

2018

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Daniel Dahlstrom. 2018. "Im-position: Heidegger's analysis of the essence of modern technology." In: Heidegger on Technology. pp. 39-56. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561226-3>
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/35762>

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Im-position: Heidegger's Analysis of the Essence of Modern Technology

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[“Im-position: Heidegger’s analysis of the essence of modern technology.” *Heidegger on Technology*. Edited by Aaron Wendland, Christos Hadjioannou, Christopher Merwin. New York: Routledge, 2018. Pages 39-56.]

One of Heidegger’s initial moves in “The Question Concerning Technology” is to call attention to the difference between *Technik* and its essence. When we are looking for the essence of a tree, he notes, we are not looking for something that is itself a tree. So, too, the essence of *Technik* is “completely and utterly nothing *Technisches*.”¹ Initially, Heidegger offers no argument for this claim (pragmatists might dispute it), but it has a certain prima facie plausibility. What a [bit of know-how](#) is—the essence of [Technik as a technique or mechanical art](#)—is arguably not itself [necessarily](#) a [bit of know-how](#), any more than what technical equipment is—the essence of [Technik as equipment](#)—is itself a piece of equipment.²

But these considerations still leaves us questioning what exactly Heidegger has in mind by ‘essence.’ This line of questioning, which Heidegger no doubt means to induce, becomes all the more pressing, given the extraordinary importance he attaches to determining the essence of technology. His aim in posing the question of the essence of technology is “to prepare a free relationship to it” (ibid.). After stipulating that such a relationship is free “if it opens our being-here up to the essence of technology,” he adds: “If we correspond to this essence, then we can experience the technological [*das Technische*] in its limits” (ibid.). By contrast, we fail to experience our relation to the essence of technology and find ourselves involuntarily chained to technology, as long as we remain preoccupied simply with technology, whether by pursuing and affirming it or by evading it, denying it, or even resigning ourselves to it. “Worst of all,”

Heidegger adds, we are at the mercy of technology if we regard it as something neutral, since doing so completely blinds us to its essence (ibid.).

Heidegger's preoccupation with analysis of essences is not new. Particularly in 1929 and 1930, he investigates the essence of ground, of truth, and of human freedom. There is a common pattern to these analyses that sheds considerable light on what he is looking for when he probes an essence. Moreover, this pattern re-appears in his inquiry into the essences of technology and modern technology in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (hereafter 'QT'). Accordingly, as a means of facilitating an examination of that inquiry, I begin with a review of his essentialist analysis in the essay "On the Essence of Truth" (hereafter 'OET').

There are additional reasons to examine QT in light of OET. OET anticipates central themes of QT, demonstrating Heidegger's early concern with the issue of technology. Moreover, stemming from a public lecture first held in 1930, OET is first published by Heidegger in 1943, but then re-published in 1949 and 1954, with additional notes in each case. The dating of these re-publications corresponds with the dates of the first version of QT (the second Bremen lecture, entitled *Das Gestell*) and the published version respectively. Hence, when Heidegger publishes these subsequent versions of OET with their amplificatory notes, he does so with the content of QT very much in mind.

An additional reason for dwelling on OET is the fact that, by Heidegger's own reckoning, it marks a watershed in the development of his thinking. In a "Remark" added to the 1949 edition, he notes that OET was supposed to be followed by a companion essay on the truth of essence. The language of metaphysics hampered him, as he puts it, from bringing this to fruition. Nonetheless, he contends that OET, despite the appearance of keeping to the path of metaphysics, belongs to the overturning of metaphysics, precisely by virtue of taking the

decisive steps beyond truth as correctness (more on this below). Those steps coincide with a progressive determination of the essence of truth according to a pattern of essential analysis that Heidegger repeats in QT.

In the following paper, after reviewing (1) Heidegger's essentialist analysis in OET, I turn to (2) the essentialist analyses in QT and their parallels with OET, with a view to their implications for the goal of developing a free relationship to the "essence" of modern technology.³

1. The essential analysis in OET

The 1954 edition of OET contains an opening footnote identifying the three senses of essence.

(OET₁) Essence: 1. Quidditas – the What – *κοινόν*; 2. Enablement – condition of the possibility; 3. Ground of the enablement. (*P* 136a)

His essentialist analysis of truth is structured accordingly, beginning with the ordinary or customary concept of truth.

1.1 What is truth?

Whether we think of a true friend, conforming to our idea of friendship, or a true observation, agreeing with the way things are, truth appears *prima facie* as a form of correctness. This correctness, Heidegger observes, is captured by the medieval conception of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. To be sure, on that conception, the correspondence of a thing (*res*) with an understanding of it (and vice versa) is grounded in the fact that things are created in accordance with the divine intellect and its understanding of them. In modernity, human

subjectivity in one form or another (e.g., Descartes' cogito, Kant's transcendental subject) takes the place of the divine mind, thus profoundly altering but not fundamentally undermining the traditional definition. The basic idea of the order of such an agreement or correspondence (between things and minds) can persist and be represented as a "world order" (*Weltordnung*) even with the dissolution of the role played by a divine mind/creator. In this connection, Heidegger gives his first preview of the technology issues within OET.

Taking the place of the theologically conceived order of creation is world (OET₂) reason's ability to plan all objects by giving the law to itself and thus also laying claim to the immediate intelligibility of its way of proceeding (what one calls 'logical'). (P 139)

With this development, the question of truth seems to be settled. The attribution of truth (even to things) is increasingly construed as conformity to some rational conception, one that increasingly dispenses with considerations of the essential sense of 'being' with respect to beings.

1.2 The internal enablement (condition of the possibility) of truth as agreement

Heidegger begins this second phase of the analysis by noting the familiar problem of using the terms 'agreement' or 'correspondence' (translations of *adaequatio*) in connection with assertions. Although the assertion must match up (*Angleichung*) with something, this matching cannot take the form of an overt similarity or alignment. Instead, this matching consists in placing something before (*vor-stellt*) whoever makes or understands the assertion, and, indeed, presenting it as it is. "Suspending all 'psychological' and 'consciousness-theoretical' preconceptions, presenting here means 'letting the things stand opposite as object'" (P 141). The object necessarily stands in an open area, opposite those who make or understand the assertion,

without ceasing to be self-standing and to show itself as such. The openness of that open area is “not first created by the presenting but instead [is] in each case only related to and taken over as a realm of relation” (ibid.). Those who place the object before them by way of assertions exemplify this relation (*Verhältnis*), as they relate (alternatively, comport themselves or behave: *Verhalten*) toward what is placed before them. “Standing in the open, they cling [*sich hält*] in each case to something manifest [*Offenbares*] as such” (ibid.).

The behavior varies, depending upon the sort of beings and the manner of behaving or relating to them. But all action and work takes place within the openness of a region within which beings can explicitly position themselves as to what and how they are, and within which it becomes possible to say as much. An assertion is a way of presenting something to us and, indeed, presenting it not only as such and such, but also truthfully (so long, of course, as the assertion articulates it such as it is). If, for example, I can truthfully (correctly) say ‘the car in front of us is turning left,’ it is because the car presents itself to us as such at an intersection and because, in making the assertion, I am focused on the car in this respect. The punch line here is that the assertion owes its correctness (truth) to a way of relating (behaving) towards something, where both the one relating (behaving) and the object to which she relates stand in some open expanse. According to Heidegger, since this complex relation makes truth as correctness possible, it is the essence of truth “in a more legitimate sense” (P 142). In the scenario just flagged, for example, the intersection is the open area in which we behave in a certain way towards the car; the assertion makes explicit—but thereby also depends upon—the car in front of us, what it is doing, and the disclosure of the same to us (truth allegedly “in a more legitimate sense”).

1.3 The ground of the enablement of a correctness

Heidegger's next move is to inquire into the ground of what enables an assertion's correctness, i.e., the ground of the complex just described. This enablement is only possible on the basis of being free for what manifests itself within the open expanse described above. "The behaving's character of standing in the open as the internal enablement of correctness is grounded in freedom. *The essence of truth, understood as correctness of the assertion, is freedom*" (P 142). To return to the example given above, the truth of the assertion depends not only on how I behave towards the car but also on my freedom to do so. If something blocks my view, if solar glare suddenly flashes before me, if something is pre-occupying me, or the like, my freedom of relating to the car and being free for it, the freedom that enables the car to disclose itself to me is canceled. In this way, that freedom on my part is a necessary, grounding condition of what Heidegger deems truth in a "more legitimate" sense than truth as correctness.

With this identification of the essence as that ground, Heidegger has completed the three steps of his analysis:

- (1) What truth is: the correctness of an assertion;
- (2) The internal enablement of (1): the behavior of standing in the open, allowing what is there to manifest itself;
- (3) The ground of (2): being free for what is manifest within the open.

In other words, freedom is the essence of truth insofar as it is the ground of the internal possibility of truth as correctness.⁴

To be sure, identifying freedom as the essence of truth is by no means the end of the story and for obvious reasons.⁵ Freedom is the ground of the internal possibility of correctness only because it "receives its own essence from the more primordial essence of the truth that is alone

essential” (*P* 144). Heidegger explains this last remark by introducing a way of thinking about freedom that anticipates once again his thinking about technology.

The freedom for what is manifest within an open expanse lets the
(OET₃) respective entity be the entity that it is. Freedom reveals itself now to be the
process of letting entities be. (ibid.)

Part of the danger of the essence of modern technology is precisely the threat to fail to let beings be—to fail to be released (*gelassen*) to them.

Heidegger acknowledges that talk of letting something be usually means that we have next to nothing more to do with it. It has the negative sense of disregarding, indifference, and even omission. But he insists that his talk of letting beings be is the very opposite.

To let be is to embrace [literally, to let oneself in for: *Sich einlassen auf*] entities.
This, of course, is understood not only in the sense merely of handling, securing,
caring, and planning for the entities respectively encountered or sought
(OET₄) out. Letting be—letting the entities be, namely, as the entities that they are—
means embracing the open expanse and its openness into which each entity stands
forth, bringing that expanse as it were with it. (ibid.)

In its inception, Western thinking conceived this expanse as ἀλήθεια, as the “unhidden” (though it is usually translated as ‘truth’). Herein lies the explanation for Heidegger’s remark about freedom, as the ground of truth, receiving its essence “from the more primordial essence of the truth that is alone essential.” That primordial truth is the unhiddenness of things, entailing all the reverberations of presupposing hiddenness, and the freedom that consists in letting beings be is the freedom for this unhiddenness. “The freedom, understood in this sense as letting beings be,

fulfills and implements [vollzieht] the essence of truth in the sense of the disclosure of beings” (*P* 146).

Freedom, as this unwilled implementation of the essence of truth in the primordial sense of disclosure, presupposes that disclosure, i.e., the unhiddenness of beings, which in turn supposes their hiddenness. “Older than every manifestness of this or that being,” hiddenness “is also older than the letting be itself,” which for its part, in disclosing, relates to the hidden (*P* 148). Sustaining this relating is “the mystery,” the hiddenness of beings as such, the hidden as a whole. Because the unhiddenness of truth that freedom implements supposes this hiddenness, it is integral to “the truth that is alone essential.”

Although there is no freedom without this mystery, i.e., no freedom that does not relate to the hiddenness of beings, this very relation remains hidden, not least given the all-too-human proclivity to “forget” it (*P* 149). Human beings are constantly relating to beings, leaving matters for the most part with this or that entity and its respective manifestness. Even where it is a matter of the first and last things, they keep to the “accessible and controllable,” so much so that, when they try to expand or alter the scope of what is manifest, they take their bearings from “the sphere of currently available aims and needs” (*ibid.*). Things may remain enigmatic, unexplained, and questionable, but the questions are self-assured and merely way-stations for routes that stay *within* what is currently available. “Where the hiddenness of beings as a whole is admitted only as a boundary that occasionally announces itself, the fundamental occurrence of hiding has sunk in oblivion” (*ibid.*).

The mystery of being is the fragile, fragmented, and fraught emergence of the unhiddenness of beings from a foregoing, ongoing, and enveloping hiddenness. All human behavior, invariably a way of relating to one being or other (or one complex of beings or

another), depends on this event—an event that is, in the final analysis, never under the control of human beings. Forgetting this mystery leaves human beings to their own “devices” (*Gemächte*).

Left standing in this way, humankind replenishes its “world” with the latest needs and goals, filling it out with its projects and plans. From the latter, human beings draw their measures for things, forgetting beings as a whole. They insist (OET₅) on these measures, and continually provide themselves with new measures without considering the ground of the measure itself and the essence of the measure. They go wrong in regard to their genuine, essential measures. They mistake themselves the more exclusively they take themselves qua subjects as the measure for all beings. (*P* 149–50)

The mystery of being, here as elsewhere, makes this human insistence on itself and its access to beings (*Gangbarkeit des Seienden*) possible, but it does so as “the essence of truth that has been forgotten and thus become ‘inessential’” (*P* 150).

‘Erring’ is Heidegger’s term for turning away from the mystery of being. Like fallenness within BT, errancy is not avoidable. It is inherent to being-here at all,⁶ defined as the latter is by its thrownness and projections, such that there is a distinctive manner of erring for every manner of behaving and relating to beings. Erring is made possible by the hiddenness of things that inherently accompanies every manifestation, i.e., unhiddenness of them.⁷ The sort of error familiar to philosophical doctrine, e.g., incorrect judgments or false cognition, is merely one manner of erring. Errancy dominates human beings, leading them astray.

Notably, however, in yet another anticipation of QT, Heidegger introduces the possibility of usurping this dominance.

But errancy, by leading astray, at the same time contributes to fashioning the possibility that, by virtue of experiencing the errancy itself and not

(OET₆) overlooking the mystery of being-here, human beings can come to extract from ek-sistence the possibility of *not* allowing themselves to be led astray. (*P* 151)

Heidegger follows up this hopeful remark with a dense reprise of reasons why human beings are subject to errancy, not least of which is—as noted above—the hiddenness itself (the “non-essence” included, along with the errancy, in the essence of truth), the freedom of letting beings be (insofar as it stems from the way the mystery holds sway in the errancy), and the fact that “every disclosure of a being is in itself at the same time the hiddenness of beings as a whole” (ibid.).

Though Heidegger does not complete the planned companion essay to OET, he signals what he understands by ‘essence,’ in reviewing the structure of the analysis in the essay. The analysis consists in tracing the internal possibility of truth as correctness back to its ground, while pointing to “the essential beginning of this ground in the hiddenness and errancy” (*P* 153).⁸

The point of the exercise is to realize that:

. . . the essence of truth is not the empty ‘generality’ of an ‘abstract’ universality, but instead the self-concealing singular character of the unique history of the

(OET₇) disclosure of the ‘sense’ of what we call ‘being’ and what for a long time we have been accustomed to consider only as beings in their entirety. (ibid.)

In order to think the truth of essence, it is thus necessary to break with entrenched philosophical and metaphysical traditions, collaborating in “an overturning of metaphysics” in the interest of preparing “a nearness to the truth of being” (*P* 154). Already in the first edition of OET, Heidegger glosses this kind of philosophical thinking that inquires into the full essence of truth.

This kind of thinking is the releasement [equanimity: *Gelassenheit*] of the mildness that that does not deny the hiddenness of being as a whole.

(OET₈) This kind of thinking is especially the resoluteness of the rigor that does not explode the hiddenness, but requires that its essence enter, unscathed, into the open area of conceiving and so into its own truth. (*P* 152)

This conception of thinking, invoking the notion of releasement, again anticipates a crucial aspect of Heidegger's thinking about technology, to which he returns repeatedly in the following decades.

2. The essential analysis in QT

In QT Heidegger pursues two essentialist analyses, each time following the template similar to that found in OET. After analyzing the essence of technology (2.1), he turns to analysis of the essence of modern technology (2.2), which serves as his platform for consideration of human freedom and the response to the essence of modern technology (2.3).

2.1 The essence of technology

Just as OET begins with a description of the ordinary understanding of truth (1.1 above), QT begins with the customary, readily accessible (*gängig*) notion of technology. Just as truth is commonly understood as correctness, so technology is commonly presented as a means and a human doing, resulting in instrumental and anthropological definitions of technology. (Since these two definitions belong together, I refer hereafter simply to the instrumental definition of technology, with the understanding that technology is thereby construed as an instrument in human hands.)

Just as Heidegger affirms in OET that the ordinary understanding of truth as correctness is correct, he stresses in QT that the instrumental definition of technology is correct. Even modern technology, with its mechanization, turbines, and generators, has an undeniably instrumental character, serving as a means to the achievement of some purpose. Still, a definition can be correct, i.e., it can establish something that applies to what it defines, but fail to convey its full essence (*QT 6*).

Determining what technology is, i.e., how it is ordinarily understood, is thus only the first step in determining its essence. But it is, nonetheless, the first step, and there are no further determinations of the essence of technology without it. Just as OET starts with the ordinary construal of truth as correctness, so, too, in QT the instrumental definition of technology is the starting point of the investigation.

Heidegger's second move in QT is to trace technology, presented as a means, back to what is responsible for it. Glossing Aristotle's account of αἰτία with the example of a silversmith molding a sacrificial vessel, Heidegger elaborates four aspects of what is responsible for the creations of technology. These aspects all belong together, contributing to a process of molding something, bringing it forth (ποίησις). As in the essentialist analysis of truth, the second step of the analysis focuses on the behavior, the human activity, that enables what is understood by the common, initially given definitions of technology.

Heidegger introduces his third move by noting that this molding process (like its analogue in nature) occurs thanks to the fact that something becomes present that wasn't before. In other words, technology occurs (*sich ereignet*) only insofar as what is hidden comes to be unhidden. This occurrence is, Heidegger submits, what the Greeks called ἀλήθεια.

Heidegger's analysis of the essence of technology in QT thus follows the familiar, three-step template of essentialist analysis found in OET. In OET freedom is (3) the ground of (2) what enables (1) truth (ἀλήθεια) as correctness—where (1) through (3) represent progressively more fundamental and more concrete accounts of the essence of truth. Correspondingly, in QT, truth is (3) the ground of (2) ποίησις and the four things (the four causes) that are responsible for (1) technology as instrumental (*QT* 11). The analysis is once again a regressive one that, formally construed, takes the form of two conditionals. If technology is instrumental, then it is because it is a manner of disclosing through a process of production, but it is a manner of disclosing only if truth (ἀλήθεια) obtains.

2.2 The essence of modern technology

This essentialist analysis applies, one might object, only to pre-modern technology, where 'technology' and 'craft'—or, more literally, a 'work done by hand' (*Handwerk*)—are synonymous. The objection is important, Heidegger recognizes, both because modern technology is what disturbs us and because modern technology, with its symbiotic relation to the modern natural sciences, appears incomparable to all earlier technologies. As a result, Heidegger turns to the question of the "essence of modern technology" (*QT* 13–14).

Heidegger contends that the novelty of modern technology only becomes evident if we dwell on how it, too, is a kind of disclosing. Modern technology differs from pre-modern technology by challenging nature to supply energy capable of being extracted and stockpiled.

The disclosing that dominates modern technology through
(*QT*₁) and through has the character of positioning in the sense of
challenging. (*QT* 16)

Modern technology is, in brief, a way of disclosing by force, an assault on nature's treasures. This account is the initial description of its essence, corresponding to correctness as the initial account of truth's essence. In this forcible disclosure, nature is imposed upon; it is placed (*gestellt*) in a position of yielding its energy. This positioning discloses and exposes resources in a relentless pursuit of the greatest possible use at the least expense. Resources are incessantly stockpiled, organized, and "on order" (*be-stellt*), so as to "keep things moving." Heidegger makes much of the notion that, whereas pre-modern technologies accommodated themselves to nature, nature is built (*verbaut*) into modern technologies as a gigantic delivery system (*QT 16*). Whereas pre-modern technologies make do with the nature around them, modern technologies can lend credence to the idea that nature is completely what human beings want to make of it (*QT 26*).⁹

Throughout this process, energies once hidden are unlocked, transformed, stored, distributed, and switched around – all "manners of disclosing" (*QT 16*). Far from being aimless, the entire process is steered and secured by a forcible disclosure of whatever can be put on order or requisitioned (*bestellbar*) in the "standing reserve" (*Bestand*) – Heidegger's term for how everything is on hand or on order, produced or able to produced (or re-produced).

What is the place of the human being in all of this? Heidegger concedes that human beings are the ones who, indeed, challenge and thereby position whatever is deemed actual such that it is revealed as that standing reserve. (This aspect parallels the behavior toward beings that, as the condition for things' disclosure, enables truth as correctness, the second step of the essentialist analysis in OET.) Human beings are thus indispensable to modern technology and not only or even principally because they become part of the standing reserve. They are themselves positioned and challenged to disclose nature or better natural energies in what

amounts to an assault on them.

Only insofar as the human being, for its part, is challenged to challenge
 (QT₂) the energies of nature can this disclosing happen, i.e., disclosing them by
 ordering them and putting them on order. (QT 18)

Corresponding, [as noted above](#), to the second step of the general pattern of essentialist analysis, this passage indicates the internal condition of the possibility of what modern technology is.

Whatever a human being does or experiences, she always find herself already among things (including others) that are not hidden from her and that, as such, already in a sense “speak to” her, with a claim (*Anspruch*) to what they are. From the outset, human beings are invariably gathered up, not simply into relationships with things, but into a particular way of being vis-a-vis them. That those things are not hidden from them is something that has already taken place whenever this unhiddenness calls them (such is their humanity) [to reveal things in a](#) distinctive manner. In the case of modern technology, human beings collaborate in challenging nature, but only by virtue of being themselves challenged to do so. They are gathered up into the process of challenging nature.

. . . we call that challenging claim that gathers human beings together
 (QT₃) in the direction of ordering the self-disclosing as standing reserve
 –the *im-position* [*Ge-stell*]. (QT 19)

In other words, it is only insofar as human beings are themselves challenged to disclose the energies of nature by force that modern technology’s way of disclosing can occur. This challenging claim is history-making before it is part of the historical record, a legacy of a way of thinking and acting that has been transmitted to modern humanity, defining modern technology (more on this point to follow).

Heidegger arrives at the essence of modern technology by way of a novel metaphor, namely, ‘im-position’ (*Ge-stell*).¹⁰ Im-position is, in the final analysis, the essence of modern technology, where ‘essence’ means neither simply what modern technology is (QT₁) nor what inherently makes it possible (QT₂)—i.e., the basis of the instrumental conception of it. Instead its essence rests upon im-position as the ground of what makes its forcible disclosure possible. “‘Im-position’ means the assembling of that positioning that positions, i.e., challenges, human beings, imposing on them to disclose what is actual by ordering [it, placing it on other] as a standing reserve” (QT 20). As a manner of disclosing, the imposition is, at bottom, a way that things emerge into the open, becoming unhidden, at least to a degree, from out of the underlying hiddenness of things. As in the threefold structure of the analysis of the essence of truth, Heidegger locates the essence of modern technology in the ground of the human activity that inherently enables what it is (forcible disclosure). (This ground corresponds, in OET, to the freedom that grounds the behavior towards things within an open expanse, allowing them to disclose themselves, and thereby enabling correct claims about them.)

Although human beings, as noted, play a pivotal role in this forcible disclosure, the unhiddenness of what is disclosed lies, Heidegger observes, outside human control, thus belying any instrumental conception of technology.

By acting out technologies, a human being takes part in the ordering as a way of disclosing. But the unhiddenness itself, within which the ordering

(QT₄) unfolds, is never something made by human hands as little as is the realm through which the human being passes when he refers as subject to an object (QT 18).

The final line of this passage flags the modern propensity of relying upon a subject/object structure. Just as (1) human beings do not fabricate the disclosure of things, so (2) the traditions

that they are thrown into and enact (like the tradition of rendering everything a subject or object) are not of their making.

Im-position is thus the ground and, in that sense, the essence of modern technology in the two respects noted. In order to appreciate the first respect (i.e., that what is disclosed is, as such, beyond human control), consider anything that we might see. We would not see it, did we not have the power of sight. But nothing in this power is sufficient by itself for sight; other conditions (light, proximity, size, movement, etc. of what is seen) must also be met. Above all, something must show itself, it must be unhidden, in order for it to be seen and thus disclosed—with its unhiddenness itself remaining all the while hidden.¹¹ Any success, modern or otherwise, in probing nature, in unlocking its hitherto hidden resources, remains contingent on entering, largely unknowingly, into a place—a clearing—in which it is no longer hidden.

Heidegger calls attention to the continued efficacy of this point for contemporary physics in the 1950s. Even as physics retreats from objects (presumably as elementary particles give way to fields of energy), it cannot forego the basic requirement that nature announce itself in some way that can be determined and computed. Of course, we are indispensable to the process as the site of the clearing—the ‘here’ of ‘being-here’ (*Da-sein*). After denying that the disclosing proper to modern technology happens beyond any human doing, Heidegger adds: “But it also does not happen only *in* the human being and it does not happen, setting the standard, *through* him” (*QT* 24).

Yet this first aspect of im-position is never without the second, i.e., the disclosure is never without its inherited character (not least when resisting it). Im-position is, as we’ve seen, the essence of modern technology in the sense that it grounds the human activity that inherently enables the forcible mode of disclosure. But this im-position, far from being wholly

unprecedented, is the legacy of leading interpretations of the sense of being. The im-position is a party to those interpretations, i.e., to Western metaphysics—indeed, by Heidegger’s account the last round of the party.¹² I use the term ‘legacy’ here to convey a sense of the way history (*Geschichte*), the history that we make, is a matter of a legacy, something passed down, sent to us (*schicken, Geschick*). We are thrown into the world that has already interpreted what it means to be in one way or another for us (i.e., our shared worlds and environs), and there is no escaping our reliance upon, indeed, our incorporation and even embodiment of that legacy. Central to this legacy are both the hiddenness of being and the tendency to overlook and forget it through a complete absorption in beings.¹³

Recapping the foregoing essentialist analysis of modern technology, we find a threefold pattern operative similar to the pattern in his other essentialist analyses.

- (1) What is modern technology? It is a way of disclosing, i.e., making present, by challenging nature, forcing it to unlock its energy and resources; in short, it is the forcible disclosure flagged in QT₁.
- (2) What makes modern technology inherently possible? Modern technology would not be possible without human beings, the modern technicians, who carry out this manner of disclosing, as Heidegger puts it in QT₂.
- (3) What is the ground of this possibility? The ground is “im-position,” (introduced by Heidegger in QT₃), a metaphor for a “fateful manner of disclosing, namely, the challenging manner of doing so,” that itself imposes on human beings to forcibly disclose what is actual, installing it in a standing reserve (*QT* 29). Although originating in those pre-modern ways of disclosing, im-position’s insistent, demanding way of disclosing has the fateful effect of distorting or obstructing (*verstellen*) those

former ways (*QT* 30).

2.3 The danger and the saving

At this point, Heidegger would appear to have come to the conclusion of his question concerning technology. Yet he is far from finished. The point of inquiring into technology's essence was to sort out "our relation" to it. Accordingly, what remains to be discussed is how we should respond (*entsprechen*) to this essence or, better, this essential ground of modern technology (*QT* 23). Pursuing this theme, he sheds some light on what he means by 'essence,' and, above all, attempts to make good on the aim of preparing a "free relation" to technology where we are not engulfed by it and where we experience its boundaries.

Discussion of such a free relation, however, must begin with acknowledgment of human complicity. As his essentialist analysis makes crystal clear, modern technicians constitute the internal condition of its possibility (*QT*₂). Yet, while human beings have one foot in the standing reserve, they have another foot outside it. Human beings never become a mere standing reserve, since their part in disclosing is more primordial than whatever makes up the reserve (*QT* 18). Accordingly, Heidegger observes, it is never too late to question whether we explicitly experience ourselves as those whose actions and omissions, at times overtly, other times covertly, are imposed upon by the im-position; it is never too late to ask whether and how we let ourselves in (*einlassen*) for what pre-vailes in the im-position (*QT* 24).¹⁴

Human beings thus cannot be merely part of the standing reserve because they enable it and they enable it because they are necessary for the disclosure that is the essential ground of technology, modern or pre-modern. The key to us having a free relationship to modern technology rests, Heidegger proposes, on our experiencing it as a legacy and our role within it.

Experiencing it in these ways keeps us in the free space of it, which by no means locks us “into a numb coercion” of “blindly” pursuing technology or “helplessly” raging against it and condemning it as the work of the devil. “To the contrary,” he adds, “if we explicitly open ourselves up to the *essence* of technology, we find ourselves unexpectedly taken up into a liberating claim” (*QT* 26).

Notable, here, is a parallel with the experience of errancy inherent to the freedom that, letting beings be, constitutes the essence of truth. Just as the experience of errancy (along with attending to the mystery of the hiddenness of being) can keep us from being led astray (see OET₆ above), so the experience of the im-position as the legacy of a way of disclosing opens up the possibility of relating to it freely, and it does so, not least, because all disclosing presupposes the hiddenness or, equivalently, what Heidegger in *QT*, as in *OET*, dubs “the mystery” (*ibid.*).

The foregoing observations—concerning the parallel between the experience of errancy and that of the im-position, the irreducibility of mankind to the standing reserve, its ineliminable role in disclosing (technological and otherwise), and the promise of opening ourselves up to the essence of technology—are anything but defeatist. Nonetheless, modern technology remains a threat of the highest order. In fact, Heidegger deems the legacy of disclosing in terms of im-position “the supreme danger” and, indeed, in two respects.¹⁵

(1) Im-position threatens human beings with the loss of their relation to themselves and to all that is. Heidegger introduces this first respect by once again glossing Heisenberg’s remarks that, for the quantum physicist, it is no longer objects but a standing reserve (presumably of quanta of energy) that counts. This thinking marginalizes human beings to the point that they are supposed to belong to the reserve themselves, but it also incongruously elevates them, as measurers of the reserve, to “lords of the earth” (or, as he

puts it OET₅, “the measure of all beings”; see, too, OET₂). The illusion that human beings encounter only their constructs gives way to the final delusion that they everywhere encounter only themselves. In this way, Heidegger somberly concludes that humanity does not perceive how decisively the im-position imposes on them, rendering it impossible for them to ever encounter themselves (*QT* 27).

(2) In addition to dispelling every other sort of disclosure, im-position conceals “the disclosing as such and, with it, that within which unhiddenness, i.e., truth, happens” (*QT* 27 GA7: 29). The danger for humanity does not come first from the possibly deadly effects of technological machinery. Rather the danger that modern technology presents is that of denying human beings the possibility of “turning around to a more primordial disclosing and thus experiencing the claim of a more originary truth” (*QT* 28).

Following these grave lines about the danger that modern technology presents, Heidegger again sounds a more hopeful note, citing Hölderlin’s verse: “But where danger is, grows also the saving [element: *das Rettende*],” that saves us from the danger. Identifying this growth requires a re-consideration of the essence in which it is grounded.

At this point Heidegger first addresses explicitly if somewhat meagerly what ‘essence’ means in this connection. It does not designate the quiddity of modern technology, i.e., a universal containing possible and actual instances.¹⁶ The essence of modern technology, again like the essence of truth, is not “what one usually understands” by essence, i.e., a *genus* or *essentia* (*QT* 30).¹⁷ To unearth this other way of thinking of essence, Heidegger taps into a broad range of senses of *Wesen* in ordinary and philosophical discourse.¹⁸ He cites examples where *Wesen* designates how something (e.g., *Hauswesen*, *Staatswesen*) is organized and administered, as well as how it unfolds and falls apart. As these examples illustrate, far from being timeless or

inert, ‘essence’ has a verbal sense, the same as the term ‘enduring’ (*währt*) (*QT* 30).

Im-position is the essence of modern technology—the ground of its essence in other senses—precisely as something that endures. But it is also an affording (*gewähren*) both in the sense that the im-position continues a legacy, something that has been afforded (transmitted to) us, and in the sense that it affords human beings a part in the disclosing. Heidegger locates the saving element precisely in this affordance.

The affording that transmits this or that into the disclosure is, as such, the saving element. For this lets human beings see and turn around into the highest
(*QT*₅) dignity of their essence. This dignity rests upon safeguarding the unhiddenness and, with it, in each case first the hiddenness of every essence [*Wesen*] on this earth. (*QT* 32)

This passage indicates how the experience of im-position can be said to prepare human beings for a free relationship to it as the essence of modern technology. To be sure, relentlessly challenging everything in its path, im-position distorts any insight into the event of disclosure (*Ereignis der Entbergung*), endangering the relation to the truth from the ground up.

Nevertheless, experiencing it as, on the one hand, the legacy of *disclosing* reminds human beings of their dignity, their irreducibility to the standing reserve, given their indispensable role in the disclosing. That dignity consists in safeguarding the fundamental truth of every essence on earth, not only a particular unhiddenness but also the hiddenness underlying the latter (enveloping it and serving as its source and destination) and comprising the limits of modern technology.

Experiencing im-position as, on the other hand, a *legacy* of disclosing also calls attention to the fact that there is nothing timeless or written in stone about the essence of modern technology.

‘Essence’ here signifies a tradition of disclosing that has been transmitted to us, something that,

like other essences (*Staatswesen*), comes to be and passes away. In both these ways, out of the danger that im-position presents, a saving element grows, giving us reason to hope and beckoning us to cultivate it.

We are still not saved thereby. But we are called upon to hope in the growing light of the saving element. How can this happen? Here and now and only in slight ways such that we cultivate the saving element in its growth. This entails that we keep the most extreme danger in sight (*QT 33*).

Bibliography

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¹ QT 4; all translations are my own.

² The distinction between *Technik* and its essence has affinities with distinctions between beings and being, ontic and ontological truth, and ontic and ontological investigations. Without rejecting these distinctions outright, Heidegger came to see a central difficulty with them, namely, our tendency to have recourse to ontic differences, i.e., differences between beings to characterize them. Still, particularly if we recognize that *Technik* can stand for equipment, procedures, and/or tools (which, as beings within-the-world, are subject to ontic investigations), the question of the essence of *Technik* can be construed as an ontological investigation, since ‘essence’ designates not particular beings themselves, but precisely their way of being. Noteworthy in this connection is a difference between *Technik* and ‘technology.’ Whereas comparison of *Duden* and OED indicates that both terms can designate a kind of knowledge (*logos*) as well as the practice and

products of such knowledge, the German can readily stand for the tools themselves (equipment, apparatuses).

³ Thanks to Aaron Wendland, Christopher Merwin, Christos Hadjioannou, Al and Maria Miller for suggesting needed changes to an earlier draft.

⁴ Whereas the first step (an assertion's [correctness](#)) abstracts from the level of the second step ([the behavior enabling the assertion](#)), the freedom [to relate to beings in terms of their being \(unhiddenness\)](#) is least abstract since it concretely grounds [the others](#). [As discussed below, this freedom, far from being an idle condition of the behavior enabling the assertion, takes the form of actively letting beings be.](#)

⁵ Resistance to locating the essence of truth in freedom is rooted in the stubborn, mistaken prejudice that freedom is a property of human beings – rather than the reverse.

⁶ 'Being-here,' my way of translating *Da-sein*, seems to flaunt Heidegger's directive that the *da* not be understood as a particular place. In his dialect, however, *da* together with forms of *sein* typically stands for a proximate presence and place signaled by 'here' as in 'he is here' (*er ist da*) or 'the train is here, has arrived' (*der Zug ist da*). Moreover, without understanding *da* in the sense of spatial co-ordinates (as though space were a given or independent variable), his use of it clearly invokes a sense of space or, better, time-space. See, too, his characterization of the battle of 'being-here' (*Da-sein*) with 'being-away' (*Weg-sein*); CP 256 and Dahlstrom 2013, 35–37.

⁷ Unhiddenness (the primordial truth, corresponding to the literal Greek sense of *aletheia*) presupposes hiddenness (a primordial untruth, as Heidegger often puts it). This primordial play of unhiddenness and hiddenness stands in stark contrast to the logical prejudice of understanding truth and falsity solely in terms of the correctness and incorrectness of an assertion.

⁸ Thus, what might be differentiated as a fourth step to the analysis consists in passing *from* the ground of the enablement of correctness *to* the essential inception of the ground in hiddenness and errancy.

⁹ Countless species have been existentially challenged (sometimes liquidated) by the force of wheels and pulleys, pumps and screws, hoes and plows, nets and cages, smiths and spears, bridges and mills. To this extent, the claim that pre-modern technology does not challenge and assail nature seems to overreach.

¹⁰ *Ge-stell* has also been rendered as ‘enframing,’ ‘positionality,’ and ‘set-up.’ ‘Set-up’ has a colloquialism’s shortcomings and advantages. ‘Enframing’ has the advantage of echoing the ordinary meaning of the German term as a ‘shelf,’ ‘scaffold,’ but at the cost of the wordplay on uses of ‘positioning’ (*stellen, be-, vor-, her-, zu-, dar-stellen*). ‘Positionality’ captures this wordplay but at the cost of forfeiting the metaphorical meaning and misleadingly introducing a term from anthropology and sociology. Though ‘im-position’ also forfeits the metaphorical meaning, it is an ordinary term put to use metaphorically as a word of art that avoids the neutrality of some renderings. Moreover, as with Heidegger’s use of the hyphenated *Ge-stell*, its hyphenation reminds us that it is used here as a word of art, i.e., a technical term of his analysis.

¹¹ The ring of paradox in this last qualification may be dispelled by considering the fact that when something appears to us the appearing itself does not appear, just as when we perceive something we do not thereby (at least on some accounts) perceive the perception.

¹² According to Heidegger, whereas the culmination of metaphysics begins with Hegel’s absolute self-consciousness, Nietzsche’s conception of beings in terms of will is its “penultimate” stage, but technology, understood in an essential way, coincides with its completion. But this event—the event (*Ereignis*) in the history of Western philosophy (see OET₇)—is long in coming, supposedly

initiated by ancient Greek thinkers, albeit unbeknownst to them. The hiddenness of the unhiddenness of things, the very process by which beings are, i.e., present themselves, comes full circle or doubles back, as it were, as the nihilism of the obsession with beings comes to completion. Far from being an intellectual abstraction, this nihilism—allegedly the culmination of Western metaphysics, with its forgottenness of being and the nothingness pervading being—is the im-position that essentially grounds modern technology, including the human collusion that makes it possible.

¹³ The hiddenness of being that is overlooked includes the very unhiddenness of beings as well as the various sorts of hiddenness on which that unhiddenness supervenes.

¹⁴ Although the im-position is part of our Western legacy, “a human being only becomes free, insofar as he belongs to the realm of the legacy and thus becomes someone who listens but does not obediently submit” (*QT* 25).

¹⁵ To be sure, the possibility of overlooking and misconstruing what is unhidden is always present; in this sense, the fateful legacy of disclosure is not just any danger but, as Heidegger puts it, “*the* danger.” However, if that fatefulness takes the form of im-position, then it is “the supreme danger” (*QT* 26).

¹⁶ Rehearsing the discussion that Heidegger used to introduce his deliberations, he notes that just as the essence of tree is not a tree, so the essence of modern technology is not itself an apparatus, machine, resource, or concept of the like. But it is also not to be equated with either a genus containing species and sub-species of modern technologies or a timeless Platonic idea (*QT* 29).

¹⁷ Regrettably and probably misleadingly, neither in OET nor in QT does Heidegger back up these claims about the emptiness or abstractness of traditional notions of essence with any references.

¹⁸ *Wesen* often stands for an entity or kind of entity, as in the *göttliches Wesen* (divine being) or *Lebewesen* (roughly, animate being). Not unlike many uses of ‘essence’ (the essence of lavender, the essence of lemons, “time is of the essence,” “His glassy essence” (Shakespeare)), *Wesen* can also stand for the core element or feature of something, what is most important, what makes it what it is, the necessary as opposed to incidental characteristics of something (Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums*). Also instructive in this regard are the copious publications, films, and online articles featuring the subtitle *das unbekannte Wesen*.