality. Seeing the rise of modern technology's dominance as tantamount to the sundering of man's essential relation to being, Heidegger undertakes a questioning of technology in order to trace back a more primary meaning that has been lost and forgotten in technological modernity. The present work on Heidegger's philosophy of technology is based on his lecture titled: *The Question Concerning*

¹ Heidegger was perhaps the most decisive philosopher of the twentieth century. He was born on September 26, 1889 in Messkirch in south-west Germany to a Catholic family. His father worked as sexton in the local church. In 1903 he went to the high school in Konstanz and in 1909, after completing the high school, he became a Jesuit novice, but was discharged within two weeks for health reasons. He then entered Freiburg University, where he studied theology. However, Heidegger left the seminary in 1911. It was also at that time that he first became influenced by Edmund Husserl. In 1913 he completed a doctorate in philosophy. The outbreak of the First World War interrupted Heidegger's academic career briefly. He was conscripted into the army, but was discharged after two months because of health reasons. His thesis, *Duns Scotus's Doctrine of Categories and Meaning*, was completed in 1915, and in the same year he was appointed lecturer. He taught mostly courses in Aristotelian and scholastic philosophy, and regarded himself as standing in the service of the Catholic world-view. In 1916, Heidegger became a junior colleague of Edmund Husserl when the latter joined the Freiburg faculty. His career was again interrupted by military service in 1918. He served for the last ten months of the war, the last three of those in a meteorological unit on the western front. Within a few weeks of his return to Freiburg, he announced his break with the "system of Catholicism" (January 9, 1919), got appointed as Husserl's assistant (January 21, 1919), and began lecturing in a new, insightful way (February 7, 1919). In 1923, with the support of Paul Natorp, Heidegger was appointed associate professor at Marburg University. In September 1930, Heidegger joined Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). On April 21, 1933, he was elected rector of the University of Freiburg by the faculty. He came under attack of Ernst Krieck, semi-official Nazi philosopher. For some time he was under the surveillance of the Gestapo. His final humiliation came in 1944, when he was declared the most "expendable" member of the faculty and sent to the Rhine to dig trenches. Following Germany's defeat in the Second World War, Heidegger was accused of Nazi sympathies. He was forbidden to teach and in 1946 was dismissed from his chair of philosophy. The ban was lifted in 1949. During the last three decades of his life, from the mid 1940s to the mid 1970s, Heidegger wrote and published much. Heidegger died on May 26, 1976, and was buried in the churchyard in Messkirch.

Technology. In his lecture paper, he sets out to raise questions about 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.*²

From the foregoing, the primary concern of Heidegger is how the human person can have a free relationship with technology and not to condemn technology³. He writes further:

*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.*⁴

Balancing his critique of technology further, Heidegger thinks that there is the possibility of the use of technology in such a way that it would further the being of man:

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

² Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. Trans. William Lovitt, Basic Writings. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 3-4

³ Ronald Godzinski, *Enframing Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. Essays in Philosophy. Vol. 6. Issue. 1. The Philosophy of Technology, P. 1

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*. Trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 53.

“yes” and at the same time “no,” by an old word,
releasement toward things.⁵

This work will begin by giving attention to the main thrust of his philosophy, which is the study of being. This is necessary as it is the platform from which his major thoughts emerged. This would be followed by the relationship between being and technology, his concept of technology and his critique of modern technology. These notwithstanding, who is Martin Heidegger?

BEING AND THE DIMENSIONS OF HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY

Martin Heidegger had two main philosophical obsessions: the distinction between Being and beings, and the nature of Truth. He has in fact been described as the philosopher of being with his *magnus opus* being *Being and Time*⁶. When philosophers try to figure out what really exists (God? matter? numbers?), Heidegger thinks they have forgotten a question that really should come first: what is it to exist? Thus, one theme which persists in both early and later works of Heidegger is the idea of being and the failure of western philosophy to “think” the ontological difference between beings and being⁷.

It is, therefore, not surprising that throughout his career as a philosopher, Heidegger probed into the question of the meaning of being. It is from his concept of being that his other major ideas flow—his idea of being is, therefore, a binding theme that unites all his thought. Thus, for a better understanding of his perspective on technological development, it is fundamental to study his philosophy of being. To the question, what is being? Heidegger opines that being is

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 54.

⁶ Eric Scrivner, *Technological criticism: Heidegger and enframing*. Retrieved 27/4/17 from <http://etscrivner.github.io/posts/2014/02/technological-criticism-heidegger>.

⁷ Michael J. Quirk, *Martin Heidegger, Beings, Being and Truth*. In Philosophy Archives. Retrieved 27/4/17 from http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/quirk_heidegger2.pdf.

not an entity. It is not this or that object, nor is it a concept or a specific event. Rather, it is the “unfolding” of things around us, and more importantly, it is also the “unfolding” that happens in our very lives⁸. His sense of being here does not denote an entity or an object or a person, but a happening or an “unfolding” of some sort. Being then is primarily a “process” as linguistically denoted by its verb-like usage. In fact, *Being* is also expressed by the infinitive verb “to be.” He thinks that we can only understand this *Being* as “unfolding” through *beings* as “entities” because *Being* happens in *beings*. The process of unfolding transpires in the existence of beings, as when flowers bloom and *become* the flowers they ought to be, or when a pony grows into a strong stallion and *become* the horse it ought to be⁹. Every entity participates in this unfolding process (*Being*) of reality.

Heidegger elaborates further that it is through the being (second sense) called man that *Being* sheds its light. It is through man that reality is revealed in the unfolding process of Being. The key word to understand what Heidegger means here is the word “OPENNESS.” Man is said to be placed in the center of this Openness known as the world. Heidegger writes: “Being is unavoidable for man, so that he- himself a being- resides in the openings of beings, comports towards them, and holds onto them”¹⁰. Through man, the unfolding process comes into play. He discovers objects of nature, names them, elaborates them, makes poems and songs about them, and brings them forth into the light of knowingness. What man does, his very existence and connection to things, is itself a process of unfolding. In his existence, *Being* comes into play¹¹. If in man the unfolding process of reality comes into play,

⁸ Michael J. M. Tamayao, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. In Law, Politics and Philosophy. Retrieved 27/4/17 from <https://tamayaosbc.wordpress.com/2008/02/10/heidegger%E2%80%99s-philosophy-of-technology>.

⁹ Michael J. M. Tamayao, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. In Law, Politics and Philosophy.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*. London: Continuum, 2006, p. 69

¹¹ Michael J. M. Tamayao, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. In Law, Politics and Philosophy.

then the answer to the question of the meaning of Being must, therefore, be found in the very existence of man. And this is precisely what Heidegger took as the course for his thinking. The question of the meaning of Being is also the question of the existence of man. Being and man are always interconnected¹².

THE NEXUS BETWEEN BEING AND TECHNOLOGY IN HEIDEGGER

Heidegger understands the question concerning technology as essentially linked to the question of being. This explains why the question of being was treated before the idea of technology in Heidegger. Technology, according to Heidegger, points to something essential about the constitution of our ontology, that is, our way of being-in-the-world. What compelled him to write on technology lies in his observation that “everywhere, man remains unfree and chained to technology,”¹³ a situation in which the more technology advances itself the more it “threatens to slip from human control”¹⁴. This adversely has affected the ordering of the world- in fact, disordering the world. As a result, a questioning of technology became necessary and urgent for Heidegger as modern technology has brought and continues to bring with it a new way of ordering the world, which he saw as contaminating man’s authentic sense of being, thus, signaling a certain crisis at bay in European industrial modernity. In responding to this crisis, Heidegger writes the work on *The Question Concerning Technology*.

HEIDEGGER’S CONCEPT OF TECHNOLOGY

The word “technology” stems from the Greek *techné*, which designates “skill,” “art,” and “craft,” a mode of doing or making. It is in this spirit that Plato understood politics as fundamentally belonging to the domain

¹² Michael J. M. Tamayao, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Technology*. In Law, Politics and Philosophy.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. Trans. William Lovitt, Basic Writings. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 287

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 289

of *techné*, politics as first and foremost a political skill to be learned, an art or, better yet, a kind of technology of the *polis*¹⁵. *Techné* in the original Greek usage refers to both the skill or power of doing/making as well as that which is performed, produced, or fabricated—in other words, *techné* as designating both art and artifice. From this perspective, *techné* (art/artifice) is opposed to *physis* (nature), most fundamentally in terms of causality. On the one hand, the organic forms of nature are self-developing in the sense that they exhibit the principle of change within themselves (*physis* as the “arising out of something from itself,” a natural self-genesis). *Techné*, on the other hand, implies a mediation by an external agent (Reason) to an object in order to bring about change in it, which means that the principle of change is here foreign to the object¹⁶.

The above perspective is at the base of our common understanding of technology, defined minimally as **the human activity of furnishing means to effect a desired end**. Thus, a bridge can be said to be a thing of technology because, as a product and performance of man’s dealings with *physis* through *techné*, nature by art, the bridge is the materialization or actualization of an intended, desired end: namely, the enabling of connection and transportation across discontinuous spaces¹⁷. Thus Heidegger writes that:

*The manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the [social] needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is.*¹⁸

However, in relation to his concept of being, Heidegger goes beyond the colloquial understanding of technology as availing means for an

¹⁵ Paul Nadal, *Heidegger's critique of modern technology: On "The question concerning technology"*. Retrieved 27/4/17 from

<https://belate.wordpress.com/2010/07/12/heidegger-modern-technology>.

¹⁶ Paul Nadal, *Heidegger's critique of modern technology: On "The question concerning technology"*.

¹⁷ Jean-Luc nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 118..

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 288

end, of man's transactions with nature, the merely **instrumental and anthropological definition of technology**. He expands the concept of technology to encompass *poiesis* (poetry) and *episteme* (knowledge or science), Greek words that belong to the domain of revealing (*aletheia*) and, hence, have something to do with engendering and truth¹⁹. In doing so, Heidegger moves beyond the initial meaning of *techné* as making. Heidegger holds this position because, first, *techné* is related to *poiesis* because *before* it is a making, it is a bringing-forth. *Poiesis*, the Greek word from which we get the word poetry, names that which brings-something-forth into presence, or that which renders the potentiality of the not-yet into explicit actuality. Hence, any activity or action which is the cause of a thing in the sense of bringing-something into presence belongs to *poiesis*. Second, *techné-as-poiesis* is linked to *episteme* (knowledge/science) not only because every rational design is enabled by a certain knowledge, but also because what is brought-forth, what is disclosed, is a truth²⁰.

So, to return to our example, a bridge is a kind of *poiesis* because it is a bringing-forth of man's artificial fabrications of nature (*physis*), in which the materialization of ends embodied in the finished bridge displays the truth of man's rational power. **Thus, stitching together *techné*, *poiesis* and *episteme*, that is to say, linking the power of making (*techné*) as primarily a mode of bringing-forth (*poiesis*), in which what is revealed is truth (*episteme*), Heidegger takes us away from the conventional and instrumentalist definition of technology as "a means to an end" toward an idea of technology as an originary form of truth-revealing, a disclosing of worlds, hence, a form of worlding.** If we follow Heidegger's reformulation of technology as a mode of revealing (*aletheia*), technology, in its essence, can be said to be *poetic* because it is a bringing-forth, whose causality, like poetry,

¹⁹ Paul Nadal, *Heidegger's critique of modern technology: On "The question concerning technology"*.

²⁰ Paul Nadal, *Heidegger's critique of modern technology: On "The question concerning technology"*.

“let[s] what is not yet present [to] arrive into presencing,” into the order of the presence or the real²¹. This is what constitutes the original, essential meaning of technology²². If I understand Heidegger correctly, the essence of technology, then, is the poetic process of bringing something forth into presence and, as a mode of revealing. Now, in its modality as revealing, the essence of technology is what Heidegger calls “enframing”- Ge-stell. But, what is important is that the fundamental specificity of technology in Heidegger – a mode of revealing as enframing which pulls together techné, poiesis, and episteme – is nothing technological, it does not belong to the domain of the machine or the mechanical. Rather, “enframing” names the fundamental, ontological process of “revealing.” Hence, “to enframe” refers to the process of an “opening up” as a “gathering together of that setting-upon that sets-up man, that challenges him forth, to reveal to himself the real”²³. **Enframing is not a tool or an apparatus, but (and this is the crucial point in Heidegger’s argument) the very condition of possibility for the truth of the real to be revealed, poetically, to man**²⁴.

HEIDEGGER’S CRITIQUE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Heidegger’s argument against modern technology is that it is not poetic, and thus, does not belong to the essence of technology as a bringing-forth and revealing of a world. And this is precisely what is dangerous about it. The poetry of *techné-as-poiesis* is denied for a certain positivism or scientism. Realities that do not conform to the standard of calculability and utility are looked upon with suspicion, and addressed as mere myth or superstition²⁵. Modern technology does not

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 293

²² Paul Nadal, *Heidegger’s critique of modern technology: On “The question concerning technology”*.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 302

²⁴ Paul Nadal, *Heidegger’s critique of modern technology: On “The question concerning technology”*.

²⁵ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p.3.

share the essence of technology because it is a different kind of truth-revealing: where the original essence of technology is the poetic revealing of bringing-something-forth, in modern technology the kind of revealing is what Heidegger describes as a “challenging” [*Herausfordern*] that “puts to nature an unreasonable demand that it supply energy, which can [then] be extracted and stored” for man’s purposes²⁶.

*The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanised food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be released either for destruction or for peaceful use.*²⁷

While it is true that modern technology is also a kind of “enframing,” it is an enframing that enframes nature only in order to capture it, that is to say, not as the occasion for the truth of being to disclose itself, but nature disclosed merely as a valuable material resource to be extracted, expropriated, and used-up for whatever man desires or wills of it. Under conditions of modern technology, “the earth,” as Heidegger notes, “reveals itself as [only] a coal mining district, [its] soil as a mineral deposit”²⁸. Heidegger writes:

The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 296

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 15

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 296

*the sense of a challenging-forth. Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing that dominate the age of technological modernity.*²⁹

The essence of technology as an ontological mode of revealing and bringing-forth truth is thus perverted in modern technology. Rather than reveal, therefore, modern technology “conceals a former way of revealing”. It “blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth”³⁰. The essence of technology as enframing transmogrifies in European modernity precisely as “*technological* enframing,” an enframing that reduces the originary process of revealing and the organic power bringing-forth (*poiesis*) to mere instrumental ends. That is to say, “technological enframing” in modern technology reveals the world only insofar as it reveals the world as an energy resource, a thing to be used, what Heidegger describes as a “**standing-reserve.**” In the mechanization and industrialization of everyday life, reality becomes technologically enframed as a standing-reserve, which for Heidegger denies man to “enter into a more original revealing...to experience the call of a more primal truth”³¹.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Martin Heidegger was perhaps the most divisive philosopher of the twentieth century. Many hold him to be the most original and important thinker of his era. Some scholars describe him as a “prophet. Others spurn him as an obscurantist and a charlatan, while still others see his

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 297-298

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 309

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. p. 309

reprehensible affiliation with the Nazis as a reason to ignore or reject his thinking altogether. These notwithstanding, Heidegger's undoubted influence on contemporary philosophy and his unique insight into the place of technology in modern life make him a thinker worthy of careful study. His work on technology is exhilarating and the single most influential position in the field³²; as there are only a few philosophers who can make this quality of thinking as palpable as Heidegger. He is the pioneer philosopher in the list of the few philosophers who have taken the issue of technology seriously. He is among the first to raise technology to a central concern of philosophy and to see to it a genuine ontological issue³³.

As a prophet, Heidegger observed truly that because of man's arrogance, nature is on the verge of fighting back. His understanding of technology as revealing rather than an instrument for exploitation is very instructive. Man thinks he knows how nature works and tends to hasten or "expedite" its processes. He demands too much from it and in turn disrupts its natural flow. Nature is beyond our control. Its truth is beyond our grips. And if we ever try to dominate it, nature will surely revolt against us in a very humbling manner³⁴. The present experience as regards climate change affirms the perspective of Heidegger that nature would soon revolt against us in a humbling manner.

In Heidegger, we see a philosopher who emphasizes that with the advancement of technology an appreciation and celebration of being must not be lost. There are certain qualities technology allows the human race to enjoy but these must not be allowed to take attention and importance away from what makes us human. Technology has intelligence but no heart and intelligence without heart possesses the

³² Robert Scharff and Val Dusek, *Heidegger on Technology*. In Robert Scharff and Val Dusek (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing, London. p. 247.

³³ Don Ihde, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. In Robert Scharff and VI Dusek (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing, London. p. 282.

³⁴ Michael J. M. Tamayao, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Technology*. In Law, Politics and Philosophy.

potential to create a manifestation of unrealistic satisfaction and inhuman goals. For instance, a computer game is not a human person, and must not be misled to fulfill satisfaction within the human that is believed to be more important than the qualities of the beauty in the senses a human possesses; sight, touch, smell and hearing are inherent to all forms of life but not technology.

Notwithstanding Heidegger's ideas on technology which can be considered great, it is observable that while Heidegger has criticized technology, he did not present any concrete sense on how social and political change in a technological world can be achieved. There was no sociopolitical program offered by him in spite of his insightful technological excess³⁵. His ideas can be so metaphysical and abstract to the point that they lack application in concrete historical circumstances. After his insightful advice on technological excesses, all that he could say is that we should liberate ourselves from technological engagements.

More so, in the light of recent developments in technology as seen in smart phones, ipads, tablets, one would wonder if Heidegger was entirely right to consider technology in terms of exploitation?³⁶ Not every dimension of technological advancement can be considered exploitation. Technological development has advanced the human person to a great extent. In Heidegger's critique of technology one senses a romantic longing for a pre-technological age³⁷, a longing which, while not straightforwardly technophobic, is implicit in his discussion on modern technology³⁸. Heidegger seems to have studied

³⁵ Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Evaluation of Heidegger and Borgman*. In Robert Scharff and Val Dusek (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing. London. p. 230.

³⁶ Bert Olivier, *Was Heidegger right about technology?* In Thought Leader. Retrieved 27/4/17 from <http://thoughtleader.co.za/bertolivier/2013/07/24/was-heidegger-right-about-technology>.

³⁷ Ihde, Don, 'Deromanticizing Heidegger'. In *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1993, p.40.

³⁸ Dreyfus, Hubert, 'Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relation to Technology' In Feenberg, Andrew & Alastair Hannay. *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1995, p.20.

technology simply from a non-empirical viewpoint, and seem to have taken an unjustified moral stand on modern technology.

This work has studied the perspective of Martin Heidegger on technology. His work cannot be ignored in any significant discourse on the relationship between the human person and technology. No matter how abstract his thoughts might be considered to be, if it is put into proper consideration in our reflection on technological progress, it would save humanity from the impending danger signaling in the relationship between human beings and technological development. In the face of advancements in the modern world, the primary attention Heidegger draws humanity to is the fact that effort must be made to safeguard the dignity and integrity of the human person.

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