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CompLit 102W

Expressing the Purpose of Technology

Philosopher Martin Heidegger and play writer Aeschylus both attempt to express technology in their own particular way. Heidegger, being the philosopher that he was, used a method of philosophical discourse to express the importance that technology plays on the world. Aeschylus, on the other hand, offers a poetical expression of its importance. While both deploy different genres to accomplish this expression, they both arrive at the same conclusion as to what new media and digital discourse says about technology: that each is dependent on one another. As long as new technologies continue to develop, new methods of communication will continue to arise in order to interpret these developments.

For Heidegger, technology is a form of “poiesis” or “techne” meaning, “bringing-forth.” Heidegger uses this “bringing-forth” interchangeably with the terms “unconcealment” and “revealing.” He explains that “revealing” is a term derived from the Greek word “aletheia” which is best translated as “truth.” It is because of these linguistic interpretations that Heidegger feels he is able to conclude that technology, being a form of unconcealment, is the essential link in unconcealing the truth about the world.

In Aeschylus’ play *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus steals fire from Hephaestus (the god of fire) and gifts it to the mortal humans. “Fire,” in the play, is a metaphor for “techne” and it is with this gift that humans are given the ability to make many crafts. Prior to the gift of techne, humans were “like swarms of ants” lacking purpose, notion, and knowledge (Aeschylus 34).

Once given the gift of *techne*, humans transformed into independent, rational beings, and in a sense, they became more “authentically human.”

In both texts, Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology” and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, the essence of technology is expressed as being the key to unlocking the truth or deeper meaning of the world. With one method being a poetic creation, and the other being a mode of philosophical discourse, each author seems to be arriving at the conclusion that technology, not humans, is closer at discovering truth. This seems difficult to grasp, given that humans are so obviously the authors of technology, but both Heidegger and Aeschylus seem to address this concern and provide an accurate defense for it.

Heidegger begins his defense by illustrating how humans have an instrumental concept of technology. They view it as a mode of “means and ends” and of “causality.” But it is this view that Heidegger uses for his argument for why technology is closer at revealing the truth about the world than humans are. He uses the term “standing-reserve” to describe what happens when causality is used as a way of defining technology. An aircraft on a runway waiting for take-off, for example, only reveals itself as a plane once it takes off and is flying, and thus is a “standing-reserve” until it is in flight. But if technology is seen as a mere means to an end, or subject of causality, just as the airplane is, then humans become the means to technology’s end. Thus, humans become “standing-reserves” for technology, and technology becomes the higher “revealing” that is closer to unlocking truths about the world.

In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus also presents “fire” or “technology” as an object that exists independently from humans. This reiterates Heidegger’s argument that it is because of technology’s existence that humans are able to grasp a further understanding of truth, for before Prometheus gave humans this gift of “fire” they “had eyes, but sight was meaningless; heard

sounds, but could not listen; all their length of life they passed like shapes in dreams, confused and purposeless” (Aeschylus 34). With the gift of *techne*, humans were able to produce more crafts and more technology, but because it existed independently from them in the first, humans were still the “standing-reserve” to it.

While both authors clearly illustrate how *techne*, or technology, is seen as a “closer truth” than humans, they also seem to convey a sense of interdependency on each other as well. Technology may exist independently of humans, but humans are needed in order to reveal it. In Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” this is addressed when Heidegger contrasts technology with nature and explains how nature reveals itself on its own terms, completely independent and without the need or help of human interaction. Technology, on the other hand, seems to already exist but requires a human to discover it and reveal its potentiality and purpose. Aeschylus also displays this interdependency between humans and technology when Prometheus tells The Chorus, “if a man fell ill, he had no remedy, solid or liquid medicine, or ointment, but for lack of drugs they pined away; until I showed them how to mix mild healing herbs and so protect themselves against all maladies” (Aeschylus 34). Similar to Heidegger’s text, technology (in this case, of medicine) existed independently of humans, but humans were still needed in order to fully reveal it and put its purpose to use (in this case, making drugs).

Works Cited

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2. F, Rufus. "Prometheus Bound (via Hesiod, Aeschylus, Heidegger, McLuhan)." Web log post. *The League of Ordinary Gentlemen*. 17 Mar. 2010. Web. 26 Oct. 2010.
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3. Heidegger, Martin. *The Question concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. Print.
4. Zuern, John. "Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology." *Redirecting You to University of Hawaii...* Web. 26 Oct. 2010.
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Dear Becky,

Like your last paper, your grammar and sentence structure are very clear and direct. Take a little bit more care with your word choice and make sure the choice is as precise as possible.

I was wondering about the term “purpose” in the title of your paper: does H really talk about “purpose” in relation to technology? Also, you use the term “truth” several times in your essay, but you need to be cautious here about the meaning of truth: it simply means bring-forth (poiesis) or unconcealing, and H suggests that this is exactly what *Ge-stell* blocks. You use the phrase “revealing the truth about the world,” but this is not something H talks about at all: he writes about techne as a mode of revealing: revealing IS truth itself.

I feel a little bit that your intro and the third paragraph spend too much time restating the assignment prompt: we had several excellent in-class discussions about H and was expecting a little bit more specificity and depth in the paper. One way to get this specificity is by working more closely with the text and finding quotations to support your points. For instance, your final point about technology being independent from humans needs to be further explained with material from Heidegger.

You mention digital media etc. in your intro but there’s no follow-up in the paper (perhaps the conclusion?). You don’t seem to have a concluding paragraph at all—perhaps this would have been where you could have said something about our contemporary technology.

Grade for Paper Two: **B+**

Suggestions for Paper Three: Work more closely with the text (Heidegger again).