Heidegger's Essentialist Responses to the Challenge of Technology

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Contents

Abstract. This paper is an effort to defend Heidegger's essentialist philosophy of technology against the charge of determinism. Rather than merely accepting its all-encompassing power, Heidegger provides three responses to the challenge of technology: 1) "aggressive essentialism" or the elimination of technology; 2) "moderate essentialism" or the reform of political, social and cultural institutions to better reflect the changes that technology brings; and 3) "passive essentialism" or the acceptance that we cannot act against or direct technology.]]

Résumé. Dans cet article, l'auteur s'efforce de défendre la philosophie d'essentialisme de technologie proposée par Heidegger contre l'accusation de déterminisme. Plutot que simplement accepter le pouvoir omniprésent de la technologie, Heidegger fournit trois réponses au défi qu'elle présente: 1) « l'essentialisme agressif », ou l'élimination de la technologie; 2) « l'essentialisme modéré », ou la réforme des institutions politiques, sociales et culturelles pour mieux refléter les changements apportés par la technologie; et 3) «l'essentialisme passif », ou l'acceptation du fait que nous ne pouvons ni agir contre la technologie ni la diriger.

Introduction

Almost every academic discipline has engaged in a structure versus agency debate. Articulated variously in terms of nature versus nurture, sex versus gender, or primordialism versus modernism, this debate finds a common foundation in the ancient dispute between determinism and free will (Wallerstein, 1997), that is to say, where structuralists argue that human thought and action are determined by such things as linguistic, biological, and psychological structures, advocates of agency argue that individual humans are free to decide the future course of their lives unfettered by any underlying or given framework.

Andrew Feenberg has dubbed the philosophy of technology version of this debate as one between essentialism and constructivism (1999, 2000b) or, more specifically, substantive and instrumental theory (2002). He explains that essentialism or substantive theory "attributes an autonomous cultural force to technology that overrides all traditional or competing values" whereas constructivism or instrumental theory "treats technology as subservient to values established in other social spheres (for example, politics and culture)" (2002: 5; see also Borgmann, 1984: chap. 2). He goes on to criticize essentialism for being deterministic and embraces constructivism because it empowers individuals to transform our currently oppressive and dehumanizing technological society into one that generates "conditions of a meaningful life and a livable environment" (1999: xiv). For the critical theorist Feenberg, essentialism is not merely an opposing view of technology but an obstacle to this emancipatory project because it presents technology as a juggernaut, unresponsive to human efforts, leaving us doomed to submit to the enveloping power of technology and fated to an inevitable technological enslavement. His harshest criticism of essentialism is saved for Martin Heidegger, whom

he sees as its progenitor, pointing to his enframing *(Gestell)* and standing-reserve *(Bestand)* arguments as particularly disempowering, promoting inaction or a "politically dehabilitating substantivism" (Thomson, 2000: 435) in the face of the many inequities and challenges presented by contemporary technology.[1] Inspired by the work of Heidegger's student Herbert Marcuse, Feenberg endorses and describes a constructivism that he understands will allow for positive human intervention into the development and design of technology, directing it toward a free and equal society. As with Feenberg's own interpretation of Marcuse, the application of constructivism "would require not merely a political and social revolution but the end of the *Gestell,* Heidegger's technological age, since it would replace the 'standing-reserve' with a living world once again" (2005: 137). In other words, the achievement of the political and cultural goals of constructivism is dependent upon a preliminary reproach of essentialism.

In part, this paper is an attempt to reconsider whether essentialism as articulated by Heidegger is guilty of this charge of determinism and whether it can provide a viable response to the challenge of technology, overcoming its oppressive and dehumanizing character. On the face of it, determinism suggests a need to accept or submit to our technological fate and, in turn, the futility of any political, social, or private response. Therefore, it is worth considering why and how Heidegger can both be reconciled to the unavoidable advance of technology and still present the possibility of a human contribution to a more authentic existence unobstructed by its enframing power.[2]

As I will also show, Heidegger is not alone in this effort. A broad range of essentialist philosophers of technology try to merge concerns about the inexorable advance of technology with a variety of proposed projects, warnings and advice on how to live a better life in a technological age. Using Heidegger as a guide, I come to identify three categories of response to the challenge of technology: 1) an "aggressive" essentialism, in other words, the elimination or restriction of technology; 2) a "moderate" essentialism, in other words, the modification or reform of our relationship to technology; and 3) a "passive" essentialism, in other words, the acceptance that we cannot act against or direct technology.

Two notes of caution before I continue. First, my identification of these three essentialisms should not be interpreted as an attempt to highlight contradictions in Heidegger's thinking on technology. On this matter Heidegger is consistent throughout his corpus: the essence of technology is enframing (see Olafson, 1993; Gilbert-Walsh, 2003: 54). what does change, however, is the way he thinks we can respond to the challenge

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[1] Feenberg is not alone in his criticism of technological essentialism. Mario Bunge, for example, criticizes Heidegger's "the romantic wailings about the alleged evils of technology" (1979: 68 as quoted in Mitcham, 1994: 37–8). Iain Thomson summarizes and addresses many of these criticisms of essentialism in "what's wrong with Being a Technological Essentialist? A Response to Feenberg." He argues that "technological essentialism turns out to be an extremely complex notion" and thus not easily subject to such blanket criticisms (2000: 430).

[2] Thomson already has pointed out a "Heideggerian caveat, which holds that our action could *indirectly* transform the essence of technology" (2005: 62).

of enframing. It is in these changing responses to the challenge of technology that we find the three essentialist responses rather than in a changing understanding of technology itself. So, for example, while Heidegger ultimately rejects National Socialism as a way to overcome the challenge of technology, he nowhere rejects *his* preconceived goals of the Nazi project. Again, the analysis of technology is the same while the response changes. My intention, then, is not explore the overarching inconsistency of his philosophy and politics, highlight a contradiction in his thoughts on technology, or map the "early" to "late" stages of Heidegger's evolution, but much more modestly to emphasize that Heidegger describes a variety of responses to the challenge of technology. However cryptically, Heidegger is doing far more than simply prophesizing some frightening technological future.

This leads to the second caution: in Heidegger we will find no concrete or clear instructions on how to live an authentic life outside of technology. Indeed, this is what Feenberg wants most from Heidegger but cannot have.[3] Because Heideggerian authenticity comes with a demand for infinite openness, he can provide no specific instructions to individuals or communities.[4]

Essentialism

As already suggested at the beginning of the paper, essentialism is by no means exclusive to Heidegger's thought or the philosophy of technology. In the broadest terms, essentialism simply implies that things have an "essence." Rather than being artificial or accidental, all objects, whether rocks, houses, horses or people, have a quality, character or nature intrinsic to their being which distinguishes them from all other things. In his *Metaphysics,* for example, Aristotle explains, "the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in respect of itself" *(Metaphysics,* 1029b14). Similarly, in the first chapter of *On Being and Essence,* Thomas Aquinas notes, "essence signifies something common to all natures through which the various beings are placed in the various genera and species." Twentieth-century existential philosophers challenge this notion. Jean Paul Sartre argues that we have no predetermined essence, concluding instead that "existence precedes essence." For Sartre, we construct our essence rather than being born with it.

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[3] For example, Feenberg attacks Heidegger for a lack of consideration for the actual design of devices (2000b: 297, note 4).

[4] As Paul Farwell explains, "Because *Dasein* lacks absolute control over the world it was born into, it can achieve its authenticity only in terms of the choices, things, and opportunities this particular world offers. *Dasein* cannot create ex nihilo a new world of meaning since the significance of anything is determined prior to any choice on the part of an individual *Dasein.* (As Heidegger stresses, the world is 'always and already' meaningful). For this reason, no drastic transition occurs once *Dasein* becomes authentic... We should keep in mind that Heidegger focuses mostly upon the ontological dimension of authenticity, i.e., the basic structures of *Dasein* which make authenticity possible, and much less the nature of any specific (existential) act which is authentic" (1989: 82).

It follows that philosophers of technology such as Heidegger hold that technology has an essence whereas critics of this view adopt a more Sartrian analysis. Heidegger articulates his essentialism by explaining that essence is more than just the visible qualities or characteristics of a given thing. it includes both the seen and the unseen because all beings have an essence that comes into being and goes out of being. This is also described as an unconcealment *(aletheia)* and concealment *(lethe),* a disclosure and hiding, and a presencing and absencing. Informed by Aristotle, Heidegger explains that all essence participates in a larger movement, moved-ness, or "emerging power" of nature or *physis.* Now, the essence of technology is unique or distinctive in that, rather than indicating a parity of essence and nature, it instead challenges nature. Like all other things, the essence of technology also unconceals and conceals itself. But, unlike any other coming into being or revealing of essence, the unconcealment of the essence of technology is characterized by the concealment of the essence of all other beings or what Heidegger calls *Gestell,* "enframing." Just as the hydroelectric dam on the River Rhine submerges the Rhine River valley, technology as a whole obscures the rest of existence. Everything is taken as standing-reserve *(Bestand)*—"stuff" to be manipulated and formed rather than things with a given nature. This means that the unconcealment of the essence of technology takes the "movedness" of nature and replaces it with the singular presence of technology.[5]

For Heidegger, this challenge of technology has been ongoing for the last 2,400-years, beginning with Plato's articulation of metaphysics.[6] In light of this unique playing out of the essence of technology, our present age is even exceptional in that this epochal challenge is about to end with a final taking up of human beings as standing-reserve.[7] The concealment of human essence by the enframing essence of technology has two related and unprecedented consequences. First, the concealment of human beings by technology also entails the disappearance or concealment of the uniquely human capacity to ask the question of Being. Here we see the link between Heidegger's analysis

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[5] Heidegger writes, "Man ... comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve." He continues, "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" (1993a: 332). The same idea is suggested in his Bremen lectures of 1949: "Agriculture is now a motorized food industry—in essence the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same thing as the blockading and starvation of nations, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs" (see De Beistegui, 1997: 153).

[6] For Heidegger, the unconcealment of the essence of technology and, in turn, the concealment of the rest of existence did not begin in the twentieth century or even in the recent past. Well before the advent of computers, cars and other machines or, for that matter, contemporary economic systems and political systems, the essence of technology began to reveal itself in ancient *techne* or technical knowledge. Technical knowledge or techne is "a process of reflection" that transforms the world because, through it, existence is assimilated to the technological model. What is more, this process will continue; eventually leaving humans unable to think outside of its narrow confines (see 1993a: 218).

[7] Iain Thomson writes, "This unprecedented absorption of the subject into the resource pool makes our contemporary world unique in Heidegger's eyes; ... we post-moderns have turned the practices developed by the moderns for objectifying and controlling nature back onto ourselves" (2000: 434).

of technology and his larger work on fundamental ontology. Second and more immediately relevant to this paper, human beings will no longer be able to notice or criticize this enframing process. Heidegger writes, "The need to ask about modern technology is presumably dying out to the same extent that technology more decisively characterizes and directs the appearance of the totality of the world and the position of man in it" (1993a: 434). It is in this silence or inability to think, act or question that we find the source of Feenberg's greatest criticism of essentialism. Because Heidegger gives us no clear or concrete indication of how we should respond to the increasingly technological character of the world and the commensurate threat to our capacity to conceive of its consequences, he is dubbed (along with other essentialists such as Jacques Ellul and Marshall McLuhan) a disempowering determinist.

Right away we can identify a basic problem with Feenberg's drawing of equivalence between essentialism and determinism. He assumes that an "essence" of technology implies autonomy, a predetermined end or a "fixed destiny" (2005: 1) that cannot be influence by human intervention. Nonetheless, according to Heidegger, humans *can* and *do* participate in the way technology manifests. Even though "man does not have control over unconcealment itself, in which at any given time the actual shows itself or withdraws" (1993a: 323) we still have the capacity to respond appropriately when technology does reveal itself to us. The point is we must be aware or recognize that it is happening, that technology is revealing itself to us. The pressing concern for Heidegger is that we have turned our backs on all of this, under the false impression that we completely control technology even as we ourselves are being taken up by it. That is why Heidegger is not interested in predicting or prescribing the development of specific technological devices as Feenberg wants him to. When he writes, "Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be unleashed either for destructive or for peaceful purposes" (1993a: 320) he is telling us to shift our focus from good or bad, peaceful or destructive technologies to the essence of technology itself.

Interestingly, Feenberg also argues that while Heidegger's "standing-reserve" criticism or the "modern obsession with efficiency" may be an accurate description of many if not most contemporary technologies, it does not necessarily describe the way technology must and always be. "The 'essence' of actual technology, as we encounter it in all its complexity," Feenberg argues, "is not simply an orientation toward efficiency" (1999: x). For him, the efficiency obsession and all the negative consequences that go along with it stems not from some abstract metaphysical turn in Western civilization but from the actual design and use-context of technological devices. In other words, even though Feenberg and Heidegger may agree that "real dangers do lurk in modern technology" (1999: x) they disagree on the source of that danger. And, because Feenberg identifies the source in existent and adaptable social structures, his philosophy of technology allows for positive change and progress, whereas he sees no clear political or social project that comes out of Heidegger's critique. Feenberg decides that "in Hei-

degger the most one can hope for is a 'free relation to technology,' a salutary change in attitude" (2005: 98) and "Heidegger calls for resignation and passivity *(Gelassenheit)* rather than an active program of reform" (1999: 184).

Aggressive Essentialism

And yet, Feenberg also concludes, "one finds no criteria for the transformation of modern technology anywhere in Heidegger" beyond the shortlived experiment with Nazism (2000a: 226–67). But, the very fact that Heidegger saw a possibility of transforming our relationship with technology through Nazism highlights the fact that his essentialism is not also determinism.[8] we can rightly criticize the horrific form of Heidegger's response to the challenge of technology but we cannot also say that he was simply resigned to it, far from it. In his embrace of the Nazis, Heidegger called for the defiant recapturing of a pre-technological world through the destruction of the scientific establishment that he understood to be an obstacle to "authentic being."[9] He comes to the astonishing conclusion that:

> From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same; the same dreary technological frenzy, the same unrestricted organization of the average man ... The spiritual decline of the earth is so far advanced that the nations are in danger of losing the last bit of spiritual energy that makes it possible to see the decline (taken in relation to the history of "being"), and to appraise it as such. (1959: 37–8)

Here, Heidegger presents the Soviet Union and the United States as political/national articulations of the same enframing essence of technology. while it is difficult to understand how he failed to recognize the obvious differences between American liberal democracy and Soviet totalitarianism, he draws this equivalency because he viewed these societies as flip sides of the technological coin. Michael Gillespie explains that "Heidegger was attracted to Nazism because he believed it offered a solution to the crisis of Western civilization ... Heidegger clearly felt that resolute action was needed to deal with the social and spiritual crisis and was attracted to the Nazis because of their determination for action" (2000: 141–42). Clearly, there is no resignation here!

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[8] Iain Thomson already does an admirable job pointing out that Feenberg criticizes Heidegger's essentialism on an "ontic" level whereas Heidegger himself was ultimately concerned with our ontological relationship with technology. But he also notes that for Heidegger "it is possible that a confluence of ontic political struggle could open the space for a reconfiguration of our ontological self-understanding, but only if we are aware of the true radicality of that endeavour, the fact that it requires a fundamental transformation in the nature of our existence, not merely the redistribution of power or the realignment of particular interests" (2000: 436).

[9] See "The Self Assertion of the German University," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (1993b: esp. pg. 33).

This *aggressive* essentialism calls for "resolute action" or resolve *(Entschlossenheit)* to destroy or remove the obstacle of technology manifested in the USSR and America. Once the obstacle is destroyed or removed, human beings can return to a proper or primordial spiritual life, what Heidegger calls authentic being or existence.[10]

Of course, Heidegger is not the first philosopher to worry that modern society as manifest through technology somehow impedes or corrupts our capacity to live full and complete lives, barring us from experiencing the world in same way as our pre-technological brethren. In the eighteenth century, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously declared that "Man was born free; and everywhere he is in chains." The idea that prehistorical humans existed in a free and blissful state of nature only to be interrupted by the imprisonment of civil society resonates a century later in the anti-Enlightenment Romanticism of Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, William Blake, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, as well as American transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[11] However, unlike Heidegger, nowhere do these thinkers call for the banishment of technology or a planetary effort to destroy technology. In fact, many Romantics sought to humanize and enlist technology toward a utopian future (Cantor, 1993: 114). Even the legendary nineteenth-century Luddites limited their destruction to woolspinning machines. Their rebellion did not reflect essentialism, because they feared unemployment and inequity at the hands of the owners, not the machines themselves.

The particular strain of Heidegger's analysis of technology can be traced to the German Romantic movement including Friedrich Nietzsche's anti-modernism and anti-rationalism (Rockmore, 1997: 122–76). Michael Zimmerman explains in *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* that Heidegger's understanding of technology was very much shaped by thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Ludwig Klages, Max Scheler, and Leopold Ziegler (1990: 29). Spengler writes, "This industrial technology will reach its end with Faustian man and will some day lie demolished and forgotten—railroads

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[10] It could also be said that this destruction allows once again for the movement of nature where before it was concealed by the enframing essence of technology. Heidegger believed that a re-embracing of pre-Platonic ways of being would serve to return human beings to a more authentic existence. Rather than the instrumental rationality, sterility and humanism indicative of Plato's theory of the forms (*eidos*), Heidegger wanted to somehow recover a lost Hericlitean universe in flux where man is tossed "back and forth between structure and the structureless, order and mischief, between the evil and noble" (Heidegger, 2000: 161). He also asks, "But if that which is an essential consequence is raised to the level of essence itself, and thus takes the place of the essence, then how do things stand?" He continues, "What remains decisive is not the fact in itself that *phusis* was characterized as idea, but that the idea rises up as the sold and definitive interpretation of Being" (194). Heidegger explains that the idea or *eidos* is initially understood as the visible appearance of the "movedness" or "emerging power" of nature (*physis*). From here, physis as movedness is ignored in lieu of the superficial, unmoving *eidos. Eidos* becomes a *paradeigma,* a model or prototype rather than anything immediately apparent. Heidegger concludes, "Because the actual repository of being is the idea and this is the prototype, all disclosure of being must aim at assimilation to the model, accommodation to idea" (184–5).

[11] See Paul Cantor's "Romanticism and Technology" for a thorough review of the Romantics' view of technology.

and steamships just like once the Roman roads and the Great Wall of China, our enormous cities with their skyscrapers in the same way as the palaces of old Memphis and Babylon." (61, as quoted in Farrenkopf, 1993: 405–6). Like Spengler, Heidegger often seems to suggest that technology is a "deal with the devil" in which we sacrifice our traditions, our culture and our long-term horizons for a short-term satisfaction of our material need.

It is also from this group of German idealists that we find a source of contemporary anti-technology "neo-Luddite" movements. Unlike their Luddite predecessors, these aggressive essentialists view technology as an independent danger and seek its quarantine, restriction or total destruction. Not exactly an organized political or philosophical movement, this group includes a diverse array of radical environmentalists, activists and protestors as well as members of the back-to-nature movement, no-growth school, and provocatively named anarcho-primitivists. On a par with Heidegger's rejection of both the USSR and America, the neo-Luddites reject the characteristic goals of contemporary politics. Nicols Fox explains that neo-Luddism "is neither conservative nor liberal: both capitalism and Marxism are committed to the concept of industrial progress, the wisdom of which Luddites question" (2002: xvii).

Ted Kaczynski is probably the best-known advocate of this aggressive essentialism. In his manifesto *Industrial Society and its Future,* he denies all possibility of reforming technology as to "prevent it from progressively narrowing our sphere of freedom." He instead calls for the complete overthrow of the whole technological system. Of course, Kaczynski's notoriety does not stem from the eloquence of his anti-technology theories but from his twenty-year terrorist campaign as the Unabomber.[12] While crude and con-

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[12] His rage and naiveté reminds me of George Hayduke, the protagonist from Edward Abbey's novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang.* In this striking passage, Hayduke describes his vision of a post-technological world similar to Spengler's:

>when the cities are gone, he thought, and all the ruckus has died away, when sunflowers push up through the concrete and asphalt of the forgotten interstate freeways, when the Kremlin and the Pentagon are turned into nursing homes for generals, presidents and other such shitheads, when the glass-aluminum skyscraper tombs of Phoenix Arizona barely show above the sand dunes, why then, why then, why then by God maybe free men and wild women on horses, free women and wild men, can roam the sagebrush canyonlands in freedom—goddammit! (100–01)

Or perhaps he is more like Tyler Durden, the anti-hero of the 1999 film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club,* who imagines the domain left in the wake of the terrorist attack dubbed "Project Mayhem":

>in the world i see—you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You will wear leather clothes that last you the rest of your life. You will climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. You will see tiny figures pounding corn and laying-strips of venison on the empty car pool lane of the ruins of a superhighway.

In these depictions, there is no effort to humanize technology. They are postapocalyptic, post-holocaust scenarios unlike anything described by eighteenth and nineteenth century critics of science. while certainly more anarchist than fascist, they share in the same vicious defiance of the Nazis and the violent atavism of the twenty-first century Taliban and Jihadists movements. Heidegger's "Russia and America" is Hayduke's "the Kremlin and the Pentagon." Durden's "Project Mayhem" is Osama Bin Laden's September 11th. Unlike George Orwell's Winston Smith or Aldous Huxley's Bernard

tradictory, the Unabomber's lengthy manifesto expresses many of the attitudes shared by more eloquent and moderate neo-Luddites such as Kirkpatrick Sale (1995b), Jerry Mander (1978), E.F. Schumacher (1989), and Theodore Roszak (1994). Sale explains the common bond that links these thinkers together: "Wherever the neo-Luddites may be found, they are attempting to bear witness to the secret little truth that lies at the heart of the modern experience: Whatever its presumed benefits, of speed or ease or power or wealth, industrial technology comes at a price, and in the contemporary world that price is ever rising and ever threatening" (1995a: 785).

So, whether it is the danger of television, pollution, or genetic modified organisms, the neo-Luddites agree that technology is a threat to human and non-human life. In her short piece "Notes Toward a NeoLuddite Manifesto," Chellis Glendinning writes, "The worldview [the Luddites] supported was an older, more decentralized one espousing the interconnectedness of work, community, and family through craft guilds, village networks, and townships." She explains, "Like the early Luddites, we too are a desperate people seeking to protect the livelihoods, communities, and families we love, which lie on the verge of destruction" (1990: 50). Just as the introduction of new technology threatened the Luddites way of life and community, so too does it threaten ours. Despite her claim the neo-Luddites are not anti-technology, she then goes on to call for the dismantling of "destructive technologies" such as nuclear, chemical, genetic engineering, television, electromagnetic, and computer technologies. These technologies serve as obstacles to the "lifeenhancing worldview" whereas other technologies such as solar panels and wind power are somehow less problematic. But, if the essence of technology is enframing, how is it possible to live with kinder, gentler technologies such as solar panels and windmills? Obviously, these are no less technological than any of the other technologies that Glendinning identifies as destructive.

Moderate Essentialism

Notably, we see a similar embrace of "authentic technical products" from Heidegger. He writes: "For all of us, the arrangements, devices, and machinery of technology are to a greater or lesser extent indispensable. It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil" (1966: 19). And elsewhere he explains, "I want to say that I am not against technology; I have never spoken against technology, nor against the so-called demonic elements in technology... So, above all, the misunderstanding that I am against technology is to be rejected" (1970: 43).[13] There is no inconsistency here. After all, Heidegger's initial embrace of

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Marx, Kaczynski and his literary doppelgangers, react to technological utopianism with visions of non-technological dystopia.

[13] Thomson writes:

>"In his 1949 essay 'The Turning,' Heidegger unequivocally states that he is not advocating anything as ridiculous as the abandonment of technology ... 'Technology,' [Heidegger] repeats, 'will not

the Nazis was not the product of a naive hope that they would reject the technological as such. Obviously, he could never have had the expectation that the Nazis would fight the Russians and Americans with farmers' pitchforks and scythes. Olafson explains that "Heidegger appears to have understood Nazism as a way of having things both ways," that is to say, he embraced the idea that the Nazis would wipe away the inauthenticity of modern society while, at the same time, protect the authentic *volkisch* traditions of Germany by the military and economic power of a modern state (Olafson, 2000: 277–78).

But still, how can we remedy Heidegger's call for resolute action against spiritual decline with this later sense of moderation? In the rectoral address, Heidegger calls for a recapturing of "the original Greek essence of science" (1993b: 31). This recapturing entailed a move away from the contemporary effort to control nature through scientific research and technology and a return to the ancient Greek understanding of making or *techne* which, he claims, worked in co-operation or in partnership with nature (Heidegger, 2000: 174). Heidegger does not disparage the products of the ancient craftsman in the same way he does contemporary technology because they are "scenes of disclosure" for overpowering nature and draw our attention to the nature of existence (Tabachnick, 2004). In "The Question Concerning Technology," the ancient craftsman's art is described as a "bringing-forth" or a working in partnership with the nature of materials to construct an artifact, such as a chair or a house, and the contemporary technologist is described as "challenging-forth" or changing the nature of materials to make them stronger, more flexible, longer lasting, and so forth.[14] In turn, contemporary technological artifacts do not disclose nature. And, because in a technological society so much of our world is filled with these "undisclosing artifacts," we are cut off from, become unaware of, or forget the essential movedness or transience of nature, being, and existence (Heidegger, 1993a: 333).

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be done away with. Technology will not be struck down, and certainly it will not be destroyed'" [1977: 38] (2005: 72–3).

[14] In "Techne, Technology and Tragedy," Tabachnick continues:

>Heidegger explains that earlier human inventions did not permanently impose a new form onto nature because, under normal conditions, the material of an artifact was still bound by natural characteristics; nature would always "shine through" the imposition of the artist, craftsman or technician (see Glazebrook, 2000: 95–118). A carpenter, for example, imposes the form of a chair onto wood but once the chair is finished that wood still maintains its natural characteristics to rot and decompose in the same way a fallen tree rots and decomposes on the forest floor. In other words, the craftsman's chair is a site of openness for the revealing of nature or, as mentioned above, scenes of disclosure. In contrast, we might look to the growing list of contemporary technologies that do not co-operate with nature but attempt to replace it. A nuclear engineer can manipulate the structure of natural elements to produce artificial elements. Plutonium is designed to never abide by or return to the characteristics of the uranium from which it was derived. The character of plutonium (i.e., its level of radioactivity) is always artificial. Likewise, the genetically altered human is designed to never return to the natural characteristics of the material from which it was derived (e.g., a sick or weak body) and thus is always artificial.

This does not mean that Heidegger favoured a return to the simple, nostalgic world of the rural farmer of the Black Forest or the authentic ancient craftsman toiling away in his workshop.[15] Despite the fact that Heidegger often juxtaposed wooden bridges to hydroelectric damns and peasants farming to open pit mining, the point for Heidegger is not "what" we build but rather "why" we build it. Indeed, the Pyramids and Parthenons of the ancient world were not quaint or modest projects by any estimate and yet would still, for Heidegger, qualify as authentic artifacts. Therefore, Heidegger's non/post-technological world could still be grand and technically advanced in the same sense as these noble monuments. This seems to be what Heidegger is addressing when he proclaims as rector that, "The beginning exists still. It does not lie behind us as something long past, but it stands before us... [It] has invaded our future; it stands there as the distant decree that orders us to recapture its greatness (1993b: 32)." This is a *moderate* essentialism because it does not require the destruction or restriction of technology but instead a return to the building of authentic artifacts.

We get a further understanding of the possibility of authentic artifacts from Heidegger's discussion of a rural farm in "Building Dwelling Thinking." He warns, "Our reference to the Black Forest farm in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses; rather, it illustrates by a dwelling that *has been* how it was able to build" (1993a: 362). Here, he explicitly rejects a nostalgic return to some pretechnological age. In this same essay, Heidegger provides a remarkable analysis of a contemporary technology that seems to embrace some of the aspects of an authentic artifact:

> The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced and calculated for maximum yield. Always and ever differently the bridge initiates the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro ... The bridge *gathers,* as a passage that crosses, before the divinities—whether we explicitly think of, and visibly *give thanks for,* their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside. (1993a: 355)

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa explain that this unique passage shows Heidegger accepting that technological things such as highway bridges may allow for a "plurality of communities of focal celebration" (1997: 173; see also Thomson, 2000: 439).[16] That is to say, the modern highway bridge can open us up to a similar experience as the old wooden bridge over the river Rhine. At least in part, this answers what Dreyfus and Spinosa call *"the* question for our generation": "How can we relate ourselves to technology in a way that not only resists its devastation but also gives it a positive role in our lives?" (1997: 159). Feenberg retorts:

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[15] Thomson discusses the mislabeling of Heidegger as nostalgic for the pre-industrial world, as embracing a "reactionary anti-modernism of a philosophical 'redneck' or a "Luddite 'technophobia'" (2005: 45).

[16] The "focal" is in reference to Albert Borgmann's work on focal things and practices (discussed below).

The highway bridge passage is the one and only instance in his whole corpus of a positive evaluation of a modern technology. Alongside this passage, there are dozens of others that reek of *volkisch* nostalgia for the good old days of thatch roofed huts, silver chalices, quill pens, humble jugs, wooden shoes, and suchlike trappings of the elitist anti-modernism of right-wing German intellectuals in the Weimar and Hitler period. (2000a: 226)

Of course, simply because this is the "one and only instance" of positive evaluation does not mean we must discount it. In fact, the highway bridge can be taken as an example of Heidegger's later claim that "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" (1966: 54). While there is still an obvious antagonism here, the idea that we can "affirm" technical devices suggests that we can live with technologies while avoiding dehumanization. This represents a rejection of going back to the "good old days." Then again, considering all that Heidegger has said, it remains unclear how we can live, work, and think in a technological society while not becoming dominated by technical devices.

Later essentialist thinkers such as Neil Postman, Hans Jonas, Langdon Winner and Albert Borgmann attempt a more coherent moderate response to the challenge of technology. For example, in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life,* Borgmann writes, "Focal things and practices can empower us to propose and perhaps to enact a reform of technology" (1984: 155). He then goes onto suggest that things such as cyclotrons and space shuttles may bear resemblance to medieval cathedrals and monuments in that they serve as "focal points" for our communities, inspiring awe and appreciation for the place of humanity in the cosmos: we can find peace and serenity in the "midst of our own creations which surround us daily" (161). Borgmann and other moderate essentialists believe that by reorienting or reforming the way we relate to technology, by recognizing that it is revealing something to us, we can mitigate its threat. So yet again we see essentialism as something other than determinism. By recognizing and changing our relationship to technology, we can help determine the course technology will take.

Passive Essentialism

As described above, Heidegger understood Nazism as a route to respond to the challenge of technology, and, while he moves away from this aggressive response, it should not be taken as an admission that it was nonviable. His unwillingness to explicitly disavow the goals of the National Socialist revolution suggests that he held out the faint hope that sometime in the distant future a similar planetary effort to knock back and destroy the technological establishment would be again possible. In an oft-quoted interview given well after the war, he cryptically explains that the Nazis were "far too

limited in their thinking" to fully realize or take advantage of the opportunity presented to them (1993b: 111).[17] However, Heidegger comes to critique the Nazis because their revolution became a furthering of the "dreary technological frenzy" in same sense as the American and Russian revolutions did before it. It is this realization that leads him to consider new ways to respond to the immediate challenge of technology.

At base, the defeat of the Nazis brought Heidegger to question the very possibility of any contemporary political response to technology. He asks in the 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, "How can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which system would this be? ... We still have no way to respond to the essence of technology" (1993b: 104). Heidegger is led to explore a far more passive approach. The recognition of the ineffectuality of a political or social response to technology is why he moves away from both his call for a violent recapturing of the primordial and for the development of new institutions and instead suggests that by accepting or realizing that technology dominates us will we once again know what it is to be in the grasp of a fate beyond our control. As Zimmerman puts it, "Despite his descriptions of how the old world was being obliterated by the advance of the technological one, Heidegger did not finally despair. Rather, he held out the hope that a saving power could grow from out of the dangerous depths of technological nihilism" (1990: 133). Zuckert similarly explains, "What he had learned both from his study of the history of philosophy and the outcome of World War II was the impossibility of checking this technological leveling with 'will' or force" (1990: 72). This is a *passive* essentialism, then, because it requires a stepping back from any and all activist effort to defeat or moderate technology.

Of course, it is this acceptance, detachment or passivity *(Gelassen-heit)* that is the source of Feenberg's criticism of Heidegger's essentialism. But Heidegger comes to recognize that no politics, no programs of reform, and no "philosophy of technology" could itself steer humanity away from the consequence of the challenge of technology: until we ourselves are taken up as standing-reserve we will not recognize the danger of our age. Heidegger writes, "The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become" (1993a: 341). Only when we become fully cognizant of the supreme danger of technology will we be prepared to take a new course away from technological nihilism. Whether this will happen, what that course might be and where it might take us remains a mystery.

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[17] The rest of the quote reads:

>It seems to me that you are taking technology too absolutely. I do not see the situation of man in the world of global technology as a fate which cannot be escaped or unraveled. On the contrary, I see the task of thought to consist in helping man in general, within the limits allotted to thought, to achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology. National Socialism, to be sure, moved in this direction. But those people were far too limited in their thinking to acquire an explicit relationship to what is really happening today and has been underway for three centuries.

In his book, *On Heidegger and Nazism,* Tom Rockmore explains: "Here, in his own way, Heidegger is signaling, as clearly as he can—candidly, and accurately—that his theory of technology is meant to carry out the ideas which the National Socialists were too limited to develop through a theory of technology with political consequences" (206).

We see similar calls for resignation and acceptance in many important twentieth-century thinkers. Lewis Mumford, for example, calls for "quiet acts of mental or physical withdrawal—in gestures of nonconformity, in abstentions, restrictions, inhibitions" (1974: 433). In *The Technological Society,* Jacques Ellul argues that we still have an opportunity to respond to the challenge of technology: "The challenge is not to scholars and university professors, but to all of us. At stake is our very life, and we shall need all the energy, inventiveness, imagination, goodness, and strength we can muster to triumph in our predicament" (1967: xxxiii). But, like Heidegger, Ellul eventually gives up this activism. In the later *Technological System,* he questions whether it is at all possible for man to " 'take in hand,' direct, organize, choose and orient technology" (1980: 311) as is the moderate essentialist position, and decides, "Man in our society has no intellectual, moral, or spiritual reference point forjudging and criticizing technology" (1980: 316). Marshall McLuhan has the same concern and, like Ellul, seems to straddle the moderate and the passive positions. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* he writes, "Far from being deterministic, however, the present study will, it is hoped, elucidate a principal factor in social change which may lead to a genuine increase of human autonomy" (1992: 3).[18]

In both Ellul and McLuhan, there seems a small and quickly shrinking window of opportunity to do something to avoid or mitigate the onset of the technological system or what McLuhan calls the global village. Differently, George Grant argues that the window closed decades ago. Influenced by Heidegger, Grant regularly puts forward that "the planetary technical future" is our "fate" and that there is nothing we can do about it (1969: 139). He clearly states that "those who would try to divert, to limit, or even simply to stand in fear before some of its [technology's] applications find themselves defenceless" (1969: 139). Passive essentialism accepts that the reform of institutions and traditions advised by moderate essentialists does nothing to direct or limit technology but instead participates in, if not accelerates, the incorporation of humanity into technology. These essentialists decide that the activist effort to subordinate technology to human concerns is itself an outgrowth of technological thinking and actually seeds the way for further enframing, that is to say, protest and criticism of the "failures" of technology simply highlight the need for new methods to incorporate human needs into technology.

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[18] McLuhan is not calling for the elimination or destruction of technology. In a late interview, he puts it bluntly, "Resenting a new technology will not halt its progress" (McLuhan, 1995: 264). He continues:

>First of all—and I'm sorry to repeat this disclaimer—I'm not advocating anything; I'm merely probing and predicting trends. Even if I opposed them or thought them disastrous, I couldn't stop them, so why waste my time lamenting? ... I see no possibility of a world-wide Luddite rebellion that will smash all machinery to bits, so we might as well sit back and see what is happening and what will happen to us ... The central purpose of all my work is to convey this message, that by understanding media as they extend man, we gain a measure of control over them ... If we persist, however, in our rearview-mirror approach to these cataclysmic developments, all of Western culture will be destroyed and swept into the dustbin of history (264–5).

For Heidegger, passivity is simply another way for us to become open to the revealing of technology. By stepping back from the technological frenzy, we remove the primary obstacle to recognizing revealing. This is what he means when he quotes Holderlin's poem: "But where danger is, grows/The saving power also" (1993a: 340).

So, even though technology is what threatens us the most, it also the thing through which we might once again appreciate the disclosure of being. When we come to realize through our own taking up as standing-reserve that we do not control the revealing of technology but merely participate in that revealing, we may be able to return to a more authentic or free relationship with technology. Therefore, while passive, this approach is not deterministic. In a sense, it is passivity with a purpose, helping to express the playing out of technology, whether or not it will overwhelm and conceal the essence of all other things including ourselves.

Of course, we may agree with Feenberg that the passive approach of Heidegger, Ellul, McLuhan, and Grant seems insufficient: we should take to the streets, lobby for change, and take a proactive approach against the effects of technology. But, according to the passive essentialists, in order to escape encompassing technology, we must do nothing. Otherwise, their actions will be sucked into the dynamo once more and turned out anew on the other side.

Conclusion

In this paper, I introduce three different essentialist responses to the challenge of technology: aggressive, moderate, and passive. At the very least, I have gone some way to defend these varieties of essentialism from Feenberg's charge of determinism. If determinism is based on the principle of inevitable consequences, clearly aggressive essentialism is not guilty of being deterministic. Aggressive essentialists simply do not accept that the course of technology is impervious to human action and intervention. Likewise, because moderate essentialists work under the assumption that the negative effects of technology can be mitigated through a process of reform, they too evade the charge of determinism. Finally, the passive essentialists, the most likely of suspects, are also able to put forward a strong defence. Their acceptance of the autonomous revealing of technology actually affects the way that revealing is articulated.

Overall, these distinctions help us make links between essentialist theories of technology, such as Heidegger's enframing argument, and possible routes to respond to the challenge of technology. At the very least, they clearly indicate that essentialism is not also determinism.

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