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David M. Kaplan

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Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relation to Technology

Hubert Dreyfus

INTRODUCTION: WHAT HEIDEGGER IS NOT SAYING

In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger describes his aim:

"We shall be questioning concerning technology, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it."

He wants to reveal the essence of technology in such a way that "in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it."[1] Indeed, he claims that "When we once open ourselves expressly to the *essence* of technology, we find ourselves unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim."[2]

We will need to explain essence, opening, and freeing before we can understand Heidegger here. But already Heidegger's project should alert us to the fact that he is not announcing one more reactionary rebellion against technology, although many respectable philosophers, including Jürgen Habermas, take him to be doing just that; nor is he doing what progressive thinkers such as Habermas want him to do, proposing a way to get technology under control so that it can serve our rationally chosen ends.

The difficulty in locating just where Heidegger stands on technology is no accident. Heidegger has not always been clear about what distinguishes his approach from a romantic reaction to the domination of nature, and when he does finally arrive at a clear formulation of his own original view, it is so radical that everyone is tempted to translate it into conventional platitudes about the evils of technology. Thus Heidegger's ontological concerns are mistakenly assimilated to humanistic worries about the devastation of nature.

Those who want to make Heidegger intelligible in terms of current anti-technological banalities can find support in his texts. During the war he attacks consumerism:

> The circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld.[3]

And as late as 1955 he holds that:

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> The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought. . . . Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry.[4]

In this address to the Schwartzwald peasants he also laments the appearance of television antennae on their dwellings.

> Hourly and daily they are chained to radio and television. . . . All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man—all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world.[5]

Such statements suggest that Heidegger is a Luddite who would like to return from the exploitation of the earth, consumerism, and mass media to the world of the pre-Socratic Greeks or the good old Schwartzwald peasants.

HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY

As his thinking develops, however, Heidegger does not deny these are serious problems, but he comes to the surprising and provocative conclusion that focusing on loss and destruction is still technological.

> All attempts to reckon existing reality . . . in terms of decline and loss, in terms of fate, catastrophe, and destruction, are merely technological behavior.[6]

Seeing our situation as posing a problem that must be solved by appropriate action turns out to be technological too:

> [T]he instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. . . . The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control.[7]

Heidegger is clear this approach cannot work:

> No single man, no group of men, no commission of prominent statesmen, scientists, and technicians, no conference of leaders of commerce and industry, can brake or direct the progress of history in the atomic age.[8]

His view is both darker and more hopeful. He thinks there is a more dangerous situation facing modern man than the technological destruction of nature and civilization, yet a situation about which something *can* be done—at least indirectly. The threat is not a *problem* for which there can be a *solution* but an ontological *condition* from which we can be *saved.*

Heidegger's concern is the human distress caused by the *technological understanding of being,* rather than the destruction caused by specific technologies. Consequently, Heidegger distinguishes the current problems caused by technology—ecological destruction, nuclear danger, consumerism, etc.—from the devastation that would result if technology solved all our problems.

> What threatens man in his very nature is the . . . view that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition . . . tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects.[9]

The "greatest danger" is that

> the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as *the only* way of thinking.[10]

The danger, then, is not the destruction of nature or culture but a restriction in our way of thinking—a leveling of our understanding of being.

To evaluate this claim we must give content to what Heidegger means by an understanding of being. Let us take an example. Normally we deal with things, and even sometimes people, as resources to be used until no longer needed and then put aside. A styrofoam cup is a perfect example. When we want a hot or cold drink it does its job, and when we are through with it we throw it away. How different this understanding of an object is from what we can suppose to be the everyday Japanese understanding of a delicate teacup. The teacup does not preserve temperature as well as its plastic replacement, and it has to be washed and protected, but it is preserved from generation to generation for its beauty and its social meaning. It is hard to picture a tea ceremony around a styrofoam cup.

Note that the traditional Japanese understanding of what it is to be human (passive, contented, gentle, social, etc.) fits with their understanding of what it is to be a thing (delicate, beautiful, traditional, etc.). It would make no sense for us, who are active, independent, and aggressive—constantly striving to cultivate and satisfy our desires—to relate to things the way the Japanese do; or for the Japanese (before their understanding of being was interfered with by ours) to invent and prefer styrofoam teacups. In the same vein *we* tend to think of politics as the negotiation of individual desires while the Japanese seek consensus. In sum the social practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human self, those containing an interpretation of what it is to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. They add up to an understanding of being.

The shared practices into which we are socialized, then, provide a background understanding of what counts as things, what counts as human beings, and ultimately what counts as real, on the basis of which we can direct our actions toward particular things and people. Thus the understanding of being creates what Heidegger calls a *clearing* in which things and people can show up for us. We do not produce the clearing. It produces us as the kind of human beings that we are. Heidegger describes the clearing as follows:

> [B]eyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. . . . This open center is . . . not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is. . . . Only this clearing grants and guarantees to human beings a passage to those entities that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are.[11]

What, then, is the essence of technology, i.e., the technological understanding of being, i.e., the technological clearing, and how does opening ourselves to it give us a free relation to technological devices? To begin with, when we ask about the essence of technology we are able to see that Heidegger's question cannot be answered by defining technology. Technology

is as old as civilization. Heidegger notes that it can be correctly defined as "a means and a human activity." He calls this "the instrumental and anthropological definition of technology."[12] But if we ask about the *essence* of technology (the technological understanding of being) we find that modern technology is "something completely different and . . . new."[13] Even different from using styrofoam cups to serve our desires. The essence of modern technology, Heidegger tells us, is to seek more and more flexibility and efficiency *simply for its own sake.* "[E]xpediting is always itself directed from the beginning . . . towards driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense."[14] That is, our only goal is optimization:

> Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it standing-reserve. . . .[15]

No longer are we subjects turning nature into an object of exploitation:

> The subject-object relation thus reaches, for the first time, its pure "relational," i.e., ordering, character in which both the subject and the object are sucked up as standing-reserves.[16]

A modern airliner is not an object at all, but just a flexible and efficient cog in the transportation system.[17] (And passengers are presumably not subjects but merely resources to fill the planes.) Heidegger concludes: "Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object."[18]

All ideas of serving God, society, our fellow men, or even our own calling disappear. Human beings, on this view, become a resource to be used, but more important to be enhanced—like any other.

> Man, who no longer conceals his character of being the most important raw material, is also drawn into this process.[19]

In the film *2001,* the robot HAL, when asked if he is happy on the mission, answers: "I'm using all my capacities to the maximum. What more could a rational entity desire?" This is a brilliant expression of what anyone would say who is in touch with our current understanding of being. We pursue the growth or development of our potential simply for its own sake—it is our only goal. The human potential movement perfectly expresses this technological understanding of being, as does the attempt to better organize the future use of our natural resources. We thus become part of a system which no one directs but which moves toward the total mobilization of all beings, even us. This is why Heidegger thinks the perfectly ordered society dedicated to the welfare of all is not the solution of our problems but the distressing culmination of the technological understanding of being.

WHAT THEN CAN WE DO?

But, of course, Heidegger uses and depends upon modern technological devices. He is no Luddite and he does not advocate a return to the pre-technological world.

> It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil. We depend on technical devices; they even challenge us to ever greater advances.[20]

Instead, Heidegger suggests that there is a way we can keep our technological devices and yet remain true to ourselves:

> 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.[21]

To understand how this might be possible we need an illustration of Heidegger's important distinction between technology and the technological understanding of being. Again we can turn to Japan. In contemporary Japan a traditional, non-technological understanding of being still exists alongside the most advanced high-tech production and consumption. The TV set and the household gods share the same shelf—the styrofoam cup co-exists with the porcelain one. We can thus see that one can have technology without the technological understanding of being, so it becomes clear that the technological understanding of being can be dissociated from technological devices.

To make this dissociation, Heidegger holds, one must rethink the history of being in the West. Then one will see that although a technological understanding of being is our destiny, it is not our fate. That is, although our understanding of things and ourselves as resources to be ordered, enhanced, and used efficiently has been building up since Plato and dominates our practices, we are not stuck with it. It is not the way things have to be, but nothing more or less than our current cultural clearing.

Only those who think of Heidegger as opposing technology will be surprised at his next point. Once we see that technology is our latest understanding of being, we will be grateful for it. We did not make this clearing nor do we control it, but if it were not given to us to encounter things and ourselves as resources, nothing would show up *as* anything at all and no possibilities for action would make sense. And once we realize—in our practices, of course, not just in our heads—that we *receive* our technological understanding of being, we have stepped out of the technological understanding of being, for we then see that what is most important in our lives is not subject to efficient enhancement. This transformation in our sense of reality—this overcoming of calculative thinking—is precisely what Heideggerian thinking seeks to bring about. Heidegger seeks to show how we can recognize and thereby overcome our restricted, willful modern clearing precisely by recognizing our essential receptivity to it.

> [M]odern man must first and above all find his way back into the full breadth of the space proper to his essence. That essential space of man's essential being receives the dimension that unites it to something beyond itself . . . that is the way in which the safekeeping of being itself is given to belong to the essence of man as the one who is needed and used by being.[22]

But precisely how can we experience the technological understanding of being as a gift to which we are receptive? What is the phenomenon Heidegger is getting at? We can break out of the technological understanding of being whenever we find ourselves gathered by things rather than controlling them. When a thing like a celebratory meal, to take Heidegger's example, pulls our practices together and draws us in, we experience a focusing and a nearness that resists technological ordering. Even a technological object like a highway bridge, when experienced as a gathering and focusing of our practices, can help us resist the very technological ordering it furthers. Heidegger describes the bridge so as to bring out both its technological ordering function and its continuity with pre-technological things.

> The old stone bridge's humble brook crossing gives to the harvest wagon its passage from the fields into the village and carries the lumber cart from the field path to the road. The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced as calculated for maximum yield. Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro. . . . The bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own way* earth and sky, divinities and mortals.[23]

Getting in sync with the highway bridge in its technological functioning can make us sensitive to the technological understanding of being as the way our current clearing works, so that we experience our role as receivers, and the importance of receptivity, thereby freeing us from our compulsion to force all things into one efficient order.

This transformation in our understanding of being, unlike the slow process of cleaning up the environment which is, of course, also necessary, would take place in a sudden Gestalt switch.

> The turning of the danger comes to pass suddenly. In this turning, the clearing belonging to the essence of being suddenly clears itself and lights up.[24]

The danger, when grasped as the danger, becomes that which saves us. "The self-same danger is, when it is *as* the danger, the saving power."[25]

This remarkable claim gives rise to two opposed ways of understanding Heidegger's response to technology. Both interpretations agree that once one recognizes the technological understanding of being for what it is—a historical understanding—one gains a free relation to it. We neither push forward technological efficiency as our only goal nor always resist it. If we are free of the technological imperative we can, in each case, discuss the pros and cons. As Heidegger puts it:

> We let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside . . . as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher [the clearing]. I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses "yes" and at the same time "no", by an old word, *releasement towards things*.[26]

One way of understanding this proposal—represented here by Richard Rorty—holds that once we get in the right relation to technology, viz. recognize it as a clearing, it is revealed as just as good as any other clearing. Efficiency—getting the most out of ourselves and everything else—is fine, so long as we do not think that efficiency for its own sake is the *only* end for man, dictated by reality itself, to which all others must be subordinated. Heidegger seems to support this acceptance of the technological understanding of being when he says:

> That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws [i.e., the clearing] is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*. Releasement toward 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 in the world of technology without being imperiled by it.[27]

But acceptance of the mystery of the gift of understandings of being cannot be Heidegger's whole story, for he immediately adds:

> Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery give us a vision of a new rootedness which *someday* might even be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing rootedness in a changed form.[28]

We then look back at the preceding remark and realize *releasement* gives only a "possibility" and a "promise" of "dwelling in the world in a totally different way."

Mere openness to technology, it seems, leaves out much that Heidegger finds essential to human being: embeddedness in nature, nearness or localness, shared meaningful differences such as noble and ignoble, justice and injustice, salvation and damnation, mature and immature—to name those that have played important roles in our history. *Releasement,* while giving us a free relation to technology and protecting our nature from being distorted and distressed, cannot give us any of these.

For Heidegger, there are, then, two issues. One issue is clear:

> The issue is the saving of man's essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive.[29]

But that is not enough:

> If releasement toward things and openness to the mystery awaken within us, then we should arrive at a path that will lead to a new ground and foundation.[30]

Releasement, it turns out, is only a stage, a kind of holding pattern, awaiting a new understanding of being, which would give some content to our openness—what Heidegger calls a new rootedness. That is why each time Heidegger talks of *releasement* and the saving power of understanding technology as a gift he then goes on to talk of the divine.

> Only when man, in the disclosing coming-to-pass of the insight by which he himself is beheld . . . renounces human self-will . . . does he correspond in his essence to the claim of that insight. In thus corresponding man is gathered into his own, that he . . . may, as the mortal, look out toward the divine.[31]

The need for a new centeredness is reflected in Heidegger's famous remark in his last interview: "Only a god can save us now."[32] But what does this mean?

THE NEED FOR A GOD

Just preserving pre-technical practices, even if we could do it, would not give us what we need. The pre-technological practices no longer add up to a shared sense of reality and one cannot legislate a new understanding of being. For such practices to give meaning to our lives, and unite us in a community, they would have to be focused and held up to the practitioners. This function, which later Heidegger calls "truth setting itself to work," can be performed by what he calls a work of art. Heidegger takes the Greek temple as his illustration of an artwork working. The temple held up to the Greeks what was important, and so let there be heroes and slaves, victory and disgrace, disaster and blessing, and so on. People whose practices were manifested and focused by the temple had guidelines for leading good lives and avoiding bad ones. In the same way, the medieval cathedral made it possible to be a saint or a sinner by

showing people the dimensions of salvation and damnation. In either case, one knew where one stood and what one had to do. Heidegger holds that "there must always be some being in the open [the clearing], something that is, in which the openness takes its stand and attains its constancy."[33]

We could call such special objects cultural paradigms. A cultural paradigm focuses and collects the scattered practices of a culture, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds them up to the people who can then act and relate to each other in terms of the shared exemplar.

When we see that for later Heidegger only those practices focused in a paradigm can establish what things can show up as and what it makes sense to do, we can see why he was pessimistic about salvaging aspects of the Enlightenment or reviving practices focused in the past. Heidegger would say that we should, indeed, try to preserve such practices, but they can save us only if they are radically transformed and integrated into a new understanding of reality. In addition we must learn to appreciate marginal practices—what Heidegger calls the saving power of insignificant things—practices such as friendship, back-packing into the wilderness, and drinking the local wine with friends. All these practices are marginal precisely because they are not efficient. They can, of course, be engaged in for the sake of health and greater efficiency. This expanding of technological efficiency is the greatest danger. But these saving practices could come together in a new cultural paradigm that held up to us a new way of doing things, thereby focusing a world in which formerly marginal practices were central and efficiency marginal. Such a new object or event that grounded a new understanding of reality Heidegger would call a new god. This is why he holds that "only another god can save us."[34]

Once one sees what is needed, one also sees that there is not much we can do to bring it about. A new sense of reality is not something that can be made the goal of a crash program like the moon flight—a paradigm of modern technological power. A hint of what such a new god might look like is offered by the music of the sixties. The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and other rock groups became for many the articulation of new understanding of what really mattered. This new understanding almost coalesced into a cultural paradigm in the Woodstock Music Festival, where people actually lived for a few days in an understanding of being in which mainline contemporary concern with rationality, sobriety, willful activity, and flexible, efficient control were made marginal and subservient to Greek virtues such as openness, enjoyment of nature, dancing, and Dionysian ecstasy along with a neglected Christian concern with peace, tolerance, and love of one's neighbor without desire and exclusivity. Technology was not smashed or denigrated but all the power of the electronic media was put at the service of the music which focused all the above concerns.

If enough people had found in Woodstock what they most cared about, and recognized that all the others shared this recognition, a new understanding of being might have coalesced and been stabilized. Of course, in retrospect we see that the concerns of the Woodstock generation were not broad and deep enough to resist technology and to sustain a culture. Still we are left with a hint of how a new cultural paradigm would work, and the realization that we must foster human receptivity and preserve the endangered species of pre-technological practices that remain in our culture, in the hope that one day they will be pulled together into a new paradigm, rich enough and resistant enough to give new meaningful directions to our lives.

To many, however, the idea of *a* god which will give us a unified but open community—one set of concerns which everyone shares if only as a focus of disagreement—sounds either unrealistic or dangerous. Heidegger would probably agree that its open democratic version

looks increasingly unobtainable and that we have certainly seen that its closed totalitarian form can be disastrous. But Heidegger holds that given our historical essence—the kind of beings we have become during the history of our culture—such a community is necessary to us. This raises the question of whether our need for one community is, indeed, dictated by our historical essence, or whether the claim that we can't live without a centered and rooted culture is simply romantic nostalgia.

It is hard to know how one could decide such a question, but Heidegger has a message even for those who hold that we, in this pluralized modern world, should not expect and do not need one all-embracing community. Those who, from Dostoievsky, to the hippies, to Richard Rorty, think of communities as local enclaves in an otherwise impersonal society still owe us an account of what holds these local communities together. If Dostoievsky and Heidegger are right, each local community still needs its local god—its particular incarnation of what the community is up to. In that case we are again led to the view that releasement is not enough, and to the modified Heideggerian slogan that only some new *gods* can save us.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), pp. 25–26.
2. Ibid.
3. Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," *The End of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 107.
4. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 50.
5. Ibid., p. 48.
6. Heidegger, "The Turning," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 48.
7. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 5.
8. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 52.
9. Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 116.
10. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 56.
11. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 53.
12. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 5.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 15.
15. Ibid., p. 17.
16. Heidegger, "Science and Reflection," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 173.
17. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 17.
18. Ibid.
19. Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," *The End of Philosophy*, p. 104.
20. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 53.
21. Ibid., p. 54.
22. Heidegger, "The Turning," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 39.
23. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 152–53.
24. Ibid., p. 44.
25. Heidegger, "The Turning," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 39.
26. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 54.
27. Ibid., p. 55.
28. Ibid. (My italics.)
29. Ibid., p. 56.

30. Ibid.
31. Heidegger, "The Turning," *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 47.
32. "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976.
33. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 61.
34. This is an equally possible translation of the famous phrase from *Der Spiegel*.