"Heidegger's Argument in the First Two Sections of 'The Question Concerning Technology'"

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Martin Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" engages in "*questioning concerning technology*" in an attempt to "build a way" towards a "free relationship" with technology that "opens our human existence to the essence of technology."[1] The essence of technology, according to Heidegger, is not technology itself, or even "anything technological."[2] Instead, inquiry into Heideggerian "essence" involves getting at *"what* the thing is."[3] When Heidegger poses this question towards technology, two interconnected[4] answers arise immediately: "Technology is a means to an end" and "Technology is a human activity."[5] This "instrumental and anthropological definition of technology" is described as "so uncannily correct"[6] that it holds for technology of the past and the present (i.e., modern technology), but the questioning concerning technology does not end here because Heidegger makes a distinction between the "correct" and the "true." The correct has the potential to fix itself "upon something pertinent in whatever is under consideration," but only the true can bring us "into a free relationship with that which concerns us from out of its essence."[7]

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[1] 3 (all citations reference the edition of *The Question Concerning Technology* published by Harper Torchbooks in 1977)

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[3] 4 (emphasis in original)

[4] As Heidegger points out, these two answers are interconnected because "to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity (4).

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Going from the "correct" definition given above, Heidegger connects "means" with "effects" and then "effects" with "causes" to elicit a discussion of Aristotle's four causes.[8] Heidegger criticizes praise of this Aristotelian framework "as though the doctrine of the four causes had fallen from heaven as a truth as clear as daylight."[9] He proceeds to investigate "cause" so that the definition of technology does not remain "obscure and groundless."[10] He begins this investigation by pointing out that people[11] have said "cause" to ostensibly mean nothing more than "efficient cause" for "a long time."[12] This singular cause has come to "set the standard for all causality."[13] Heidegger does not simply endorse this view of causality, but instead proceeds by exploring the question of what unifies the (ostensibly four) modes of causality. He remarks that "the four causes are the ways, all belonging at *once* to each other, of being responsible for *something* else."[14] Applying this concept to the example of the silver chalice, Heidegger identifies the silver as the material cause, the "chaliceness" of the chalice as a formal cause, and the sacrificial rite as the final cause in a manner relatively consonant with Aristotle's framework. Despite this agreement, Heidegger demurs from a wholly Aristotelian view of causality by rejecting to identify the silversmith as an efficient cause. Heidegger claims that that the silversmith does "not at all, in working, brin[g] about the finished sacrificial chalice

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[8] i.e., 1) the material; 2)the form; 3)the end; 4)the efficient cause. Heidegger illustrates this with the example of the silver chalice. In that case, the causes are 1)the raw silver material; 2)the shape into which the silver is forced; 3)the sacrificial rite involving the chalice; 4)the silversmith.
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[11] Francis Bacon comes to mind.
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[14] 7 (emphasis added).

as if it were the effect of a making."[15] The silversmith's contribution is not his physical work but his careful consideration, his *logos*.[16]

Having outlined his conception of the four causes, Heidegger then proceeds to inquire into their "source of *unity*." The search for unity leads to a discussion of responsibility -- a term that relates to (and unites) all four causes. In this specific illustration, the four causes are responsible for "the silver chalice's lying ready before us as a sacrificial vessel."[17] In Heideggerian terms, the four causes are responsible for the chalice's "occasioning."[18] Drawing on Plato's language in his *Symposium*, Heidegger connects "occasioning" (and through this term his four causes) with the critical notion of "bringing-forth." He neglects to explicitly define this term, but he does comment that the term applies to manufacturing, artistic pursuits, *and* nature (*physis*) itself.[19] The difference between the first two categories[20] and nature is not that one lacks "bringing-forth" but instead that nature has "bringing-forth" in itself; the craftsman or the artist "has the bursting open belonging to bringing forth not in itself, but in another."[21] At this point, Heidegger need only make a few slight philosophical moves to connect "bringing-out" to "revealing."[22] "Bringing-forth" deals with bringing something that is currently in concealment

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[19] 10 Heidegger's (in my opinion very useful) example on the last point is flower blooming and bursting out of its bud.

[20] I.e., manufacturing and art

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[22] That is, the greek word "aletheia." A word that is apparently essential to Heidegger's magnum opus, *Being and Time*. I haven't read the work, but I take from a secondary source (http://www.ontology.co/heidegger-aletheia.htm) that the word's appearance here is striking and significant.

into a state of unconcealment, and coming into unconcealment "rests and moves freely within what we call revealing."[23]

After the dramatic crescendo that connects technology with the term "revealing," Heidegger points out that he appears to have strayed. He asks, "What has the essence of technology to do with revealing?" and then answers his own question with a dramatic, "everything."[24] From here, the focus shifts to explaining how technology's connection with "revealing" brings it beyond the label of mere "means" given earlier. Heidegger begins by making two etymological points about the root word of technology, *techne*. First, the Greek word is associated with the abstract arts of the mind and fine arts in addition to physical craftsmanship. Second, *techne* distinguishes itself from the similarly defined *episteme* in its being a form of *aletheia*; it describes an art that aims at *"revealing* what is to be brought forth" in distinction to actualized "making and manipulating."[25]

After making these claims, Heidegger addresses the potential objection that these definitional points ring true for Ancient Greek technology but fail to address 20th-century technology since "[i]t is said that modern technology is something incomparably different from all earlier technologies because it is based on modern physics as an exact science."[26] Heidegger agrees that modern technology is distinctly *modern*, but he maintains that it still is a revealing. He demonstrates this by allowing his "attention to rest on [the] fundamental [new] characteristic" of modern technology.[27] He identifies this characteristic as "challenging, which puts to nature the

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[25] 13 (emphasis added)
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unreasonable demand that it supply energy than can be extracted and stored as such."[28] Modern

agriculture serves to illustrate this point. Heidegger explains how the work of peasantry for

millennia did not "challenge the soil of the field."[29] In contrast, the *modern* agricultural schema

of the "mechanized food industry" challenges nature by -- to give just one example -- setting air

to yield nitrogen, earth to ore, ore to uranium, and uranium to yield atomic energy.[30] The

connection to revealing remains intact because this process -- modern technology's process of

"setting-upon that challenges forth the energies of nature"[31] -- involves "unlocking, transforming,

storing, distributing, and switching."[32] All of these processes are "ways of revealing."[33]

Having demonstrated that modern technology is a form of revealing, of unconcealment,

the next question is what the nature of this revealing. Heidegger at least partially answers the

question by introducing the phrase "standing-reserve." Critically different from merely "taking

stock," an object that is standing-reserve loses its sense of being as an object and continues to

exist only as a tool, as the product of man's "challenging revealing."[34] An airliner serves to

illustrate this point. While it may be understood as an object, i.e., the plane itself, it is more

properly understood as a standing-reserve to "ensure the possibility of transportation."[35] Notably,

in this example and in all conceivable examples, *man* is the being accomplishing the challenging

setting-upon. The state of affairs is not so simple, though, because man only sets out to challenge

when he *himself* is "already challenged to exploit the energies of nature."[36] Something *outside* of

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man compels facilitates the ordering revealing that is modern technology. Heidegger searches for this "gathering" that "concentrates man upon ordering the real as standing-reserve."[37]

This search yields the critical term "enframing." Just as the "mountain chain" unfolds the mountains and links them together or "disposition" leads to human emotion, enframing "gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing reserve."[38] Heidegger uses this term to address the fundamental inquiry that began this investigation. He states, "Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological."[39] Enframing also involves an extension of the definition of technology beyond the two given in the beginning of the essay.[40] This is because enframing necessitates a revealing that "comes to pass in conformity with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing-reserve."[41]

Despite this expansion of technology's essence at least partially beyond man, Heidegger returns to man's being challenged forth into revealing to comment on modern science. Man's challenging of nature leads to modern science, and this is particular true regarding modern physics. Heidegger points out that physics is not "experimental" because it questions nature with apparatus, but instead because it "sets nature up to exhibit *itself* as a coherence of forces calculable in advance."[42] This in turn leads to a discussion of whether technology came about as a historical result of theoretical physical science or vice versa. Through an interesting line of argument, Heidegger argues for the latter. He explains that "all coming to presence, not only

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[40] I.e., a means to an end or a human activity.
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[42] 21 (emphasis added)

modern technology, keeps itself everywhere concealed to the last."[43] Thus Heidegger can say, "from the point of view of the essence holding sway within it, [modern technology is] historically earlier than modern physical science."[44]

This discovery problematizes physics and leads to an epiphany regarding causality. Since physics "must resign itself ever increasingly to the fact that its realm of representation remains inscrutable" if it does not include modern technology, it will never be able to renounce "that nature reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information."[45] This invalidates any conception of either efficient or formal causes, since all viable causality has shrunk into a mere "*reporting* of standing-reserves" that cannot be justified by modern physics.[46]

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