

Heidegger on technology

Description

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Heidegger and the problem of technology

Heidegger, in his later writing, builds on Hegel's view that distinguishes between a kind of primordial logic, which he recognises as **Thought**, and science, sociology, history, psychology, theology and everything else, which he regards as **philosophy**.^[1] Like Hegel, Heidegger develops the theme of the self-revelatory and autonomous nature of Thinking.^[2] According to Heidegger we have to attend to thinking, and let it speak, rather than search always for reasons. Thought has a history. But for Heidegger this history is also the history of Being. Heidegger's use of the capitalised word **Being** is difficult to appreciate, but it is important for an understanding of his view of technology. So I will dwell upon it at some length here.

In his earlier work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger indicates how conventional attempts to address the issue of Being have come unstuck. *Being* is the most universal concept, though it is clearly not a category. In keeping with its universal nature it defies definition. Being is also self evident, to the extent that we are capable of saying what *is* and what *is not*, yet **Being** is still veiled in darkness.^[3] In his book, *Being and Time*, Heidegger systematically develops a characterisation of the entity (which Heidegger identifies as *Dasein*) that is inquiring into the possibilities of its Being.^[4] Heidegger's own thinking on Being underwent development since *Being and Time*. According to Caputo, the **Being** of the later Heidegger is best understood through an analogy with religious thinking, particularly that of the so-called **mystical** writers and poets.^[5] The autonomy of Being and its relationship to a being (or an entity) is analogous to the relationship between God and the soul. Certainly the elevated autonomy of Being and Thought (by both Heidegger and Hegel as well as the Absolute and Spirit by Hegel and the Idealists) is in keeping with the German Christian tradition.

Whereas, for Hegel, history progressively discloses consciousness of *freedom*, the history of Being according to Heidegger is one in which *Being reveals itself*. Whereas philosophy would readily assert that historically there are philosophers and others who have explored the issue of Being in different ways, for Heidegger this process of history is more accurately described as one in which Being both **reveals and conceals** itself. Being has this **autonomy** for Heidegger. We see Being at work when we let thinking run its course.

The revelation of Being is apparent when we let certain statements recorded in history, or the even questions we pose, speak. Of course, what philosophers have said and the way Being speaks are not necessarily the same. When we let such statements speak then it becomes apparent that Being has tantalisingly revealed itself **only** to be covered over again. For Heidegger, there is a **mission of Being**. Occasionally Being breaks through and reveals itself. Whereas for Hegel history is a

progressive unfolding of consciousness of freedom, for Heidegger history is a successive *concealing* of Being, with occasional lapses when Being is able to reveal itself. [6] Like Hegel, Heidegger calls upon the thinking of the Presocratics (ie philosophers who pre-date Socrates) for support. The insight of Heraclitus is one such occasion where Being momentarily revealed itself and on which Heidegger places great store.

For Hegel, the progress of thought is such that *thought of being leads to thought of nothing*. Being and nothing are intertwined. What emerges is a third thought, that of *becoming*. Heidegger develops a similar argument with his deep analysis of (or rather meditation upon) Leibniz's (1646-1716) principle that "nothing is without reason," translated by Heidegger as "nothing is without (sufficient) *ground*." For Heidegger, this statement by Leibniz is a key moment in history when Being revealed itself in a particular way. Heidegger's process of thinking is therefore to take a simple, but historically significant statement such as Leibniz's principle of reason, to look at its *ontic* or limited meaning then to argue through to what it says about Being itself. In Heidegger's terms this is to let Being speak through the statement.

The first and obvious reading of "nothing is without ground" is to think of everything, all beings, and how they are built on something. Every idea, concept, entity is founded upon another idea, concept or entity. Heidegger's re-reading is to indicate that "nothing is without ground" is a statement about being in general (Being) and its ground. Caputo explains this interpretation as placing the emphasis on different parts of the sentence—changing the intonation of the sentence. The statement is thereby taken as equating Being and ground: Being is the ground. But "nothing is without ground" also states the converse: Being is without ground. What does it mean to be without ground? Whatever lacks a ground is above a chasm, or an abyss. This progression of thought leads Heidegger to assert that **Being is an abyss**, a statement which accords with the mystical poets and with Hegel. Before continuing with this discussion it is worth reflecting on the processes at work in Heidegger's meditations on Being, as a demonstration of his view of what it means to think—and ultimately his view of technology.

How Heidegger thinks

Caputo offers an incisive summary of the Heideggerian approach to thinking. Heidegger's approach in his later writings is first and foremost meditative. We are *not* being invited to participate in a critical dialogue with Heidegger. The appeal is to thinking as a deeper form of reason, more basic than formal argument. We are being invited to participate in the profound experience of another thinker (namely Heidegger). Further, the steps in thinking are discontinuous. Each step is characterised as a preparation for the next. Then there is a leap to the next stage, sometimes characterised by Heidegger as a "change in key." Furthermore, thinking is not about solving an everyday problem but about the profound but simple issues of Being. Thinking is getting to the essence of things, the place of Being in things. Finally, we are brought to the recognition that the whole of history is involved in thought. Being undertakes to reveal and conceal itself throughout history. At times Being is dormant. How is this process revealed in Heidegger's analysis of Leibniz's principle? Caputo explains the process with five steps.

The **first** step: for Heidegger, the principle, "nothing is without ground," says something about Being, or, rather, Being is disclosing itself through the principle. According to Heidegger, the principle was revealed in a momentary disclosure of Being in the writing of Heraclitus.

If you have heard not me, but the *logos*, then it is wise to say accordingly: all is one.^[9]

According to Heidegger the word *logos* has since changed its meaning and significance. For Heraclitus it was something to be listened to, and it spoke of the unity of Being and ground. Being has since withdrawn itself as Being. Subsequent history developed the *logos* as logic, a concern with causes: the search is to find the ground of one being in another.^[10] Logic is now the rational inquiry into the cause of beings. So the solid ground of Leibniz's principle is causal explanation.

According to Heidegger, philosophy has turned into a *tyranny* over things: it insists that nothing is unless human reason has certified its existence.^[11] It should be added that this fallen state of philosophy is not a human error. Being has withdrawn itself. In this light we are at the mercy of Being. The play of Being is an earnest game.

The **second** step: in this telling of the history of Being in Leibniz's principle (nothing is without ground), Being is reawakened with the announcing of the principle. But is revealed as a *fundamental* or *first* principle. According to Heidegger, this establishing of a principle serves to conceal Being even further. Being now conceals itself under the guise of objectivity, and as a concern with objects or beings.^[12] In the principle there is a call by Being for thinking to supply reasons.

The **third** step is to listen elsewhere for the voice of Being. For Heidegger this is to listen to the mystical poets, such as Angelus Silesius. One of Silesius's poems which so impresses Heidegger includes a statement about the blooming of a rose. According to the poem the rose is grounded in itself and is without why. For Heidegger this is a major rediscovery. It treats a being, a rose, not as an object but as grounded in itself.^[13] This discovery tells us that Being and ground belong together.

The **fourth** step is to generalise this discovery. Being and ground belong together. Beings stand on their Being, their own grounds. There is no necessity for us to supply grounds (reasons) in order to legitimate things.^[14]

Heidegger's technology

On the face of it, this meditation on thought and Being seems far removed from a concern with technology, yet, according to Heidegger technology is implicated in the whole enterprise. What does the discussion so far say about technology? According to Heidegger, the technological age can be characterised in several ways.^[15]

First, there is a denial in the technological age of *thought* in favour of philosophising. Philosophising is that ontic mode of thinking where we are always looking for reasons for things. (For Hegel this was exemplified in the logic of Aristotle.) This mode of thinking is *correct* according to Heidegger, but it does not uncover what is *true*.^[16] Technology is complicit in this transition from thought to ontic reason. It is not just that we now see thought instrumentally as if it were an object in technology to be crafted (*techne*) and manipulated. Rather there has been a corruption in our understanding of the craftsperson's art (*techne*) itself. According to Heidegger, to craft something (*techne*), originally meant to let a thing disclose itself, for it to be revealed or brought forth. But to craft something soon came to mean to produce or manufacture an object.

Thus what is decisive in *techne* does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *techne* is a bringing-forth.[\[17\]](#)

The roots of this transformation of the meaning of *techne* are allied to various transitions in early Greek thinking outlined by Heidegger. This "productionist metaphysics" of making and manipulating came to dominate all thought, such that we now see all artefacts, thoughts and ideas as *produced*. They are produced by subjects—craftspersons, artists and thinkers—and the process is causal. Artefacts, thoughts and ideas are derived from other artefacts, thoughts and ideas in a series of causal links. This is what it means to ask "why?" of any phenomenon. It means to look for causes. According to Heidegger, this is scientific, philosophical, and hence technological thinking.

Second, technological thinking has imposed a "frame" over everything such that everything is now seen as produced or caused. Technological thinking has imposed a totalising, metaphysical orientation to everything. Everything fits within a grand and unified system. Everything can ultimately be explained. This explanatory system is homogeneous (or it seeks to be so), and the system assumes that it will ultimately show how everything is dependent on certain laws. Technological thinking assumes that the uniquely valid kind of thought is that offered by logic and mathematics.

A variation on the notion of "enframing" is to see that it treats everything as a *potential* to be used and exploited. To see everything as a potential is to bring it to the same level and to dispense with valuable distinctions. The relationship between technological thought and its objects is analogous to the relationship between a hydroelectric dam and its river.[\[18\]](#) The river becomes a potential for energy and is no different to coal dug up from the ground that also yields suitable energy. For Heidegger, this enframing is the "essence" of technology—the way that technology discloses things to us in the modern era.

Third, Being is *concealed* in the technological age. This identification of the relationship between technology and Being is Heidegger's most provocative and difficult insights in the matter of technology. In summarising Heidegger, Caputo says that in the technological age Being "has become a vapor, a vacuous abstraction."[\[19\]](#) The difficulty we have in understanding and coming to terms with Being in this age is due to our concern with beings, or entities, and their causal connections, rather than with Being itself. In the technological age there is a darkening of the essence of truth, the disclosive nature of Being.

Fourth, it is not technology that conceals Being, but rather Being conceals itself. Technology is part of Being's mission by which it conceals itself. Strangely, Heidegger concludes that the distortions to the essence of truth and of humanity are of Being's doing. The current state of the world, and the various demises implied by the fall from Presocratic thought are not therefore "anyone's fault."[\[20\]](#) Heidegger's resignation towards technology is one of his most controversial points, and possibly also one his most incisive. Having dispensed with causality in thinking, Heidegger is not now in a position to say that humanity (as subject) has *caused* this takeover of technological thinking. Nor can he say that technology itself has *caused* our "enframing" of everything. Nor can we *cause* a change away from this enframing. Rather the language is that of revealing and concealing, and the ultimate "subject" and "object" of this disclosure is Being.

So Heidegger's difficult inquiry radically implicates thought, being, the opposition of being and non-being, and technology. Heidegger borrows Hegel's reverence for the grand sweep of history in

which these things reveal themselves, and are revealed. But, contrary to Hegel, the grand message of history is not freedom but Being's concealment through technological enframing.

The identification of these difficulties inherent in Critical Theory brings us to Heidegger's scepticism about the project of Critical Theory and human intervention into the problems posed by technology. According to Heidegger, release from technology's pull will not be of our making.

If the essential being of technology—the *Gestell* as the danger within Being—is Being itself, then technology can never be mastered, neither positively nor negatively, through a merely self-dependent human action. Technology, whose essential being is Being itself, can never be overcome by man. This would mean that man would be the lord of Being.[\[21\]](#)

But we cooperate with Being:

the essential being of technology cannot be led into a transformation of its mission without the cooperation of man.[\[22\]](#)

But Heidegger does envisage a transformation. This cooperation with Being is a "letting be" or "releasement." Heidegger uses the archaic German word ***Gelassenheit***, which he borrowed from the mystical philosopher Meister Eckhart. Letting be is what the poet does before the rose, letting Being reveal itself. The antidote to the enframing of technology is not revolution but to adopt a new attitude.

We are able to use technological objects and yet with suitable use keep ourselves so free of them that we are able to let go of them at any time. We are able to make use of technological objects as they ought to be used. But we are also able simultaneously to let them alone as something which does not concern what is innermost in us and proper to us.[\[23\]](#)

Borgman presents one of the most persuasive attempts to translate Heidegger's project for *letting be* into terms that are meaningful to late twentieth century technological society.[\[24\]](#) Borgman translates Heidegger's identification of technological objects (mere objects manufactured and exploited through the imperative of causality) as commodities or *devices*. In contrast to devices there are the ***things***, of which Heidegger wrote. *Things* are situated, corporal and involved in human practices. They provide a focus. For Borgman the archetypal example of a *thing* is the domestic hearth, which in earlier times provided a focus for domestic activity and a focus for thinking about the home and the family. These *things* are still around us in the technological age, but take on new significance within the current technological context.

According to Borgman there are focal *things* and also *practices*. Examples of focal practices include the preparation and serving of a great meal, hiking and jogging, not as mere leisure diversions but as totally engaging activities that unite means and ends, effort and accomplishment, labour and leisure. These practices may also involve devices (such as running shoes, camping equipment, highways and motorised transportation), but the devices are at the service of the focal practices. The technological context is not at war with focal practices, but they are mutually enhancing. According to Borgman, radical reform within technological society will come about by attending to such focal things and practices.

But however we choose to realise Heidegger's ambiguous call to *letting be* or *letting go*, the solution is not entirely illuminating for the technologist, the designer or the decision maker interested in how this understanding of technology can impinge on their practices as designers. There appears to be no positive program for intervention. The solution for designers appears to be to remove themselves from the business or to trade a concern with advanced technology for craft.^[25] Designers appear as either perpetrators or victims of domination (under critical theory), or those whose work is to be a mere adjunct to focal things and practices (according to Heidegger and Borgman).

Footnotes

- [1] See Heidegger, M. (1968). *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J.G. Gray and F.T. Wieck, Harper and Rowe, New York; Heidegger, M. (1971) The origin of the work of art, in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Harper and Rowe, New York, pp.15-87; Heidegger, M. (1971) The thing, in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Harper and Rowe, New York, pp.163-182; Heidegger, M. (1974) The principle of ground, *Man and World*, trans K. Hoeller, Vol.7, pp.207-222; Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Trans. W. Lovitt, Harper and Row, New York; Heidegger, M. (1984) *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, trans. D.F. Krell and F.A. Capuzzi, Harper and Row, San Francisco, California (collection of essays first published in German between 1950 and 1954).
- [2] The term "autonomy" here reflects the way that thought is spoken about. As I will show subsequently it is consistent with Heidegger to see thought as totally connected with day to day life, involved and situated.
- [3] Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.25.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p.27.
- [5] Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, op. cit.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.79.
- [7] Heidegger uses the term "ontic" to designate scientific understand, as opposed to "ontological" which denotes that which pertains to Being.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p.69.
- [9] Heraclitus, frag. 50. See Allen, *Greek Philosophy*, op. cit., p.40.
- [10] Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, op. cit., p.79.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p.80.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p.72.
- [13] *Ibid.*
- [14] According to Heidegger this acceptance of things in themselves and as they present themselves was the early Greek understanding of *physis* prior to the scientific, causal understanding. *Physis* originally meant "presentation" rather than its common modern translation as *nature*.
- [15] For the identification of these and other issues see Caputo, op. cit. and also Borgman, A. (1987) The question of Heidegger and technology: a critical review of the literature, *Philosophy Today*, Vol.31, No.2/4, pp.97-194; Zimmerman, M.E. (1990) *Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana; Bernstein, R. (1991) *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Polity, Cambridge.
- [16] Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, op. cit., p.6.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p.13.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p.16.
- [19] Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, op. cit., p.185.

[20] Ibid., p.188.

[21] Quoted by Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, op. cit., p.174. From Heidegger, M. (1962) *Die Technik und die Kehre*, Verlag Günther Neske, Pfullingen (published in 1971 as *The turning*, trans K.R. Maly, in *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol.1, pp.3-16).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Heidegger, M. (1966). *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J.M. Anderson and E.H. Freund, Harper and Rowe, New York, p.54.

[24] See Borgman, A. (1984). *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.

[25] Leder points out Borgman's favoritism towards hand made artefacts such as violins as focal things, ignoring highly technology devices such as a sound mixing board in a music studio as a focus for enriching, engaging, corporal and communal activity. The same could be said for networked computers. See Leder, D. (1964) *The rule of the device: Borgman's philosophy of technology*, *Philosophy Today*, Spring, Vol.32, pp.17-29.

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