

The Construction of the Attitude Towards Technology: A Reconsideration of Heidegger's The Question Concerning Technology

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Abstract: *Heideggerian studies on the philosophy of technology often focus on “technology as a mode of revealing”, neglecting the value of “opposing the neutrality of technology” This proposition is, in fact, the core thread running through Heidegger’s critique of technology: by deconstructing the “subject-object dualism” implicit in both the neutrality thesis and the autonomy thesis, he opposes both technological optimism and pessimism, arguing that the essence of technology, Gestell (Enframing), constitutes a structural determination at the ontological level. This critique bridges Heidegger’s early and later thought: the early “intentionality of equipment” already implies technology’s transcendental constitution of the structure of existence, while the later theory of Gestell elevates this to an internal mechanism within the history of Being. Reinterpreting “releasement” (Gelassenheit) via Zhuangzi-Free and Easy Wandering, this attitude is revealed not as ambiguous but as a positive response based on the ontological difference: while acknowledging the necessity of technology, it resists the “danger” (Gefahr) of the “forgetting of Being” by maintaining an openness to possibility.*

Keywords: Heidegger, Technology, Gestell, Gelassenheit.

1. Introduction

Among the many philosophers concerned with technology, Heidegger is undoubtedly unique. He connects “technology” with “Being” (Sein), exploring technology from an ontological perspective, elevating it to the height of first philosophy, even considering technology as “the completion of metaphysics” [1].

The Question Concerning Technology, as a key late text where Heidegger centrally addresses technology, has always been valued by researchers. However, the focus of previous studies has consistently been on starting from the discussion of the ancient Greek word “technē” (τέχνη) to introduce the proposition that “technology is a mode of revealing” [2]. This “revealing” (Entbergen) connects the core of the ontological system—“Being” (Sein)—with technology. Proceeding from the Greek word for technology to the mode of truth’s (Wahrheit) occurrence, it bridges the gap between epistemology and ontology [3]. While this line of argument solidly clarifies the process of Heidegger’s “thinking” (Denken), it overlooks the view of “opposing the neutrality of technology” clearly presented at the very beginning of The Question Concerning Technology. It treats this opposition merely as a given premise without sufficient justification.

This neglect is understandable, as Heidegger does not devote extensive space to specifically elaborating this view. However, it is precisely this inconspicuous viewpoint that holds the key to Heidegger’s philosophy of technology—his attitude towards technology and how humans should respond to it. Regarding Heidegger’s view of technology, many researchers often summarize it simplistically as “Gelassenheit” (releasement), considering his attitude ambiguous, or they point out the importance of “art” (Kunst) for addressing the technological crisis without delving deeper. Therefore, it is necessary to start anew from the viewpoint of “refuting the neutrality of technology,” combining previously clarified lines of thought, to find something solid and reliable amidst

the mysticism and ambiguity.

What is revealed by “refuting the neutrality of technology” is opposition to technological optimism, because optimism is founded on the neutrality thesis. Furthermore, Heidegger also opposes technological pessimism based on the autonomy of technology. Although these two seem unrelated, they share a common underlying presupposition. The ultimate point of refutation is Heidegger’s proposed “Gelassenheit,” but this attitude is not vague or ambiguous; it has a clear answer. The revelation of this answer depends on Heidegger’s borrowing and development of resources from Zhuangzi’s thought, and cannot be divorced from the research path leading from epistemology to ontology.

2. Refuting the Neutrality of Technology

The primary task is to clarify Heidegger’s definition of “technology.” The reason is that although Heidegger habitually uses poetic language, resulting in obscure texts filled with mysticism, both the concepts and arguments within the text are the product of Heidegger’s rigorous and meticulous thinking. Therefore, any of his discussions must revolve around defined concepts.

In *Overcoming Metaphysics*, Heidegger elaborates his definition of “technology”: “‘Technology’ ... always makes ready the totality of beings: objectified nature, implemented culture, fabricated politics, and ideas constructed by overstepping boundaries [1].” Heidegger vastly expands the extension of “technology.” It is not just machine manufacturing and equipment; even ideas are included within technology’s domain. On one hand, this means that as the focal point of Heidegger’s later thought, “technology” is tasked with participating in the construction of the ontological system. On the other hand, since technology’s extension is infinitely expanded to include “all regions of beings”, one cannot think about technology from its appearance. “If we seek the essence (Wesen) of ‘tree’ ... that which pervades and

holds sway through every particular tree as tree, is itself not a tree [1].” Technology is not merely “tools”, “production processes”, or similar things; it encompasses the entire human world, forming an epistemological mode for grasping the world as a whole. This extremely broad definition is precisely the foundation for thoroughly questioning technology in The Question Concerning Technology.

At the very beginning of The Question Concerning Technology, Heidegger points out that “questioning technology” means “corresponding to the essence of technology,” and the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. Technology can be called a “phenomenon”, and precisely because people are dazzled by the kaleidoscope of “phenomena,” they move ever further away from the essence of technology.

He then lists common views of technology: (1) Technology is a means to an end. (2) Technology is a human activity. These two definitions are actually one. Technology is used for human purposes, and its use necessarily requires human participation. This view leads to the “neutrality of technology”. Heidegger explicitly opposes technological neutrality: “Those who represent technology as something neutral evoke a troublesome semblance, as if it were precisely they who regard technology objectively, that is, examine it free of any valuation. Yet this semblance is deceptive [4].”

The so-called “neutrality of technology” is the view that technology’s value is neutral; whether it benefits or harms society does not depend on technology itself, but on human causes. As long as human problems are solved, no significant issues will arise no matter how technology develops [5]. But this view is untenable. If technology were truly completely neutral, depending solely on the user and unrelated to technology itself, why would people feel anxiety about technology potentially “replacing humanity” [6]? The actual situation is not as optimistic as the “neutrality of technology” supposes. Since the “neutrality of technology” is not unassailable, the technological optimism based on it naturally also deserves refutation.

Technology itself also has an “intentional structure”. Taking common tools as an example, using a specific tool depends not only on our preference but, more importantly, on whether the tool’s “intentional structure” conforms to the actual need. Here, it is not humans who decide technology, but technology that decides humans. The view analyzing tools via an “intentional structure” was already mentioned in Heidegger’s early work Being and Time (Sein und Zeit): “The hammering itself discovers the specific ‘handiness’ of the hammer. ... [The hammer] not only has knowledge (Wissen) about the hammer’s equip mental character, but it also possesses this equipment (Zeug) in the most appropriate way [7].” In other words, tools (Zeug) have their specific “in-order-to” (Um-zu), and the place of any tool is determined through its use.

3. Revealing the Essence of Technology — Gestell (Enframing)

If the customary view is inadequate, how then should one question the essence (Wesen) of technology? Heidegger turns back to Aristotle’s doctrine of the four causes. Taking a

sacrificial silver chalice as an example: The raw material “silver” is the *causa materialis* (material cause); the appearance and form of the chalice are the *causa formalis* (formal cause); the purpose for making the chalice is the upcoming sacrificial rite—the *causa finalis* (final cause); the silversmith is the *causa efficiens*; it is through the silversmith’s labor that the chalice is produced [1]. Because the “four causes” are intimately interconnected, they “occasion” the chalice as the product.

The silversmith must select materials, consider requirements, plan the manufacturing process, and finally bring these modes of occasioning together through “consideration” (*überlegen*), crafting the chalice. Heidegger argues that this “consideration” is rooted in “ἀποφαίνεσθαι”, meaning: to bring forth into appearance [8]. Heidegger argues that the silversmith neither simply operates nor creates something out of nothing [9], but rather engages in an “occasioning” or gathering process.

Through this specific example of making the chalice, Heidegger begins to analyze the meaning of the word “technē” (τέχνη). He finds that from early ancient Greece to Plato’s time, “τέχνη” was always closely related to “ἐπιστήμη” (*epistēmē* [knowledge, understanding]). “Both words are names for knowing (*Erkennen*) in the widest sense. They mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and be expert in it [1].” Thus, Heidegger connects technology with “cognition”, “knowledge”, endowing technology with epistemological significance. Technology becomes a mode of revealing.

The questioning of technology is thereby brought into the realm of “the question concerning truth”, that is, the realm of unconcealment. What does this “revealing” (*Entbergung*) mean? For Heidegger, it means a “challenging-forth” (*Herausfordern*). In short, technology is an irresistible force that fills people’s minds with only utilitarian thinking.

Under this coercive force, everything is “commanded” or “ordered”. All beings are placed into a singular chain. For Heidegger, this is a “setting-upon” (*Stellen*), revealing reality as standing-reserve (*Bestand*), and it is humans who perform this setting-upon. But this does not mean humans can rest easy, because humans themselves belong more primordially to standing-reserve than nature does [1]. For in many cases, humans are measured only by whether they can produce benefits. After the above analysis, the essence of technology becomes apparent: it is “Gestell” (*Enframing*).

This view leads to the misconception that Heidegger holds an “autonomy of technology” thesis—that technology possesses its own will, “Technology has long since shaken off the constraint of being a mere means. On the contrary, technology itself drags man behind it as its instrument [10].” This technological autonomy thesis is the theoretical basis for technological pessimism. But contrary to this, Heidegger’s path of revealing necessarily opposes technological autonomy. The premise of technological autonomy—splitting humans and technology apart—presupposes that humans have one essence and technology another. However, by interpreting technology as a mode of revealing, Heidegger shows that within this revealing process, the essence of technology, Gestell, gradually unfolds. Gestell as a fateful mode of

revealing is sent as the destiny of Being. Technology and humanity trace back to the same origin. This reveals the internal contradiction of technological autonomy.

Although Gestell is sent as destiny, this violent mode of unconcealment re-conceals. Because unconcealing "Being" is not limited to technology alone. But when people become intoxicated by technology's conveniences, the other paths (Weg) to "Being" quietly close. Under the rule of modern technology, humans reduce all beings to calculable, manipulable objects. This "forgetting" constitutes the fundamental "danger" (Gefahr).

4. "Gelassenheit" (Releasement) and Possibility

How should humans face this "danger"? Heidegger proposes the attitude of "Gelassenheit" (releasement) as an existential (existenzial) response to the situation where "everything is set up as standing-reserve." So-called "Gelassenheit" means simultaneously saying "yes" and "no" to technology: humans use technology while, in its appropriate use, retaining their own position independent of technology [11]. Heidegger's seemingly ambiguous attitude has led to differing interpretations of "Gelassenheit." Two representative views are:

One view holds that Heidegger is hostile to technology. This inclination can be seen in the description in *The Question Concerning Technology* of "beings being transformed into standing-reserve." But this is merely a matter of personal preference, for Heidegger acknowledges that "technology is a mode of revealing," also a "sending" (Schicken) of the "destiny of Being" (Geschick des Seins). Moreover, in the 1969 Le Thor seminar, he compared Gestell to the "negative" (Negativ) of Ereignis (Appropriation) [12]. Interpreting this personal preference as "hostility" is an overinterpretation.

Another view emphasizes Heidegger's focus on "art," believing that Heidegger's solution is to save beings from the danger of being alienated into standing-reserve through art. But whatever kind of art, it seems difficult to overcome the "danger," making this view seem "empty". The reason for reaching this impasse lies precisely in not having a holistic grasp of *The Question Concerning Technology*, focusing only on the "epistemology-ontology" line of reasoning. Therefore, precisely at the final point of "attitude," one encounters an insurmountable chasma. Only by combining the line of thought with the attitude can one grasp Heidegger's implied meaning—namely, the pursuit of "possibility".

The characteristic of "art" lies in its ambiguity. Heidegger considers ambiguous "art" also a "mode of revealing." This warrants consideration: Why can something ambiguous, non-unique, also "reveal," also question "Being"? Heidegger uses Zhuangzi's Free and Easy Wandering as his intellectual resource:

Zhuangzi said: "Now you have this big tree and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, ... If it isn't useful, then what could entrap or afflict it?" [10].

For Zhuangzi, the "useless" (wu yong) also becomes "useful" (you yong). This is not degrading the "useless" to "useful"; for Heidegger, the relation of "useless" to "useful" is precisely the primordial "sending" of "Being" (Sein) to "beings" (Seiendes). Rather than Heidegger emphasizing art alone, it is precisely "art" through its ambiguity and mystery that corresponds to the characteristic of possibility, hence its importance to him. Heidegger emphasizes the pursuit of diverse possibilities. Thus, attitude and method become one. The attitude humans should hold is simultaneously the method they should adopt: an "openness" or "clearing" (Lichtung) for possibility.

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