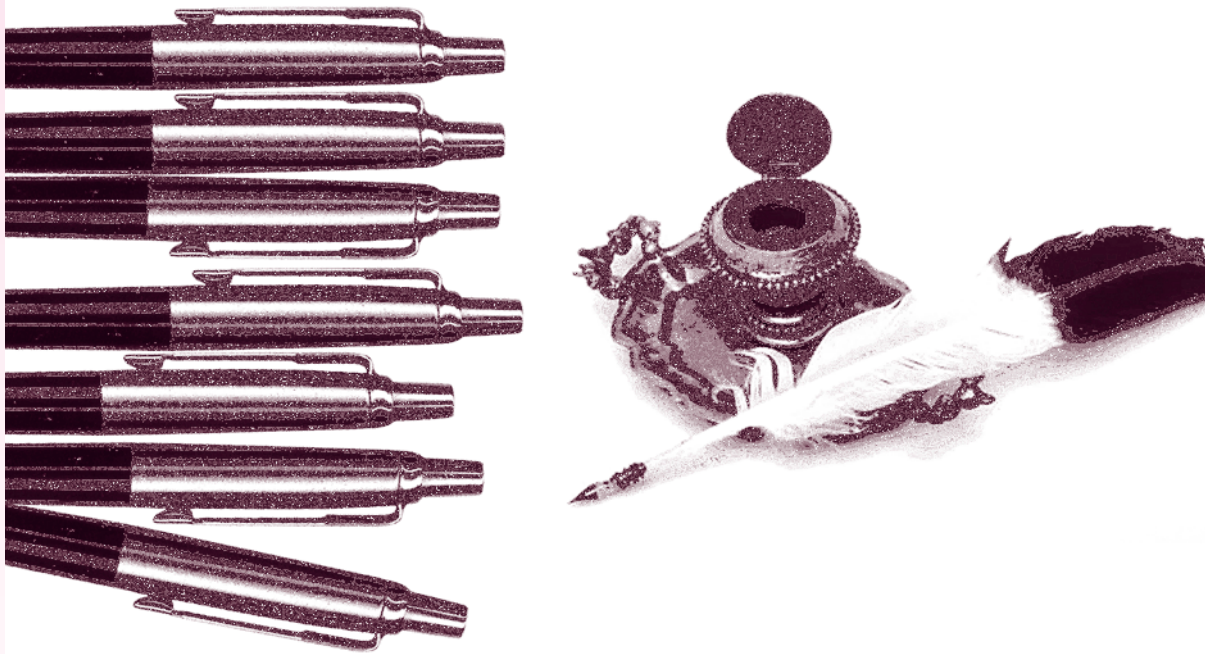


The Gods and Technology

A READING OF HEIDEGGER



RICHARD

ROJCEWICZ

The Gods and Technology

SUNY series in Theology and Continental Thought
Douglas L. Donkel, editor

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A Reading of Heidegger

Richard Rojcewicz

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Preface

This is a lengthy study attempting to reopen and take a fresh look at a brief text in which Martin Heidegger projected a philosophy of technology. What is offered here is a careful and sympathetic reading of that text in its own terms. I do situate Heidegger's philosophy of technology within his overall philosophical enterprise, and I follow to their end certain paths that lead not infrequently into ancient Greek philosophy and at times into modern physics. Moreover, never far from the surface is the theme of piety, a theme especially characteristic of Heidegger's later period; in play throughout this study is what Heidegger sees as the proper human piety with respect to something ascendant over humans, with respect to the gods. Nevertheless, the focus remains intensely concentrated, and the goal is neither more nor less than a penetrating exposition of a classic text of twentieth century continental philosophy.

That such a reading could be urgent, or even called for at all, might seem highly doubtful today, fifty years after the appearance of "Die Frage nach der Technik." Has not Heidegger's philosophy of technology already been exhausted of its resources? Was it not time long ago to pass beyond exposition to judgment, perhaps even—in view of Heidegger's unsavory political leanings—to dismissal? In any case, surely everyone is already familiar with this philosophy of technology in its own terms: the "Enframing," the "saving power," the "objectless standing-reserve," the "constellation," the redetermination of the sense of essence as "granting," and so on and on. Or are all these terms, if they do genuinely express Heidegger's ideas, still largely undetermined and deserving of closer examination? Have we mastered, not to say surpassed, Heidegger's philosophy of technology, or are all readers of Heidegger, the present one included, still struggling to come to grips with what is thought there? The modest premise of this book is that the latter is the case.

Thus I do not pretend to speak the last word on Heidegger's philosophy of technology, nor do I even purport to offer the first word—in the sense of a definitive exposition that would set every subsequent discussion on sure ground. On the contrary, I merely attempt to take a step closer to the matters genuinely at issue in Heidegger's thought. In that way, the following pages, even while claiming a certain originality, merge into the general effort of all the secondary literature¹ on Heidegger.

Introduction

The original turn in the history of philosophy, from pre-Socratic thought to the philosophy of Socrates and of all later Western thinkers, can be understood as a turn from piety to idolatry. In a certain sense, then, Cicero was correct to characterize this turn as one that “called philosophy down from the heavens and relegated it to the cities of men and women.”¹

Cicero is usually taken to mean that Socrates inaugurated the tradition of humanism in philosophy, the focus on the human subject as what is most worthy of thinking. In contradistinction, the pre-Socratic philosophers were cosmologists; they concerned themselves with the universe as a whole, with the gods, with the ultimate things, “the things in the air and the things below the earth.” Socrates supposedly held it was foolish to inquire into such arcane and superhuman matters and limited himself instead to the properly human things; his questions did not concern the gods and the cosmos but precisely men and women and cities. Thus his questions were ethical and political: what is virtue, what is friendship, what is the ideal polity?

The Ciceronian characterization, understood along these lines, would have to be rejected as superficial, even altogether erroneous. As for Socrates, he by no means brought philosophy down to earth, if this means that the human world becomes the exclusive subject matter of philosophy. Socrates did not limit his attention to human, moral matters. On the contrary, even when the ostensible topic of his conversation is some moral issue, Socrates’ aim is always to open up the divine realm, the realm of the Ideas. That is, he is concerned with bringing philosophy, or the human gaze, up to heaven; more specifically, he is occupied with the relation between the things of the earth and the things of heaven. To put it in philosophical terms, his concern is to open up the distinction between Being and beings. That is his constant theme, and the ostensible moral topic of discussion is, primarily, only the occasion for the more fundamental metaphysical inquiry. As for all later thinkers, Cicero’s characterization seems even less applicable. The entire tradition of metaphysics, from Aristotle

down to our own times, concerns itself precisely with the things of heaven, with Being itself, and even calls this concern “first philosophy” in contrast to the secondary philosophical interest in men and women and cities.

Understood in another sense, however, Cicero’s characterization is perfectly correct. From Socrates on, philosophy is indeed withdrawn from the gods and relegated, completely and utterly, to men and women, with the result that the human being becomes the exclusive subject of philosophy. This statement holds, and it expresses the Socratic turn, but only if “subject” here means agent, doer, and not topic, not subject *matter*. Socrates makes philosophy a purely human accomplishment and Being a passive object. In other words, for the Socratic tradition philosophy is the philosophy “of” Being, or “of” the gods, *only* in the sense of the *genitivus obiectivus*; in philosophy Being merely lies there as an object, awaiting human inquiry. This is indeed a turn, since the pre-Socratic view is the pious one that humans, in carrying out philosophy, in disclosing what it means to be, play a deferential role. The proper human role in philosophy is then something like this: not to wrest a disclosure of the gods but to abet and appropriate the gods’ own self-disclosure. While we might be able to see the piety in this pre-Socratic attitude, it will strike us much more forcefully as enigmatic. The turn taken by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was the removing of the enigma. The turn taken by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, two and half millennia later, reverses the original one and restores the enigma—as well as the piety.

Consider the Socratic versus the pre-Socratic notion of truth. For the Socratic tradition, truth is an unproblematic, though no doubt arduous, human affair. Truth is the product of the human research which wrests information from the things. For the pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, on the contrary, truth is a goddess, one that leads the thinker by the hand. As Heidegger emphasizes, Parmenides does not speak of a goddess *of* truth, a divine patron of truth, but of truth itself as a goddess:

If, however, Parmenides calls the goddess “truth,” then here truth itself is being experienced as a goddess. This might seem strange to us. For in the first place we would consider it extremely odd for thinkers to relate their thinking to the word of a divine being. It is distinctive of the thinkers who later, i.e., from the time of Plato on, are called “philosophers” that their own meditation is the source of their thoughts. Thinkers are indeed decidedly called “thinkers” because, as is said, they think “out of” themselves. . . . Thinkers answer questions they themselves have raised. Thinkers do not proclaim “revelations” from a god. They do not report the inspirations of a goddess. They state their own insights. What then are we to make of a goddess in the “didactic poem” of Parmenides, which brings to words the thoughts of a thinking whose purity and rigor have never recurred since? (*P*, 7/5)

That is the sense in which Socrates brought philosophy down to the men and women in the city: he made their own meditation the source of their thoughts. Philosophy becomes a human affair, not in that it becomes primarily ethics and politics, but in the sense that it arises exclusively out of the spontaneity of the human faculty of thinking. Humans are the protagonists in the search for truth, they take the initiative, they exercise the spontaneity, they think “out of” themselves, and Being is the passive object. For Parmenides, and the pre-Socratics generally, on the other hand, philosophy is a response to a claim made upon the thinker by something beyond, by a god or goddess, by Being. The pre-Socratic philosopher does not take up the topic of the gods; on the contrary, the gods take up the philosopher.

This last statement indeed strikes us as extremely odd, not to say nonsensical, since we recognize no claim coming from beyond and nothing more autonomous than our own subjectivity. Therein lies the idolatry. The post-Socratic view is the narrow, parochial view that humans as such are above all else, are sovereign in their search for knowledge, subject to nothing more eminent. This is an idolizing of humanity, a kind of human chauvinism, our epoch’s most basic and pervasive form of chauvinism. It is humanism properly so-called, and the unrelenting domination of modern technology, which is entirely motivated by it, attests to its pervasiveness.

Now Heidegger’s philosophy is emphatically not a humanism, at least not the usual chauvinistic one. For Heidegger, there is something which holds sway over humans, is more eminent, more autonomous, and it would be utterly parochial to regard humans as the prime movers. This applies especially to that most decisive of all accomplishments, the disclosure of truth. To consider humans *the* agents of truth, to consider truth a primarily human accomplishment, would amount to hubris, a challenging of the gods, and would draw down an inexorable nemesis.

From Socrates on, in Heidegger’s eyes, there has been a “falling away” from the great original outlook,² a forswearing of the attitude that led to the view of truth as a goddess, and so the entirety of the intervening history basically amounts to *Ab-fall*, apostasy (*P*, 79/54). For Heidegger, this apostasy has culminated in metaphysics, humanism, and modern technology, and for him, as we will see, these are all in essence exactly the same. They are merely different expressions of the same human chauvinism. They all understand the human being in terms of subjectivity and in particular as *the* subject, the sovereign subject.

For example, metaphysics defines the human being as ζῷον λόγον ἔχον (*zoon logon echon*), “the animal possessing language.” Heidegger’s quarrel here is not primarily over the words ζῷον and λόγος. Those terms do signify something essential, namely that humans are unique among living beings in enjoying an understanding of what it means to be in general. This understanding is especially manifest in the use of *language*, inasmuch

as words are general expressions; they express universals, concepts, essences, the Being of things. Thus to be able to speak is a sign that one is in touch with the realm of Being or, in other words, that one is “in the truth.” To that extent, the metaphysical definition points to something valid and is unobjectionable. The definition goes further, however, and in Heidegger’s eyes it does not simply make the observation that humans enjoy a relation to truth but also stipulates that relation as one of “possessing.” Now that *is* objectionable to Heidegger, and so his criticism bears on what, to all appearances, is an utterly innocuous word in the definition, ἔχω, “possess.”

To possess is to be the subject, the owner, the master. Heidegger’s concern here is not that the metaphysical definition implies humans are in *complete* possession of the truth; it does not imply that at all. But the definition indeed intends to say that humans are the subjects of whatever truth they do possess. Humans are the possessors of language in the sense that the understanding of the essence of things, and the expression of essences in words, are human accomplishments. Humans have *wrested* this understanding; it is a result of their own research and insight. Humans are then, as it were, *in control* as regards the disclosure of truth; humans are the subjects, the agents, the main protagonists, of the disclosure. That is the characteristic stance of metaphysics; metaphysics makes the human being the subject. In other words, the human being is the subject *of* metaphysics: again, not in the sense of the subject *matter*, but in the sense of the agent of metaphysics, that which by its own powers accomplishes metaphysics, wrests the disclosure of truth or Being.

From a Heideggerian perspective, the “possessing” spoken of in the metaphysical definition ought to be turned around. Accordingly, Heidegger reverses the formula expressing the essence of a human being: from ζῶον λόγον ἔχον to λόγος ἀνθρώπου ἔχον (*EM*, 184/137), from humans possessing language to language possessing humans. Humans are not the sovereign possessors, not the subjects of metaphysics, not the primary disclosers of truth. Instead, humans are the ones to whom truth *is disclosed*. Referring to the metaphysical definition, Heidegger asks: “Is language something that comes at all under the discretionary power of man? Is language a sheer human accomplishment? Is man a being that possesses language as one of his belongings? Or is it language that ‘possesses’ man and man belongs to language, inasmuch as language first discloses the world to man and thereby [prepares] man’s dwelling in this world?” (*PT*, 74–5/59)

The attitude motivating these questions is the pre-Socratic one whereby the gods (or, equivalently, truth, Being, language, the essence of things in general) hold sway over human subjectivity. The full sense of this holding sway is a nuanced one and will emerge in the course of our study

of Heidegger's philosophy of technology. It is certain at least that Heidegger does not merely reverse the direction of the "possessing" while leaving its sense of mastery or domination intact. Nevertheless, for Heidegger, the human powers of disclosure are indeed appropriated by something ascendant over them, something which discloses itself to humans—or which hesitates to do so. Thus Heidegger makes it clear that the apostasy he finds in history is not *human* apostasy; it is not a matter of human failing. Humans are not the ultimate subjects of this apostasy; they are not the apostates, the gods are. That is to say, humans have not forsaken the beginning, so much as the beginning has forsaken humans. Humans have not foresworn the gods; on the contrary, the gods have on their own absconded from us. Humans have not been unobservant or careless in their pursuit of the truth; instead, the truth has drawn over itself a more impenetrable veil. Humans do now speak superficially, but not because they have been negligent, have neglected to preserve the strong sense of words; on the contrary, language itself has emasculated the terms in which it speaks to us. Most generally, humans have not overlooked Being, so much as Being has become increasingly reticent in showing itself.

These inverted views are altogether characteristic of Heidegger's philosophy, especially in its later period. His philosophy cannot then but seem countersensical or mystical to someone in the metaphysical tradition. For Heidegger, the human being is not the subject of metaphysics. The prime movers of metaphysics, the main protagonists of the disclosure of what it means to be in general, are the gods or, to speak less metaphorically, Being itself. Since metaphysics and modern technology are essentially the same, we will see that for Heidegger humans are not the subjects of this technology either; the gods are the prime movers of modern technology and indeed of all technology. Technology is not merely, and not even primarily, a human accomplishment.

If humans are, in some way, possessed by language, *led* to the truth, if they are primarily the receivers rather than the agents of the disclosure of Being, that does nevertheless of course not mean for Heidegger that humans are sheer receivers, utterly passive recipients. Humans do not receive the self-offering of the gods the way softened wax receives the impress of a stamp. Humans make an active contribution to the disclosure of the meaning of Being. Humans co-constitute that disclosure and are co-responsible for it. Humans are therefore called upon to exercise all their disclosive powers; humans must be sensitive, thoughtful, creative, resolute. There is no disclosure of truth without a human contribution, and the genuineness of the disclosure depends to some necessary extent upon that contribution. In other words, truth, the goddess, may take the thinker by the hand, but the thinker must actually be a thinker, must actively attempt to disclose the truth, must, as it were, reach out a hand toward the truth for the goddess to take up.

Heidegger never loses sight of the necessary and necessarily *active* role humans play in the disclosure of the meaning of Being. Nevertheless, for him the human role remains ancillary, and the primary actor, the primary agent of the disclosure of truth, is Being itself. The proper human role is therefore not to wrest a disclosure of Being but to abet Being's own self-disclosure. Humans are not the prime movers, and neither are they merely, passively, the moved. Humans are, rather, something like shepherds or, perhaps better, midwives; they play a creative role within a more general context of receptivity. Heidegger attempts to express this role in the name he proposes as the proper one for humans, when viewed specifically with respect to the disclosure of Being. That name is not "possessor," but *Dasein*.

This German term is to be understood, in accord with its etymology, as designating the place, the "there" (*da*), where a disclosure of Being (*Sein*) occurs. Taken in this sense, the term is applicable to humans alone, and so it indicates, first of all, the privileged position of humanity. Only humans are *Dasein*, the "there" of Being. Only to humans is it revealed what it means to be in general. Only humans speak. Only humans are in the truth. Furthermore, humans are privileged in the sense that Being, as inherently self-revelatory, *needs* a place to reveal itself; and so Being can even be said to *require* humans. Being needs its "there" as a ground just in order to come into its own as Being. These privileges accorded to humans, and expressed in the name *Dasein*, do then mark Heidegger's philosophy as a humanism, though not a parochial one.

What is most decisive, however, in Heidegger's understanding of humans as *Dasein* is the precise meaning of the "there," the exact sense in which humans are called upon to be the place of a self-revelation of Being. This sense of "there" (as also of *da* in German) is expressed very nearly in a colloquial use of the word in a context admittedly quite foreign to the present one. In the interpersonal domain, a parent may promise a child, or a lover a beloved, to "be there" always for her or him. That is of course not a promise simply to remain at a certain place in space. Nor, at the other extreme, is it a claim of domination. Instead, it is a promise to be available in a supportive way; it is an offer of constant advocacy and nurture. To be "there" in this sense is not to dominate, but neither is it at all passive; it requires an active giving of oneself, a mature commitment of one's personal powers, all while respecting the other person's proper autonomy. For Heidegger, humans are called on to be *Dasein*, to be the "there" of Being, in an analogous sense. To be *Dasein* is to be a place of reception, but not of passive reception. To be *Dasein* is to be pious, but not obsequiously pious. Being cannot and does not *impose* itself on humans. To be *Dasein* is not to take in passively but to abet the self-offering of Being by exercising one's own disclosive powers. To be *Dasein* is thus

to be a sort of midwife or ob-stetrician to the self-revelation of Being; it is to “stand there” (*ob-stare*) in an abetting way.

It is thus impossible to be Dasein passively. No one is Dasein simply by occupying a certain place. All receiving (not only of the self-offering of Being) requires some degree of giving, some amount of going out of oneself or active opening of oneself. As regards the human reception of the meaning of Being, Heidegger is calling for the highest possible giving on the part of the receiver, the most dedicated reception, the most active reaching out toward the giver. To be truly Dasein is to be “there” *with all one’s might*, with full diligence, with the exercise of all one’s disclosive powers.

On the other hand, Dasein’s abetting must not be understood as a compelling or even an *invoking*, to which Being or the gods would *respond* with a self-disclosure. The abetting does not *call forth* the self-offering of the gods. The gods are always the *motivating* and never the *motivated*. They offer themselves, to the extent that they do offer themselves, on their own initiative and not on account of our reaching out to them. To be Dasein is not to be a supplicant. Thus Heidegger is exhorting humans to be watchful and ready out of his mere *hope* that Being will return, that another beginning, one rivaling the first, more wholehearted, self-disclosure of the gods, might be at hand. A new beginning will not take place unless humans are ready for it; but human readiness will not cause it.

In other terms, to be Dasein is to be theoretical, provided we take “theory” in the original sense, i.e., in the sense of the Greek *θεωρία* (*theoria*). In Heidegger’s analysis, this word expresses a two-fold looking (PS, 63/44; P, 152–160/103–09). The one look, *θέα- (théa)*, expresses the “looking” at us of the goddess, *θεά (theá)*, or, in other words, the self-disclosure of the gods, *θεοί (theoi)*, to us.³ The other look, *-ὄραω (horoao)*, refers to our human disclosive looking back upon the gods. Thus to be theoretical, *thea-horetical*, means to have some insight into the gods, to be in the truth, to understand, more or less, the meaning of Being in general. And that understanding is precisely what is constitutive of Dasein. The decisive moment in theory, however, is not *looking* as opposed to other modes of disclosing, e.g., feeling and handling. Theory is not empty speculation, mere gaping. Theory is intimate acquaintance, no matter how acquired; it is only later ages that take theory to be “mere” onlooking, in distinction to real knowledge acquired hands-on. What is decisive in the Greek concept of theory is, rather, the *relation* between our human disclosive looking and the self-disclosure of the gods, their “looking” at us. Originally, the gods were given the priority. Their self-disclosure was understood as the primary determinant of what we see and that we see:

The Greeks experience the human look as a “taking up perceptually,” because this look is determined originally on the basis of a look that already takes up man and . . . has the priority. With respect to the [gods’] primordial look, man is “only” the looked upon. This “only,” however, is so essential that man, precisely as the looked upon, is first received and taken up into a relation to Being and is thus led to perceive. (*P*, 160/108)

This passage says that the Greeks experienced themselves as the looked upon, the ones to whom a self-disclosure of Being is addressed, not ones who by their own efforts *wrest* a disclosure of the meaning of Being. Human looking is not original but is a *response*—to a more original being-looked-at. Thus the Greeks were not chauvinistic as regards theory. For them, the main protagonists with respect to theory, with respect to the disclosure of truth, or of the meaning of Being, are not humans but the gods. Therefore, according to Heidegger, the word “theory” ultimately breaks down into *θεῖα*- (“goddess”; specifically, the goddess truth) and *-ῥα* (*ora*, “pious care”). Theory then names not merely a responsive looking back upon the gods but a specifically deferential, solicitous looking back. Theory is the “disclosive looking that abets truth” (*das hütende Schauen der Wahrheit*) (*WB*, 47/165).

To be Dasein and to be theoretical are therefore equivalent—these terms both refer to humans as the “there” of Being, as active, abetting receivers of the self-disclosure of truth. The theoretical is, of course, only one characteristic of humans, but Heidegger’s philosophical concern with humans does not extend beyond it. Heidegger’s is exclusively a first philosophy, an ontology, a study of the meaning of Being, and not second philosophy, not philosophical anthropology, not the study of humans *as such*. Heidegger’s single philosophical theme, which he pursues with unprecedented concentration, is Being (or its avatars, namely, the gods, truth, essence, language, etc.). Only secondarily does Heidegger’s philosophy attend to humans, and then only in a restricted way, i.e., merely as Dasein, merely as the “there” of Being, merely as *theoretical*. Heidegger thematizes humans only insofar as they relate to the gods, only as privileged places for the self-disclosure of Being. He thematizes the place of access only inasmuch as he is interested in the thing accessed, Being. Heidegger’s philosophy then disregards the full phenomenon of the human being. But that should occasion absolutely no reproach. Heidegger does not deny that second philosophy is worthwhile. He simply does not get beyond the more foundational questions, the ones of first philosophy; he does not get beyond theory, in the original sense.

Then what are we to make of Heidegger’s writings on technology? Technology would seem to be a theme of second philosophy. Indeed, if ever there was a purely human affair, it is technology. Technology is a

matter of human inventiveness, and it is a way humans accomplish practical tasks. Technology seems to be absolutely human and instrumental, rather than god-like and theoretical. Technology has nothing to do with the gods and is not theory but, quite to the contrary, is the practical application of theory. Technology is concerned simply with ways and means, not with ultimate causes, and certainly not with Being itself. Technology would then seem to have no place in Heidegger's theoretical philosophy of Being. Yet all this merely seems to be so, and for Heidegger the philosophy of technology is actually *equivalent* to first philosophy, since, for him, technology is nothing other than the knowledge of what it means to be in general. Like all ontological knowledge, technology is accomplished primarily by the gods, by the self-revelation of Being. Thus, to be Dasein, to be thea-horetical, to be technological, and to be ontological all mean exactly the same. They all mean to stand in a disclosive relation to Being itself.

This concept of technology as theoretical knowledge is not simply a new, idiosyncratic use of the term on Heidegger's part. Quite to the contrary, it is a return to the old Greek understanding of *techne*:

What is wonder? What is the basic attitude in which the preservation of the wondrous, the Being of beings, unfolds and comes into its own? We have to seek it in what the Greeks call *τέχνη* [*techne*]. We must divorce this Greek word from our familiar term derived from it, "technology," and from all nexuses of meaning that are thought in the name of technology. . . . *Techne* does not mean "technology" in the sense of the mechanical ordering of beings, nor does it mean "art" in the sense of mere skill and proficiency in procedures and operations. *Techne* means knowledge. . . . For that is what *techne* means: to grasp beings as emerging out of themselves in the way they show themselves, in their essence, *εἶδος* [*eidōs*], *ιδέα* [*idea*]. . . . (GP, 178–79/154–155)

Heidegger is here identifying *techne*, in its original sense, with wonder, the basic disposition of philosophy. For Heidegger, individual beings may be astonishing, marvelous, remarkable, but only Being itself is worthy of wonder. If *techne* has to do with wonder, then it is related to Being and to first philosophy. Furthermore, it is in *techne*, the passage says, that Being comes into its own, i.e., fulfills its self-disclosure. *Techne* is the human looking back in response to a more primordial "look" or self-disclosure. Thus *techne* does pertain to the gods; it is thea-horetical. What Heidegger means by "technology" (*die Technik*), or by the "essence of technology," is *techne* in that sense.

Technology is then not the application of some more basic knowledge but is itself the most basic knowledge, namely, the understanding of

what it means to be at all. On the other hand, technology itself can be applied. For example, science is an application of modern technology. Science is the research motivated by the self-disclosure of the essence of beings as orderable through calculation. Science *presupposes* this understanding of the Being of beings, and so science presupposes modern technology, which is nothing other than the theory of beings as essentially calculable. In turn, science itself can be applied, and that application issues in a certain sophisticated manipulation of beings, which is “technology” in the usual sense, namely, “the mechanical ordering of beings.”

Whence arises this theory of beings as orderable through calculation, a theory that leads to science and to modern, high-tech machinations? According to Heidegger, “in the essence of *techne* . . . , as the occurrence and establishment of the unconcealedness of beings, there lies the possibility of *imperiousness*, of an unbridled imposition of ends, which would accompany the absconding of the [original deferential attitude]” (*GP*, 180/155).

Modern technology accompanies the absconding of the original attitude. Modern technology is not the cause of the absconding but is simply the most visible aftermath of that withdrawal. Modern technology is the theory that is motivated when humans no longer experience themselves as the looked upon. In other words, when the gods abscond, when they look upon humans not wholeheartedly but reticently, then human disclosive looking presents itself as autonomous, as subject to nothing of greater autonomy. An imperious theory thereby fills the void left by the deferential one, hubris replaces piety, unbridled imposition supplants respectful abetting, and the understanding of humans as possessors displaces the one of humans as *Dasein*. Humans thereby become subjects, *the* sovereign, imperious subjects. The theory of beings as orderable through calculation is a correlate of this imperiousness: to be imperious is precisely to take beings as submissive to an ordering imposed by humans. The imperiousness of modern technology is therefore evidence of the self-withholding of the gods, and it is as such that Heidegger takes up modern technology. He pursues the philosophy of technology out of his interest in the relation between humans and the gods, i.e., out of his sole interest in the disclosure of the meaning of Being. Consequently, Heidegger’s philosophy of technology is an exercise in first philosophy.

According to Heidegger, history has seen two basic forms of technology, two theories of the essence of beings in general, namely, ancient technology and modern technology. The history of these theories, the gradual supplanting of the first by the second, is grounded not in autonomous human choices but in what is for Heidegger a *history of Being*, namely a relative absconding of the gods after their original, more wholehearted, self-disclosure. The history of technology is thus, fundamentally,

a history of Being. The latter history is the domain of the autonomous events, and these motivate a certain technology, a certain outlook on the essential possibilities of beings, which in turn issues in a certain practice with regard to those beings. The practice that arose from the earlier theory was ancient handcraft, whereas modern, high-tech machinations derive from the subsequent technology. The essential difference in the two practices, however, does not lie in the sophistication of the means employed; that is, the difference is not that one practice uses simple hand tools, and the other one high-tech devices. The essential difference resides in the theory, in the attitude that underlies the use of the means: namely, a pious attitude toward the object of the practice, versus an imperious, hubristic, “unbridled imposition of ends.” By way of a preliminary illustration, let us consider counseling and farming, two practices offered by Aristotle as paradigms of the so-called efficient cause.

The ancient farmer and the ancient counselor were midwives. They respected the object to which their practice was directed, and their creative activity amounted merely to finding ingenious ways of *letting* this object come into its own. Thus the ancient farmer respected the seed and merely nursed it toward its own end. This “mere” nursing, of course, is not at all passive; farming requires intelligent, hard work. As to counseling, the prime example is, significantly, a father counseling his child, according to Aristotle. Counseling used to respect the one to be counseled and so required intimate acquaintance, such as a father might have of his child. Counseling took direction from the one counseled, took its end from the counseled, and was thereby a matter of “mere” rousing or abetting, instead of imposing.

In contrast, today’s farming and counseling are imperious; they are unbridled in imposing their own ends. Farming is becoming more and more not a respect for the seed but a genetic manipulation of it, a forcing of the seed into the farmer’s own predetermined ends. And counseling is being degraded into a casual dispensing of psychopharmaceuticals to almost complete strangers. Instead of respecting the counseled, counseling now imposes the counselor’s own ends on the other. Farming and counseling have indeed today become “efficient causes,” impositional causes, but they were not so for Aristotle.

In Heidegger’s view, it is not because high-tech drugs are available that modern counseling looks upon the counseled as an object to be imposed on. On the contrary, it is because the object is already disclosed as a *patient*, as something meant to undergo (*pati*) the imposition of the agent, that we are motivated to synthesize those drugs in the first place. Modern counseling is not impositional *because* it uses high-tech drugs; instead, it summons up such drugs because it is already impositional in outlook. More generally, modern technology does not disrespect the things

of nature *because* it uses impositional devices. On the contrary, the disclosure of nature as something to be disrespected and imposed on is what first calls up the production of those devices. Things do now look as if they were subject to our unbridled imposition of ends, but that is not *because* we now possess the means to impose our will on them. On the contrary, it was our view of ourselves as unbridled imposers that first motivated the fabrication of those means. It is the imperious theory that calls up the imperious means, and it is precisely this theory, and not the practice or the means, that embodies a challenging of the gods. It is as a theory that modern technology harbors the threat of nemesis.

For Heidegger, the prime danger of our epoch does emphatically not lie in the effects of modern technology, in high-tech things. In other words, the prime danger is not that technological things might get out of hand, that genetically manipulated crops might cause cancer, that laboratory-created life-forms might wreak havoc on their creators, or that humans might annihilate themselves in an accidental nuclear disaster. Something even more tragic is imminent; human beings are not so much in danger of losing their lives as they are in danger of losing their freedom, wherein lies their human dignity. That is the disintegration which accompanies arrogance. It is a threat deriving from the *essence* of technology, from the theory of ourselves as unbridled imposers and of nature as there to be imposed on.

This theory, according to Heidegger, places humans on the brink of a precipice. It is bound to bring disillusionment, most basically since it will eventually become obvious that humans, too, are part of nature and so are themselves subject to the same impositional causality they claimed to be the agents of. Then humans will view themselves as outcomes of environmental forces over which they have no control whatsoever. If imposition presents itself as the only possible mode of causality, then humans will either be the imposers or the imposed on, the controllers or the controlled. In either case, humans will be oblivious to genuine human freedom, unaware of the threats to that freedom, and therefore unable to protect it. The nemesis would then be to become enslaved to the very technology that promised freedom. Heidegger's first philosophy is indeed concerned with obviating this slavery, and so, again, it can be called a humanism, though not an idolizing one.

The antidote to the danger of modern technology, according to Heidegger, is a return to ancient technology or, more precisely, to the *essence* of ancient technology. That is to say, Heidegger is not at all urging a return to the practice of ancient handcraft; he is not advocating an abandonment of power tools or high-tech things; he is not a romantic Luddite. But he is advocating the pious, respectful outlook, the nonchauvinistic theory, which is precisely the essence of ancient technology. In that the-

ory, human freedom does not amount to imposition but to abetting, nurturing, actively playing the role of Da-sein. Ancient technology is the theory of abetting causality, and it is that theory, rather than the practice of handcraft, that Heidegger sees as possessing saving power.

Theory is for Heidegger, to repeat, primarily a matter of the self-disclosure (or self-withholding) of truth or Being.⁴ Thus a particular theory is not to be achieved by sheer human will power, and Heidegger is not, strictly speaking, urging us to adopt the ancient outlook. He is not urging humans to seize this viewpoint as much as he is hoping that it might *bestow itself* once again. That will indeed not come to pass without our abetting, and we need to prepare ourselves for its possible bestowal. Indeed, the preparation, the waiting, advocated by Heidegger will demand what he calls the most “strenuous exertions.” The proper human waiting is not at all passive. Nevertheless, the other beginning, the return of the ancient attitude, is *primarily* in the hands of the gods. It will arrive, if it does arrive, primarily as a gift of the gods. That is the meaning of Heidegger’s famous claim that “Only a god can save us.” And it is also the theme of his philosophy of technology.



All the above is, of course, only meant as a thread of Ariadne; it is obviously abstract and merely programmatic. My task is to bring it to life. That I propose to do through a close reading of the principal statement of Heidegger’s thinking on technology, his essay, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” first delivered as a lecture in 1953.⁵ Since Heidegger’s time, a great deal of ink has been spilled over the philosophy of technology, but his work remains unsurpassed—indeed unequalled—in its radicality, in its penetration down to the root, the essence, of technology.

“Die Frage nach der Technik” is carefully crafted; it is highly polished and follows a path that has been well staked out. At the very outset, Heidegger insists on the importance of this path. Heidegger likes to appeal to the image of meandering country lanes when describing the course of thinking, but here the path is practically a straight road. There are indeed a few side paths that need to be pursued, but the main directionality is clear and intelligible. By following it, my commentary will receive its own intelligible organization and will begin accordingly with ancient technology, approached through the correspondent Greek understanding of causality. Part II will then be devoted to Heidegger’s characterization of the essence of modern technology and of the role played by science in manifesting that essence. For Heidegger, however, the task is not simply to *characterize* the essence of modern technology but to prepare for a proper relation to that essence. The preparation requires that we first see the danger in modern technology (Part III). Heidegger then proposes *art*

and, specifically, poetry as that which might save us from the danger, and the connection between art and the saving gods will have to be drawn out (Part IV). Finally, Part V will suggest a sympathetic response to Heidegger's philosophy of technology. His essay is, so to speak, open-ended. It issues in an invitation and needs to be carried on; I will thus conclude by asking about the most proper response to that invitation. Here the guide will be Heidegger himself, who, in another of his writings, proposed contemplative thinking and a certain form of detachment (*Gelassenheit*) as the activities, the strenuous exertions, to be practiced in response to the danger of modern technology. In the end, I hope to show that this response, which would produce a genuinely "lasting human work," namely, the safeguarding of human freedom, and would prepare for a return of the gods, should they indeed be willing to offer us a clearer view of themselves once again, is, most concretely, an improvisation on the example of piety still manifest in art.

Part I

Ancient Technology

It is especially significant, in Heidegger's eyes, that the epoch of ancient technology coincides with the time of the theory of the four causes. Indeed, for Heidegger, the distinctive outlook of ancient technology found its most explicit expression in that theory. Where causality is understood as it is in the theory of the four causes, there ancient technology reigns. Ancient technology, in essence, *is* the theory of the four causes; ancient technology is the disclosure of things in general as subject to the four causes. Heidegger's path to an understanding of ancient technology thus proceeds by way of the sense of the causality of the four causes. In particular, the delineation of ancient technology in "Die Frage nach der Technik" turns on the sense of the four causes in the locus classicus of that theory, Aristotle's *Physics*.

The four causes as obligations, as making ready the ground

Heidegger begins by repeating the names and the common way of viewing the four causes of change or motion. It is well known that the four causes are the matter, the form, the agent (or efficient cause), and the end or purpose (the final cause). The prototypical example is a statue. What are the causes of the coming into existence of a statue? First, the matter, the marble, is a cause as that which is to receive the form of the statue. The shape or form (e.g., the shape of a horse and rider) is a cause as that which is to be imposed on the marble. The sculptor himself is the efficient cause, the agent who does the imposing of the form onto the matter. And the purpose, the honoring of a general, is a cause as the end toward which the entire process of making a statue is directed. All this is well known, indeed too well known. It has become a facile dogma and bars the way to the genuine sense of causality as understood by the ancients.

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