

Technology, objects and things in Heidegger

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1. Introduction

Martin Heidegger is famous for his early analysis of tools, and equally famous for his later reflections on technology. This might suggest an easy literal reading of these themes in his work along the following lines: ‘Heidegger began his career fascinated by low-tech hardware such as hammers and drills, but later took an interest in advanced devices such as hydroelectric dams’. But such a literal interpretation would miss the point, since neither Heidegger’s tool analysis nor his views on technology are limited to a narrow range of specific *kinds* of entities. When he speaks of ‘tools’, his analysis holds for trees and monkeys no less than for hammers; when he speaks of ‘technology’, he has little to tell us about specific high-tech instruments. In both cases he is more concerned with a general *ontology* than with a theory of tools or technology. Hence, this article will focus on the basic ontological background of Heidegger’s reflection on these themes; there is more to say about his ontology of things than about his relatively sparse discussions of technology *per se*.

The tool analysis is probably Heidegger’s most important contribution to philosophy, and contains his other breakthroughs in germinal form. The tool analysis was first published in 1927 in his masterwork *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) but dates back to his 1919 lecture course during the so-called Freiburg War Emergency Semester (see Heidegger, 2000). Thus, the occasional claims that Heidegger stole the tool analysis from Edmund Husserl’s unpublished works of the early 1920s result from a flawed chronology and can be dismissed without further comment.¹ In fact, the tool analysis marks Heidegger’s definitive *break* with Husserl, not a plagiarism of his teacher.

Heidegger’s views on technology are well known through his famous lecture ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, delivered in Munich in 1953 and published the following year (Heidegger, 1982). But the major ideas of this celebrated talk can be found

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¹ Oddly, no less a scholar than Rudolf Bernet endorses the false chronology with great enthusiasm (see, Bernet, 1994, p. 257).

in an earlier and more comprehensive public address. Speaking in Bremen in 1949, the denazified Heidegger made his post-war debut with a lecture cycle entitled ‘Einblick in das was ist’ (‘Insight Into What Is’; Heidegger, 1994). This work introduced many of the key themes of the so-called ‘later Heidegger’ of the 1950s: technology, the fourfold structure of the thing, the turn (*Kehre*) in being itself, and even a brief taste of his later thoughts on language. Indeed, this long Bremen address is more deserving of the title ‘Heidegger’s second *magnum opus*’ than the usual pretenders to the throne, such as the overrated *Contributions to Philosophy* of 1936–38 (Heidegger, 1999).

2. The tool analysis

Heidegger’s philosophy is unthinkable without the works of Edmund Husserl, his mentor and rival. The term ‘phenomenology’ indicates that Husserl’s interest is phenomena that appear to consciousness, not things-in-themselves lying hidden behind appearance. Instead of inventing theories that the world is composed of atoms, electromagnetic flux or psychological motives, the phenomenologist should simply describe the world as it appears. When we hear an explosion we are hearing an explosion, not sound waves vibrating the eardrum and transmitting signals to the nervous system. Stated more technically, phenomenology ‘brackets’ the natural world, focusing solely on things as they appear to us. For Husserl it no longer makes sense to speak of real things lying outside the phenomenal field. But we should not overlook that Husserl introduces a new and profound dualism *within* the phenomenal realm, since he rejects the usual empiricist claim that an apple is simply a ‘bundle of qualities’ (red, smooth, sweet, juicy) arbitrarily linked together by the human mind through custom or habit. For Husserl, intentional objects are never identical with the qualities through which they are presented, since a house or mailbox can be viewed via countless different profiles while still remaining the same things in our eyes.¹

When Husserl urges a return to ‘the things themselves’, he means the things as present in consciousness, not independent things hidden from view in a real outside world. And this is the point on which Heidegger makes a permanent break with his teacher. For, as Heidegger famously observes, our most frequent mode of dealing with things consists not in having them in consciousness, but in taking them for granted as items of everyday use. If I observe a table and try to describe its appearance, I silently rely on a vast armada of invisible things that recede into a tacit background. The table that hovers visibly before my mind is outnumbered by all the invisible items that sustain my current reality: floor, oxygen, air conditioning, bodily organs. This is the meaning of Heidegger’s tool-analysis. For the most part entities are not Husserlian phenomena lucidly present to view, but are hidden or withdrawn realities performing their labours unnoticed. Though we can turn our attention to these hidden entities whenever we choose, they will always be surrounded by a vast landscape of other things still taken for granted. As Heidegger puts it, ‘the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98). As opposed to the *Vorhandenheit* (or ‘presence-at-hand’) of phenomena in consciousness, the being of equipment is called *Zuhandenheit* (or ‘readiness-to-hand’). The latter term, ready-to-hand, refers to equipment that remains concealed from view insofar as it functions effectively. Present-at-hand, the opposite term, refers to at least three different sorts of situations. In Heidegger’s writings objects present in

¹ For a detailed treatment of this intriguing dualism, and its relation to recent imaginative literature, see Harman (2008).

consciousness are called present-at-hand, and so are 'broken tools' that become obtrusive once they no longer function effectively, and so is the physical concept of objective matter occupying a distinct point in space-time.

At any rate, present-at-hand and ready-to-hand are not two different *types* of entities. Instead, all entities oscillate between these two separate modes: the cryptic withdrawal of readiness-to-hand and the explicit accessibility of presence-at-hand. Although defenders of Husserl often claim that he already handled this issue by speaking of a tacit 'horizontal fringe' surrounding each conscious experience, this idea does not go nearly as far as Heidegger. Whereas for Husserl the hidden hammer-at-work might be brought into consciousness whenever we feel like it, Heidegger finds it impossible *in principle* to make the withdrawn reality of the hammer fully reveal its secrets. There will always be a subterranean depth to the world that never becomes present to view.

Another typical feature of Heideggerian equipment is that it always belongs to a system: 'Taken strictly, there "is" no such thing as *an* equipment. To the Being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 97). Entities only gain significance from their full context, since a knife is not the same thing in a kitchen, a theatrical drama or the hand of a criminal. 'Equipment—in accordance with its equipmentality—always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room' (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger these things are not individual solid objects that pre-exist an accidental system of references: 'these "things" never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves, so as to add up to a sum of *realia* and fill up a room' (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 97–8). Rather, they are constituted by their involvements from the start. The totality of involvements among ready-to-hand entities is what Heidegger calls 'world', and since there are, ultimately, no individual items of equipment, the global system of 'world' amounts to a colossal referential whole without parts.

Yet world does not always function properly: equipment breaks. Hammers shatter in our hands and bodily organs fail us. These entities were once silent and withdrawn, but have now become obtrusive: 'this *conspicuousness* presents the ready-to-hand equipment as in a certain un-readiness-to-hand ... Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment, but only to withdraw to the readiness-to-hand of something with which one concerns oneself—that is to say, of the sort of thing we find when we put it back into repair' (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 102–3). Such a reversal is possible at any moment. An entity malfunctions and loudly announces itself; later, the same entity might retreat into the background and be taken for granted once again. To repeat, the opposition between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand is not a division between two specific *types* of objects; it is not the case that hammers are always ready-to-hand while colours and shapes are always present-at-hand. Instead, *Zu-* and *Vorhandenheit* are two modes of being that pertain equally to *all* entities. Objects can withdraw into their hidden underground action or they can become objects of explicit awareness. In fact, they do both simultaneously: the hammer is faintly felt even when we invisibly used it, and something withdraws in objects even when we explicitly stare at them. The problem with Husserl is that his ontology allows for only one of these two dimensions of reality. Namely, he devotes his life's work to presence-at-hand in consciousness and recognises no withdrawal of entities into the shadowy depths of readiness-to-hand.

A large portion of Heidegger's philosophy boils down to this simple opposition between *Zu-* and *Vorhandenheit*. His break with Husserl hinges entirely on his rejection of Husserlian phenomena as a form of presence-at-hand. And this harsh treatment goes far beyond

Husserl, since Heidegger holds that *the entire history of philosophy* is guilty of reducing reality to some form of presence. The history of philosophy is described as ‘ontotheology’, meaning that it sets up one privileged entity as the explanation for all others: whether it be water, atoms, perfect forms, substance, God, monads, subjectivity or power. Some Heidegger scholars like to claim that the ontological and theological moments are distinct, but this is a false complexification of what is really a rather simple issue. To single out one entity or one type of entity as an explanation of the entire cosmos is the same bad step—no matter whether the root of everything else is held to be atoms, economic considerations or God. All of these options amount to treating one specific type of present-at-hand entity as the incarnation of being itself, which is unacceptable for Heidegger (as it is for his controversial French admirer Jacques Derrida). Instead, philosophy must be reconstructed around a permanent interplay of light and shadow, one in which reality is never fully manifest to human view. Ironically, this leads Heidegger to make the *opposite* criticism of natural science from Husserl’s own. Whereas Husserl holds that science wrongly leaps beyond phenomena into some supposedly hidden natural world (‘science tries to be too deep’), Heidegger holds that science reduces entities to measurable present-at-hand features (‘science is never deep enough’). We will soon see that Heidegger makes the same critique of technology: like the history of philosophy, technology marks the reign of boundless presence-at-hand, stripping all mystery from being. By failing to see the profoundly monotonous character of Heidegger’s obsession with presence, Heideggerians often draw an artificial distinction between his critique of technology and the earlier stages of his philosophy.

There is one especially pernicious mistake that is often made in interpreting the tool analysis. Namely, it is said that presence-at-hand refers to entities in their independence from humans and that readiness-to-hand is a name for entities in their relation to us. In fact, the opposite is the case. The reason so many commentators hold otherwise is that Heidegger describes the entities found in nature as a form of presence-at-hand, and describes readiness-to-hand as belonging to a system of references that plug together in a single massive system dependent on human purposes (as in the aforementioned example of the knife). This notion is based on a double misunderstanding, since presence-at-hand is *never* independent and readiness-to-hand *always* is, however paradoxical this may sound.

First, we have already seen that Heidegger uses the term *Vorhandenheit* for at least three different cases: (i) phenomena present in consciousness; (ii) broken equipment that emerges from withdrawal and becomes obtrusive; (iii) natural physical objects. In the first two cases it should be painfully obvious that we are not speaking of anything ‘independent’ of humans. For in the first case phenomena require an observer, and in the second case broken equipment must be obtrusive *for someone*. The third case of natural physical objects might seem to be independent from humans, but it takes little effort to see that they are not. Objects as defined by the natural sciences are simplifications of real objects by means of mathematical formalisations. Such entities are in no way independent of humans, since they exist only as oversimplified mathematical fictions bearing little resemblance to the real entities unleashed in the world that they attempt to capture. For Heidegger at least, such formalisations are never quite equal to the depth and mystery of the things.

Second, it is equally false to say that *Zuhandenheit* is relational. It is certainly true that Heidegger claims all equipment belongs to a unified system, that it gains its meaning only through assignment to other pieces of equipment. But we must also never forget that equipment also *breaks* for Heidegger. The fact that hammers and trees sometimes generate obtrusive surprises proves that they *are not* reducible to their current sleek functioning

amidst the unified system of the world. They must have some excess or residue not currently expressed in the relational system of the world. In other words, the fact that tool-beings withdraw does not just mean that they withdraw from human perception into unnoticed human praxis. Instead, it means that the ready-to-hand must withdraw from the system of the world altogether—otherwise it could never malfunction. While this latter conclusion goes beyond Heidegger's own self-interpretation, it is the only way to make sense of the tool-analysis.¹

In any case, Heidegger's tool analysis makes a good initial assault on the status of presence-at-hand in philosophy. Nothing in the world is adequately expressed by its visible incarnations, since hammers, stars and monkeys will always exceed whatever we can see or say about them. We can never swallow their reality whole, never use them up through all our attempts to formalise them. By means of the tool analysis, Heidegger counters the boundless reign of presence-at-hand and paves the way to his question of being. For being withdraws from all access just as the tool does. In this respect, tool-beings are 'good' in Heidegger's eyes, since they hint at a layer of reality deeper than all access. But the opposite is true of technology, which strips all mystery from the world and reduces everything to stockpiled presence-at-hand.

3. Technology

'All distances in time and space are shriveling' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5).² So go the opening words of Heidegger's 1949 Bremen lectures. Physical distance is dissolved by aircraft. The radio makes information instantly available that once went unknown. The formerly slow and mysterious growth of plants is laid bare through stop-action photography. But Heidegger is unimpressed by these technological gimmicks: 'the hasty removal of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in a small amount of distance' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5). Or even more memorably: 'Small distance is not already nearness. Great distance is not yet farness' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5). None of this should come as a surprise to readers of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger observed that the eyeglasses on my face are further than the acquaintance I see approaching on the street, since the glasses are usually ignored as long as they are clean and in good working order. Distance is not a discrete physical span, but refers primarily to distance and nearness for human concern. Yet even nearness to human concern is not 'true' nearness: for Heidegger, a stop-action film gives us no true nearness to the growth of plants. If we call something 'near' when it is a small physical distance away, or instead call it 'near' because it is an immediate object of our concern, in both cases we make the same mistake: we *reduce the thing to its presence-at-hand*. Though the phrase 'presence-at-hand' was no longer used in 1949, it is still what Heidegger means. True nearness to the thing comes not from making it as close as possible in physical or mental terms. Instead, true nearness requires *distance*. True nearness and true distance are one and the same.

The inability to let anything be distant from us is what Heidegger calls the 'distanceless', or *das Abstandlose*. 'Everything dissolves together into a uniform lack of distance' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 6). And this leads to one of Heidegger's major technical terms pertaining to technology: 'The distanceless is never without a stance [*Stand*]. It stands, insofar as everything present is standing reserve [*Bestand*]' (Heidegger, 1994, pp. 25–6).

¹ For an extensive consideration of the tool analysis see Harman (2002).

² All translations from this work (Heidegger, 1994), throughout the text, are my own.

This ‘standing reserve’ is without distance, without true nearness, and is ontologically identical with what was earlier called presence-at-hand. It may be a more politically sinister form of such presence than most, but it should be remembered that ‘technology’ for Heidegger is already present in human history long before steamships and computers appear. All science is ruled in advance by technology—a forgetting of the hiddenness of being and a reduction of things to their presence or outward look. Insofar as being itself must be manifested in some form of oversimplified presence, it is even the case that *being itself* can be held responsible for the era of technology.

Technology turns everything into an accessible surface, devoid of distance. At times Heidegger also shows the disturbing tendency to treat all technology as the same. This can be seen in his claim that the explosion of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima four years earlier is not so important, since the real disaster happened long ago when being was forgotten in favour of presence (Heidegger, 1994, p. 6). Or, even more controversially: ‘Agriculture is now a motorized nourishment industry, essentially the same as the fabrication of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of nations, the same as the fabrication of hydrogen bombs’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 27). In this way, all objects are reduced to a single mournful feature: their superficiality in comparison with the withdrawn depth of being.

At this point, we must depart sharply from the usual view that for Heidegger ‘independence from humans is bad’ and ‘dependence on humans is good’. While I have argued that the opposite is already true in the period of *Being and Time*, by 1949 this is undeniably the case. Standing reserve, the spectre that haunts the age of technology, is obviously not independent natural matter sitting around apart from humans. Instead, it is placed into a total system, just as was the case with tools in *Being and Time*. ‘The standing reserve stands. It remains in existence insofar as it is placed into an ordering ... Thus ordered, everything is: as a consequence of ... But consequence [*Folge*] is ordered in advance as success [*Erfolg*]’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 26). Here, to belong to a system is obviously not a ‘good’ feature that frees things from their presence-at-hand. Rather, it is what drags these things into a colossal gridwork and reduces them to calculable and manipulable surfaces. This ordering ‘is only directed toward one thing ... namely: to establish [*stellen*] the single whole of that which is present as standing reserve. Ordering [*Bestellen*] is in itself universal’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 32). In a further play on words, this universal ordering is called *Ge-stell*. In normal German this is a word for all sorts of everyday frames, racks and gridworks, but as a Heideggerian technical term it is usually translated as ‘en-framing’. Things now have meaning only insofar as they are subjected to this universal grid of presence. ‘The en-framing arranges. It pulls everything together into orderability. It heaps up everything that is present into orderability and is thereby the assembly of this heaping-up. The en-framing is en-heaping’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 32). And still more candidly, ‘the essence of technology is en-framing’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 40). Technology does not amount to a set of devices invented in recent centuries, datable to the advent of flint tools or electrical power. Instead, technology is one face of being itself: the face that is not withdrawn but tends to reveal itself in presence. As Heidegger famously puts it, ‘the essence of technology is nothing technical’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 34). It far predates the industrial revolution. Machines are dependent on the essence of technology, they do not constitute it. Through en-framing we experience a ‘refusal’ of world and a ‘neglect’ of things (Heidegger, 1994, p. 51). Technology places [*stellt*] things before our view: *bestellen*, *Ge-stell*. The word in Greek for placing is ‘thesis’. In opposition to thesis, Heidegger valorises *physis*, the Greek word for nature. But instead of nature as a set of

present-at-hand physical objects, Heidegger always regards *physis* as that which emerges or blossoms forth from concealment: '[we must] think pro-duction rigorously in the unitary dimension that is ordained by concealment (*lethe*) and unconcealment (*a-letheia*)', and he adds that 'pro-duction [is] thought in a Greek manner in the sense of *physis* . . .' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 64). But present-day physics knows nothing of this ancient *physis*: 'for physics, nature is the standing reserve of energy and matter. They are the components of nature. From the standpoint of inertia, matter is determined by way of energy. Yet energy is the effectual—that which is capable of being ordered for the ordered placing of a successful outcome' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 42).

Another word in Heidegger's constellation of technology terms is *danger*, which turns out to be yet another synonym for a presence-at-hand that strips the world of all concealed mystery. 'The essence of technology is en-framing. The essence of en-framing is danger' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 54). Though the danger is already with us, we do not yet experience it *as* danger (Heidegger, 1994, p. 55). And to add yet another term to the mix: 'in the wake of every danger, there looms a distress. Distress compels. [*Not nötig!*]' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 55). This talk of danger also links up with one of Heidegger's favourite passages from the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In the hymn 'Patmos', Hölderlin writes: 'Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch' ['But where danger is, there grows / also that which saves']. This two-sided interplay of danger and saving power reflects the two faces of being itself. Being presents itself as a present-at-hand façade, but also withdraws into inscrutable subterranean depth. Technology is not a lamentable human deed of Neolithic times or the Industrial Revolution, but an unavoidable facet of being itself. For being (or sometimes 'beyng' [*Seyn*], to use Heidegger's beloved archaic spelling) lies far beyond the normal cause-and-effect relationships of the world: 'beyng is not accompanied by anything comparable to it. It is caused by nothing else, and is not the cause of itself. Beyng does not proceed, and never proceeds, from a causal connection' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 75). Hence, humans cannot force a change in the essence of technology to occur and must passively wait. But this still leaves us with a special role denied to all other entities: 'the great human essence resides in the fact that it belongs to the essence of being, is used by it to preserve the essence of being in its truth' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 70). In the danger of being lies the possibility of a turn (*Kehre*) away from the forgetting of being into the truth of being itself (Heidegger, 1994, p. 71). Despite the horror of technology, Heidegger contends that we can see the lightning-flash of being in the essence of technology. By stripping everything down to such a miserable form of presence-at-hand, it confronts us with the call of distress from being itself (Heidegger, 1994, p. 77). But humans, the shepherds of being, must continue to wait: 'Only when humans, as the shepherds of being, wait upon the truth of being can they in any way anticipate the arrival of the other destiny of being, without degenerating into a mere wish to know' (Heidegger, 1994, pp. 71–2).

4. Objects and things

We have now seen that Heidegger's tool analysis and his theory of technology both hinge on the question of distance and nearness. In a further step he contends that this play of near and far plays out in the structure of *individual things*, which thereby turn out to be the neglected central theme of his philosophy as a whole. For 'near to us is that which we are accustomed to calling "things"' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5). Referring to his discussion of a jug, which we will soon consider, Heidegger says that 'we sought the essence of nearness and found the essence of the jug as thing. But in this discovery we become aware by the

same stroke of the essence of nearness. The thing things' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 17). This last phrase, 'the thing things', might sound like nothing but a distracting word game, but at the very least it has an immediate *negative* value. The fact that the thing *things* means that it does something besides sit around as a target for human awareness of it. Heidegger provides a list of examples to show that things lie far beyond the realm of human consciousness: jug, bench, footbridge, plough, brook, mountain, heron, deer, horse, bull, mirror, bracelet, book, picture, crown, cross (Heidegger, 1994, p. 21). The key to achieving a proper relation to distance and nearness will be to let the thing *thing*, and not reduce it to a stockpile of present-at-hand correlates of consciousness. In other words, it will require the philosophically *realist* step of allowing that a world exists apart from all human access to it.

The term 'thing' is counterposed to the term 'object'—generally speaking, 'thing' is a good term for Heidegger and 'object' a bad one. What makes the jug a thing rather than an object is that it stands independently in itself. 'As the independent stance [*Selbststand*] of something independent, the jug differentiates itself from an object [*Gegenstand*]' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5). But here, as with the earlier tool analysis, we should avoid the temptation of thinking that Heidegger is talking about different *kinds* of entities. For 'something independent *can* become an object, when we represent it to ourselves . . . Yet what is thingly in the thing [does not] consist in the fact that a thing becomes the object of a representation . . .' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 5, emphasis added). Any entity can be viewed as a thing *or* an object, just as any entity can be viewed as invisibly ready-to-hand or as explicitly present-at-hand. The thing is irreducible to what we represent of it. It is also irreducible to the causal conditions that produced it, since, in Heidegger's famous words, 'the jug is not a container because it is produced, but rather the jug must be produced because it is this container' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 6).

More generally, the thing cannot be reduced to any sort of outward look, or *eidōs* in Greek. External representation of things never gives us their true inner life, which partly withdraws from every human grasp. This holds even for the vaunted achievements of science: 'science always encounters only that which its type of representation permits in advance as the object that is possible for it' (Heidegger, 1994, pp. 8–9). In short, science reduces the thing to a present-at-hand caricature by replacing it with a set of tangible properties through which it is modelled. Indeed, 'science annihilated the things as things long before the atom bomb exploded. This explosion is only the crudest of all crude confirmations of the annihilation of the thing that transpired long ago: that the thing as thing remains null and void' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 9). But it is not just science that is found guilty of doing so. The entire history of philosophy revolves around presence (i.e. false nearness) no less than science does. In Heidegger's blunt words, 'Plato, who represents the presence of that which is present by way of its outward look, thought the essence of the things as little as Aristotle *and all ensuing thinkers*' (Heidegger, 1994, p. 7, emphasis added). For Heidegger, the only way to think the essence of thing is to recognise that things have a 'fourfold' structure. But this fourfold (*Geviert*, in German) is a thorny topic best discussed elsewhere.

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