

Self vs. Un-Self

The Ancient Origin of Technological Thinking

Bryan Turley

Contents

Introduction	3
Technology as Mode of Revealing	3
Technology as Utilitarian Hierarchy	4
The Technological Self	5
Technology as Fearful Dominion	6
Revealing Revelation	8
References	9

Introduction

In his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, Martin Heidegger identifies the essence of modern technology not as anything obviously technological, but rather as the way reality has revealed itself to humanity throughout the modern era. He dubs this revealing “Enframing”, and it contains within it the demand that humanity ever more efficiently order and reorder a universe of mere resource. Anarcho-primitivist writer Darren Allen reconsiders the utilitarian relationship between humanity and the rest of existence we see in Heidegger’s concept of Enframing as one defined more fundamentally by fear, which allows him to date the inception of technological thinking not to the dawn of modernity but to the dawn of civilization. In doing so, he identifies a deeper source of the danger Heidegger believes modern technology poses to humanity and makes the means by which Heidegger believes we might transcend that danger even more explicit.

Technology as Mode of Revealing

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Martin Heidegger argues that the essence of modern technology, what truly differentiates it from the tools that preceded it, is not some attribute that can be glimpsed in the objects to which we might give that name; that is, “modern technology” is not a genus defined by what it contains. Rather, Heidegger claims, it is the result of a particular way that reality reveals itself to humanity, and it is that mode of revealing, which he terms “Enframing”, that has defined our reality throughout the modern era. Heidegger acknowledges¹ that this claim might seem counterintuitive since, chronologically, the sophisticated technology we’ve used to understand our universe as quantifiable would seem necessarily to precede that understanding. However, it is not that we have successfully quantified our universe due to the sophistication of our technology, but the reverse: our technology has been designed in such a way because we believe our universe to be quantifiable. Certainly, the information that we have gleaned about our universe by means of our technology is by no means wrong; rather, it is merely *correct*, “but precisely through these successes the danger can remain that in the midst of all that is correct the true will withdraw.” For Heidegger, the fact that reality now² *only* appears to us as orderable and quantifiable is the supreme danger to our understanding of existence and our place in it.³

¹ Heidegger, 2013, p. 29

² Heidegger, 2013, p. 26

³ Ibid., p. 26

Technology as Utilitarian Hierarchy

The threat that Enframing poses to our experience of truth lies in its imperceptibility, and it is an imperceptibility that cannot be overcome with a sharper lens, because Enframing *is the lens*. Heidegger's metaphor for our experience of reality is a clearing in the woods: everything we can identify as a component of our reality must enter that clearing before we can gain the slightest awareness of it, even enough to know that we know nothing about it. We will never find⁴ Enframing *within* the clearing because *it is the clearing*, just as the modes of revealing that preceded Enframing constituted their own clearings within which humanity stood at earlier historical epochs. In this sense, there has always been some mediation between humanity and our experience of reality, some way that it was destined to appear to us. But Enframing is⁵ unique; rather than revealing a universe of objects that either bloom forth into our experience of them, as in the case of the natural world, or that we ourselves bring into being by means of art or handicraft, we are made to see all of existence as a uniform resource to be endlessly extracted, ordered, and rearranged, what Heidegger calls "standing-reserve". Heidegger⁶ anticipates our skepticism of such an object-less universe this way:

Yet an airliner that stands on the runway is surely an object. Certainly. We can represent the machine so. But then it conceals itself as to what and how it is. Revealed, it stands on the taxi strip only as standing-reserve, inasmuch as it is ordered to ensure the possibility of transportation. For this it must be in its whole structure and in every one of its constituent parts, on call for duty, i.e., ready for takeoff.⁷

Enframing does not leave humanity idle in this object-less universe, however: its revelation of reality as standing-reserve contains within it the demand that humanity participate in the ordering and exploitation of that standing-reserve. We should understand Enframing, then, not⁸ only as a differentiation between humanity and standing-reserve, perhaps of the kind that previous modes of revealing made between subject and object (Enframing does not deal in objects, after all), but as the establishment of a hierarchy with humanity as the singular agent amidst a universe of undifferentiated resource. Heidegger acknowledges this implicit hierarchy with the most explicit language of domination:

[M]an...exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only

⁴ Heidegger, 2002, p. 30

⁵ Heidegger, 2013, p. 24

⁶ For Heidegger's consideration of other modes of revealing, see: Heidegger, 2013, p. 10. For his definition of standing reserve, see: Heidegger, 2013, p. 17.

⁷ Ibid., p. 17

⁸ Ibid., p. 18

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.⁹

After all, in a universe of standing-reserve, what else is there to encounter?

The Technological Self

This exploitative hierarchy between humanity and the rest of existence is also central to Darren Allen's diagnosis of the pervasive and accelerating assimilation of our world by technological thinking. His book, *The Apocalypedia*, proceeds from the common anarcho-primitivist claim of a historical rupture between Edenic prehistory and exploitative civilization and develops a phenomenological dichotomy between "self" and "unself" that powerfully echoes Heidegger's Enframing.¹⁰ It is exactly this similarity that makes Allen's analysis such a useful lens with which to reconsider Heidegger's: we are challenged to account for their differences.

One such difference exists in where the two thinkers place their technologizing medium with respect to the human subject. Heidegger's "clearing" is portrayed as a passive space within which entities are revealed to us, whereas Allen's analogous concept of a technological "self" that enables our representative experience of reality already *is us*. He describes self this way:

Self can be described as a mechanism (or tool) which uses calorific power to animate an organic apparatus (comprised of interrelated parts) which is capable of A) manifesting reality as sensations and feelings B) structuring reality into spacetime things and ideas and C) manipulating these things and ideas. Everything I physically sense (matter), inwardly feel (vibe), think (mind), and my motivating energy, occurs in, or as, the extraordinary machine of self.¹¹

It may be argued that this is merely a distinction and not a difference, that Heidegger would not deny that our experience of the "clearing" is biologically determined but rather argue that his project is only concerned with what the clearing reveals and how. However, making technological thinking identical with human subjectivity goes a long way to explaining Allen's dramatically different chronology of technology's spread. Where Heidegger observes a distinct rupture between traditional and modern technological practices that marks the arrival of modernity, Darren Allen instead describes a

⁹ Heidegger, 2013, p. 27

¹⁰ Allen's particular spin on this historical claim can be found at Allen, 2016, p. 185. Examples of skepticism regarding the beneficiality of sedentary civilization are numerous; a popular encapsulation of such claims can be found in Harari, 2011.

¹¹ Allen, 2016, p. 185

continuum of technological self-expansion that originates in prehistory and spans the entirety of human civilization. If modernity is the result of Enframing's emergence, so too can human civilization, from Allen's perspective, be viewed as the result of a changed relationship between the human subject and everything it is not, mediated by the technological self.

Technology as Fearful Dominion

Just as Enframing manifests an implicit hierarchy between humanity and a universe of standing-reserve, so too does Allen's concept of the technological self establish a hierarchy between that self and everything it is not. But where the former relationship might be defined primarily by utility, by the availability of standing-reserve for the fulfillment of human aims (even if the "regulating and securing" of standing-reserve becomes its own sole aim, as we'll see later), the relationship between self and not-self is defined primarily by fear:

The problem for ego [a term Allen sometimes uses interchangeably with self] is that this, the threat of unself, is literally everywhere and nowhere...this engenders a permanent feeling of primal fear, a constant background restlessness, anxiety, insecurity, worry, irritation, emptiness, indecision or boredom which - if self softens, if unself gets too close, or if ego's growth-through-addiction slacks - blows up into dread, violence, depression, horror, or chronic psychosis.¹²

Armed with this recontextualization of reality as a technological self beset everywhere by the hostile not-self of nature, we can now consider why Allen sees only a continuum between traditional and modern technology where Heidegger observes a breach. One example of this contradiction is Heidegger's consideration of agriculture, in which he contrasts traditional agricultural practices with both resource extraction and mechanized farming.¹³ Heidegger argues that what differentiates traditional agriculture from resource extraction and mechanized farming is that the modern technology at work in the latter two reveals nature to be mere resource to be ordered and stored, while traditional agriculture is a cultivation of nature rather than a negation of it. However, if we define technology as anything that subordinates nature to self, there is little distinction between the three practices; everything is resource for the defense and expansion of self. Traditional agriculture is so manifestly suitable for human ends because it is premised on the negation of what preceded it that was unsuitable: wilderness, and with it danger. Heidegger makes a similar comparison between a windmill and a hydroelectric plant, claiming that the former does not negate the wind while

¹² Allen, 2016, p. 190

¹³ Heidegger, 2013, p. 14-15

the latter reconceives the river into which it is set as mere standing-reserve to be exploited.¹⁴ If technological expansion is driven by the urge to dominate any threat to self, we see that same impulse present in both windmill and hydroelectric plant - only our ability to exploit the world around us has changed.

Just as we can find examples of Heidegger's technological categories breaking down in the modern era, we can also find, conversely, examples that would fit his definition of modern technology that far predate modernity. If the essence of modern technology is that it reveals existence as standing-reserve to be marshalled and deployed, what are we to make of all the armies and empires that have criss-crossed the Earth throughout history? What were the manufacture of huge caches of military equipment and the mobilization of thousands of soldiers across whole continents but the marshalling of resources in the never-ending pursuit of territorial security? It has been suggested that the ancient Roman understanding of being, particularly in contrast to that of their Greek contemporaries, may be understood as a kind of proto-Enframing, but in terms of imperial expansion, how different were the Romans from the¹⁵ Persians who preceded them, or the Arabs who came after them, or the Mongols after *them*, and so on? One can easily interpret imperial expansion (as well as its modern analog, *realpolitik*) as a response to this fear of otherness - whether that fear is conscious or otherwise. Indeed, then, as now, military action was often couched in terms of security. And just as ancient empires spread across continents, ostensibly to secure their safety, so too has the technological self, which mediates every human's experience of reality in the same way that Enframing does in Heidegger's model, rendered all of existence into mere resource for its defense and expansion. If we take this conception of technology as self-aggrandizement onboard, humanity's subjugation to technological thinking is far older and more pervasive than Heidegger appears to have imagined.

For Allen, then, the essence of technology is not only the revelation of nature as exploitable resource, but also the intrinsic purpose of that revelation - self-preservation:

If the self-machine is questioning itself about what is beyond itself - or where self comes from - no answer it finds, ultimately, is ever going to make sense; and if the self-machine is operating itself no solution, ultimately, is ever going to work; because everything that I say, see, feel, and do is, ultimately, motivated by an inapt selfish [genetic-mental-emotional] impulse. Ultimately, the only message a machine can give itself - that can make sense to a machine that creates its own programming, or attempts to understand itself with itself - is 'expand, defend, and avoid death'. *Forever*.¹⁶

This once again echoes Heidegger's conception of modern technology as the product of Enframing, which he also characterizes as lacking any kind of guiding purpose be-

¹⁴ Heidegger, 2013, p. 14-16

¹⁵ Carman, 2019

¹⁶ Allen, 2016, p. 188, brackets and emphasis in the original ¹⁷ Heidegger, 2013, p. 16

sides its own persistence.¹⁷ But Allen's analysis reveals that the purpose of technology, modern or otherwise, is and always has been this aggrandizement of the self.

Revealing Revelation

Despite their differing chronologies of humanity's assimilation by technological thinking, Heidegger and Allen both agree that reflection on the very fact that reality can manifest itself to us technologically is the only means by which we may regain some measure of freedom within the digitized order of such a reality. What Heidegger refers to as the "saving power", which he proposes will allow us to regain the free expression of our human essence, is the apprehension that reality may manifest itself to us in a variety of ways, of which Enframing is only one, and that this revelation is not any exercise of our power (for example, via the pursuit of modern physics) but is rather a quality of our human being. Unfortunately, our experience of reality is so thoroughly mediated by self and by Enframing that we "can never take up a relationship to it only subsequently":

Thus the question as to how we are to arrive at a relationship to the essence of technology, asked in this way, always comes too late. But never too late comes the question as to whether we actually experience ourselves as the ones whose activities everywhere, public and private, are challenged forth by Enframing. Above all, never too late comes the question as to whether and how we actually admit ourselves into that *wherein Enframing itself comes to presence*.¹⁷

Just as Allen's concept of self can be analogized to Enframing, so too does he propose an analog to Heidegger's saving power: unself. This is a very, though perhaps not completely, different concept than what Allen means when he uses the same term to describe "that which self understands to be opposed to it", which might be better termed "not-self". Unself, by contrast, can be defined as the phenomenological experience of human being that exceeds what is captured by the mechanism of self, most notably that *one in fact possesses a self to which reality appears*. And just as Heidegger exhorts us to "ponder this arising"¹⁸ of Enframing, Allen, in prescribing how one might possibly overcome the self, writes: "Ask yourself who it is that sees, thinks or feels [reality] and experience the hyper-subtle sense of youness, that you've had all your life, that precedes an answer."¹⁹

The purpose of such reflection is the same for both thinkers: to reveal revelation itself as a contradiction of otherwise totalizing conceptions of reality, and thus a

¹⁷ Heidegger, 2013, p. 24, my emphasis

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 32

¹⁹ Allen, 2016, p. 196

contradiction of their constitutive dichotomies. Standing-reserve is only one way that reality may manifest itself, and so the utilitarian relationship humanity has had with it throughout modernity is only one possible relationship; the technological self is only one way of interfacing with existence, and so its insistence on dominating everything around it is not absolute. Since it was the establishment of these dichotomies that dictated humanity's relationship with existence, their abolition permits us a fuller definition of what it means to be a human being.

References

Allen, Darren (2016). *The Apocalypedia*. UIT Cambridge Ltd.

Carman, Taylor (2019). *The Question Concerning Technology*. Later Heidegger, 14 November, Columbia University, New York City.

Harari, Yuval N. (2011). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harper.

Heidegger, Martin (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, Martin (2013). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. HarperCollins.

The Ted K Archive

Bryan Turley
Self vs. Un-Self
The Ancient Origin of Technological Thinking

<www.academia.edu>

www.thetedkarchive.com