

“Let It Be.” Heidegger’s Conception of Technology Between Enframing and Releasement

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Abstract:

In *Heidegger on Technology*, Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou analyze Martin Heidegger’s multifaceted engagement with modern technology by taking into account texts on the subject only recently translated and published in English. The volume brings together 17 contributions by renowned experts who develop and interpret Heidegger’s thoughts on our technological age. Furthermore, this essay collection probes fruitful appropriations of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology in the study of culture.

“Let It Be.” Heideggers Technikphilosophie zwischen Gestell und Gelassenheit

German Abstract:

In *Heidegger on Technology* untersuchen Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin und Christos Hadjioannou Martin Heideggers vielseitige Auseinandersetzung mit moderner Technik unter Miteinbeziehung erst kürzlich ins Englische übertragener und veröffentlichter Texte. Der Band versammelt 17 Beiträge von ausgewiesenen Expert_innen, die Heideggers Einsichten in unser technologisches Zeitalter interpretieren und weiterentwickeln. Darüber hinaus sondiert der Sammelband die fruchtbare Anwendung von Heideggers Technikphilosophie in der *Study of Culture*.

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The ongoing controversy around the undeniable antisemitism manifest in his *Black Notebooks* has shaken the foundations of the international Heidegger community since the publication of its first volume in 2014. Despite — or perhaps because of that — academic interest in and scholarship on Heidegger has been thriving in recent years as can for instance be seen in the upcoming publication of the massive, almost 1000-page *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (edited by Mark A. Wrathall, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020). Given the accelerated development of electronic technology and artificial intelligence, it comes as no surprise that his philosophy of technology is thereby increasingly brought into focus. In the case of the English-speaking public, however, this interest has a mundane reason: two central works of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology, namely *Country Path Conversations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2010; originated in the winter of 1944/1945) and the *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking* (edited by Andrew J. Mitchell, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2012; originally delivered in 1949 and 1957) have only recently been translated into English and published (cf. p. 2-3). Heidegger’s canonical texts on technology hitherto available in English are *Discourse on Thinking* (1966) and *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977).

Published by Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou in 2019, the volume at hand constitutes the first major attempt to engage in a more holistic manner with the entirety of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology. For this purpose, the authors gather 17 contributions by leading international Heidegger scholars and thereby illuminate the nexus under scrutiny from a variety of perspectives. The articles range between the poles of text exegesis and conceptual work on the one hand (Wrathall, Thomson, and Keiling, among others) and attempts to probe the applicability of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology in and for the

study of culture on the other (e.g. Glazebrook, and Zimmerman, whose contributions are informed by an ecocritical perspective).

In their valuable “Introduction: Heidegger’s Thinking Through Technology” (p. 1-12), Merwin, Wendland, and Hadjioannou at first contextualize the above-mentioned publication history and Heidegger’s life-long philosophical engagement with technology (cf. p. 1-5). Most significantly, the authors then provide concise working definitions of the two major concepts Heidegger coins in this context, namely, ‘enframing’ or ‘positionality’ (*Gestell*) and ‘releasement’ (*Gelassenheit*) (cf. p. 5-8). Collecting, gathering together, and ordering different kinds of entities, *Gestell*, “[r]ather than allowing entities to appear to us on their own terms, [...] prepositions them by deciding in advance what they are and what position they should occupy within a specific technological framework” (p. 5-6). As a consequence thereof, unique and singular entities are degraded to mere interchangeable and manipulable objects (*Gegenstände*) — ‘resources’ or ‘standing reserve’ (*Bestand*) — to be “placed (*gestellt*), represented (*vorgestellt*), or produced (*her-gestellt*)” (p. 6). The authors’ illuminating example for this nexus is the object of the smartphone in its various entanglements (cf. p. 6-7). This putting into position of *Gestell*, equally enframing human beings, constitutes the crux of Heidegger’s conception of the essence of technology, which he posits as a dominant and apparently inescapable frame of our modern understanding of the world. However, only apparently so, as *Gelassenheit* comes to epitomize what Heidegger merely vaguely hints at as “saving power” arising amidst the greatest danger technology in *The Question Concerning Technology*. Referring to the *Country Path Conversations*, the authors point out the philosophical prehistory of *Gelassenheit* — which can also be translated as equanimity or tranquility — in the works of medieval theologian Meister Eckhart. Heidegger accordingly conceives of it “as a form of willing non-willing” which “both releases us *from* our will to dominance and our will to represent (*vorstellen*) and releases us *to* the possibility of encountering entities on their own terms” (p. 7; emphasis in original).

In his contribution “Letting Things Be for Themselves: *Gelassenheit* as Enabling Thinking” (p. 96-114), Tobias Keiling meticulously traces the implications of *Gelassenheit* in and for thinking as delineated in Heidegger’s *Country Path Conversations*. The latter’s form comprises a fictional exchange between ‘the scholar’ (*der Gelehrte*), ‘the scientist’ (*der Forscher*), and ‘the guide’ (*der Weise*) (though Keiling prefers the terms ‘researcher’ and ‘sage’ for the latter two) about human rationality and thinking. Keiling detects Heidegger’s implicit critique of the dominant

form of thinking in *Country Path Conversations*, namely “a ‘mediational’ form of representationalism” through which “specific subjective forms of the representation of an object mediate and in this way determine how the object appears as meaningful to a subject” (p. 101). The contrasting form of thinking as ‘enabling letting’ does not impose any universal or final horizon but is “*ontologically non-committal*” (p. 104; emphasis in original) and always appropriated anew vis-à-vis the particular individual ‘thing’ (*Ding*) it encounters: “To truly enable something thus means to take it as a ‘thing for itself’ (*Ding für sich selbst*)” (p. 109; emphasis in original). At the end of his article, Keiling sets his interpretation apart from the ones put forward by Richard Rojcewicz (*The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006) and other Heidegger interpreters. Keiling convincingly argues that these approaches take Heidegger to be proposing a new, positive, or alternative ontology enabled in and through *Gelassenheit* that subverts the all-encompassing ways of making sense of the world within *Gestell* (cf. p. 109-112). His interpretation of *Country Path Conversations*, in contrast, conceives of Heidegger implicitly expressing his contentious ‘turn’ (*Kehre*) from a fundamental ontology undertaken in *Being and Time*: “Rather than an ultimate confirmation of Heidegger’s ontological discourse, then, the understanding of *Gelassenheit* in *CPC* [...] provides us with a plausible self-understanding as creatures that think without our mind being set on one single ontology” (p. 109). It is thus not a new ontology that enables us to come to terms with technology and to overcome its metaphysical reign, but *only a new thinking can save us*. “The alternative to the age of technology is not a post-technological age, but a kind of thinking that embraces the openness of ontological thinking” (p. 112).

Drawing on his previous work, renowned Heidegger scholar Michael E. Zimmerman asks, in his contribution, “How Pertinent Is Heidegger’s Thinking for Deep Ecology?” (p. 209-225). With Heidegger, he first interprets our present situation marked by the mass exploitation of world and environment as a consequence of *Gestell*’s all-encompassing commodification, “the result of a specific metaphysical understanding of what things are” (p. 209). As a mode of disclosure, which ‘lets beings be,’ Zimmerman finds *Gelassenheit* extrapolated in late Heidegger’s discourse about ‘dwelling’ in the “fourfold division of being (*das Geviert*) between the earth, sky, divinities, and mortals” (p. 215). Released ‘dwelling’ would simultaneously free and preserve entities as they are (cf. p. 216). Zimmerman then points toward the history and relation between Deep Ecology and above-mentioned concepts. Emerging in the 1970, Deep Ecology is

an environmental and philosophical movement that stresses the connectedness, interdependence, and relationality of all organisms – including human beings – and thus advocates what the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess terms “biospherical egalitarianism—in principle” (p. 217). While Heidegger’s concepts of *Gelassenheit* and the ‘fourfold’ have been curiously reviewed, and in parts been fruitfully appropriated, by Deep Ecologists, the author works out the two philosophies’ central differences and stresses the irreconcilable status therein ascribed to the human being. Heidegger — also the later one — privileges human existence (*Dasein*) as possible clearing for the disclosure of beings and being whereas Deep Ecologists renounce this privileged position in favor of an envisioned equality among the different organic entities (cf. p. 217-221). A major similarity, however, is to be found in the encompassing cultural function of narration as Deep Ecologists’ “demand for new narratives about the human-nature relationship clearly resembles Heidegger’s call for a new beginning to Western history in the face of the threat posed by technology” (p. 218).

Presupposing some basic familiarity with Heidegger’s terminology, *Heidegger on Technology* offers a variety of contributions that urge “us to think through the essence of modern technology” (p. 9), by, on the one hand, historicizing, conceptualizing, and criticizing the notion of *Gestell* in Heidegger’s oeuvre. The contributors, on the other hand, engage in diverse interpretations of *Gelassenheit* in its poetical, mystical, phenomenological, and environmental dimensions in order to flesh out how this rather vaguely defined, yet crucial, term of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology might be conceived as complementary antidote to *Gestell*. The rich volume successfully addresses two possible audiences: The die-hard philosophy camp will appreciate the thorough and inspiring close reading and further development of Heidegger’s broadened engagement with technology. Scholars working in the study of culture will be inspired by the innovative concept-based appropriations of said philosophical grounding, mainly with regard to the field of ecocriticism.