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TECHNOLOGY, TRUTH, AND DESTINY: HEIDEGGER'S ENCOUNTER WITH MODERN TECHNOLOGY

James Gurney

I. Introduction

This paper will examine the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, specifically his conception of technology and its relationship to human existence. Heidegger's critique of technology is situated in his larger critique of Western metaphysics, which contends that Western philosophy since Plato has mistaken the presence of entities for their essence.¹ Being ought not to be reduced to presence, Heidegger argues, because to do so hides the truth of being: the process by which something absent becomes present, a phenomenon Heidegger calls "revealing".² Heidegger asserts that "'Being-true' ('truth') means Being-uncovering", and therefore that truth comes to pass when something passes from absence into presence. Thus the being of entities entails absence as well as presence.³

¹ This word is translated from the German "wesen". Heidegger means by "essence" the way something comes to presence.

² This word is translated from the German "entbergen", a word unique to Heidegger. Entbergen is related to a larger family of verbs, variously translated into English as "to dis-cover", "to un-cover", "to reveal", and "to dis-close". This family of verbs is meant to denote the process by which something comes into presence, and to remind us that this process necessarily involves absence.

³ Heidegger's notion of "truth" is likely unfamiliar to some readers. It

Modern technology (hereafter, MT), Heidegger argues, is also a revealing. Moreover, MT is the culmination of the metaphysical tradition which mistakes presence for Being because it seeks to render present the entire world. As we shall see, however, Heidegger's conception of technology falls victim to his own critique of metaphysics because his analysis conceals the role of absence in modern technology. The "absence of absence" in Heidegger's critique of technology is worrisome because it calls into question the validity not only of his critique of modern technology, but also his larger critique of metaphysics. To redress this problem, this paper argues that the essence of MT is human understanding. This conception of technology foregrounds the role of absence, and is therefore more consistent with Heidegger's ontology than Heidegger's own conception in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

II. "The Question Concerning Technology"

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger inquires into the essence of technology. His investigation comes at a time of accelerating technological growth and integration. He writes, "Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it."⁴ The aim of his critique is not anthropological or sociological; rather, he seeks to uncover the true essence of technology. "We shall be question concerning technology,"

is important to note that this notion of truth is quite distinct from contemporary concepts that hold truth to be coherence or correspondences. Heidegger uses the ancient Greek term *aletheia* to denote his notion of truth.

⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays (QCT)*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper. 1977. 4

he explains, “and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it. The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology.”⁵ For Heidegger, that we remain “unfree” in our relationship is because technology is not merely a means to an end, in which case it could be considered something neutral, directed toward good or evil by whomever commands it. Rather, he argues, “we are delivered over to [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.”⁶

For Heidegger, the essence of technology is rather a “revealing”, the process by which something absent becomes present. Modern technology too is a revealing, but it is distinctive because it is a “challenging-revealing”. He argues, “The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth.”⁷ Heidegger means that MT challenges nature to provide more resources than it had in the past. These resources are stockpiled for the future expansion of MT itself. “That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn distributed and what is distributed is switched about ever anew.”⁸ Thus the Rhine is challenged to provide hydroelectric power, and the forest is challenged to provide not only timber, but profit.

⁵ *QCT*, 3

⁶ *QCT*, 4

⁷ *QCT*, 16

⁸ *QCT*, 16

Heidegger uses the term “standing-reserve” to refer to the stockpiling demanded by this challenging-revealing. He argues that MT seeks to make the entire world into standing-reserve so that it is present and ready for utilization. This demand to make present is, for Heidegger, a manifestation of Western metaphysical thinking which ignores the importance of absence. This way of understanding the world and the mode of revealing it engenders is called “Enframing”.

Heidegger argues that Enframing, and indeed all revealing is a “destining” of humanity. This “destining” sends humanity upon a way of revealing the world according to the demands of that mode of revealing. In the case of Enframing, this destining demands that the world be revealed as standing-reserve. Heidegger writes, “The essence of modern technology starts man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve.”⁹

This possible destining is the greatest danger to humanity. Heidegger writes:

[W]hen destining reigns in the mode of Enframing, it is the supreme danger. This danger attests itself to us in two ways. As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather, exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to

⁹ *QCT*, 24

the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.¹⁰

Thus the danger of MT is that it will render even humanity as standing-reserve, and we will be nothing more than mere instruments ourselves in the process of Enframing. Further:

Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to be the posture of the lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself...*In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence.*¹¹

The danger to humanity is therefore not merely that its potential is limited, but moreover that humanity mistakes its present condition for its essence while being forever closed off from that essence. In short, humanity can no longer encounter truth.

This danger is not the only possibility engendered by the emergence of MT. The other, Heidegger argues, is “that man might be admitted more and sooner and ever more primally to the essence of that which is unconcealed and to its unconcealment, in order that he might experience as his essence his needed belonging to revealing.”¹² Heidegger calls this the saving power of MT, and argues, moreover, “[T]he saving power lets man see and enter into

¹⁰ *QCT*, 24

¹¹ *QCT*, 24

¹² *QCT*, 26

the highest dignity of his essence. This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment—and with it, from the first, the concealment—of all coming to presence on this earth.”¹³

It is only when humanity encounters its own essence and participates in the process of revealing, Heidegger argues, that we are free. He writes, “[M]an becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey.”¹⁴ Humanity listens and hears, Heidegger maintains, “Above all through our catching sight of what comes to presence in technology, instead of merely staring at the technological.”¹⁵ By listening we discover that the essence of technology is a process of revealing rather than the stockpiling of what has already been revealed (i.e. that which has already been made present) and instead recognize that revealing entails absence as well as presence. It is by understanding this openness that humanity freely participates in the destining of revealing. “Freedom is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing there shimmers that veil that covers what comes to presence of all truth and lets the veil appear as what veils.”¹⁶

Although Heidegger maintains that we can foster the saving power of MT, how we might actually do so remains quite murky. He writes, “Human activity can never directly counter this danger. Human achievement alone can never banish it.”¹⁷ What, then, can humanity do?

¹³ QCT 32

¹⁴ QCT, 25

¹⁵ QCT, 32

¹⁶ QCT 25

¹⁷ QCT, 33

“Human reflection can ponder the fact that all saving power must be of a higher essence than what is endangered, though at the same time kindred to it.”¹⁸ Because, for Heidegger, the force that drives history is metaphysical, we harbor the saving power of MT not with material or political actions, but by understanding it properly. For a closer examination of understanding, we turn now to Heidegger’s infamous ontological investigation of human Being, *Being and Time*.

III. “Being and Time”

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that we can distinguish between human Being and the being of other entities because human Being has the faculty of “understanding”. He uses the term “Dasein” to refer to human Being and reserves the term “entity” to refer to other beings. Dasein’s “understanding” is the faculty by which Dasein and the world are revealed. Dasein’s understanding is such that it always understands itself and the world in terms of its past and future. “As long as it is, Dasein always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities.”¹⁹ That Dasein understands itself in terms of possibilities “is because the understanding has in itself the existential structure we call “*projection*”.”²⁰ Central to projection is the notion that Dasein does not project toward specific goals, but rather projects itself as new possibilities. “Projecting,” Heidegger

¹⁸ *QCT*, 33 and 34

¹⁹ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time (BT)*. 7th. trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. 185

²⁰ *BT*, 184 and 185. The root of *Entwurf*—the German word for projection—denotes both “throwing”, as well as to set upon some project.

argues, “has nothing to do with comporting oneself towards a plan that has been thought out, and in accordance with which Dasein arranges its Being. In the contrary, any Dasein has, as Dasein, already projected itself; and as long as it is, it is projecting.”²¹

Projecting toward a specific plan has the effect of foreclosing future possibilities:

Furthermore, the character of understanding as projection is such that the understanding does not grasp thematically that upon which it projects—that is to say, possibilities. Grasping it in such a manner would take away from what is projected its very character as possibility, and would reduce it to the given contents which we have in mind; whereas projection, in throwing, throws before itself the possibility as possibility, and lets it *be* as such.²²

Already we can see how Heidegger’s ontology is distinct from the Western metaphysics he criticizes. Whereas past philosophies have reduced being to the present form of an entity, Heidegger maintains that Being includes Dasein’s past and future as well. He writes:

Because of the kind of Being which is constituted by the *existential* of projection, Dasein is constantly ‘more’ than it factually is, supposing that one might want to make an inventory of it as something-at-hand and list the contents of its Being, and supposing that one were able to do so. But Dasein is never more

²¹ *BT*, 185

²² *BT*, 185

than it factually is, for the to its facticity its potentiality-for-Being belongs essentially.²³

Thus Dasein is 'more' than it's present form in the sense that it projects toward the future. The openness of Dasein's future possibilities constitutes the absence from which Dasein reveals entities.

The being of other entities is also determined by Dasein's understanding, particularly by their relationship to Dasein's projects. For Heidegger, the "world" is the totality of these instrumental relationships in their relationship to Dasein's projects. Thus whenever Dasein is disclosed, so too are entities. He writes, "Along with Dasein as Being-in-the-world, entities within-the-world have in each case already been disclosed. These entities are either present-to-hand, in which case they exist somewhere in the world, or they are ready-to-hand, meaning that they are ready for Dasein's utilization."

Heidegger broadly distinguishes between two modes of Dasein's Being: Authentic and Inauthentic. These modes of Being are not meant to impart moral judgment or indicate greater or less degrees of Being. Heidegger writes, "On no account, however, do the terms 'inauthentic' and 'non-authentic' signify 'really not', as if in this mode of Being, Dasein were altogether to lose its Being."²⁴ Rather, these modes of Being characterize a fundamental choice regarding the aim and nature of projection.

When Dasein is concerned primarily with what is already present rather than its future possibilities, Dasein is said to be inauthentic. "Inauthenticity" does not mean

²³ *BT*, 185

²⁴ *BT*, 220

anything like Being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world—the kind which is completely fascinated by the ‘world’ and by the Dasein-with of Others in the ‘they’.”²⁵ Heidegger calls this tendency of Dasein, “falling”. Falling, “does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the ‘world’ of its concern. This ‘absorption in...’ has mostly the character of Being-lost in the publicness of the ‘they’. Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the world.”²⁶

By “publicness of the ‘they’”, Heidegger means how the world is popularly understood and interpreted. Heidegger distinguishes this way of Being from authentic projection because when Dasein is concerned with the “they,” Dasein is interpreting only those things which have already been disclosed; that is to say, Dasein is concerned with that which is already present-at-hand. Heidegger writes, “Proximally and for the most part Dasein is lost in its ‘world’. Its understanding, as a projection upon possibilities of Being, has diverted itself thither. Its absorption in the ‘they’ signifies that it is dominated by the way things are publicly interpreted. That which has been uncovered and disclosed stands in a mode in which it has been disguised and closed off by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.”²⁷

If Dasein is being inauthentic when it becomes concerned with that which is already present, Dasein is being authentic when it projects toward the future in such a

²⁵ *BT*, 220

²⁶ *BT*, 220

²⁷ *BT*, 264

way that it is open to its possibilities, thereby fostering the absence from which it reveals. Heidegger writes, "Understanding *can* devote itself primarily to the disclosedness of the world; that is, Dasein can, proximally and for the most part, understand itself in terms of its world. Or else understanding throws itself primarily into the "for-the-sake-of-which"; that is, Dasein exists as itself. Understanding is either authentic, arising out of one's own Self as such, or inauthentic."²⁸

The primary absence which grants Dasein the capacity to disclose its own essence is Dasein's inevitable death. Death, Heidegger argues, "reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that Dasein is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself."²⁹

Because authenticity and inauthenticity characterize Dasein's orientation toward the future, these terms also characterize Dasein's relationship to truth. Authentic Dasein has a closer relationship to truth. Heidegger writes, "This *authentic* disclosedness shows the phenomenon of the most primordial truth in the mode of authenticity. The most primordial, and indeed the most authentic, disclosedness in which Dasein, as a potentiality-for-Being, can be, is the *truth of existence*."³⁰ Truth, you will recall, comes to pass through revealing. Thus the truth of Dasein's Being comes to pass when Dasein authentically

²⁸ *BT*, 186

²⁹ *BT*, 294

³⁰ *BT*, 264

projects towards its possibilities, necessarily confronting its own most possibility, death.

Inauthentic Dasein, however, because it ignores its temporal essence, occupies a more distant relationship to truth. In the case of Inauthentic Dasein, Heidegger writes, “Being toward entities has not been extinguished, but it has been uprooted. Entities have not been completely hidden; they are precisely the sort of thing that has been uncovered, but at the same time they have been disguised. They show themselves, but in the mode of semblance.”³¹ Thus Dasein insofar as its state of Being is falling encounters untruth in the form of semblance. “*Because Dasein is essentially falling, its state of Being is such that it is in ‘untruth’.*”³² But the fact that Dasein encounters semblance does not foreclose the possibility of Dasein’s encountering truth. Rather, “The uncovering of anything new is never done on the basis of having something completely hidden, but takes its departure rather from uncoveredness in the mode of semblance.”³³ Thus, “Dasein is already both in the truth and in untruth. The way of uncovering is achieved only in...distinguishing between these understandingly.”³⁴

In “Being and Time”, the structures of disclosure and Truth are within Dasein’s power. It is Dasein’s understanding which discloses/reveals the world. Dasein’s understanding discloses possibilities, Authentic and Inauthentic, towards-which Dasein must project. And, as we observed above, authentic projection is in turn grounded in Dasein’s being-towards-its-ownmost-possibility: Death. Thus Dasein is disclosed in its Being to itself through its

³¹ *BT*, 264

³² *BT*, 264

³³ *BT*, 265

³⁴ 265

Being-towards the possibility of its absence, death; that is, Dasein's being obtains in its becoming absent through death. It is through the uncovering of its own Being through its Being-towards death—that is, through projection—that Dasein encounters the truth of its own Being, and *understands* it. And, insofar as the world too is disclosed through Dasein's understanding, the world too is disclosed in terms of this fundamental truth.

This understanding of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic Being can inform our understanding of Heidegger's critique of MT. We established above that the difference between the saving power and the greatest danger lies in our understanding of MT. If understand MT inauthentically, and become concerned only with what has already been made present, we participate in Enframing and invite the greatest danger. The only way to harbor the saving power is to authentically understand MT by remembering and protecting its intrinsic absence—the open horizon of possibilities MT engenders. As we shall see in the next section, however, Heidegger's analysis of MT is not such an understanding, and indeed seems to foreclose the possibility of ever attaining it.

IV. Solution

The difference between harboring the saving power of technology and falling into the greatest danger lies in our understanding and interpretation of modern technology. The value of this interpretation in turn depends upon whether it focuses upon what has already been revealed, or projects toward presently-absent interpretations. Another way to say this is that our interpretation will either be authentic, in which case it will project toward open possibilities, or, proximally and for the most part, it will be

inauthentic, and become preoccupied with the technological, that is, what has already been made present.

In light of our examination of Heidegger's discussion of authenticity, however, it seems strange that Heidegger would assert that humanity faces a definitive choice regarding authenticity given that Dasein's Being entails both authenticity and inauthenticity. Heidegger is quite clear in *Being and Time* that although Dasein may become mired in inauthenticity, Dasein's confrontation with untruth never forecloses the possibility of authenticity; rather, it is semblance which enables the possibility of our encountering truth in the first place. In *Question*, however, Heidegger appears to assert that humanity occupies a cusp, and must either seize authenticity and harbor the saving power, or succumb to inauthenticity and invite the greatest danger. Recall that, "As a destining, [Enframing] banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing."³⁵

Therefore, even if someone were to defend Heidegger's position in *Question*, and argue that he retains the possibility of harboring the saving power, any such power is moot because Heidegger's account of MT robs Dasein of its primordial capacity to participate in revealing. This is because Heidegger reduces Dasein's horizon of possibility to a choice between two alternatives.

Our discomfort with Heidegger's thesis in *Question* is only amplified when we consider the origin of Heidegger's assertion that we face a choice concerning MT. While in *Being and Time*, "To Dasein's state of Being, *disclosedness in general* essentially belongs,"³⁶ in

³⁵ QCT 27

³⁶ BT 264

Question, Dasein must choose between truth and untruth. Thus “truth” and “untruth” are no longer conditioned by Dasein’s understanding, because if this were the case it would be impossible for Dasein to be compelled to choose between truth and untruth; Dasein, rather, would be the author of this unfolding.

In asserting that Dasein faces a choice between authenticity and inauthenticity Heidegger is reducing Dasein’s horizon of possibilities to a choice between a mere two possibilities. While one may defend Heidegger by arguing that by harboring the saving power Dasein retains openness regarding its future, because this fundamental choice emerges not from Dasein’s understanding, but rather from a destining which occurs prior to and conditions that understanding, Dasein is primordially closed off from authentic understanding of MT. This destining is Heidegger’s own interpretation of MT, issued from on high.

Heidegger’s critique of MT forecloses an authentic understanding of MT because even when we foster the saving power of technology we adopt Heidegger’s interpretation of MT. This interpretation, moreover, mistakes the present demands of Enframing and the present possibility of our resisting these demands for revealing itself. In order to enable an authentic understanding of MT we must instead

In failing to provide an account of absence in his critique, however, Heidegger forecloses the possibility of authentically understanding MT. Heidegger is unable to account for absence because he mistakes the challenging-revealing demand of Enframing—the present demand of a specific historical situation—for the essence of MT itself. Because in Heidegger’s schema MT is the necessary manifestation of historical forces, his inauthentic

understanding of MT reveals a teleological interpretation of historical development in Heidegger's thinking. This teleological assumption is tantamount to the mistake of presence Heidegger accuses Western metaphysics of committing.

Though this paper has been an exercise in the interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy, the reading advanced here may also usefully inform our understanding and interpretation of his infamous association with National Socialism. When we encounter Heidegger's error, his mistaking of the present demands of history for history's essence, we encounter the truly dangerous element of his philosophy—the latent assumption of a teleological development of history. In light of this, it becomes easier to understand why Heidegger might have mistaken National Socialism for an authentic intervention in history. By assuming not only that MT is the necessary development of history, but also that if this moment of history is supplanted, it is necessarily supplanted by his notion of the saving power, Heidegger is tacitly—and inauthentically—arguing that the history of Being unfolds by an internal principle, rather than by Dasein's participation.

There is therefore no absence to ground Dasein's projection. In either the case of the greatest danger or the saving power, our relationship to the future is determined by history's principle and not by Dasein's understanding. Dasein cannot project possibilities, but merely project toward history's telos. This theory of history thus necessarily forecloses Dasein's participation in revealing. Whether Dasein succumbs to the danger or harbors the saving power Dasein must in either case understand MT, and in turn history, inauthentically. As we established above, inauthentic understanding consists in using present-at-hand interpretations rather than truly projecting toward

absent possibility. In Heidegger's schema, Dasein is bound to be inauthentic because it is limited in either case to Heidegger's inauthentic understanding of history.

We ought instead to consider the essence of MT to be human understanding. This notion of MT is superior to Heidegger's because it does not rely upon or engender the inauthentic understanding of history which plagues Heidegger's notion. Though our understanding will be, proximally and for the most part, inauthentic, this notion of technology does not impose inauthenticity. Rather, because Dasein's understanding necessarily discloses Dasein in terms of its possibilities, Dasein retains the possibility not only of hearing the call of revealing, but moreover of authentically participating in revealing—that is, of truly Being.

To argue that we need not completely reject Heidegger's philosophy is not however to advocate complete acceptance of his philosophy. Our analysis has shown us that the greatest danger to humanity is an inauthentic understanding of history; an understanding which limits us to particular interpretations, to particular projections. We must therefore invoke Heidegger's philosophy carefully, as we ought to use all totalizing philosophies, because of the inherent propensity to explain too much, to foreclose too many possibilities, to lose sight of truth. Our present interpretation has shown how we might guard against gluttonous theorizing which seeks to reduce even the open future to present understanding by foregrounding absence and openness, but our work is necessarily incomplete. For to assume that the project of authentically engaging technology could somehow end, that we might someday establish a free and open relationship to the essence of technology, is to have fallen

victim to the metaphysics of presence and to conceal the openness which necessarily grounds our relationship to technology. Thus we must keep questioning, never forgetting that to authentically engage technology is at every moment to authentically engage our own understanding. The greatest danger is to excise one from the other.

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