

Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology and Politics

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Martin Heidegger's major work, Being and Time, is usually considered the culminating work in a tradition called existential philosophy. The first person to call himself an existential thinker was Soren Kierkegaard, and his influence is clearly evident in Heidegger's thought. Existential thinking rejects the traditional philosophical view, that goes back to Plato at least, that philosophy must be done from a detached, disinterested point of view. Kierkegaard argues that our primary access to reality is through our involved action. The way things show up for a detached thinker is a partial and distorted version of the way things show up to a committed individual.

Kierkegaard defines the self as a relation that relates itself to itself. That means that who I am depends on the stand I take on being a self. Moreover, how I interpret myself is not a question of what I think but of what I do. I have to take up what is the given or factual part of my self and, by acting on it, define who I am. I understand myself as being a student, a teacher, the lover of a specific person, or the follower or a specific cause. Thus the self defines itself by taking up its past by means of present

actions that make sense in terms of its future. For Kierkegaard, then, the self can be understood as a temporal structure.

Given his emphasis on involvement, Kierkegaard was convinced that philosophical reflection had undermined commitment in the West. In his book The Present Age,¹ written in 1846, he gave a prophetic description of how all authority was disappearing, all concrete differences were being leveled, everything was becoming indifferent, giving rise to alternate fits of lethargy and excitement. Such was the victory of critical detachment over involved commitment. His whole work was devoted to the question: How can we get meaning and commitment back into our lives once we have gotten into the passionless, reflective attitude we are now in?

Heidegger calls the basic structure of human being -- that each human being's way of being is an issue for it -- *Dasein*. In his "existentialist" phase, during the nineteen twenties, Heidegger was interested in the ahistorical, cross-cultural structures of everyday involved experience. He worked out an interpretation of three basic ways of being (availableness or "readiness-to-hand", occurrence or "presence-at-hand", as well as *Dasein*) and their general structure (temporality) grounded in *Dasein*'s ability to take a stand on its own being. These existential structures, Heidegger demonstrated, provided the conditions of the possibility of all modes of intelligibility. He also investigated the way the conformity to norms necessary for

intelligibility opens up the possibility of flight into conformism which levels down all meaningful distinctions.

But whereas Kierkegaard thought that leveling and lack of commitment had been accentuated to nihilistic proportions by the media, Heidegger in Being and Time writes as if leveling has been with mankind as long as tools, and he sees nothing special in the present age. But around 1930 Heidegger began to investigate the understanding of being peculiar to modern western culture. As he put it, in Being and Time “ ‘phenomenology’ and all hermeneutical-transcendental questions had not yet been thought in terms of the history of being.”²

His early interest in the existential structure of the self had shifted to another Kierkegaardian concern -- the lack of meaning and seriousness in the present age.

I. Nihilism

In his lectures on Nietzsche in 1936 Heidegger quotes with approval Nietzsche's Kierkegaardian condemnation of the present age:

Around the year 1882 [Nietzsche] says regarding his times, "Our age is an agitate one, and precisely for that reason, not an age of passion; it heats itself up continuously, because it feels that it is not warm -- basically it is freezing.

... In our time it is merely by means of an echo that events acquire their
`greatness' -- the echo of the newspapers" (XII, 343-344).³

Heidegger agrees with Nietzsche that "There is no longer any goal in and through
which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere and in the
direction of which they can develop".⁴

Nihilism is Nietzsche's name for this loss of meaning or direction. Both
Kierkegaard and Nietzsche agree that if nihilism were complete, there would be no
significant private or public issues. Nothing would have authority for us, would make
a claim on us, would demand a commitment from us. In a non-nihilistic age there is
something at stake; there are questions that all can agree are important, even if they
violently disagree as to what the answers to these questions are. But in our age,
everything is in the process of becoming equal. There is less and less difference
between political parties, between religious communities, between social causes,
between cultural practices -- everything is on a par, all meaningful differences are
being levelled.

Kierkegaard thought that the answer to nihilism was to make one's own
individual absolute commitment. If you can commit yourself unconditionally -- in
love for instance -- then that becomes a focus for your whole sense of reality. Things
stand out or recede into insignificance on the basis of that ultimate concern. One does

not discover a significance that is already there. There is no basis for this commitment in the cosmos. Indeed, such a commitment is exactly the opposite of belief in an objective truth. You are called by some concrete concern -- either a person or a cause -- and when you define yourself by your dedication to that concern, your world acquires seriousness, and significance.

The only way to have a meaningful life in the present age, then, is to let your involvement become definitive of reality for you, and what is definitive of reality for you is not something that is in any way provisional -- although it certainly is vulnerable. That is why, once a society like ours becomes rational and reflective, such total commitments begin to look like a kind of dangerous dependency. The committed individual is identified as a workaholic or a woman who loves too much. This suggests that to be recognized and appreciated individual commitment requires a shared understanding of what is worth pursuing. But as our culture comes more and more to celebrate critical detachment, self-sufficiency, and rational choice, there are fewer and fewer shared commitments. So, commitment itself begins to look like craziness.

Thus Heidegger comes to see the recent undermining of commitment as due not so much to a failure on the part of the individual, as to a lack of anything in the modern world that could solicit commitment from us and sustain us in it. The things that once evoked commitment -- gods, heroes, the God-man, the acts of great

statesmen, the words of great thinkers -- have lost their authority. As a result, individuals feel isolated and alienated. They feel that their lives have no meaning because the public world contains no guidelines.

When everything that is material and social has become completely flat and drab, people retreat into their private experiences as the only remaining place to find significance. Heidegger sees this move to private experience as characteristic of the modern age. Art, religion, sex, education all becomes varieties of experiences. When all our concerns have been reduced to the common denominator of "experience" we will have reached the last stage of nihilism. One then sees "the plunge into frenzy and the disintegration into sheer feeling as redemptive. The 'lived experience' as such becomes decisive."⁵

That is, when there are no shared examples of greatness that focus public concerns and elicit social commitment, people become spectators of fads and public lives, just for the excitement. When there are no religious practices that call forth sacrifice, terror, and awe, people consume everything from drugs to meditation practices to give themselves some kind of peak experience. The peak experience takes the place of what was once a relation to something outside the self that defined the real and was therefore holy. As Heidegger puts it:

[T]he loss of the gods is so far from excluding religiosity that rather only through that loss is the relation to the gods changed into mere "religious experience". (QCT 117, GA 5 76)

Of course, private experience only seems attractive once the shared public world has lost its meaning and reality. Then one thinks (as if somehow it had always been the case and one had just discovered it) that, after all, it is the experience that matters. But sooner or later one finds that although private experience may have "energy" or "spontaneity" or "zing," it provides nothing in terms of which one can give consistency, meaning, and seriousness to one's life.⁶ In Nietzsche's words, "God is Dead, and we have killed him".

Nietzsche, however, unlike Heidegger, finds the death of God liberating. He foresees a new stage of our culture that he calls "positive nihilism," in which each "free spirit" will posit, i.e., create, his or her own values. Heidegger is not so sanguine. He sets out to investigate the history of the understanding of being in the West in order to understand how we did the terrible deed of killing God. One way he tells the story of the loss of meaning is by tracing the history of the very idea of values taken over uncritically by Nietzsche. Heidegger argues that to think of nihilism as a state in which we have forgotten or betrayed our values is part of the problem. Thinking that we once had values but that we do not have values now, and that we should regain our values or choose new ones, is just another symptom of the

trouble. Heidegger claims that thinking about our deepest concerns as values *is* nihilism.

The essence of a value is that it is something that is completely independent of us. It is perceived, and then chosen or rejected. Values have an interesting history. Plato starts with the claim that they are what shows us what is good for us independent of our interests and desires. The idea of the good shines on us and draws us to it. Only with the enlightenment do we arrive at the notion that values are objective -- passive objects standing over against us -- and we must *choose* our values. These values have no claim on us until we *decide* which ones we want to adopt. Once we get the idea that there is a plurality of values and that we choose which ones will have a claim on us, we are ripe for the modern idea, first found in the works of Nietzsche, especially in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, that we *posit* our values -- that is, that valuing is something we do and value is the result of doing it. But once we see that we posit values, we also see that we can equally "unposit" them. They thus lose all authority for us. So, far from giving meaning to our lives, thinking of what is important to us in terms of values shows us that our lives have no intrinsic meaning. As long as we think in terms of explicit value-objects rather than being gripped by shared concerns, we will not find anything that elicits our commitment. As Heidegger says, "No one dies for mere values." (QCT 142, GA 5 102)

Once we see how thinking of the problem of nihilism in terms of lacking values perpetuates rather than combats the problem, we are ready to diagnose and seek a cure for our condition. According to Heidegger our trouble begins with Socrates' and Plato's claim that true moral knowledge, like scientific knowledge, must be explicit and disinterested. Heidegger questions both the possibility and the desirability of making our everyday understanding totally explicit. He introduces the idea that the shared everyday skills, concerns, and practices into which we are socialized provide the conditions necessary for people to make sense of the world and of their lives. All intelligibility presupposes something that cannot be fully articulated -- a kind of knowing-how rather than a knowing-that. At the deepest level such knowing is embodied in our social skills rather than in our concepts, beliefs, and values. Heidegger argues that our cultural practices can direct our activities and make our lives meaningful only insofar as they are and stay unarticulated, that is, as long as they stay the soil out of which we live. If there is to be seriousness it must draw on these unarticulated background practices. As Heidegger puts it in a later work, "Every decision ... bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would never be a decision."(OWA 55)⁷ Critical reflection is necessary in some situations where our ordinary way of coping is insufficient, but such reflection cannot and should not play the central role it has played in the philosophical tradition. What is most important and meaningful in our lives is not and should not be accessible to critical reflection.

The cultural know-how which embodies our concerns is certainly not conscious, but neither does it appear to be unconscious. To get a sense of what this know-how is like, take a very simple case. People in various cultures stand different distances from an intimate, a friend, a stranger, etc. Furthermore, these distances vary when chatting, doing business, or engaging in courtship. Each culture, including our own, embodies an incredibly subtle shared pattern of social distancing. Yet no one explicitly taught this pattern to each of us. Our parents could not possibly have consciously instructed us in it since they do not know the pattern any more than we do. We do not even know we have such know-how until we go to another culture and find, for example, that in North Africa strangers seem to be oppressively close while in Scandinavia friends seem to stand too far away. This makes us uneasy and we cannot help backing away or moving closer. That is how we got this know-how in the first place. As small children, when we began to interact with other people, we sometimes got the distances wrong. This made our parents and friends uneasy and they either backed away or moved closer so that we gradually picked up the whole pattern. It never was made explicit. As a skill or *savoir faire* it is not something like a set of rules that could be made explicit.⁸ Yet it embodies rudiments of an understanding of what it is to be a human being -- hints of how important body contact is, and the relative importance of intimacy and independence.

Now practices like how far to stand from people are not all that is passed on by training and imitation. Our everyday know-how involves an understanding of what it

is to be a person, a thing, a natural object, a plant, an animal, and so on. Our understanding of animals these days, for example, is in part embodied in our skill in buying pieces of them, taking off their plastic wrapping, and cooking them in microwave ovens. In general, we deal with things as resources to be used and then disposed of when no longer needed. A styrofoam cup is a perfect example. When we want a hot or cold drink it does its job, and when we are through with it we throw it away. How different this understanding of an object is from what we can suppose to be the Japanese understanding of a delicate, painted tea cup, which does not do as good a job of maintaining temperature and which has to be washed and protected, but which is preserved from generation to generation for its beauty and its social meaning. Or, at the other extreme, an old earthenware mug, admired for its simplicity and its ability to evoke memories of ancient crafts, such as is used in a Japanese tea ceremony. It is hard to picture a tea ceremony around a styrofoam cup.

Note that an aspect of the Japanese understanding of what it is to be human (passive, contented, gentle, social, etc.) fits with an understanding of what it is to be a thing (evocative of simpler times, pure, natural, simple, beautiful, traditional, etc.). It would make no sense for us, who are active, independent, and aggressive -- constantly striving to cultivate and satisfy our desires -- to relate to things the way the Japanese do; or for the Japanese (before their understanding of being was interfered with by ours) to invent and prefer styrofoam teacups. In the same vein *we* tend to think of politics as the negotiation of individual desires while the Japanese

seek consensus. In sum, the practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human being, those containing an interpretation of what it is to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. Social practices thus not only transmit an implicit understanding of what it is to be a human being, an animal, or an object, but finally, an understanding of what it is for anything to be at all.

The shared practices into which we are socialized, moreover, provide a background understanding of what matters and what it makes sense to do, on the basis of which we can direct our actions. This understanding of being creates what Heidegger calls a *clearing* in which things and people can show up as mattering and meaningful for us. We do not produce the clearing. It produces us as the kind of human beings that we are. Heidegger describes the clearing as follows:

[B]eyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting.... This open center is ... not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is.... Only this clearing grants and guarantees to human beings a passage to those entities that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. (PLT 53, G 5 39-40)

As we have noted, our cultural practices and the understanding of being they embody allow us to direct our activities and make sense of our lives only insofar as

they are and stay unarticulated, that is, stay the atmosphere in which we live. These background practices are the concealed and unmastered that Heidegger tells us give seriousness to our decisions. Mattering lies not in what we choose, but in "that on the basis of which" we choose. The more our know-how is formulated and objectified as knowing-that, the more it is called up for critical questioning, the more it loses its grip on us. This is what Kierkegaard saw in his attack on modern critical reflection, and Heidegger in his attack on value thinking.

But this cannot be the whole story. For things and people to be intelligible, there must always be a clearing -- background practices containing an understanding of being. These will never be fully accessible to reflection. So there must be a deeper problem -- something wrong with our current background practices that leads us to ignore them -- seeking meaning in choosing objective values and finally in positing individual values for ourselves. So Heidegger raises new questions: What is it to have a nihilistic clearing, how did we come to have one, and what can we do about it? Only when we have answered these, he holds, can we ask: Are there still left in our practices some remnants of shared meaningful concerns? If so, where are such practices to be found? The strongest argument that some such practices must have survived is that without some remnant of them we would not be distressed by nihilism. But before we can answer these questions, we must ask a prior one: How do practices give shared meaning to the lives of those who practice them?

II. The Work of Art (World and Earth)

For everyday practices to give meaning to our lives and to unite us in a community, they must be focused and held up to the practitioners. Clifford Geertz and Charles Taylor have each discussed this important phenomenon. In describing the role of the cockfight in Balinese society, Geertz points out:

[I]t provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.⁹

Heidegger calls this interpretive function, "truth setting itself to work", and anything that performs this function he calls a work of art. As his illustration of an artwork working, Heidegger takes the Greek temple. The temple held up to the Greeks what was important, and so let there be meaningful differences such a victory and disgrace, disaster and blessing.

It is the templework that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of

destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. (PLT 42, GA 5 29)

The Greeks whose practices were manifested and focused by the temple lived in a moral space that gave direction and meaning to their lives. In the same way, the Medieval cathedral made it possible to be sinner or a saint and showed Christians the dimensions of salvation and damnation.¹⁰ In either case, one knew where one stood and what one had to do. Heidegger would say that the understanding of what it is to be changes each time a culture gets a new art work. Then different sorts of human beings and things show up. For the Greeks, what showed up were heroes and slaves and marvelous things; for the Christians, saints and sinners, rewards and temptations. There could not have been saints in Ancient Greece. At best there could only have been weak people who let everybody walk all over them. Likewise, there could not have been Greek-style heroes in the Middle Ages. Such people would have been regarded as pagans -- prideful sinners who disrupted society by denying their dependence on God.

Generalizing the idea of a work of art, Heidegger holds that "there must always be some being in the open [the clearing], something that is, in which the openness takes its stand and attains its constancy" (PLT 61, G 5 48). Let us call such special things cultural paradigms. Talking of a paradigm focusing the practices seems almost inevitable. Compare Geertz:

It is this kind of bringing of assorted experiences of everyday life to focus that the cockfight ... accomplishes, and so creates what, better than typical or universal, could be called a paradigmatic human event.¹¹

A cultural paradigm collects the scattered practices of a group, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds them up to the people who can then act and relate to each other in terms of this exemplar. Works of art, when performing this function are not merely representations or symbols, but actually produce a shared understanding. As Geertz puts it:

Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of ... sensibility.¹²

Charles Taylor makes the same point when he distinguished *shared meanings* which he calls inter-subjective meanings, from *common meanings* "whose being shared is a collective act." He continues:

[I]t is part of the meaning of a common aspiration, belief, celebration, etc. that it be not just shared but part of the common reference world. Or to put it another way, its being shared is a collective act. ... Common meanings are

the basis of community. Inter-subjective meanings gives a people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meaning does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations, and feelings. These are objects in the world that everybody shares. This is what makes community.¹³

In his book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn shows that scientists engaged in what he calls normal science operate in terms of such an exemplar or paradigm -- an outstanding example of a good piece of work. The paradigm for modern science was Newton's Principia. All agreed that Newton had seen exemplary problems, given exemplary solutions, and produced exemplary justifications for his claims. Thus, for over two centuries natural scientists knew that, insofar as their work resembled Newton's, they were doing good science.

The Newtonian paradigm was later replaced by the Einsteinian paradigm. Such a paradigm shift constitutes a scientific revolution. After such a revolution scientists see and do things differently. As Kuhn puts it, they work in a different world. They also believe and value different things, but this is less important. Kuhn is quite Heideggerian in holding that it is the paradigm that guides the scientists' practices and that the paradigm cannot be explained as a set of beliefs or values and so cannot be stated as a criterion or rule. As Kuhn notes: "That scientists do not usually ask or debate what makes a particular problem or solution legitimate tempts us to suppose

that, at least intuitively, they know the answer. But it may only indicate that neither the question nor the answer is felt to be relevant to their research. Paradigms may be prior to, more binding, and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them."¹⁴

Kuhn further points out that: "the concrete scientific achievement, as a locus of professional commitment, [is] prior to the various concepts, laws, theories, and points of view that may be abstracted from it." He adds that the paradigm cannot be rationalized: "[T]he shared paradigm [is] a fundamental unit for the student of scientific development, a unit that cannot be fully reduced to logically atomic components which might function in its stead."¹⁵ That the paradigm cannot be rationalized but only imitated is crucial to the paradigm's authority. It requires that the paradigm work by way of the background practices, in terms of which the scientists have a world. It also makes it possible for the scientists to agree without having to spell out their agreement.

At a time of a scientific revolution, however, Kuhn tells us, the paradigm becomes the focus of conflicting interpretations, each trying to rationalize and justify it. Similarly, Heidegger holds that a working artwork is so important to a community that people must try to make the work clear and coherent and to make everyone follow it in all aspects of their lives. But the artwork, like the scientific paradigm, exhibits a resistance to such rationalization. Any paradigm could be paraphrased and

rationalized only if the concrete thing which served as an exemplar symbolized or represented an underlying system of beliefs or values abstracted from the particular exemplar. But the whole point of needing an exemplar is that there is no such system, there are only shared practices. Heidegger calls the way the artwork solicits the culture to make the artwork explicit, coherent and encompassing the *world* aspect of the work. He calls the way the artwork and its associated practices resist such totalization, the *earth*.

Heidegger points out that world and earth are both necessary for an artwork to work. The temple must clarify and unify the practices -- it must be "all governing" -- but being a concrete thing it resists rationalization. Such resistance is manifest in the very materiality of the artwork. Such materiality is not accidental. The temple requires the stone out of which it is made in order to do its job of showing man's place in the natural world, so that a temple made out of steel would not work. Likewise a tragedy requires the sound of poetry to create a shared mood and thus open up a shared world. Since it is made out of rock or sounds, the art work shows that what is at stake cannot be captured in a system of beliefs and values. All those aspects of a cultural paradigm and the practices it organizes that resist being rationalized and totalized are included in Heidegger's notion of the earth. Earth is not passive matter, but comes into being precisely as what resists the attempt to abstract and generalize the point of the paradigm. And since no interpretation can ever completely capture what the work means, the work of art sets up a struggle between

earth and world. This struggle is a necessary aspect of the way meaning inheres in human practices. It is a fruitful struggle in that the conflict of interpretations it sets up generates a culture's history. Heidegger generalizes the notion of a cultural paradigm from a work of art to any being in the clearing that can refocus and so renews cultural practices.

One essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is truth setting itself into work. Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state. Still another way in which truth comes to shine forth is the nearness of that which is not simply a being, but the being that is most of all. Still another way in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice. Still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker's questioning, which, as the thinking of being, names being in its question-worthiness. (PLT 61-62, GA 5 49)

One can recognize an allusion to the covenant of God with the Jews and the Crucifixion, and also the political act that founds a state. For example the American constitution, like a work of art, has necessarily become the focus of attempts to make it explicit and consistent and to make it apply to all situations and, of course, it is fecond just in so far as it can never be interpreted once and for all. The founding of a state could, of course, also refer to the act of a charismatic leader such as Hitler. This possibility will concern us later in this essay.

III. Technology

Cultural paradigms do not, however, always establish meaningful differences. There can be nihilistic paradigms. Such paradigms, instead of showing forth the earth on the basis of which our actions can matter to us, conceal the struggle between earth and world and celebrate our ability to get everything clear and under control. Thus the current paradigms that hold up to us what our culture is dedicated to and is good at are examples of flexibility and efficiency, not for the sake of some further end, but just for the sake of flexibility and efficiency themselves. We admire the way computers are getting faster and faster and at the same time cheaper and cheaper, without knowing how we will use the incredibly flexible computing power they give us. Likewise, fast food chains that give us cheap and instant service at any time of day or night, stand out as technological triumphs of efficiency and adaptability. Heidegger's example is the power station on the Rhine.

The hydroelectric plant is set into the current of the Rhine. It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch electricity ... [T]he energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is

stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command (QCT 16).

All such paradigms deny that an understanding of being necessarily involves receptivity and mystery, and so they deny Heideggerian seriousness.

Again, a comparison with Kuhn can help us see Heidegger's point. According to Kuhn, a science becomes normal when the practitioners in a certain area all agree that a particular piece of work identifies the important problems in a field and demonstrates how certain of these problems can be successfully solved. Thus, a scientific paradigm sets up normal science as an activity of puzzle solving. It is the job of normal science to eliminate anomalies by showing how they fit into the total theory the paradigm sketches out in advance. In a similar way, the technological paradigm embodies and furthers our technological understanding of being according to which what does not fit in with our current paradigm -- that is, that which is not yet at our disposal to use efficiently (e.g., the wilderness, friendship, the stars) -- will finally be brought under our control, and turned into a resource. The contrast with the Greek temple is obvious. The temple is not a totalizing paradigm that makes everything clear and promises to bring it under control. The temple shows people not

only what they stand for but also that there is an earthy aspect of things that withdraws and that can never be articulated and dominated.

In the face of the totalizing tendency of the technological artwork, the earth's resistance to total ordering shows up as a source of what Kuhn calls anomalies. What cannot be ordered is treated as recalcitrant human beings who are deviant and must be reformed or as natural forces that have yet to be understood and mastered. All cultures inculcate norms of human behavior and find some order in nature, but ours is the only culture which tries to make the social and natural order total by transforming or destroying all exceptions. Kierkegaard already saw that the individual or exceptional was menaced by levelling. Heidegger sees that all our marginal practices are in danger of being taken over and normalized. It looks to us, of course, as if this is for our own good.

Heidegger, however, sees in these marginal practices the only possibility of resistance to technology. Greek practices such as friendship and the cultivation of the erotic are not efficient. When friendship becomes efficient networking, it is no longer the mutual trust and respect the Greeks admired. Likewise the mystical merging power of the erotic is lost when we turn to private sexual experience. Similarly, Greek respect for the irrational in the form of music and Dionysian frenzy do not fit into an efficiently ordered technological world. Indeed, such "pagan" practices did not even fit into the Christian understanding of being and were marginalized in the

name of disinterested, *agapé* love, and peace. These Christian practices in turn were seen as trivial or dangerous given the Enlightenment's emphasis on individual maturity, self-control, and autonomy.

In order to combat modern nihilism Heidegger attempts to point out to us the peculiar and dangerous aspects of our technological understanding of being. But Heidegger does not oppose technology. In The Question Concerning Technology he hopes to reveal the essence of technology in a way that "in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it". Indeed, he promises that "when we once open ourselves expressly to the *essence* of technology, we find ourselves unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim". (QCT 25-26, VA 33)

We will need to explain opening, essence and freeing before we can understand Heidegger here. But already Heidegger's project should alert us to the fact that he is not announcing one more reactionary rebellion against technology, although many take him to be doing just that. Nor is he doing what progressive thinkers would like to do: proposing a way to get technology under control so that it can serve our rationally chosen ends. The difficulty in locating just where Heidegger stands on technology is no accident. Heidegger has not always been clear about what distinguishes his approach from a romantic reaction to the domination of nature, and when he does finally arrive at a clear formulation of his own original view, it is so

strange that in order to understand it everyone is tempted to translate it into conventional platitudes. Thus Heidegger's ontological concerns are mistakenly assimilated to ecologically-minded worries about the devastation of nature.

Those who want to make Heidegger intelligible in terms of current anti-technological banalities can find support in his texts. During the war he attacked consumerism.

The circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld. (EP 107, VA 96)

And as late as 1955, in an address to the Schwarzwald peasants, he points out:

The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought.
... Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry. (DOT 50, G 19-20)

In this address he also laments the appearance of television antennae on the peasants' dwellings, and gives his own version of an attack on the levelling power of the media.

Hourly and daily they are chained to radio and television. ... All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man -- all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world. (DOT 50, G 17)

Such quotes make it seem Heidegger is a ludite who would like to return from consumerism, the exploitation of the earth, and mass media to the world of the pre-Socratic Greeks or the good old Schwarzwald peasants.

Nevertheless, although Heidegger does not deny that technology presents us with serious problems, as his thinking develops he comes to the surprising and provocative conclusion that focusing on loss and destruction is still technological.

All attempts to reckon existing reality ... in terms of decline and loss, in terms of fate, catastrophe, and destruction, are merely technological behavior. (QCT 48, TK 45-46)

Seeing our situation as posing a problem that must be solved by appropriate action is technological too:

[T]he instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. ... The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control. (QCT 5, VA 14-15)

Heidegger is clear this approach will not work. "No single man, no group of men," he tells us, "no commission of prominent statesmen, scientists, and technicians, no conference of leaders of commerce and industry, can brake or direct the progress of history in the atomic age." (DOT 52, G 22)

Heidegger's view is both darker and more hopeful. He thinks there is a more dangerous situation facing modern man than the technological destruction of nature and civilization, yet this is a situation about which something *can* be done -- at least indirectly. Heidegger's concern is the human *distress* caused by the *technological understanding of being*, rather than the *destruction* caused by *specific technologies*. Consequently, he distinguishes the current problems caused by technology -- ecological destruction, nuclear danger, consumerism, etc. -- from the devastation that would result should technology solve all our problems.

What threatens man in his very nature is ... that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature,

could render the human condition ... tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects. (PLT 116, G 5 294)

The "the greatest danger" is that

the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced *as the only* way of thinking. (DOT 56, G 27)

The danger, then, is not the destruction of nature or culture but certain totalizing kinds of practices -- a levelling of our understanding of being. This threat is not a *problem* for which we must find a *solution*, but an *ontological condition* that requires a *transformation of our understanding of being*.

What, then, is the essence of technology -- i.e., the technological understanding of being, or the technological clearing -- and how does opening ourselves to it give us a free relation to technological devices? To begin with, when he asks about the essence of technology we must understand that Heidegger is not seeking a definition. His question cannot be answered by defining our concept of technology. Technology is as old as civilization. Heidegger notes that it can be correctly defined as "a means and a human activity." But if we ask about the *essence*

of technology (the technological understanding of being) we find that modern technology is "something completely different and ... new." (QCT 5, VA 15) It even goes beyond using styrofoam cups to satisfy our desires. The essence of modern technology Heidegger tells us, is to seek to order everything so as to achieve more and more flexibility and efficiency: "[E]xpediting is always itself directed from the beginning ... towards driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense." (QCT 15, VA 23) That is, our only goal is optimal ordering, *for its own sake*.

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering.

Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it standing-reserve. (QCT 17, VA 24)

No more do we have subjects turning nature into an object of exploitation:

The subject-object relation thus reaches, for the first time, its pure "relational," i.e., ordering, character in which both the subject and the object are sucked up as standing-reserves. (QCT 173, VA 61)

Heidegger concludes: "Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object." (QCT 17, VA 24) He tells us that a modern airliner, understood in its technological essence, is not a tool we use; it is not an object at all, but rather a flexible and efficient cog in the transportation system. Likewise, we are

not subjects who use the transportation system, but rather we are used by it to fill the planes.

In this technological perspective, ultimate goals like serving God, society, our fellow men, or even ourselves no longer make sense. Human beings, on this view, become a resource to be used -- but more importantly, to be enhanced -- like any other.

Man, who no longer conceals his character of being the most important raw material, is also drawn into this process.(EP 104, VA 90)

In the film, 2001: A Space Odyssey, the robot, HAL, when asked if he is happy on the mission, says: "I'm using all my capacities to the maximum. What more could a rational entity want?" This is a brilliant expression of what anyone would say who is in touch with our current understanding of being. We pursue the development of our potential simply for the sake of further growth. We have no specific goals. The human potential movement perfectly expresses this technological understanding of being, as does the attempt to better organize the future use of our natural resources. We thus become part of a system which no one directs but which moves towards the total mobilization and enhancement of all beings, even us. This is why Heidegger thinks the perfectly ordered society dedicated to the welfare of all is not the solution of our problems but the culmination of the technological understanding of being.

Heidegger, however, sees that "it would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil. We depend on technical devices; they even challenge us to ever greater advances."(DOT 53, G 24) Instead, Heidegger suggests that there is a way we can keep our technological devices and yet remain true to ourselves as receivers of clearings:

We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature.
(DOT 54, G 24-25)

To understand how this might be possible, we need an illustration of Heidegger's important distinction between technology and the technological understanding of being. Again we can turn to Japan. In contemporary Japan traditional, non-technological practices still exist alongside the most advanced high-tech production and consumption. The TV set and the household gods share the same shelf -- the styrofoam cup co-exists with the porcelain tea cup. We thus see that the Japanese at least, can enjoy technology without taking over the technological understanding of being.

For us to be able to make a similar dissociation, Heidegger holds, we must rethink the history of being in the West. Then we will see that although a

technological understanding of being is our destiny, it is not our fate. That is, although our understanding of things and ourselves as resources to be ordered, enhanced, and used efficiently has been building up since Plato, we are not stuck with that understanding. Although the technological understanding of being governs the way things have to show up for us, we can hope for a transformation of our current cultural clearing.

Only those who think of Heidegger as opposing technology will be surprised at his next point. Once we see that technology is our latest understanding of being, we will be grateful for it. This clearing is the cause of our distress, yet if it were not given to us to encounter things and ourselves as resources, nothing would show up *as* anything at all, and no possibilities for action would make sense. And once we realize -- in our practices, of course, not just as matter of reflection -- that we *receive* our technological understanding of being, we have stepped out of the technological understanding of being, for we then see that what is most important in our lives is not subject to efficient enhancement -- indeed, the drive to control everything is precisely what we do not control. This transformation in our sense of reality -- this overcoming of thinking in terms of values and calculation -- is precisely what Heideggerian thinking seeks to bring about. Heidegger seeks to make us see that our practices are needed as the place where an understanding of being can establish itself, so we can overcome our restricted modern clearing by acknowledging our essential receptivity to understandings of being.

[M]odern man must first and above all find his way back into the full breadth of the space proper to his essence. That essential space of man's essential being receives the dimension that unites it to something beyond itself ... that is the way in which the safekeeping of being itself is given to belong to the essence of man as the one who is needed and used by being. (QCT 39, TK 39)

This transformation in our understanding of being, unlike the slow process of cleaning up the environment, which is, of course, also necessary, would take place in a sudden gestalt switch.

The turning of the danger comes to pass suddenly. In this turning, the clearing belonging to the essence of being suddenly clears itself and lights up. (QCT 44, TK 43)

The danger -- namely that we have a leveled and concealed understanding of being -- when grasped *as* the danger, becomes that which saves us.

The selfsame danger is, when it is *as* the danger, the saving power. (QCT 39, TK 39)

This remarkable claim gives rise to two opposed ways of understanding Heidegger's response to technology. Both interpretations agree that once one recognizes the technological understanding of being for what it is -- an historical understanding -- one gains a free relation to it. We neither push forward technological efficiency as our sole goal nor always resist it. If we are free of the technological imperative we can, in each case, discuss the pros and cons. As Heidegger puts it:

We let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside, ... as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher. I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses "yes" and at the same time "no", by an old word, *releasement towards things*.¹⁶ (DOT 54, G 25)

One natural way of understanding this proposal holds that once we get in the right relation to technology, viz. recognize it as a clearing, it is revealed as just as good as any other clearing.¹⁷ Efficiency -- getting the most out of ourselves and everything else, "being all you can be" -- is fine, as long as we see that efficiency for its own sake is not the *only* end for man, dictated by reality itself, but is just our current understanding. Heidegger seems to support this acceptance of the technological understanding of being as a way of living with technological nihilism when he says:

That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws [i.e., our understanding of being] is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*.

Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it. (DOT 55, G 26)

Nevertheless, such acceptance of the mystery of the gift of an understanding of being cannot be Heidegger's whole story about how to overcome technological nihilism, for he immediately adds:

Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery give us a vision of a new rootedness which *someday* might even be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing rootedness in a changed form. (DOT 55, G 26)

When we then look back at the preceding remark, we realize releasement gives only a "possibility" and a "promise" of "dwelling in the world in a totally different way", it does not yet enable us to do so. Mere openness to technology leaves out much that

Heidegger finds essential to overcoming nihilism: embeddedness in nature, nearness or localness, and new shared meaningful differences. Thus releasement, while giving us a free relation to technology and protecting our nature from being distorted and distressed, cannot by itself give us any of these. For Heidegger, then, there are, two issues. One issue is clear:

The issue is the saving of man's essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive. (DOT 56, G 27)

This is a matter of preserving our sense of ourselves as *receivers* of understandings of being. But that is not enough:

If releasement toward things and openness to the mystery awaken within us, then we should arrive at a path that will lead to a new ground and foundation. (DOT 56, G 28)

Releasement, it turns out, is only a stage, a kind of holding pattern we can enter into while we are awaiting a new understanding of being which would give a shared content to our openness -- what Heidegger calls a new rootedness. That is why each time Heidegger talks of releasement and the saving power of understanding technology as a gift, he then goes on to talk of the divine.

Only when man, in the disclosing coming-to-pass of the insight by which he himself is beheld ... renounces human self-will ... may [he], as the mortal, look out toward the divine. (QCT 47, TK 45)

This is reflected in Heidegger's famous remark in his last interview: "Only a god can save us now."¹⁸ But what does this mean?

To begin with Heidegger holds that we must learn to appreciate marginal practices -- what Heidegger calls the saving power of insignificant things -- practices such as friendship, backpacking into the wilderness, and drinking the local wine with friends. All these practices remain marginal precisely because they resist efficiency. These practices can, of course, also be engaged in for the sake of health and greater efficiency. Indeed, the greatest danger is that even the marginal practices will be mobilized as resources. We must therefore protect these endangered practices. But just protecting non-technical practices, even if we could succeed, would not give us what we need. These practices do not add up to a shared moral space of serious, meaningful options.

Of course, one cannot legislate a new understanding of being. But these saving practices could come together in a new cultural paradigm, that held up to us a new way of doing things -- a world in which these practices and others were central, and efficient ordering was marginal. An object or event that would ground such a gestalt

switch in our understanding of reality, Heidegger calls a new god, and this is why he holds that only a god can save us.

What can we do to get what is still non-technological in our practices in focus in a non-nihilistic paradigm? Once one sees the problem, one also sees that there is not much one can do about it. A new sense of reality is not something that can be made the goal of a crash program like the moon flight -- another paradigm of modern technological power. A new paradigm would have to take up practices which are now on the margin of our culture and make them central, while de-emphasizing practices now central to our cultural self-understanding. It would come as a surprise to the very people who participated in it, and if it worked it would become an exemplar of a new understanding of what matters and how to act. There would, of course, be powerful forces tending to take it over and mobilize it for our technological order, and if it failed it would necessarily be measured by our current understanding and so look ridiculous.

A hint of what such a new god might look like is offered by the music of the sixties. Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and other rock groups became for many the articulation of new understanding of what really mattered. This new understanding almost coalesced into a cultural paradigm in the Woodstock music festival of 1969, where people actually lived for a few days in an understanding of being in which mainline contemporary concerns with order, sobriety, willful activity, and flexible,

efficient control were made marginal and subservient to certain pagan practices, such as openness, enjoyment of nature, dancing, and Dionysian ecstasy, along with neglected Christian concerns with peace, tolerance, and non-exclusive love of one's neighbor. Technology was not smashed or denigrated, rather all the power of electronic communications was put at the service of the music which focused the above concerns.

If enough people had recognized in Woodstock what they most cared about and recognized that many others shared this recognition, a new understanding of being might have been focused and stabilized. Of course, in retrospect it seems to us who are still in the grip of the technological understanding of being that the concerns of the Woodstock generation were not organized and total enough to sustain a culture. Still we are left with a hint of how a new cultural paradigm would work. This helps us understand that we must foster human receptivity and preserve the endangered species of pre-technological practices that remain in our culture, in the hope that one day they will be pulled together in a new paradigm, rich enough and resistant enough to give a new meaningful direction to our lives.

IV. Politics

Heidegger's political engagement was predicated upon his interpretation of the situation in the West as technological nihilism, and of National Socialism as a new

paradigm that could give our culture a new understanding of being. But the very same interpretation of the history of being which led Heidegger to support Hitler in 1933, provided the ground for his decisive break with National Socialism somewhere between 1935 and 1938. Between 1933 and 1935 Heidegger seems to have thought that following Hitler as a charismatic leader was the only way to save and focus local and traditional practices in the face of global technology as exemplified by the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1935 he says in a lecture course:

From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same; the same dreary technological frenzy. ... Situated in the center, our nation incurs the severest pressure. ... If the great decision regarding Europe is not to bring annihilation, that decision must be made in terms of new spiritual energies unfolding historically from out of the center.¹⁹

But by 1938, in "The Age of the World Picture", Heidegger sees technology as the problem of the *West*, and National Socialism, rather than the USSR and the US, as the most dangerous form of what he calls, in Nazi terms, "total mobilization" (QCT 137, G 5 97). Heidegger also criticized the belief in a *Führer* as organizer of a total order as more technological ordering.

[B]eings have entered the way of erring in which the vacuum expands which requires a single order and guarantee of beings. Herein the necessity of

"leadership," that is, the planning calculation ... of the whole of beings, is required. (EOP 105, VA 93)

After 1938, then, Heidegger thought of National Socialism, not as the answer to technology and nihilism, but as its most extreme expression.

This gets us to one final question: To what extent was Heidegger's support of National Socialism a personal mistake compounded of conservative prejudices, personal ambition, and political naïveté, and to what extent was his engagement dictated by his philosophy? We have seen that Heidegger, like Charles Taylor and Robert Bellah more recently, holds that we can get over nihilism only by finding some set of shared meaningful concerns that can give our culture a new focus. Moreover, Heidegger sees no hope of overcoming nihilism if one accepts the Kantian ideal of rational autonomy central to the Enlightenment. In fact, he sees autonomy as the cause of our dangerous contemporary condition. He counters the Enlightenment with a non-theological version of the Christian message that man cannot be saved by autonomy, maturity, equality, and dignity alone. Heidegger holds that only some shared meaningful concern that grips us can give our culture a focus and enable us to resist acquiescence to a state that has no higher goal than to provide material welfare for all. This conviction underlies his dangerous claim that only a god -- a charismatic figure or some other culturally renewing event -- can save us from nihilism.

To many, however, the idea of *a* god which will give us a unified but open community -- one set of concerns which everyone shares if only as a focus of disagreement -- sounds either unrealistic or dangerous. Heidegger would probably agree that its open democratic version looks increasingly unobtainable and that we have certainly seen that its closed totalitarian form can be very dangerous. But Heidegger holds that given our historical essence -- the kind of beings we became in fifth century BC Greece when our culture gained its identity -- such a community is necessary to us or else we will remain in nihilism. It is, he thinks, our only hope, or, as he puts it, our destiny.

It follows for Heidegger that our deepest needs will be satisfied and our distress overcome only when our culture gets a new center. Our current condition is defined by the absence of a god:

The era is defined by the god's failure to arrive, by the "default of god." But the default of god ... does not deny that the Christian relationship with God lives on in individuals and in the churches; still less does it assess this relationship negatively. The default of god means that no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes of the world's history and man's sojourn in it. (PLT 91, G 5 269)

Heidegger's *personal* mistake comes from having thought that Hitler or National Socialism was such a god. Yet, Heidegger had already, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," developed criteria that could serve to determine whether a charismatic leader or movement deserved our allegiance. He stresses there that a true work of art must set up a struggle between earth and world. That is, a true work of art does not make everything explicit and systematic. It generates and supports resistance to total mobilization. Yet, Heidegger chose to support a totalitarian leader who denied the truth of all conflicting views and was dedicated to bringing everything under control. Heidegger no doubt interpreted Hitler as setting up some sort of appropriate struggle. Unfortunately, there is no interpretation-free criterion for testing a new god, and such mistakes are always possible. Heidegger's *philosophy*, then, is dangerous because it seeks to convince us that only a god - a charismatic figure or some other culturally renewing event -- can save us from falling into contented nihilism. It exposes us to the risk of committing ourselves to some demonic renewing event or movement.

What sort of claim is Heidegger making when he tells us that enlightenment welfare and dignity are not enough and that only a god can save us? How can one justify or criticize Heidegger when he reads our current condition as the absence of god and our current distress as a sign of the greatest danger? --for only such a reading of the present age justifies risking commitment to some new cultural paradigm.

The first answer we might try to give is that Heidegger is offering a genealogical interpretation. He will focus on and augment our distress and show that it can be accounted for by telling a story of the progressive narrowing, levelling, and totalizing of the West's understanding of being. Such an interpretation has to make sense of more details of our history and present situation than any rival interpretation, and ultimately it must convince us by the illumination it casts on our current condition, especially on our sense of ontological distress or emptiness, if we have one.

But how could we know that our distress was due to the absence of a god rather than personal and social problems? One answer might be that we will just have to wait for the perfected welfare state and then see how we feel. If defenders of the Enlightenment are right, distress will be eliminated, whereas Heidegger, one might suppose, would expect that, as technology succeeds, the suffering will grow. But Heidegger does not make this claim. Heidegger admits and fears the possibility that everyone might simply become healthy and happy, and forget completely that they are receivers of understandings of being. All Heidegger can say is that such a forgetting of our forgetting of being would be the darkest night of nihilism. In such an "unworld" Heidegger could no longer expect to be understood. Only now, and only as long as he can awaken our distress, and our sense of our receptivity to a mysterious source of meaning that creates and sustains us, can he hope that we will be able to see the force of his interpretation.

Such thinking is far from the "infallible knowledge"²⁰ many think Heidegger claims. Indeed, Heidegger goes out of his way to point out that he can claim no infallibility for this interpretation. He writes to a student that "This thinking can never show credentials such as mathematical knowledge can. But it is just as little a matter of arbitrariness."²¹ He then goes on to repeat his reading of the West as having lost touch with the saving practices excluded by totalizing technology -- practices which are nonetheless all around us.

The default of god and the divinities is absence. But absence is not nothing; rather it is precisely the presence, which must first be appropriated, of the hidden fullness and wealth of what has been and what, thus gathered, is presencing, of the divine in the world of the Greeks, in prophetic Judaism, in the preaching of Jesus. (PLT 184, VA 183)

And he immediately adds that he can claim no special authority:

I can provide no credentials for what I have said ... that would permit a convenient check in each case whether what I say agrees with "reality." (PLT 186, VA 184)

This is an appropriate warning since Heidegger's own political mistake reminds us that any guidelines must always be interpreted, and that if one opts for the charismatic one cannot avoid the risk. Thus Heidegger's letter to the student fittingly concludes:

Any path always risks going astray. ... Stay on the path, in genuine need, and learn the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring. (PLT 186, VA 185)

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, The Present Age, Alexander Dru, trans., Harper & Row, 1962.

² Martin Heidegger, The End of Philosophy, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 15.

³ Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Volume One, Harper and Row, 1979, p. 47.

⁴ Ibid, p. 157.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Volume One, Op. Cit., p. 86.

⁶ For evidence that Heidegger is right on this point, see Robert Bellah et al, Habits of the Heart, University of California Press, Berkeley.

⁷ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 55.

⁸See Dreyfus & Dreyfus, Mind Over Machine. New York: Free Press, 1982.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, Basic Books - Harper Colophon Books, 1973, p. 448.

¹⁰ For a description of the dimensions and directions of moral space cf., Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, Op. Cit., p. 450.

¹² Ibid., p. 451.

¹³ Charles Taylor, Interpretation and the Sciences of Man, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 39.

¹⁴ Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, p. 46.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 11

¹⁶ Why Heidegger speaks of "things" here is a long and interesting story. In his essay on "The Thing" in Poetry, Language, Thought, Harper & Row, Heidegger spells out the way that certain things like a jug of wine can focus practices and collect people around them. Such things function like local, temporary works of art in giving meaning to human activities, but they do not focus a whole culture and so do not become the locus of a struggle between earth and world. Rather, they

produce a moment of stillness and harmony. Albert Borgmann interprets and develops this idea in his account of "focal practices" (See A. Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, University of Chicago Press). For an illuminating discussion of the importance of Heidegger on the thing, see also Charles Taylor's "Heidegger, Language and Ecology," in Heidegger: A Critical Reader, H. Dreyfus and H. Hall editors, Blackwell, 1992.

¹⁷ See Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism," in, Heidegger: A Critical Reader, cited above.

¹⁸ "Only A God Can Save Us", Der Spiegel, May 31, 1976.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics, Doubleday, 1961, pp. 31-32

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, "Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective," Critical Inquiry, p. 456, reprinted in Heidegger: A Critical Reader, cited above.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," Poetry, Language, Thought, Harper and Row, 1971, p. 184.