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A Free Relationship to Technology

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A Free Relationship to Technology

The windmill, one of humanity's oldest machines, and the modern wind turbine, one of humanity's more recent machines, generate power in different ways: one catches and transforms energy while the other extracts and stocks energy into-standing reserve, something waiting for technical application. One works in accordance with nature, while the other withdraws, stores, and wills nature into supply. The danger of humanity's tendency to use technology to position things into standing-reserve, a mere resource waiting for production, is the possibility that humanity will gradually view itself like materials, things waiting to be managed, stored, and disposed of. In 1954, Martin Heidegger wrote "The Question Concerning Technology," a philosophical work that asks how humans can prepare themselves for a free relationship with technology. Today, I will walk through how Heidegger suggests this might be done.

If we want to form a free, open relationship with technology, we must begin with its essence. When philosophers question the essence of something, they set out to answer the "what it is" question. They seek out a fixed definition. The essence of technology is thought to be an instrument. It is also thought of as a human activity that serves as a means to an end. The hammer is the means to my end of driving a nail into the wood, just as the computer is the means to my end of sending an email. Hence, technology, in its ordinary understanding is a process- a process of means aiming to achieve an end.

For Heidegger, essence isn't something static. It is dynamic, for the essence of something changes as things appear to us in different ways. While these instrumental and anthropological definitions of technology are correct, in that they correspond with the way the world is, Heidegger doesn't find them to be particularly insightful. Technology's essence isn't technological. These definitions serve as attempts for humanity to bring itself into the correct relationship with technology instead of finding out what technology is as a being.

But how does one discover the essence of something? Heidegger starts with the knowledge of what is correct and evident about technology and uses it as a launching point to pursue the truth. Drawing from Aristotle's four ways of causation, we know there are four causes that work together to bring forth something into existence. Think of how a teacup comes to be. The porcelain serves as the matter, material cause, from which the teacup is made. The cup design and size serve as the form, formal cause, that shapes the matter. The traditional styling, final cause, instructs the way it needs to be made in accordance with sacred ritual. The potter, efficient cause, is the agent that drives the other three causes into the finished teacup. Each cause works together, needing one another to be realized. Each cause is a co-author that is responsible for how something comes to be in the world.

Heidegger believes there is something mysterious about fourfold causality. While other

philosophers accepted and built upon Aristotle, Heidegger found himself stuck wondering what were the grounds that permitted the four causes to unite?

Heidegger says, “the principal characteristic of being responsible is starting something on its way to arrival.” The four causes occasion or bring-forth into existence. Bringing-forth is the concealed moving into unconcealment, hiddenness moving into appearance. The thing that once wasn’t presenting itself to the world now appears and reveals itself. The flower blooming brings forth something in itself. The artisan brings forth something in another. She brings the teacup into being in the world.

We now return to the question of what grounds usher a bringing-forth. Bringing-forth is grounded in revealing. What does this have to do with anything? To Heidegger, the essence of technology is a mode of revealing. Technology reveals and unconceals truth.

The world reveals things to us. Each time period has a dominating mode of revealing. The prehistoric philosophers understanding of being was an emergence and fading away. A flower would spring forth, bloom, then die. The classical Greeks understood being as a sort of bringing-out. A craftsman creates a hammer. When he skillfully engages with the hammer, the hammer is brought forth into being. The era of creation followed in which an understanding of being derived from God imposing His form on all things. God was responsible for the bringing forth of everything and anything. We now find ourselves within the technological period in which modern technology shapes our understanding of being. Instead of God imposing form on things, we, through technological means, attempt to do so.

What, then, does technology as a means of revealing mean? With modern technology, things are challenged-forth rather than brought-forth. To challenge-forth is to unlock something, transform it, store it, and order it to distribute for human consumption. Heidegger says, “everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering.” He calls this “gestell,” or “enframing,” a concept that points to beings in the world as standing-reserve, stock waiting to enter the process of ordering, subject to our disposal. Differences look like this:

Music. Pre-modern: members of the band fine-tuning their instrumental abilities, collaborating over an extensive period of time to deliver a live performance. Modern: time and talent condense into soundbites accessible to stream at one’s convenience.

Food. Pre-modern: Hours of collecting, cutting, mincing, stirring, and making of food meant to be enjoyed and meditated over at a gathering. Modern: Ingredients are mechanized to stock the fridges of fast-food restaurants designed for rapid consumption.

Clothing. Pre-modern: Household, handspun, intentional weaving and spinning of harvested wool and linen into textiles, later to be dipped and dyed in colors. Modern: exploited workers, nameless to their buyers, sit in front of machines in factories, producing upwards of 1000 pieces a day of a final product they are alienated from.

Warfare. Pre-modern: Face to face, skillful, organized combat where all parties have skin in the game. Modern: Distant men create casualties by a click on a computer. People become mere numbers at the will of others.

It is dangerous to understand the world around us- the rivers, the trees, people- as things that are stock, ready to be used and replaced. We have the ability to disclose new worlds where things can be brought-forth into fruition rather than challenged and exploited. We must realize technology is mastering us by dictating how we understand the world and each other.

I understand the previous illustrations sound like a romanticization of past times that don't account for labor-saving machines that have freed people to spend their time in less dangerous and less need-focused ways. It is intended to be a reminder of something we have forgotten in the process: we must create a sensitivity to things around us. One way to develop a sensitivity and attune ourselves with the world, creating a free relationship to technology, is through skill.

Heidegger values craftsmen because they don't treat their work in a way that imposes their will. They gently nurture instead of forcing power. A skill requires an ability to respond to particular demands, creating a higher engagement with the world through craft. Technology frees us from needing to develop skills to enjoy things, so we often find ourselves content with cheap imitations, distancing our relationship to the things with which we engage. I don't have to learn how to cook, a skill that requires time and understanding of the limitations and possibilities of ingredients I get to work with, because I can buy one of many boxed meals at the store waiting to be disposed of.

Intentional engagement with the world fosters skills and skills open doors for worlds to disclose themselves. The world of jazz. The world of cooking. The world of architecture. Extraordinary is found within the ordinary. When we pay poetic respect to the things we are engaging with, we find ourselves as co-authors in a relationship with our subjects. The material is disclosing itself, being brought-forth into the world rather than challenged. And we are disclosing a world in ourselves, bringing ourselves into attunement with our surroundings.

To conclude, I want to quote a line from a poem by Marcus B. Christian called "The Craftsman." In the poem, Marcus talks about creating something with his hands, diligently fashioning it in accordance with the laws of beauty. He labors over the material with care, his mind, and his soul-

finishing the poem and his art with a lesson, being “I leave behind this thing that in return this solace gives: he who creates true beauty ever lives.”