



Research article

What is Technoexistentialism: Debating Heidegger, Don Ihde and Sunyata

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Abstract

“Technoexistentialism” may be defined as the most well-known West-centric existentialist definition of technology. We assume that the industrial project of defining technology and of coming to terms with it was first broached by Heidegger. We can indeed claim that there is a dialectical spiritualization of the forms of existential life in the writings of 19th century philosophers, starting with Hegel and evolving with Heidegger’s writings on existential ontology as well as his very important essay concerning technology (1954). Dialectical materialism also informs Heidegger’s dialectical vision of the evolution of materially created objects. Our critique of Heidegger exposes the dialectical core of technology as the “Standing Reserve” of human creative life and as an expression of the drive – of what Hegel calls *Geist* - that enables humans to create, objectify and endow qualitative character to the technological conception. As such technology also provides a subjective anchor for human consciousness and then an opportunity to it to physically evolve in conjunction with technological advancements. One of the most potent examples of this process is the evolution of AI. But AI precipitates through a faultline or a lacuna in the extension of the subjective spirit of technological form. We also ask if there is a certain lacuna in the consciousness of the moment of obsession with technology and its objective reality.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this brief exploration of Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* is to consider if understanding the phenomena of technology, as suggested by Heidegger, is tenable for those of us who live in contexts in which technology, despite its irreversible necessity, is never a prime driver of life-currents? But this question is not very simple because it is inextricably combined with our understanding of what it means to be consciously embodied in a technosphere of existence in the manner in which Ihde, following traces of thought underlined by Heidegger (among others in the occidental epistemology of technology) explains technology as an immanent inner spirit that creates "multi-stabilities" in the instruments of its application and thus changes human subjectivities which come into contact with them, forever. There are references to philosophical arguments in the assumptions to the arguments from Heidegger to Ihde and probably beyond here, as we embark on a shortcut, for our purposes here rather than trying to explain the detailed steps in the process. I will just glance briefly at the point I just mentioned – namely, that technology does not assume the same importance for all, even if the metaphysical process which engenders a subjective human consciousness of technology is a universal process and true to all ethnicities and cultures. But the orientalist subject or a subject of the global south, born and groomed in a tradition of material minimalism and frugal lifestyle (owing to poverty), technological adaptation remains a secondary concern.

Technological innovation, other than those of medicine or agriculture to some extent, never assumes the importance that it has in the West and among the aficionados of Western cultural comfortism, with its values of "progress," and "idealism," and of prosocial technology-- all that blocks of Western culture have systematically adopted, promoted or celebrated. History of Asia, with its several velocities in distinctive parts of the ancient continent, invites us to retrospectively evaluate its lamentable modernity. The values of emptiness and reverence, the lotus in the garden of Zen, in a country we imagine, - all those values, and the universal faith in the great *Dao*, the Shinto *kami*, the ubuntu spirits, the devas- the faith in the simple dedication of Japanese artists who already half-heartedly discarded post-Meiji Europeanization that began in the late 19th century, could only be sidelined where the technology question was asked – though not that Asia for example was not making technical progress in the last. Century. More than that, now, the technological life of creaturely alleviation, luxury, consumerism and self-demonisation through imperial domination did not occur as important in the setting of colonised cultures. Colonisation is never expected. There is no theory of precolonization. Only colonising and postcolonising aggrandizers will think of technology as a subject.

2. What is Technoexistentialism?

One of the primary concerns here is to also tackle the question of techno existentialism, which has now gradually gained ground in the academy. Technologically mediated or guided existential continuity, supported by rational positivism, justified itself because of the direct changes to lifestyles that it ordered. Irrigation, electric motors, cars, cranes, the conveyor belt, and satellites change the sense of being. With Ihde precisely in his *Heidegger's Technologies: Postphenomenological Perspectives* (2022), and other pragmatists (like Richard Rorty) we curiously see that Heidegger is still relevant at this distant time, already past Anthropocene, and

hoisting Heidegger up in terms of a largely either existentialist or biopolitical vision of technoexistence (as also is the case with the continental French philosophers who regard Heidegger in some way or other) technology for the existentialist have repeatedly issued in the existentialist panorama of a terrible *technodystopia*, rather than a utopia of technological liberation in films, arts and media. This has been voiced somewhat from the same premises to which Heidegger himself subscribed- that early pessimism regarding technology, more so as he found himself writing on the brink of WWII. The case is true of more technologically "advanced" social frames rather than in societies where poverty and the dependence on basic natural resources and their scarce availability reduce close contact with sophisticated technological inventions. Less technologically dependent civilisations have tended to fall back on handcrafted art alternatives, what Heidegger calls *poesis*, and naturalist-spiritualist practices and behavioural alternatives.

But let us concentrate on what Heidegger or how Ihde *defines* technology before we can begin to appreciate the postphenomenological technoexistentialism that is promised in his writings by Ihde, and the exhortations therewithal to prove that an existentialist pragmatism may enlighten us on the embodied nature of subjectivity that technological evolution impacts and disrupts by its physicalist interventions. If the self is embodied, then there is no outwardness for it, except through its entanglement with the world and its letting in of the world onto itself, so that it could change or innovate. But according to Heidegger, though the self is not embodied, except for its perception of itself and its thrownness out into the world, which it can never reach. It is thus essenceless – and forever failing in its ability to arrive. Neither is he radically original in the presentation of the notion of technology, in his attempts to reveal the essence of technology as a revealing of the holding sway of what he calls the technological drive or its capacity of *Enframing*. If this is not a spiritualist definition of technology, then we do not know what is: and not only this, the roots of his claims to technological expression or exhibition are clearly enough visible as springing from the spiritualist phenomenology of Hegel, whom indeed Heidegger mentions and neither hesitates to appropriate in order to talk about technology. The *Enframing* is made possible by the self, which is responsible for its expression – and is indeed expression in itself, alive, continuous and conceptually never-yielding. Following Hegel, technology is projected by Heidegger as a reminder of the *thinghood* or *thingness* of things – which again implants itself about everything that is outside of the sphere of the subjective immediacy of the spirit but is indeed completely a determination of itself; thus at one point in *the Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Hegel speaks of the determinate character of the "machine" (in passing) yet there is no doubt that he does not press the idea seriously forward and rather seeks to leave the question of the openness and evolutionary character of Spirit demonstrated in pristine and uncorrupted multiplicity of its ways, especially in the third section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But Heidegger's idea of the *Enframing* capacity of the spirit of technology does not essentially differ from the Hegelian objectivity of spirit, which acts by means of Hegel's critical favourite, i.e. *Aufhebung*. Whereas Hegel says

The meaning of the immediate spiritual essence of a thing will only be understood as a revealing that is not so much in purifying the individual of the sensuously immediate and in making him into a thinking substance which has itself been subjected to thought... it consists instead in doing the very opposite. It consists in actualising and spiritually

animating the universal through the sublation of fixed and determinate thoughts.
(Heidegger 1954:34)

The submission of the actualising and universally animating spirit in fixed and determinate modes of thought assumes the same immediate functional agency of the spirit in its capacity of throwing the sublated object into intuition, and the change of the subject or the self-conscious thinking of things -- that is also part of Heidegger's mission of revealing what technological efflorescence is:

Hegel says: the attained actualisation of this individuality thus consists in nothing more than this, namely, that this cycle of abstractions has been cast out from the self-enclosed confines of simple self-consciousness into the element of *being-for-itself*, or into the element of objective expansion. Thus, to self-consciousness, what in its savoring of its pleasure comes to be the *object* as its essence is the further expansion of those empty essentialities, or of pure unity, of pure difference, and of their relation. (Heidegger 1954:21)

For Heidegger, this fluid becoming of the field of technology or objectivity of technology is a manifestation of that same self-negation, or a negation of the manifestation of the object at the moment of installing that proto-Geist in the form of *Gestell*, the Standing Reserve. In other places, he waxes politically about the coming of the spirit into the sphere of technology itself as well as its consciousness in the individual subject, which is driven by that universal blind force of the Spirit:

This producing that brings forth--e.g., the erecting of a statue in the temple precinct--and the challenging ordering now under consideration are indeed fundamentally different, and yet they remain related in their essence. Both are ways of revealing, of *aletheia*. In *Enframing*, that unconcealment comes to pass in conformity with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as Standing-Reserve. This work is therefore neither only a human activity nor a mere means within such activity. The merely instrumental, merely anthropological definition of technology is therefore in principle untenable. And it cannot be rounded out by being referred back to some metaphysical or religious explanation that undergirds it. (Heidegger 1954: 21)

There is no doubt that Heidegger's questions on technology are inseparable from the legacy of the early Northern preoccupation with the dialectical Spirit of Neoplatonism, which was held up in the writings of such Neoplatonists as Nicholas of Cusa and is therefore also a legacy of that same spirit as it appeared in Hegel. Heidegger describes it and gives to it the name of the Enframing of technology

We are questioning concerning technology in order to bring to light our relationship to its essence. The essence of modern technology shows itself in what we call Enframing.
(Heidegger 1954:22)

Again, moments later he returns to Enframing as the force and concreteness of technology:

Heisenberg has with complete correctness pointed out that the real must present itself to contemporary man in this way.* In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence. Man stands so decisively in attendance on the challenging-forth of Enframing that he does not apprehend Enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear in what

respect he ek-sists, from out of his essence, in the realm of an exhortation or address, and thus can never encounter only himself." (Heidegger 1954: 27)

It continues receiving full ovation in Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology*, which was first written in 1934, and which then Don Ihde picks up as the starting point of a modernist inquiry into technology.

3. Ihde's Ontological Embodiment

Briefly again, speaking of Ihde's ontological stance, it may be said that although adopting something of that German Protestant Legacy of the *Geist* or Spirit or the Hegelian Essence of Technology, he does not rest with a simple reference to the objectivity of technology nor its subjectivity as a starting point. In *Heidegger's Technologies* (2022), Ihde takes this notion of essence as immediating, post phenomenological Intersubjectivity where technology returns to change the human subject which is always already bereft of essence:

What is needed is not a rejection of the deep and essentially phenomenological insights into technology as a culturally embedded phenomenon with its different gestalt features, but a deepening and more complex appreciation of all of the facets of our technologically textured mode of life. That includes and must include the explicit recognition of both the politics of our artifacts, and the demythologization of nostalgic and romantic views of previous times. (Ihde 2022: 83-84)

Notwithstanding whatever Ihde says post-phenomenological technological *Gestalt*, is inter-subjectivity and still manifests multi-stable potentiality of changing the inter-subjective world order of humanity and human agency through the invention of new technologies. The insistence is now no more on Enframing, Ihde does not leave it at the magical moment for technology to just arrive—because it arrives along with the arrival of the subject ion complete self-distortion or self-embodiment, whichever way we wish to look at it. There can be no technology unless the self's embodied reserve is revealed under the living hegemony of the functional body – if we might call it so. But what if we would like to speak of emotional or valence potential of that technological order, to consider whether this period of technology in that phase before, is Heidegger calls a gap filled with the "danger," one that is imminent or inevitable before "the turning in" (Heidegger 1954: 41) of the standing reserve. Is there something in that moment of existence of technology where the Enframing is quitted so the technology comes alive there – as being ?-Is there an immanent sentience or feeling that technology refers to before it calls itself forth in its user.

4. Sunyata

As such technology also provides a subjective anchor for human consciousness and then an opportunity to it to physically evolve in conjunction with technological advancements. One of the most potent examples of this process is the evolution of AI. But AI precipitates through a faultline or a lacuna in the extension of the subjective spirit of technological form. We also ask if there is a certain lacuna in the consciousness of the moment of obsession with technology and its objective

reality. There is admittedly a theoretical incompleteness which we can only begin to address but whose elusive shores would be constantly eluding us in the night of the ocean. We can have no concretion unless we address the form of its beginnings, the beginnings of potential which is not a matter for it can be neither addressed nor conceived as being in the space of starting-out or at a starting point of the inquiry. But if we went to take out the cause at the beginning of any action potential out of this discussion and to consider how that might be perceived as technology in a garden of the world then we may also come back to that same question in another form - one to which the ancients were sensitive, and which continues to be venerated, ritualized and worshiped in the heart of the East. The Lotus Garden, that *sukhavati*, the paradise and abode of the Zen of the *Daitokji*, the Temple of the Juggernaut, to all of which the East is awake, and to which the West had no access while on the merchant ships of business, is therefore a refuge in a dystopia. Technology is now transformed into an object of glory. It is a glory celebrated in the history of accumulated plastic bottles, rubber gloves, oxygen tubes and nebulisers, computer frames, cars, satellites, and the microchip. Against this technoexistentialist dystopia, at the end and shore of objective time, sits the Buddha *Amitabha* in the emptiness. The river of existentialism has a boat sailing in the wind. But Shankaracharya also speaks of the moment where cause and effect are one and indifferent, in the ground zero of the potential, the *karanavashtha* (Badarayan 1890: III), the pre-existential, inconceivable desiring that has not yet existed, that is either contained or not contained as we would understand it, the seed of the making of desire and the desire of making - the fact that it were a seed of the *dharma* - the affect of a desire, also as Heidegger says, about to be "turning in." We can appreciate Heidegger's acknowledgements of the meeting or encounter of humanity and the gods in the danger of the nothingness that precedes the turning in of the standing reserve of technology.

Thus, the coming to presence of technology harbors in itself what we least suspect, the possible arising of the saving power. They brought the presence [Gegenwart] of the gods, brought the dialogue of divine and human destinings, to radiance. And art was simply called *techne*. It was a single, manifold revealing. It was pious, *promos*, i.e., yielding to the holding-sway and the safekeeping of truth. (Heidegger, 1954: 34)

Ihde's material cultural postphenomenology sits only broadly and unfittingly into the preceding point of "the turning in." Thus, he says, since one size does not fit all - as Heidegger had erroneously assumed about the being condition of technology - yet Ihde's own insistence on the case-by-case intersubjectivity of every technological sublation, does not plunge to where Heidegger's references have done so. Last but not least - is the flaw: the emptiness into which the potential of technological Enframing is incapable of rising. There was no possibility within Protestant enlightenment phenomenology to reach this level of finesse in the discourse. Emptiness is both a turning in - to use Heidegger's dangerous gap within being - and is also the wonderful emptiness of the lack of fullness in conceptuality. Emptiness holds sway over everything that attends to the moment, or in the tranquillity of the *guanyin*-*amitabha*, or even of the terrible Hayagriva, whose heart is desiring to vanquish the evil machine. So, the *Amitabha Buddha*, as another reincarnation, is in the seated posture of being in the emptiness of essence.

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