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Midterm Paper

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The Essence of Technology

What is technology? Without hesitation, the average individual would answer this question by pulling out their smartphones or pointing to the engineering of a car. To Martin Heidegger, this answer would be described as incomplete at minimum. At the apex of describing that definition, Heidegger would say that there is an essence to technology that we are missing that if we do not find, may hurt individuals and society by dehumanizing their existence. Heidegger takes time to describe what he believes the true essence of technology is by working from the damaged perception of what technology is and the damaged perception technology gives. The thoughts laid out in his work have been later formed into practical solutions by Albert Borgmann through what he calls focal practices and focal things. With these, Borgmann believes to be giving an alternative to our understanding and relation to technology that Heidegger so imperatively demands of those who take him seriously.

To begin the search for the essence of technology, we should begin by defining the current existing understanding. This understanding is characterized by seeing technology as an instrument and nothing more. Philosophers of technology identified the instrumental theory of technology. This view of technology usually sees things as tools humans use to reach their goals. Under this theory, a baseball bat for example has very little use to a human that is not playing baseball because there is no goal of hitting a baseball at the given time. It suits to reason then that this instrumentalist view sees the use of a baseball bat as necessary to accomplish the goal of playing baseball. And so, if one was on a baseball field and wanted to play baseball, the lack of a bat's presence would make it of importance to get one. This is when Heidegger calls technology present at hand. Under the instrumental theory, humans do not perceive

technology until it is of use to them. On the occasion that a bat breaks or you do not have one, there is an unmet end that technology must serve to meet. The opposite of technology being present at hand is technology being ready at hand. Continuing the example of being on a baseball field, if one arrived to play baseball with a bat “ready at hand”, the technology is seemingly invisible. One would just play and use the instrument to meet the end of playing a game. This understanding of technology does not seem so bad at first glance. There is an unspoken rule of just using things in our grasp to reach our goals. What Heidegger argues though, is that one who subscribes to this view of technology is blind to what technology does to them and what these mere instruments can serve as instead.

Before arriving at what understanding and relation to technology one should have according to Heidegger and Borgmann, we firstly should fully define the danger of the instrumental view. Heidegger holds that technology is clearly more than just an instrument but is a way that we enframe the world. Just like a frame holds a painting, the person who agrees to the instrumentalist theory of technology has an underlying framework as to how the world is revealed to them. Revealing in this sense is invoking the phenomena of how we perceive the world. This framework in turn influences the way the person acts in the world and views themselves as individuals. The way the world is enframed to us in this understanding and relation to technology is called standing reserve by Heidegger. In simpler terms it means that when things are revealed to us as resources and nothing more, they are standing reserve. Because in the instrumental view of technology one prioritizes efficiency and meeting an end, all things are resources to be manipulated. Take for example a baseball bat again. To hit a baseball far, a wooden bat may suffice, however a metal bat would make the job easier for us. Here is how technology evolves under the instrumentalist view. As important it is for technology to advance, Heidegger’s fear is that in manipulating the world around us for our goals, we lose our sensitivity to our world and our connection to it. He is not saying out loud to be a tree hugger or environmentalist, but he is saying that there are meaningful parts of our experience in the world that we can lose sight of in the rush of being productive and effective. We forget the beauty of traveling by boat and the scenery with it for the speediness of a

train or car. One day we will just teleport to places and see nothing. And so we lose our experience of being in the world. There is nothing that is really in the world that makes up our experiences. What follows next is possibly worse, where one begins to see other humans as just resources that are expendable and replaceable. For example, there are many people in our present age who lose jobs as delivery people to drones that deliver for us. Heidegger's great fear is that we will not be able to truly relate to anything or anyone in the world for what they are but only for what they can be to us. This in turn changes how we must act in the world to remain of use. We begin to see ourselves as a resource as well. For Heidegger, all of this is a nightmare that can be undone when we see the essence of technology and relate to it correctly. It will allow us to be in the world in a meaningful way and understand ourselves in a way outside of being resources to meet goals.

Albert Borgmann takes these critiques by Heidegger and theorizes a solution in his device paradigm, which includes focal practices and focal things. Borgmann agrees with Heidegger that technology as an instrument or device takes a burden from us. What we would have once had to do ourselves with skill and time is now instant and easy to access for us. Take for example a fireplace and a light switch. A light switch is easy and accessible. All one must do to have illumination is press a button or flick a switch. Someone who has to light up their home with a fireplace has a much more cumbersome road ahead of them. They must wake up and go outside, have knowledge as to which trees have the best wood for a fireplace, strength and skill to chop the wood, and more skill to light it up with a match or maybe even do it by hand. Most of this process in contrast to the first takes time and skill. A young boy of 7 years may turn on lights in his house, but only someone with experience and age can do the second process. And so, this example shows much of what Borgmann sees as a problem with technology. As a disclaimer, he also is not saying that we should live like our ancestors. What is being pointed out is the less and less of the world we get to live, understand, and experience. For the person turning on a light, it is more hidden or less obvious how to get light. But for the person who cuts wood for a fireplace, every single part of the experience is known and understood. We can take these two examples and flesh out how

they relate to the terms focal practices and focal things. A focal practice is a practice one does that serves the purpose of protecting a focal thing. The person who takes skill and time to cut wood for a fireplace is doing a focal practice. It is something that protects the thing of an axe. If that practice were no longer done, the axe would lose meaning and fall out of use. To connect this with Heidegger, Borgmann is showing that the essence of technology can be understood and related to through focal practices. When one practices a focal practice, they are deferring from being productive and efficient and instead are deciding to be in the world since as technology evolves, the less of the world we get to be in. These practices are not about an end that is met through the means of technology. A person cutting wood by hand is not doing so for the sake of having wood but for the pleasure in the practice and the meaning it gives him. This solves much of what Heidegger brings up. Focal practices allow people to be in the world, connect to the world, and understand themselves outside of standing reserve. The person knows that the practice is a part of him, they see the world not as a place of manipulation but of enjoyment and are relating to it accordingly. It is more than just being hyper aware and continuing in the broken understanding and relation to technology but finding the essence that gives meaning to the world and our experiences in it.