

Heidegger and Social Ecology

ABSTRACT: In this essay I defend Heidegger's critique of technology against possible criticisms that he may be an anti-humanist and a mystic. This essay will show that Heidegger's critique of technology is helpful in thinking about ecological questions; and his contributions to such questions is relevant and not radically separated from some of the work of other philosophers today including Karen Warren and Marilyn Frye.

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Peter Staudenmaier criticizes deep ecologists in his essay, "Fascist Ideology: The 'Green Wing' of the Nazi Party and its Historical Antecedents."¹ He argues that deep ecologists recommend a total eschewing of technology in favor of having a feeling of "oneness" with nature.² This attitude of oneness with nature is one that has been used by Nazis to commit great harms to a part of society for the good of the whole. As a social ecologist, or one who believes that solving social problems will then put humans in the right relationship with nature, Staudenmaier criticizes Heidegger on the grounds that Heidegger puts nature first, and as such his critique of technology³ lends itself to Nazi ideology and should be rejected.⁴

In this paper, I will defend Heidegger from Staudenmaier's critique, and will show parallels in Heidegger's philosophy to Karen Warren, who is also an ecofeminist.⁵ The first task will be to address Staudenmaier's charge that Heidegger suggests rejecting reason and embracing mysticism. The second task will be to respond to Staudenmaier's charge that Heidegger was an anti-humanist by looking at Heidegger's explication of causality and evaluating it in terms of Warren's ecological theory and Marilyn Frye's "loving perception."⁶ What we will see is that Heidegger contributes to

1. Peter Staudenmaier, "Fascist Ideology: The 'Green Wing' of the Nazi Party and its Historical Antecedents," in Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (San Francisco: AK Press 1995).

2. Deep ecology ethics focus on 'oneness' with the land and the unity of humans with nature and only considering the whole Self which we are all a part of. For an example, see Bill Devall and George Sessions, "Deep Ecology" in *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, Eds. VanDerVeer and Pierce (Belmont: Thomson and Wadsworth, 2003).

3. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. 1977).

4. Staudenmaier, 12-13.

5. Ecofeminists critique ecological thinking from a feminist perspective and social ecologists tend to do so from a Marxist perspective. Because Karen Warren, as we will see, focuses on the logic of domination in general and because the two perspectives are already friendly to each other, I will not be strict in maintaining the difference throughout this essay. Karen Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," in *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, Eds. VanDerVeer and Pierce (Belmont: Thomson and Wadsworth, 2003): 283.

6. Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," in *The Politics of Reality* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983). Although I can not go into detail in this essay, there is a connection between Warren's critique of the logic of domination and Marilyn Frye's critique of arrogant perception. In fact, Warren cites Frye at length on Warren, 263.

how we should frame our thinking of ecological ethics.

The first charge Staudenmaier brings against Heidegger is that he is mystic who rejects reason.⁷ This charge may originate by reading Heidegger as advocating the shedding of technological devices and having an experience of oneness with an absolute or infinite, which all things would be a part of. In response, Heidegger does not advocate an experience of oneness with anything, because, for him, beings are finite, and saying the relationship between beings dissolves into one Self would be reductive.⁸ Furthermore, Heidegger does not recommend abandoning technological devices; "What is dangerous is not technology. There is no demonry of technology, but rather there is the mystery of its essence."⁹

For Heidegger, the critique of technology goes deeper than a problem with any object that is called technological. The problem of technology lies in its essence, which is not a mere means to an end but rather a way of revealing.¹⁰ Technological thinking, which is the way most of us in the western world reveal nature much of the time, provokes humans to unlock nature's energy for use.¹¹ In other words, it is a way of thinking in which entities in nature are understood and understood to exist insofar as humans can put them to use. Technological thinking makes the anthropological assumption that humans are the fundamental subjects who determine the nature of Being, then organizes all things that are thusly revealed in terms of serving human ends. To build on this, when we think of the technological devices used to fabricate or manufacture products that process natural resources into products for our use, we can see that the assumptions in technological thinking become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conceptual assumptions in technological thinking are similar to ones in other oppressive conceptual schemes. To show how, I will explain Warren's notion of the logic of domination, which will find parallels in Heidegger's technological thinking. For Warren, an oppressive conceptual framework, which is "a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions" that explains and justifies the subordination and domination of one group over another, relies on three main features.¹² The first is value-hierarchical thinking, which places higher value on one thing *over* another.¹³ The second is value dualisms, which creates oppositional disjunctive pairs of things and places value on one over another, e.g. Man over Woman in patriarchal societies.¹⁴ Finally, there is the logic of domination which is the active justification of the subordination of the group on the lower end of the value hierarchy by the group on top.¹⁵ It is important to remember that it is the logic of domination that justifies the subordination of one group by another and not simply thinking that one group is better than another.

7. Staudenmaier, 12-13. Staudenmaier contextualizes his claims about Heidegger's mysticism by referring to "[Heidegger's] mystical panegyrics to Heimat (homeland);" but there is a broader claim about Heidegger being a mystic that is addressed in the introduction by William Lovitt to *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, xii.

8. Staudenmaier, 12-13.

9. Heidegger, 28.

10. Heidegger, 12.

11. Harold Alderman, "Heidegger: Technology as Phenomenon," in *The Personalist*, Vol. 51 (Fall 1970): 544. The term "technological thinking" corresponds to what Alderman calls, "technicity." He writes "Technicity is itself the manner of thought which provokes [humans] to be the being[s] who [make] nature yield its resources to [them]."

12. Warren, 258.

13. Warren, 258.

14. Warren, 258.

15. Warren, 258.

In Warren, as with Heidegger, we see that oppressive conceptual schemes rely on assumptions that are not only hierarchical, but also allow the perpetuation of the hierarchy. For Heidegger, humans assume that they are the fundamental determiners of the nature of Being, and then change the beings they find into what they thought it was in the first place. Things are made into the kinds of beings that are fitted to suit humans' ends.¹⁶ In Warren's broader critique of the logic of domination, we find that dominant groups in an oppressive structure separate themselves from subordinate groups and take that separation to be justification of oppression.¹⁷

Heidegger also contends that technological thinking perpetuates itself, and in those societies where it is the dominant form of thought, other ways of revealing beings are denied and considered illegitimate.¹⁸ This is at least in part because the technological thinking is not a mere activity in which humans engage, but rather drives and challenges people to think about the world in a certain way. Heidegger uses the example of a forester who goes into the forest to acquire lumber and is under the economic constraints of the lumber industry.¹⁹ The forester must allocate his time and energy in the most efficient manner in order to meet standards and goals that exist outside of him; he is a professional forester to the extent that he is driven by profit. Technological thinking, like the logic of domination, is a social phenomenon. Organizing beings and making them into useful objects is part of the societal norms in places where technological thinking has become dominant. That technological thinking works to exclude other ways of revealing leads into Staudenmaier's charge of Heidegger as an anti-humanist.

For Staudenmaier, rejecting anthropological means-ends organizing is a rejection of humanist concerns. "Letting things be" and giving up technology in favor of experiencing oneness with nature is problematic for Staudenmaier; not only can this lead to the justification of genocide, but it is a renunciation of human ends.²⁰ As mentioned earlier, Heidegger does not encourage a flight from machinery, nor does he believe in a Self or oneness of all beings. Here, I shall argue that he does not even set ecological ends higher than human ends to show that he is not an anti-humanist. In order to do this, I will turn to Heidegger's explication of causality and how technological thinking is reductive. It is not that thinking about how to achieve one's ends and utilizing things to achieve those ends should be entirely rejected; rather, for Heidegger, we should think of nature as being more than just something to use and existent only for human use.

Heidegger's critique of technological thinking runs into a discussion of how we conceptualize causality; this is because technological thinking is so focused on instrumentality and "wherever instrumentality reigns, there reigns causality."²¹ Heidegger traces the doctrine of causality back to Aristotle's four causes that we have treated as though it "had fallen from heaven as a truth as clear as daylight," at least insofar as philosophy's teaching goes.²²

16. Frye, 57-58. Here, she talks about a tree being felled and made into a log—which is an ontologically different entity—which is then more readily exploited as a resource and can be turned into even further-processed forms that humans can utilize. As we will see later, Frye takes exploitation and the transformation resultant from human making to be linked.

17. Warren, 258-259.

18. Alderman, 544.

19. Heidegger, 18.

20. Staudenmaier, 12. In reading Staudenmaier, it is important to remember that he does not reject all non-human ends; his critique is of thinking that oneness with nature is the only kind of end, rendering strictly human ends illegitimate. Historically, this has been associated with anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and either fervent nationalism or a rejection of politics in favor of individualism. 6-7, 10.

21. Heidegger, 6.

As we will see, Heidegger not only thinks the four causes are themselves reductive, but that technocrats—those think technologically and work to keep its reign in place—only pay attention to one of the four. For Heidegger, the four causes are co-responsible for a thing's existence and the thing is indebted to all of these four causes for its existence.²³ But, uniting the four causes for a being's existence is the cause of Being itself.²⁴

Those four causes that are responsible for something being revealed are: (1) the *causa materialis*, the material from which the thing is made; (2) the *causa formalis*, which is the shape the material is put in; (3) the *causa finalis* is tied to Greek concept of *telos*, which Heidegger translates as that which circumscribes and gives bounds to the thing;²⁵ and (4) the *causa efficiens* which is the being which brings about the change that transforms the material into the final thing (usually understood to be the craftsman who makes the thing).²⁶ Heidegger, though, disagrees with the traditional characterization of the *causa efficiens*. He believes that it is the making itself that is responsible.²⁷ I will now explain in greater detail these four causes and how in technological thinking the understanding of responsibility is reduced by looking at his example of a sacrificial silver chalice.

In Aristotle's doctrine of four causes, the *causa materialis* is thought to be co-responsible with the other causes for a thing's existence. Heidegger's example of a silver chalice explains that the silver from which it is made is partly responsible for its lying there ready for use.²⁸ Silver makes possible its existence, for without it, it would not exist at all. If the chalice were made of something else, it would be a different chalice. In technological thinking, raw materials are not responsible for a thing's existence, they are simply unrefined matter to be manipulated.

The *causa materialis* alone is not responsible for a thing's existence, for it must combine with the idea or form of something else in order to be what it is. "But the sacrificial vessel is indebted not only to the silver. As a chalice, that which is indebted to the silver appears in the aspect of a chalice and not in that of a brooch or a ring."²⁹ In order for the chalice to be the thing it is, then, it requires an idea or form of chalice-ness to which it is then shaped. As with the *causa materialis*, technological thinking does not consider the form responsible for a thing's existence.

Third, and "above all responsible for the sacrificial vessel," is the *causa finalis*.³⁰ This cause is the thing that, in advance, confines the silver chalice to the realm of consecration and bestowal; this is what separates a *sacrificial* silver chalice from a fancy silver drinking cup.³¹ The conception of this cause has, in the tradition of western thought, been reduced to a thing's aim or purpose and ceases to be responsible for a thing's existence. The aim or purpose of a thing would be something that is not only entirely made up by humans, and therefore has very little to do with natural objects, but also no longer has any sense of

22. Heidegger, 6.

23. Heidegger, 6-7.

24. Alderman, 538.

25. *Telos*, he writes, is generally understood in the reductive sense of being merely an aim or purpose to which a thing is put (8).

26. This explication of causality comes from Heidegger, 6.

27. Heidegger, 8.

28. Heidegger, 8.

29. Heidegger, 7.

30. Heidegger, 8.

31. Heidegger, 8.

durability. An aim or purpose can change on a whim, and therefore cannot grant part of a thing's existence; it is a mere part of utilization.³²

The fourth cause in Aristotle's doctrine is the *causa efficiens*, which is the making which brings something about. As Heidegger explains, the maker of the silver chalice carefully considered and gathered together the previous ways of being responsible for a thing's existence and became co-responsible with them in order to reveal the sacrificial silver chalice.³³ In technological thinking, only the making is considered to be responsible for the existence of a thing. A commentator on Heidegger writes, "Metaphysics up to now preserved for itself a certain innocence through its conviction that it was pure theory free of interest and domination. Heidegger as well as other critics of ideology seeks to show up this conviction as a lack of self-knowledge. Its self-forgetfulness is, according to Heidegger, forgetfulness of Being."³⁴ Humans, as beings that are indebted to Being itself for their existence, have forgotten that they drive the revealing process and themselves are reveal-able beings.

We can draw out a similar self-forgetfulness in Marilyn Frye's account of arrogant perception. Arrogant perceivers, on her account, believe that everything exists and happens for some purpose, with the perceiver as an orienting point to which all things animate.³⁵ The arrogant perceiver holds an expectation of how things should be, and makes things behave in accordance with these assumptions.³⁶ The forester, who walks into the forest thinking that trees are yet-to-be-actualized lumber, which gives him profits, manufactures those trees into lumber, and sells that lumber for profit. He makes nature into what he wants it to be. And in the case of the arrogant perceiver, as with the forester, they forget that they are a part of the environment which makes other beings into what the perceiver and forester want those other beings to be. In another writing, Frye refers to this as "rigging the data" where she is explaining how "phallists" naively observe women acting as though they are inferior to men.³⁷

Heidegger's critique of technology is not only not opposed to social ecology, as it may be if it were a deep ecology and Staudenmaier is right; it coheres with some social ecology quite well. By juxtaposing Heidegger's account of technological thinking and its "aggressive spirit,"³⁸ with Warren's account of the logic of domination, I have highlighted connections that can be made in their critiques of oppression. The aspects of turning the subordinate group in an oppressive social structure into what the dominant group wants, justifying this making-into, and then accepting the appearance of the altered group at face value are the features of oppression that these two thinkers draw our attention to.

To close the paper, I will address a possible objection to this paper that would claim that

32. Frye, 58 on telos. She writes, "The parts and properties of the thing or stuff were not initially organized with reference to a certain purpose or telos; they altered and rearranged so that they are organized with reference to that telos." This is evidence that the *causa finalis* is conceptually reduced to the *causa efficiens*, i.e. making, in technological thinking. Later, she writes that arrogant perceivers are teleologists. 67

33. Heidegger, 8.

34. Reinhart Maurer, "From Heidegger to Practical Philosophy," from *Idealistic Studies* Vol. 3 (May 1973): 138.

35. Frye, 57.

36. Frye, 57-59.

37. Marilyn Frye, "The Problem That Has No Name," in *The Politics of Reality: essays in feminist theory* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983): 46. In this article, Frye strongly hints that we treat non-human species and "defective" persons the same way phallists treat women (starting on 43 and referred to throughout the article).

38. A phrase from Alderman, 545, where he writes: the "burden of technology lies not in its calculative style but rather in its insistent and aggressive spirit. It is, I think, part of Heidegger's point that the same trait would be pernicious in any style of thought."

Heidegger's *prescription* to technological thinking is somehow mystical. I will do this by drawing connections between the ending of "The Question Concerning Technology" and Frye's "loving perception." As we have seen, Heidegger's critiques are not misanthropic or mystical; and in this final section, by showing some parallels to Frye's work, we will see that his prescription for ecological thinking is neither misanthropic nor mystical and can help frame how we think about environmental ethics.

For Heidegger, overcoming the dangers of technological thinking lies somewhat paradoxically in resisting the drive to master the technological, which itself would be thinking technologically.³⁹ It requires, on one hand, an openness and safekeeping of "the-coming-to-pass of truth."⁴⁰ It should be noted, however, that Heidegger does not want us to flee from technology and never affect it, but rather not to reduce nature solely into what we want. Technological objects can take nature into its responsibility without changing it, e.g., a windmill can harness the energy without overcoming the wind and changing it into a mere resource.⁴¹ This helps to emphasize that his critique is of an extreme and, he thinks, ever widely practiced technological thinking and not technological objects. His recommendation to wait and accept the emergence of truth finds a parallel attitude in Marilyn Frye's work.

She writes that "the loving eye is contrary to the arrogant eye," which acknowledges the independence of the other.⁴² She prescribes that if we want to see women, we should gaze lovingly at them and wait.⁴³ It is not by mastering them or by manipulating them in such a way that they reveal something about themselves that we already want to see; rather it is by a non-reductive acceptance of their being.

The critiques of Heidegger of technological thinking, Warren of the logic of domination, and Frye of arrogant perception, as well as their recommendations to end oppression, show that Heidegger's philosophy is better suited to social ecology and not deep ecology. For those who find Staudenmaier's argument against the historical use of deep ecology persuasive, this changes how one ought to appraise Heidegger's philosophy. ■

39. Heidegger, 5, 32.

40. Heidegger, 32. This idea of safekeeping and letting things be is echoed in a deep ecologists appraisal of Heidegger, cited in Staudenmaier, 12. It should be noted, however, that Heidegger does not want us to flee from technology and never affect it; but rather not to reduce nature solely into what we want.

41. This example is used in Alderman, 543.

42. Frye, 75.

43. Frye, 82.