

The technological view of the world of Martin Heidegger

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In this video we introduce you to several important concepts of Heidegger's philosophy of technology. In the text below you can read some more about Heidegger's view on technology.

Why is technology not neutral?

Heidegger strongly opposes the view that technology is "a means to an end" or "a human activity." These two approaches, which Heidegger calls, respectively, the "instrumental" and "anthropological" definitions, are indeed "correct", but do not go deep enough; as he says, they are not yet "true." Unquestionably, Heidegger points out, technological objects are means for ends, and are built and operated by human beings, but the essence of technology is something else entirely. Just as the essence of a tree is not itself a tree, Heidegger points out, so the essence of technology is not anything technological.

What, then, is technology, if it is neither a means to an end nor a human activity?

Technology, according to Heidegger must be understood as "a way of revealing" (Heidegger 1977, 12). "Revealing" is one of the terms Heidegger developed himself in order to make it possible to think what, according to him, is not thought anymore. It is his translation of the Greek word *alètheuein*, which means 'to discover' – to uncover what was covered over. Related to this verb is the independent noun *alètheia*, which is usually translated as "truth," though Heidegger insists that a more adequate translation would be "un-concealment."

How can technology be 'a way of revealing'?

What does this have to do with technology? And what does Heidegger mean when he says that technology is "a way of revealing"? Answering these questions requires a short but important detour. What we call "reality", according to Heidegger, is not given the same way in all times and all cultures (Seubold 1986, 35-6). "Reality" is not something absolute that human beings can ever know once and for all; it is relative in the most literal sense of the word – it exists only in relations. Reality 'in itself', therefore, is inaccessible for human beings. As soon as we perceive or try to understand it, it is not 'in itself' anymore, but 'reality for us.'

This means that everything we perceive or think of or interact with "emerges out of concealment into unconcealment," in Heidegger's words. By entering into a particular relation with reality, reality is 'revealed' in a specific way. And this is where technology comes in, since technology is the way of revealing that characterises our time. Technology embodies a specific way of revealing the world, a revealing in which humans take power over reality. While the ancient Greeks experienced the 'making' of something as 'helping something to come into being' – as Heidegger explains by analysing classical texts and words – modern technology is rather a 'forcing into being'. Technology reveals the world as raw material, available for production and manipulation.

Why is technology not a human activity?

According to Heidegger, there is something wrong with the modern, technological culture we live in today. In our 'age of technology' reality can only be present as a raw material (as a 'standing reserve'). This state of affairs has not been brought about by humans; the technological way of revealing was not chosen by humans. Rather, our understanding of the world - our understanding of 'being', of what it means 'to be' - develops through the ages. In our time 'being' has the character of a technological 'framework', from which humans approach the world in a controlling and dominating way.

This technological understanding of 'being', according to Heidegger, is to be seen as the ultimate danger. First of all, there is the danger that humans will also interpret themselves as raw materials. Note that we are already speaking about "human resources"! But most importantly, the technological will to power leaves no escape. If we want to move towards a new interpretation of being, this would itself be a technological intervention: we would manipulate our manipulation, exerting power over our way of exerting power. And this would only reconfirm the technological interpretation of being. Every attempt to climb out of technology throws us back in. The only way out for Heidegger is "the will not to will". We need to open up the possibility of relying on technologies while not becoming enslaved to them and seeing them as manifestations of an understanding of being.

References

Heidegger, Martin. "The question concerning technology (W. Lovitt, Trans.) The question concerning technology: and other essays (pp. 3-35)." (1977).

Seubold, Günter. *Heideggers Analyse der neuzeitlichen Technik*. Freiburg-München: Alber, 1986.

Have a look at the glossary in STEP 1.2 for more detailed explanations of some crucial German words used by Heidegger.