**“The Question Concerning Technology” by Martin Heidegger**

Heidegger gave a series of four lectures to the Bremen Club in 1949; “The Thing,” “The Enframing,” “The Danger,” and “The Turning.” “The Enframing” was later revised as “The Question Concerning Technology” and presented to the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in 1953. In it Heidegger uncovers the *essence* of technology as a *challenging* which *sets upon* nature, forcing it to exist for us as mere standing-reserve. He calls this essence, *enframing*.

Technology as the Instrumental (Causality)

The first thing to realise is that the essence of a thing is never the thing itself. All of the many varieties of trees in the world share an *essence*, ‘treeness’, but ‘treeness’ is by no means a tree. In the same way the essence of technology won’t be technological in nature.

According to popular opinion, technology is a means and a human activity. Heidegger calls this the *instrumental* and *anthropological* definition. This is, of course, correct, but has not reached the essence of technology. Still, we can use this understanding of technology as instrumental as a starting point.

All instrumentality has its roots in causality and for this Heidegger turns to Aristotle’s four causes; the material, the form, the final, and the efficient. These days we only recognise the efficient cause but Heidegger performs his etymological magic to uncover that what we call ‘cause’ was actually *aiton* to the Greeks, which means ‘that to which something is indebted’. The four causes are actually “the ways… of being responsible for something else” and in so being, they “bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing.” In other words, they are a *bringing-forth*, a *poiesis*. All bringing-forth is a *revealing*, that is, that which “brings out of concealment into unconcealment.” This means that technology (grounded on the four causes inherent in instrumentality) is a way of revealing.

Technology as a Setting-upon

Modern technology is not a bringing-forth in the sense of revealing or *poiesis*, however, rather it is a “revealing that… is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.” Heidegger gives the example of the peasant sowing grain in the field which is a working *with* the land as opposed to the mechanised agricultural industry which *sets upon* nature.

This challenging-forth which is a setting-upon unlocks what is concealed in nature, transforms it, stores it, distributes it, and switches it about (to be used in the service of different endeavours). What is unique to this means of unconcealment or revealing is that, “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve.” Whatever is revealed in this way is no longer an object for us.

The Essence of Technology – *Ge-stell* [Enframing]

What’s interesting about this is that, while we accomplish the setting-upon, humans have no control over unconcealment itself and this means that *we* are challenged and ordered in the same way as the natural world which is challenged by and ordered as standing-reserve for us. Heidegger gives the example of a forester who, in walking the forest and felling trees, appears to be doing the same thing his grandfather did but who is actually “ordered by the industry that produces commercial woods”. Because we are “challenged more originally than are the energies of nature [though]… [we are never] transformed into mere standing-reserve.” Our role in the unconcealing is merely to be a response to the “call of unconcealment… [in which we have] already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges [us] to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve.” This challenging which *gathers* humans in this way Heidegger calls *Ge-stell*, or enframing. And enframing is the essence of technology.

Heidegger offers one last comment in this section regarding modern physical science in relation to technology. Considered chronologically the former, beginning in the 17th century, appeared before the latter, which was developed only in the second half of the 18th century. However, modern physics, because it is a “gathering-together, which challenges man to reveal by way of ordering”, is actually built on technology, that is to say, the *essence* of technology. Historically, when we consider essences, technology precedes physics.

Destining, Freedom and Danger

Anything that “first starts man upon the way of revealing” Heidegger calls a *destining*. It is only from destining that the essence of all history emerges. History isn’t made from human activity, human activity “first becomes history as something destined.”

Now, destining is not *destiny*, in the sense of an unavoidable fate. In fact, the essence of freedom, which has nothing to do with the human will or causality, is, for Heidegger, not something we *have* or even *are*, but more something we participate in. Freedom is intimately connected with revealing and all revealing also, at the same time, conceals. This is important because there can’t be any freedom without concealing, but a concealing which opens to light. Contrary to modern opinion, unfettered arbitrariness is not freedom. Freedom belongs to the destining because it is this which “starts a revealing on its way” and as we have noted, freedom only manifests in revealing. So humans *become* free only to the degree that they belong to a realm of destining.

Since destining starts us on one way of revealing, it necessarily blocks off other possible ways. This makes destining a *danger*. Enframing, in particular, is the “supreme danger” for two reasons. First, it pushes humanity to the point where we ourselves will eventually have to be taken as standing-reserve. However, second, with our technological prowess we will imagine ourselves to be lords over the earth and so come to believe that everything around us only exists inasmuch as we construct it. This will mean that everywhere we turn we will only encounter ourselves.

The truth is precisely the opposite of this. Nowhere do we encounter ourselves, i.e. our *essence* as ek-sisting beings, anymore. The reason for this is that enframing conceals that mode of revealing (*poiesis*) which lets beings come forth as they are.

The Saving Power

However, there is a *saving power* at the heart of technology’s essence. This saving power allows us to overcome the danger of the enframing and manifests before us if we catch sight of the essence of technology. This awareness breaks the spell, if you like, of the enframing. As long as we continue to “represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it.” The act of reflecting on the essence of technology lets us see it for what it is and summons us to “experience this essential unfolding as the destining of a revealing… [in which we can safekeep] the essence of truth.”

Heidegger finishes this lecture by pointing out a more primal revealing that could illuminate the saving power for us, in the revealing that brings forth and makes present (and is therefore *poiesis*) in the fine arts. In this poetic revealing, we may be able to “foster the growth of the saving power” directly.