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Technological Humanity

Dependence on technology is an essential aspect of human nature. Although humanity employs technology in various ways, each utilization—and arguably technology itself—is used as an attempt to prolong human life. The human condition can be described as the dissonance between our humanity and our devotion to technology. The work of philosophers such as Plato, Stiegler, and Heidegger provide reasoning for this relationship between humanity and technology. However, from evaluating the myth of Prometheus, in connection to Heidegger’s essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” as well as his lectures on cybernetics, emerges an understanding of the negative influence between technology and humanity, and the consequences this poses to society.

Stiegler analyzes the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, as told in Plato’s *Protagoras*, as an account for the origin of the relationship between technology and humanity; furthermore, this interpretation highlights the inherent association between technology and death. According to the story, Prometheus and his brother, Epimetheus, were charged with equipping all earthly beings with powers that would allow them to survive. Epimetheus distributed abilities to all the animals before realizing that—with nothing left to give—he had not equipped the humans with anything.ⁱ In this regard, Stiegler claims that “humans are the forgotten ones.”ⁱⁱ In response to his brother’s lack of attention toward humanity, Prometheus steals technê (“skill”) and fire from Zeus, gifting it to the humans. However, this action is depicted as the failure of Prometheus—which was simply a response to the earlier fault of his brother.ⁱⁱⁱ As Prometheus tries to compensate for his brother’s mistake, and complete the task Zeus charged them with, Prometheus resorts to stealing technê, which was never intended for humanity. Prometheus’ name means “forethinker”;

therefore, his ultimate error is his inability to predict Epimetheus' failure to complete the task. This dynamic itself reflects the relationship between technology and the human being. We understand that we lack some capability and then exploit some other faculty to try to overcome it; moreover, we use technology as a tool to achieve some task that we are incapable of completing ourselves. Yet in doing so, we often fail to foresee the possible consequences of the technology we develop. As demonstrated in the myth, technê itself is problematic as it is a stolen, all-too-human reflection of power and potential.

This myth proposes that humanity itself is simply a result of the initial mistake—namely, the error of Epimetheus to give the human sufficient powers for its survival, and subsequently Prometheus' failure to predict his brother's incompletion of the task. Technê is a quality of the gods, who possess it in a complete and infinite way; however, when it is stolen for humans, it is gifted in a deficient and tragic way. It is the only power humanity is equipped with, yet we are not properly capable of using or controlling it, as it is a divine power. The description of technê as theft in the story provides a fundamental explanation for why humanity exists between immortality and animals—in a technological life.

Prometheus supplies to humans the divine gift; but this gift is not *within* them, not inside of them, such as the case with the faculties of animals—which are bestowed *in* them by Epimedeus. Rather, technê stands outside of the human: it was subsequently attached to our nature.^{iv} Originally, humans were without technological capacity and completely fragile; however, once we were gifted technê it becomes *essentially* attached to us and it compensates for the perpetual weakness innate to human nature. As this skill remains outside of us, humanity has a dependent relationship to exterior objects to sustain our own survival, manifested through the technologies we employ. This myth of Prometheus demonstrates an attempt to account for why

humans have this link with technological thinking; furthermore, Stiegler's analysis provides an explanation for humanity's imperfect but dependent relationship to technology. We use technology as a supplement for our inability to overcome natural failures.

Humanity irrevocably relies on technology as a form of survival—striving to prevent death. We constantly use technology as an attempt to prevent or delay the inevitable. Clothes, food, medicine, housing, etc. are all products of technê that represent attempts to prolong life. With technology of the present day, when we post photos, articles, or upload information online, we strive to extend our individual self onto a permanent platform—we attempt to challenge the temporal character of our human nature. We are tied up in an essential way with our attempt to survive. In turn, this embeds within humanity a concentration on our death. Technê is utilized in various forms of products in order to make our life more comfortable. However, in improving skills in order to make our life easier, we emphasize our inherent weaknesses. For instance, the human being is not equipped to withstand environmental storms without protection or travel across the sky. So each time we use an umbrella when it is raining or take a flight on a plane, it highlights that these innovations are used out of necessity, in order to survive. Therefore, it is humanity's mistake to believe we can use technology as a method to achieve immunity from death, since humans only possess technê in relation to our inevitable mortality. Humanity is characterized by this futile attempt to harness technology as a means to stabilize our disorderly existence.

Throughout his various works, Heidegger examines this misunderstanding, and provides an explanation of the distribution of power between humanity and technology. In his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger argues that modern technology reveals itself to humans in how we demand an endless yield from nature, to exploit and use it.^v We are living

in a historical moment utterly embedded in technology; consequently, we understand all beings within the world as what Heidegger calls “standing reserve.”^{vi} “Standing reserve” is the idea that we treat everything in the world as objects we can use, and further, we are accustomed to and expect that they are readily available.^{vii} To better understand this idea, consider the following example. Imagine that you go to the store to get some eggs, but they are out. Since modern agriculture has produced a situation where eggs are expected to be readily available, one is prone to become annoyed or even angry once realizing they are not on the shelf. Technology from our present day has trained us to always expect them to be there, whenever we want them. This mindset, captured with the term “standing-reserve,” defines what Heidegger describes as the epoch of “enframing.”^{viii} According to Heidegger, enframing is the current historical moment, in which everything in the world reveals itself to humanity as standing-reserve—we relate to and understand objects as how they are useful to our own existence.

As a result of the pervasive nature of technology, this mentality has come to dominate society in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The attitude of standing-reserve has become an attempt to control or “challenge” nature, as Heidegger puts it.^{ix} However, it is not simply that we challenge nature; Heidegger claims that beings perpetually undergo the action of presenting themselves to humanity *to be challenged* (φύσις); moreover, the epoch of enframing is characterized by the activity of the particular beings in our world, and even Being itself, exposing themselves to the human as standing-reserve. Therefore, as this is initiated by beings in our world, our attempt to control nature is merely a response to this provocation.^x In this way, technology is not a faculty within our control—as typically presented—but is rather conditioning and controlling us.

Although Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology" is roughly seventy years old, in the present day we are still bound within this epoch of enframing, and arguably even more embedded within this standing-reserve mindset. Every day we view ourselves as dominating nature through technological advances—such as with the rise of the internet. Everybody has an endless access to information, people, resources, etc. Confused on a concept? Google it. Trying to find a certain person? Search for their online presence. Need a job? Reach out on LinkedIn. This enormous expanse of information tempts us to believe that we have the control—anybody has the ability to know anything, it is simply our decision to click on search. However, as Heidegger explains in his assessment of enframing, it is not that we have this authority or are choosing to take part in this activity. We do not harness technology and exercise our power over it, but rather the essence of technology directs our existence, taunting humanity to employ it. We thus use technology with a false sense of control.

A consequence of the epoch of enframing—that is, this historical moment in which we are challenged by technology to exploit nature—is our deteriorating relationship to humanity. This is demonstrated in the shift of society's values towards cybernetic thinking and technological advancement. The field of cybernetics is characterized by the human attempt to effectively achieve the goal one set for themselves. This concept is properly exemplified through the metaphor of sailing, from which the field got its name. A helmsman is sailing a predetermined route, but is blown off course, and must adjust their directions in order to reach their end goal.^{xi} Thus cybernetics can be seen as primarily concerned with *control*; moreover, humans exercise their control over nature in order to achieve the goal they set for themselves. This cybernetic view influences our thinking in our present society. The world is now understood as what can be manipulated in order to accomplish human goals. It is a mechanical

understanding of nature—as a mechanism—which must work to a certain human end.^{xii} The prevalence of cybernetic thought is evidently an effect of what Heidegger understood as enframing; furthermore, it is a consequence of perceiving the world as standing-reserve. When we only relate to beings as how they can support our own goals, we start to view the world as what can be exploited to our own use. The cybernetic mindset is detrimental as it defines what is valuable and respected in society solely in relation to its efficiency.

Technology has become the measure of success; furthermore, it has developed into our understanding of ethics. We see usefulness as the measure of whether or not something is “good”. The new standard, in this cybernetic mindset, is to value everything solely in regard to technological progression. Furthermore, anything which challenges this progress—such as ethical questioning—becomes a hindrance, an interruption to societal development.

The drive towards technology does not allow for ethical questions. For example, we have come to understand the very concept of intelligence through this cybernetic mindset. Consider the treatment of the humanities in comparison to STEM industries within society. A career in English is not guaranteed to become economically successful in the same way a STEM career may, and therefore not as valuable. Work such as English or philosophy does not produce the same efficiency toward technological development, such as computer science or engineering; therefore, society tends to disregard them and the humanities are often deemed inferior to these technical fields. Furthermore, some work within philosophy or other humanities could stand in opposition to technological advancement—and therefore must be ignored in a cybernetic society. Our understanding of “success” has become tethered to the cybernetic mindset; however, not everything in life can—or should—be directed toward accomplishing some end.

As a consequence of the cybernetic mindset invading societal values, which has resulted from enframing, humanity has begun directing the focus of life toward the maximization of efficiency. But consider a life that is solely cybernetic. In an existence which is focused only on the goal of efficiency there can be no appreciation of art, music, meditative thought etc. Within this thinking, they have no value since they have no immediately clear “use”. Such a completely cybernetic life would no longer simply be bound to technical life, but rather we would become a form of technology itself. In striving towards efficiency and completely cybernetic thinking, humanity loses what it means to be human. By its very nature, humanity is imperfect, weak, corruptible—exemplified through the myth of Prometheus. We are the “forgotten” beings, designed to spend our life attempting to survive every day, until our inevitable death. Our appreciation and relationship to technology is an attempt to escape our human faults. But in exclusively valuing technology, and constantly trying to achieve a completely cybernetic existence, we lose our humanity.

We possess technological thought in a deficient and destructive way. Technology is essentially attached to our existence—incapable of life without relying on different technologies, but simultaneously unable to exist as human while striving toward technological perfection. The promethean fault exemplified the instability of human existence. We attempt to harness technology in order to compensate for our weakness and delay our inevitable death. Humanity can never properly employ technology. Consequently, we now exist in the epoch of enframing, where all societal values are determined by the cybernetic mindset. The essence of humanity is threatened—bound to technology, we are disturbingly condemned by humanity’s own “gift.”

As a consequence of this relationship with technology, in the present day there are various innovations which are certainly dangerous and possibly harmful to humanity. There are

applications in which the sole focus is to keep people addicted to the product and capitalize on the users. Additionally, there is a lack of diversity among the CEO's and inventors of these products, whose values are implicitly presented in their work. Ultimately, there are various instances where technology at this time may have a damaging effect on humanity. Yet we are still bound to technology and constantly employing it.

Although we cannot separate ourselves from technology it does not mean that humanity is inherently destructive; however, emphasizing the negative relationship we have with technology is necessary. If we fail to recognize the level to which we are dependent on technology, and the ways it impacts societal values, humanity will continue to deteriorate. Within the context of the myth, humanity uses technê to try and become godlike—humans come to possess a power which does not belong to them, and ultimately cannot control. Although we cannot separate ourselves from technology, as we are essentially bound to it, we can approach its development with caution. People must act with humility when considering technological advancements in the current day. No one can predict the exceptional or possibly devastating consequences of technology to come; therefore, society must be cautious toward the dangerous possibilities of technological development. Humanity can never attain any omnipotent power through technological innovation; therefore, as humans we must humble ourselves in the face of technology in order to preserve our own humanity.

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ⁱ (Stiegler 187)

ⁱⁱ (Stiegler 188)

ⁱⁱⁱ (Stiegler 198)

^{iv} (Stiegler 187)

^v (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 321)

^{vi} (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 322)

^{vii} (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 322)

^{viii} (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 324)

^{ix} (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 320)

^x (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 324)

^{xi} (Heidegger 434)

^{xii} (Heidegger 434)