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The Metaphysics of Modern Technology

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Introduction

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger characterizes the reduction of the world to “pure resource” as *the* crisis of modernity.¹ This crisis is rooted in “metaphysics” and the subjection of nature for the purposes of production and consumption. Metaphysics refers to the prioritization of a particular worldview to the exclusion of all others, and the reduction of the world to pure resource counts as a crisis insofar as it leads to the violation of nature, humanity’s homelessness, and a loss of the gods. Though Heidegger has a keen sense for the problems plaguing modernity, he also tells us that the crisis resulting from our technological worldview is not simply the product of human intention but is also sent to us by Being. Moreover, Heidegger claims “human activity can never counter the danger,” and it seems that all we can do is wait for the arrival of a new revelation of reality that will redeem our culture from its fallen state. Critics of Heidegger’s work see it as “condemning man to a total subjection to history and its fateful sending’s”² and they

argue that his appeal to waiting “precludes every attempt to build from the ruins of our culture a house in which we can dwell.”³ Against these critics, this essay illustrates the extent to which waiting actually serves as an appropriate response to metaphysical thinking and the harm it produces in our technological age. Briefly, the idea is that waiting gives human beings a chance to reflect on the contingency of their current circumstances and thereby opens them up to the possibility that things may be otherwise. And once we’ve realized that things can be otherwise, we are in principle open to gods that are capable of gathering human communities in new ways, treating nature as filled with sacred things, and seeing that the rich and meaningful world in which we dwell is not subordinate to the world as it is presented in our technological activities.

Being, Mystery, and Metaphysics

Before turning to the crises produced by our technological mode of being, we need to say something about the cause of these crises, “metaphysics”, and the relationship between metaphysics and two key concepts in Heidegger’s *Seinsphilosophie*: Being and Mystery. Being is “that which determines entities as entities.”⁴ And in *Being and Time*, Heidegger says every human is thrown into a socio-historical “truth of Being” whereby: “The everyday way in which things have been disclosed is one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance... In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are preformed.”⁵

Though truths of Being are difficult to define because they are the background upon which we are able to define anything at all, Hubert Dreyfus exemplifies this phenomenon when he writes: “The Greeks encountered *things* in their beauty and

power, and people as poets, statesmen and heroes; the Christians encountered *creatures* to be catalogued and used appropriately, and people as saints and sinners; and we moderns encounter *objects* to be controlled and organized by subjects in order to satisfy their desires.”⁶ Although it may be difficult to tease out the entire concrete content of the Greek, Christian and Modern worldviews, formally these truths of Being are the set of practices, rules and relations that create the context through which all aspects of the Greek, Christian and Modern worlds are presented or make sense.

Whilst Being enables particular entities to show up as a meaningful part of our world, Being itself is not an entity. In *What are Poets For?*, Heidegger borrows Rilke’s image of Being as a sphere that, like the moon, has a light and dark side: “Being in the sense of a lightening-unifying presence” and Being in the sense of “beings...in the plentitude of all their facets.”⁷ Being, in other words, is comprised of a series of cultural practices that disclose the world in a specific way *as well as* the entities and aspects of the world disclosed in those practices. But Being is also made up of those entities that are concealed in our current culture. And in *On the Essence of Truth*, Heidegger calls the aspects of Being that are constantly turned away from us “the Mystery”.⁸

The Mystery of Being is key to understanding Heidegger’s account of metaphysics. Metaphysics aims to state “what beings are in their Being” and it refers to the truth of Being that “transcends” the aspects of our world such that they appear as the aspects that they are.⁹ Metaphysics, however, “regards such truth as the imperishable and eternal,” and it misses the fact that the disclosure of our world is relative to the practices of an historical community.¹⁰ By treating the world disclosure achieved in a

specific culture as “imperishable and eternal”, metaphysical interpretations of Being “drive out every other possibility of revealing.”¹¹ In doing so, metaphysics errs by blocking access to the entities that are concealed in our current culture, and it is precisely the metaphysics of modern technology that prevents us from revealing the world in alternative ways.

Modern Technology and Metaphysics

The essence of modern technology is, for Heidegger, *das Gestell* or the “enframing” of our world in which “the real reveals itself as resource.”¹² The real reveals itself as resource through technological production, and this production refers to our ability to represent the world such that we are able to manufacture and manipulate things to meet various ends. As Heidegger writes in *What are Poets For?*: “Man places before himself the world as the whole of everything objective, and he places himself against that world. Man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers Nature over to himself. We must think of this placing-here, this producing, in its broad and multifarious nature.”¹³

Heidegger’s generic use of “man” in this passage suggests that production is a universal feature of human existence, and he recognizes that the Ancient Greeks represented the world in resourceful ways that resemble our own. Yet what distinguishes the “gentle” technological practice of the Greeks from the “violent” technological practices of modernity is the extent to which the former “brings forth” nature whereas the later “set upon” nature in order to make something happen. And to come to terms with the dangers of contemporary technology we need to say more about Heidegger’s distinction between ancient and modern technological practice.

On Heidegger's reading, the productive activity of the Greeks was a species of *poiesis* or "bringing forth". *Poiesis* divides into two types – *physis* as the unaided bringing forth of nature, and *techne* as the aided bringing forth of the craftsman – and each is a case of "letting what is not yet present arrive in its presencing."¹⁴ *Techne* is nevertheless continuous with *physis* insofar as the Greeks saw themselves as part of a sacred order in which their activities spared, preserved or completed nature's presencing. Heidegger cites as an example of *techne* the ancient cabinetmaker who "answers and responds to all the different kinds of wood and the shapes slumbering within the wood as it enters into man's dwelling with the hidden riches of nature."¹⁵ Since the Greeks treated their building as continuous with nature, and given that they saw the natural world as the basis of their sustenance, the Greek world showed up as a holy place worthy of reverence and respect.

In contrast to Greek production, Heidegger characterizes modern production as a "setting upon" nature in order to reframe it when it fails to meet our needs. Like Greek technological practices, the real reveals itself as resource in modernity. But what worries Heidegger about modern production is the *way* the real reveals itself *simply* as resource through our "unconditional self-assertion".¹⁶ The reduction of the world to *pure* resource for our consumption connects Heidegger's talk of contemporary technology to his discussion of metaphysics. For when *Gestell* "holds sway", Heidegger says, "it drives out every other possibility of revealing."¹⁷ Driving out every other possibility of revealing in the age of *Gestell* means that "what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as an object, but does so, rather, *exclusively* as resource."¹⁸ In other words, entities "no longer stand over and against us as objects", but show up as "completely unautonomous".¹⁹ And as completely

unautonomous, entities no longer appear as they are in-and-of-themselves or as entities capable of being “brought forth” in our practical activities. Put otherwise, treating entities as just *for us* suggests that they are no longer part of a sacred order of which we are only a part. Thus, we moderns find ourselves in a world that no longer commands reverence and respect.

The Ills of Modern Technology

Reducing our world to resources for production and consumption is, for Heidegger, the crisis of modernity. Such a reduction counts as a crisis insofar as it results in the violation of nature, humanity’s homelessness, and a loss of the gods. The violation of nature that contemporary production entails is a function of our inability to see entities as they are in-and-of-themselves, and it is an *essential* harm insofar as it prevents an entity from being the entity that it is. If, for example, the forest shows up as nothing but grist for our mills, or a river as nothing more than a power source, then the forest and river show up as nothing other than resourceful entities-for-us, and nothing stands apart from our technological will to act as a condition or limit upon our exploitation of nature. In Heidegger’s words, “what is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man.”²⁰ And by reducing the world to whatever shows up as useful, our modern technological mode of Being takes away our ability to stand in what Heidegger calls a “caring” relationship to things as they are in themselves.

Caring for things is, however, essential to being at home in the world. To be at home, for Heidegger, is to be *taken-care-of* by our dwelling-place whilst at the same time *caring-for* our dwelling-place. A home, in other words, provides us with a certain amount of safety and security. But a home can only provide us with that safety and

security if the home itself is taken care of. Of course if the things that take care of us in our home do not show up as objects to be cared-for, then there is little to stop us from doing damage to that which takes care of us. And this is why Heidegger says our current violent relation to nature leads to “man’s homelessness.”

Finally, reducing the world to pure resource results in a loss of the gods. According to Heidegger, the gods gather human communities by standing out as exemplars that give meaning to a particular way of life. Yet in modernity, “no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world’s history and man’s sojourn in it.”²¹ This loss of gods is due the abolition of “the divine radiance...in the world’s history” or “the holy ether in which alone the gods are gods.”²² The holy ether of which Heidegger speaks is a world filled with sacred things that are sacred because they are the gifts upon which our existence depends. But when the world is reduced to resource things no longer show up as sacred, and our disenchanted age deprives the gods of that holy place from which they derive their authority. Alas, without a sacred space through which the gods can inspire human beings there is nothing left in our world (beyond force) to command our collective awe, and we inevitably find ourselves busied but lost in the dullness of the everyday.

Modern Technology as a Destining of Being and the Overcoming of Metaphysics Through Waiting and Releasement

The problems plaguing modernity are a function of metaphysics whereby “the unconditioned establishment of unconditional self-assertion” results in a world that is “purposefully made over according to the frame of mind of man’s command.”²³ This, for Heidegger, means human willing “turns everything into material for self-assertive

production” through which “the earth and its atmosphere become raw material for self-assertive production” and “man becomes human material that is disposed of with a view to proposed goals.”²⁴ Heidegger, however, tells us that the crisis resulting from our productive activities is not *simply* a product of human intentions but is *also* “destined” to us by Being. The fact that the devastation of modernity is accomplished *through* our will but destined *by* Being means that “human activity can never counter the danger”²⁵ and that we must wait for “a god [that] can save us.”²⁶ It seems, then, that all we can do on Heidegger’s account is stop what we are doing, release ourselves to Being, and hope that a new revelation of reality that will redeem our culture from its degraded state.

As noted above, critics of Heidegger’s work see it as “condemning man to a total subjection to history and its fateful sending’s,”²⁷ and they argue that his appeal to waiting “precludes every attempt to build from the ruins of our culture a house in which we can dwell.”²⁸ On Richard Wolin’s reading, Heidegger’s “solution” to the danger confronting modernity actually places us in an “impotent bondage” to Being where “real-life men and women are no longer seen as responsible for the course of history.”²⁹ In fact, Wolin goes so far as to say that Heidegger endows “Being with the characteristics of an all-powerful meta-subject” so as to avoid owning up to his Nazis past.³⁰ Yet in order to test the validity of these criticisms, we need to look closer at the “destining of Being” as well as the dispositions that Heidegger’s thinks will help us overcome metaphysics: namely, waiting and releasement.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims “Being (but not entities) is something which “there is” only insofar as truth is. And truth is only so far as and as long as Dasein

is.”³¹ This passage suggests that Being is dependant on us. But Heidegger also says that “Being is always the Being of an entity,”³² which implies that entities also play a part in the determination of their Being. It is the part entities play in the determination of their Being that enable’s Heidegger to speak of a “destining of Being”: that is, entities are always sent to us in their plentitude and we appropriate specific aspects of that plentitude through our activities. Therefore *Gestell* is a “destining of Being” insofar as entities are given to us and we appropriate them as resources. However, this destining means “something different from the talk we hear more and more frequently to the effect that technology is the fate of our age, where ‘fate’ means ‘the inevitability of an unalterable course,’”³³ and Heidegger claims that our current technological practice “in no way confines us to a stultifying compulsion to push on blindly with technology or...to rebel helplessly against it and curse it as the work of the devil.”³⁴ *Gestell*, for Heidegger, is not the inevitable and unalterable course of history, since it stands as only *one* of the various ways in which the world may be given to us. And in order to be saved from the ills of our contemporary technological practices, we need to open ourselves up to alternative destinings of Being.

According to Heidegger, opening up to an alternative destining is achieved through waiting and releasement. In a moment of waiting, we are released from our fascination with the entities disclosed in the productive activities that make up our everyday existence. And much like an instant of anxiety, waiting gives us a chance to reflect on the contingency of our current circumstances and thereby recognize that things can be otherwise. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, “in anxiety what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away.” Thus, anxiety “takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself in terms of the world and the way things have

been publically interpreted,” and it sets us before the world as a whole.³⁵ Similarly, Heidegger says “waiting releases us into openness” where “we leave open what we are waiting for” such that we are “open to the horizon of that-which-regions.”³⁶ In our current case, Heidegger suggests waiting allows us to “catch sight of the essence of modern technology” and therefore “bring into appearance the saving power in its arising.”³⁷ Waiting, in other words, provides us with the pause we need to see that the metaphysical assumptions of our technological age mistakenly “drives out every other possibility of revealing.”³⁸ And once we are released from our metaphysical illusion, we are in principle open to seeing things as something other than resources and indeed to the Mystery of Being more generally. As Heidegger puts it: “Releasement towards things and openness to the Mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure the world of technology without being imperiled by it.”³⁹

In short, waiting and releasement let entities be such that we can see there is a world that stands beyond the confines of our willful productive activities. And it should now be clear that Heidegger’s appeal to waiting and releasement as the antidote to the dangers of technology does not condemn man to history’s fateful sendings. For it is precisely when we are released from willful productive activity that we create a context in which nature shows up as the sacred basis upon which both divinities and mortals dwell.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Tr. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3-35 [Hereafter QCT]

² Winifred Franzen, *Von der Existenz-ontologie zur Seingeschichte* (Meisenheim: Hein, 1975), 125

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- ³ Karsten Harries, 'Verwahrloste Welt' in *Kunst-Politik-Technik*, ed. Jamme and Harries (Munich: Fink, 1993), 215
- ⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie & Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 25-6 [6] [Hereafter BT]
- ⁵ BT, 213 [169]
- ⁶ Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 338
- ⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 124 [Hereafter PLT]
- ⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. Krell (New York, HarperCollins, 1993), 130 [Hereafter BW]
- ⁹ See Martin Heidegger, 'On the Question of Being' in *Pathmarks*, ed McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 291-322
- ¹⁰ BW, 124
- ¹¹ QCT, 27
- ¹² QCT, 312
- ¹³ PLT, 107-8
- ¹⁴ QCT, 39
- ¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, tr. Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 14
- ¹⁶ PLT, 111
- ¹⁷ QCT, 27
- ¹⁸ QCT, 27
- ¹⁹ QCT, 17
- ²⁰ QCT, 129-130
- ²¹ PLT, 35
- ²² PLT, 91, 94
- ²³ PLT, 109
- ²⁴ PLT, 109
- ²⁵ QCT, 33
- ²⁶ S, 107
- ²⁷ Franzen, 125
- ²⁸ Harries, 215

²⁹ Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) p.142

³⁰ Wolin, 149, 142

³¹ BT, 272 [230]

³² BT, 29 [9]

³³ QCT, 25

³⁴ QCT, 27

³⁵ BT, 232 [187]

³⁶ DT, p.68, 73

³⁷ QCT, p.32, 28

³⁸ QCT, p.27

³⁹ DT, p.55