The Technological Viewpoint:

Its pernicious Effects and the Possibility of Self-Help

Abstract

We find ourselves in an age of self-help. Anyone who has walked through a major bookstore in recent years knows about the numerous manuals promising to show us the ways in which we can think and act differently in order change our lives for the better. But, just how much agency do we have in affecting personal fundamental change? Are not such changes to some extent out of our control? Here, I will explore these questions in the context of Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, where Heidegger lays out the deeply problematic situation in which we moderns find ourselves with respect to the essence of technology: we understand the world in terms of its potentiality as resource, a damaging and truth-obscuring viewpoint. Fortunately, we have recourse to some self-help methods. But our own actions can bring us only so far in our attempting purposeful living without the technological viewpoint.

1. The Problem

The technological viewpoint is a paradigmatic orientation of our understanding of

reality. It has been effected by our relationship to modern technologies such as

waterpower and wind turbines that produce and store up energy. The purpose of modern

technology is to create a standing-reserve of energy and this goal has permeated our

viewpoint to the extent that things appear to us in terms ready resources. This sort of

paradigm can be very harmful in its extreme forms by diminishing other values through

which we can conceive things and people. Edwards, in his essay, *The Thinging of the*

Thing, suggests that when the essence of technology takes root as our fundamental

viewpoint, we embark on a path of nihilistic hopelessness. Because we value only that

which is potential, the choices we make as to how to put the saved up resources to work

are not bounded by any pre-existing criteria. We begin to feel purposeless because we

aim only at producing resources without ever knowing just how we should use them.

And if we do choose to use them for purposes besides creating more resources, we may

feel unjustified or second-guess our decisions. These experiences, according to Edwards,

2. The Technological Viewpoint and its Dangers

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger discusses the ubiquity of the technological viewpoint as it has permeated the modern mindset. Heidegger observes that the essence of modern technology, in its bringing our world to light in terms *Bestand*, standing-reserve,—so as to view everything as an always ready and flexible supply of saved-up resources to be used in any way we like—has affected our understanding of the forests and the rivers. We come to see Nature merely as potential energy to be directed by our choice. But beyond this immediately proximal misunderstanding of the truth of Nature, the essence of technology presents meta-level problems. In its most pernicious and extreme forms, the technological viewpoint (1) obscures the nature of humanity and (2) reifies standing-reserve, as the true structure of reality while simultaneously hiding the fact that it is merely a structure. These problems correspond to the double *Gefahr*, or danger, associated with and particular to the technological viewpoint.

These dangers, however, are not only harmful on the large-scale, in an abstract sense. They also have important consequences for the individual on a practical level. The first of the dangers, the obscuring of the nature of humanity, amounts to understanding everything one encounters and can possibly encounter as something created by humans. That is to say, the individual may take others and even him- or herself to be un-purposed standing-reserve. These resources are purposed and directed by humans (and in this way human created). One considers oneself or another to be merely directable potential energy, that direction of which is to be chosen solely by oneself. In valuing the mere potentiality for usage, the technological viewpoint fails to provide guidelines for appropriate or valuable usage. When we find that we have

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resources at our disposal, the criteria for how to use them also becomes something created by humans. Edwards describes this condition as "radical egoism" in which one appears to oneself to be "solely self-conditioning." The technological viewpoint affirms my saying: "nothing makes any essential demand on me except myself" (Edwards 465). This understanding of oneself is nihilistic and can lead to feelings of purposelessness and self-hatred. But, moreover, it hides the truth of the matter, which is that each of us is fundamentally conditioned and must be receptive to demands outside of our control in order to live a human life. According to Heidegger, "there is no such thing as a man who, solely of himself, is only man" (QCT 31). Our holding the technological viewpoint itself is an excellent example of our conditionality. We did not choose it, rather, it demanded that our attention be oriented in a certain way. But, in making us seem to ourselves to be self-conditioning, the technological viewpoint obscures the fact of our humanity, of our being, at base, conditioned.

The second danger (namely, the reification and self-disguising of the viewpoint itself) adds to the potency of the hopelessness afforded by the former. Because the technological viewpoint structures everything that one can encounter, it appears to be the fact of the matter and leaves no room for recourse to a different way of seeing. Contrary to this understanding, the technological viewpoint, much like any other, is only a lens through which one looks. It is entirely mutable and impermanent. Although viewpoints are alterable, the way in which they structure our engagement with the world obscures not only their alterability, but also their presence. When the nature of the technological viewpoint, in terms of its being a viewpoint in the first place, becomes hidden, we run the risk of getting stuck within it. We may realize that something is amiss (that we are

unhappy and that somehow our purposelessness is linked with technology), but if we take

the essence of technology to be the truth of reality, then the possibility of its being

replaced is slim to none. If technology is the truth at its very basis, any recourse to

another way of seeing is precluded. The consequence is that one finds oneself trapped

within the technological viewpoint. And the problems associated with radical narcissism

are potentiated. Not only does one find oneself to be at the call only of oneself (thus

lacking any purpose which is not self-defined or chosen); furthermore, since it is the truth

of the matter, one cannot find a way out of this condition.

Fortunately, according to Heidegger in a quote from Hölderlin:

> "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
> Das Rettende auch." (FNT 39)

"But where danger is, grows the saving power also" (QCT 34). There is hope for even

the person most consumed by the dangers of the essence of technology. Some saving

element roots itself alongside the dangers. But, what is this saving element? How is it

accessible? And what does it mean in terms of self-help in the face of the dangers of the

technological viewpoint?

3. Das Rettende, The Saving Power

The sense in which the essence of technology is a viewpoint is that it structures

our perception of being. As I have already discussed, it makes the things in our world

appear in terms of standing-reserve or resources. Although it is possible for humans to

see from another viewpoint, the structure of technology is where we happen to find

ourselves. And, although it may seem as though this viewpoint has little or no redeeming

value in comparison to its harmfulness, it is the case that without a viewpoint, being

would not appear at all. Having a viewpoint is a condition of the possibility of the

appearance of reality. In Heideggerian terms, regardless of whatever path of possibility

we are sent down, the path is that which makes possible our seeing at all.

Although a viewpoint is necessary, the point Heidegger is making with his

Edwards and Dreyfus champion self-help methods whose performance is inherently constituted by other ways of seeing. These practices are meant to help us practice valuing the world without placing our consideration solely in the standing-reserve viewpoint of technology and to remember that alternative paradigms are possible. Edwards suggests that our efforts should be focused in "living lives in which we make things…, [allowing us to] abandon some of the presumption that, in this age of technology and its *Bestand*, blinds us to our proper selves and to our sheltering world" (Edwards 466). This sort of making amounts to creating things (such as "jugs, houses, paintings, books, marriages, children, whatever…") that cannot be made sense of using the technological viewpoint (Edwards 466). If one finds oneself in extremely advanced stages of the technological viewpoint, of course even these things could be taken to be resources. But, for the most part, if we were to focus on making friendships, we would find ourselves unable to treat our true friends as mere potentialities to be tapped at will for our own chosen purposes. Rather, in that our true friends make fundamental demands upon us, the time we spend with them and the activities we share in bring their individual, irreplaceable value to the fore. And in their making demands upon us (which cannot be ignored), we are also reminded of our fundamental conditionality. Dreyfus's suggested self-help measure is engagement in "pretechnological practices" such maintaining friendships, backpacking, and "drinking local wine with friends" (Dreyfus 310). One must engage in these practices in a way that does not appreciate them merely for their benefits to general efficiency and health—thus turning them into resources. The practices are meaningful on their own without collapsing into merely technological value.

The practical solutions for holding ourselves apart from technology, thus, attempt to involve us in recognizing and appreciating things that cannot be recognized nor appreciated within a merely technological viewpoint. These practices come up against the two fundamental dangers of the technological viewpoint in clear ways. Firstly, they avoid nihilism by, as Dreyfus says, *fostering receptivity* to the demands made upon us by other things and people (Dreyfus 311). Our books and children and local wine-dates with friends call us to their appreciation not as resources, but as simple, irreplaceable individuals that rightly make demands upon us. Secondly, by engaging in such practices that necessarily value things besides standing-reserve, we can be reminded that there are other ways of comportment with our world besides through the lens of efficiency and resource. This means that even if we engage in the technological viewpoint during many of our encounters, we will not have completely forgotten that there are other ways of seeing the world. Recourse to other viewpoints is maintained.

These practices, however, are not sufficient on their own to bring about the sort of fundamental alteration that would replace the technological view entirely. We can practice pretechnological activities all we want, but alone this will not amount to a new view of reality. It will not give the values we appropriate in these activities precedence in the sense of being our main lens. Because we choose to take part in these activities, their being valuable is always already rooted in our choice. But, we cannot simply choose a new way of understanding being, nor can we legislate it (see Dreyfus). Any such attempt at choosing or legislating amounts to the same disadvantages apparent in the radical narcissism of the technological viewpoint. For any such chosen viewpoint lacks what is fundamentally necessary for an effective viewpoint in the first place. A paradigm can

only be an effective paradigm insofar as it demands us to look at the world through its light. A chosen or legislated viewpoint would be only that, namely chosen. It would not demand that our attention be oriented in a certain way, but only meekly ask. This request need only be fulfilled if one so chooses. In this way, a chosen viewpoint can never be authoritative in the way a received paradigm is.

The self-help methods suggested by Dreyfus and Edwards allow us to keep a reflective distance from the technological viewpoint, but they cannot replace the technological viewpoint with a new paradigm. Arguably, no consciously concerted effort can bring about such a change. These authors are the first to acknowledge the shortcomings of our own agency in replacing the technological viewpoint with another.

What, then, is the work that is done by keeping reflective distance from the technological viewpoint? What benefit does it have? Dreyfus refers to the recognition of the technological viewpoint and its danger as "releasement" (Dreyfus 309). Releasement can be described as a phase in which, though the essence of technology has been recognized, no new paradigm has come to authority. In this stage, one is open to technology, can discuss its pros and cons, and can choose it as a goal in the appropriate circumstances, but need not (Dreyfus 308). Not yet, however, has a new paradigm taken root. The movement into releasement is an important step

conclusion, however, is nothing to despair. By practicing values besides the

technological, we can remind ourselves of the nature of the essence of technology insofar

as it is merely a framework. Heidegger calls this having a vision of the constellation of

truth. He writes,

> But what help is it to us to look into the constellation of truth?

Works Cited

Dreyfus, Hubert. "