

# HEIDEGGER AND THE EFFECTS OF WESTERN TECHNOLOGY ON AFRICAN VALUES

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## ABSTRACT

Our attempt in this paper is to explore the implications or effects of western technology on African values from the lenses of the German philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger. Drawing primarily from his seminal work *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, it will be discovered that modern technology is a revealing in the sense of challenging that unlocks what is hidden in nature to transform, store and control it. This means that modern technology is using nature as a “reserve,” a “standing-reserve” ready at hand. Its contact with African values has been devastating, exploitative, impositional and reductionist. Given that African values are relational, communitarian, and spiritual in nature, Heidegger calls for a return to the essence of ancient technology—the pious, respectful outlook that does not amount to imposition; a rediscovery of *technē* as *poiēsis*—a revealing that is unharmed to nature and a technology that preserves and respects the harmony of the Fourfold (Earth, Sky, Mortals, Divinities). The method we employed here is hermeneutic, that is, an interpretation of the texts of Heidegger. The challenge is to develop a technology of the future that preserves, respects, and cares for African values while revealing its potentials.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, Technology, Being, Enframing, Standing-reserve, African values.

## INTRODUCTION

The 20<sup>th</sup> century can rightly be called the century of technology because of the exponential discoveries made with the help of technology in various fields of human endeavour. Modern technology is altering and has in some cases, altered the way we live our lives and will soon begin to redefine what being human means. The availability of modern technology has increased the power of human beings to realise a vast array of hitherto unimaginable prodigies, at times just with the touch of a button or in some cases with a remote control. Easy access to information, faster means of communication, comfortable lifestyles, enhanced human bodies and abilities, engineered health, the availability of weapons of mass destruction, are all revolutionizing the way we see our fellow human beings. These prodigies not only improve the quality of our lives, but they also bring us to the precipice of self-destruction. Hence the questioning of technology became imperative for Heidegger and for us, “because modern technology carried with it a novel way of ordering the world, which he saw as tainting man’s authentic and essential relation to being, thereby signifying a certain catastrophe imminent in European industrial modernity” (Okoro, 2016, p. i). Heidegger was actually propelled to write on technology because of his overwhelming concern that all over Europe, the West and even Africa, man remains imprisoned in technological modernity, “a condition wherein the more technology advances itself the more it “threatens to slip from human control” Okoro, 2016, p. i). How can technology be employed most proficiently to meet human desires without enslaving man to itself?

## THE QUESTION OF BEING, MODERNITY AND TECHNOLOGY

It is well documented that Heidegger's vocation was to reawaken the question of being which traditional metaphysics led into oblivion or forgetfulness (*Seinsvergessenheit*). This oblivion of being began in ancient Greece when Plato interpreted 'Being' as 'constant presence' or '*eidōs*,' 'the eternally unchanging form,' and with that, inaugurated the era of Western metaphysics. Plato considered the eternal, non-empirical form to be the unchanging, permanently present foundation or basis of all things. He presupposed that for something "to be," it must rest upon some "ultimate" foundation, leading Western metaphysics into becoming a "foundationalist" metaphysics (Zimmerman, 1990, p. xv). Aristotle followed the footsteps of Plato and interpreted 'Being' as the 'First Cause and Unmoved Mover'. Subsequently, medieval Christianity and later thinkers reinforced this idea of 'Being' as 'permanent presence' eventually identified as "Creator God." Heidegger accused Western metaphysics of being onto-theology. Thus, instead of 'Being' representing an "unfolding" of things around us in the manner of the ancient Greek thinkers, it became something already revealed, an entity. In the technological age in particular, for something 'to be' means that it is a raw material for the self-enhancing technological system (Zimmerman, 1990, p. xiv).

With Descartes and his inauguration of modernity, all that changed. Modernity refers to a whole epoch in the history of the world; it is modern as opposed to the ancient, or the medieval periods. Cartesian metaphysics is said to mark "the beginning" of modern technology (Loscerbo, 1981, p. 63). The principle of "*Cogito, ergo sum*" suddenly placed man at the centre of inquiry, with the emergence of consciousness and subjectivity, thereby setting the 'Being question' aside. Hence man became subject, "the self-conscious shaper and guarantor of all that comes to him from beyond himself" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 147f). Modern science arose because of the work of man as subject in the Heideggerian sense. He arrests things, objectifies them, and represents them to himself in a particular way. Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* turned the self into a thing and marks the era of "dominion of the subjective" (Loscerbo, 1981, p. 63). Man is able to become subject by the specific ability of his "thinking," an ability which Heidegger (1977) designates in his language as "Vorstellen" – "a notion which is the precursor of "modern Herstellen" and of technological "Bestellen," which expresses the dominant human activity in the context of the modern world (p. 66).

As an alternative to 'self', Heidegger places 'Dasein.' Made up of two German words—*da* and *sein*—meaning 'there' and 'being'; that is, 'being-there'. In its complete form, *Dasein* expresses "being-there-in-the-world." The nature of '*Dasein*' in its average everydayness, then, is to be in the world. Being-in-the-world shows itself in average everydayness in the form of the ready-to-hand mode of being-in-the-world is understood using "equipment" in which 'Being' presents itself in connection with function or use. This deteriorating historical and metaphysical understanding of Being in the past epochs, prepared the advent of the modern, technological, nihilistic era. The effect of this technological era is seen in the way the European civilization has been altered and the way the rural and religious pedigree of the African culture/world is being altered into a mass metropolitan world based on science and technology. It was Descartes' turning of the human into a subject that is responsible for the reductionist mentality that we have of things in a technological society. The modern technologist is regularly expected and expects himself to be able to impose order on all data, to "process" every sort of entity, nonhuman and human alike, and to devise solutions for every kind of problem. He is forever getting things under control (Heidegger, 1977, p. xxvii).

## WHAT IS TECHNOLOGY AND THE ESSENCE OF TECHNOLOGY?

There are two major works where Heidegger developed his philosophy of technology—*The Question Concerning Technology* and *The Turning*. In *The Question Concerning Technology* (*Die Frage nach der Technik*), which officially inaugurates the later Heidegger (1977), he conceives technology as “Bestand”; that is, a revealing, a revelation or reality about the world. So, how is modern technology a form of revelation? What is the essence of technology? Its mark is seen in the dominion of man as self-conscious, representing subject (p. xxxii).

To understand the essence of technology, Heidegger appeals to the power of *technē* in ancient Greece. *Technē* is a form of *poiēsis*, that is, a form of ‘bringing forth’ which “was manifest first of all in physis, that presencing wherein the bursting forth arose from within the thing itself” (Heidegger, 1977, p. xxiv). In *Technē*, the bursting forth lay not in the thing itself but in another. The Greek in the face of the revealing of Being in all that met him, tended to seek to master it. It is in this tendency to grasp and consider reality, to discover what might be permanent within it and to control it, for Heidegger (1977), that lies the real origin of the modern technological age (p. xxv).

Temple Okoro (2016) describes technology, from the Heideggerian perspective, as “a way of bringing something out of concealment to unconcealment.” Simply put, technology is a mode of revealing which brings something into presence (p. 4). This means that technology participates in truth—*aletheia*. Heidegger considers truth as “a question of experiencing the being of things as they show themselves to us through our relatedness to them.” In modern technology, the revealing of which it is all about, does not unfold into a ‘bringing-forth’ in the sense of *poiēsis*, but rather a challenging (*Herausfordern*), “which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supplies energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 14). The “challenging” is here meant in the sense of demanding a duel or inviting one to a duel, a combat where one intends to defeat or kill the other and despoil the other of his or her possessions. Nature in a sense is challenged to give up of its treasure. In our case here, modern technology demands that nature surrender, “yield up its energies and resources so that they might be on call, readily available for human use” (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 71). The assumption is that the treasures found in nature are there to be exploited and transformed into whatever serves the need of man. Hence modern technology becomes the “contemporary disclosure of all things as raw material to be used for expanding the scope of technological power for its own sake” (Zimmerman, 1990, p. xiii).

Heidegger demonstrates this by observing that agriculture had become the mechanized food industry; air is extracted to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, all of which can be stored and used for other purposes; Uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be released either for destruction as it happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or for peaceful purpose as it is generating and supplying electricity in the Western world (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 15). Modern technology is a revealing in the sense of challenging that unlocks what is hidden in nature, transforms what is unlocked, stores up what is transformed, distributes what is stored up, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 16). This means that modern technology is using nature as a “reserve,” a ‘standing-reserve’, ready at hand to be used. It is in this way that modern technology arrogates to itself the right of interpreting the world and making the world an instrumental resource for technological uses. Thus, while nature for a scientist is “an object” to be studied and investigated with mathematical accuracy, a technologist considers nature as nothing but a huge source of energy to be extracted and exploited. We do not need to go far to understand what gave rise to a technological culture manifested in the massive industrialization of the modern era.

Heidegger (1977) recognises that there are two ways of defining technology: the instrumental and anthropological definitions of technology. An instrumental definition of technology sees technology as a means to an end, while the anthropological sees technology as a human activity; the two definitions get fused into one for the full understanding of the meaning of technology (pp. 4-5). When man manufactures equipment, tools, and machines, he has a purpose for them—that they may serve man’s needs and ends. This instrumental definition of technology is very correct even for modern technology which in its conception, is too a means to an end. Because technology is conceived by man as an instrument, there is even a greater need to master it as there is an increasing possibility of technology threatening “to slip from human control” (p. 5). But this correct instrumental conception of technology does not tell or show us the essence of technology. The essence of modern technology lies in the ‘enframing’ which is “Gestell” in Deutsch. Enframing is “the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 23). Heidegger argues that modern technology “enframes” the world, that is, it reduces everything—nature, people, culture—to mere resources or “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) to be ordered, exploited, extracted, optimized and controlled. Though this threatens to obscure more authentic ways of being, the anthropological follows from the tradition of western metaphysics which regards “Being” in terms of man and his doings (Loscerbo, 1981, p. 141).

## **AFRICAN VALUES AND THE DANGERS OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY**

Africa is still a developing continent where poverty and backwardness abound. To help in alleviating these negative factors, technology must continue to be advanced; albeit with its concomitant effects on African traditional values and ways of life. The values are mostly relational, communal, and spiritual in their nature. The widely accepted concept like “Ubuntu” (I am because we are), showcases the truest nature of African value of communion, togetherness and connectedness between human beings and nature. Others like reverence for nature, respect for ancestors as the founders and upholders of family lineage, and oral transmission of native wisdom in the form of basic and cultural education of the African child, sharply contrast with the reductionist and “exploitative” ethos of modern technology. African values emphasize and uphold interdependence, harmony and a sacred view of human and natural existence. Let us be more precise by looking at some of the effects on cherished African values.

### **i. Nature and the Damaged Relation with Humans**

One of the most cherished African traditional values is nature which here encompasses land, air and water. Traditional African cosmologies view nature as the abode of both spiritual and material forces all living together in relational harmony advantageous to both. In some African villages, the land is considered as the custodian of morality, an unseen but present enforcer of the rules and ethics of the land. Evil people do not survive far too long with their evil in the land. One could invoke the potency of the land to protect the righteous or go against the unrighteous. However, with the advent of modern technology, and its rapacious effects on this most sacred of values, things have changed drastically. It is like nature has withdrawn its forces of good over man. Modern technology has reduced this precious value to a mere ‘*Bestand*’, a “standing-reserve” for its resources, severing its sacred effect and spiritual bonds with humans. Heidegger describes one of the characterizations of modern technology as *Fördern*—translated weakly as ‘expedite’ but strongly as ‘ravishment.’ It is in this strong sense that modern technology relates with this most sacred of African values. For Heidegger (1977),

This setting-upon that challenges forth the energies of nature is an expediting (*Fördern*), and in two ways. It expedites in that it unlocks and exposes. Yet that

expediting is always itself directed from the beginning toward furthering something else, i.e., toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense. The coal that had been hauled out in some mining district had not been supplied in order that it may simply be present somewhere or other. It is stockpiled; that is, it is on call, ready to deliver the sun's warmth that is stored in it. The sun's warmth is challenged forth for heat, which in turn is ordered to deliver steam whose pressure turns the wheels that keep a factory running (p. 15).

To 'unlock' and 'expose' is to rape. In reality, it implies taking the other merely there for one's own exploitation and satisfaction which are done by the extreme force of imposition without regard to the disposition of the other. That is why '*Fördern*' is translated as 'to ravish' in order to express the special violence that leaves the exploited in a state of waste (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 79). There is, according to Rojcewicz, a double form of violence here: nature that is ravished for coal, and the coal that is ravished for its energy. Nature—the earth and coal—has taken the worst part of the bargain because she is not benefitting but human beings are. These are some of the industrial and extractive technologies that disrupt the sacred harmony existing between nature and human beings. They displace the spiritual significance of nature without communal consent and ritual for its economic reserves, its economic utility. This activity destroys the traditional reverence and spiritual significance of nature.

Worse still is the harmful effect of this 'technology' on the essence of man. Heidegger (1977) captures it succinctly:

The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal effects of the machines and devices of technology. The genuine threat has already affected human—in their essence (p. 29/28).

Technology enslaves man to itself by making him lose his freedom and the dignity of his human person. This enslavement is double fold—enslaved to modern technology as a willing partner in advancing the needs of man and enslaved to modern technology by the fact of being dominated by it. Heidegger observes that "we ever remain slavishly chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it" (p. 7/4).

## **ii. Urbanization and the Treatment of the Environment as Raw Material**

African communities thrive on communitarian style of living anchored on 'agrarian civilization'. This civilization that has survived for centuries is, according to Pope Paul VI (1971), gradually being weakened by technology-powered urbanization (no. 8). Hitherto quiet and simple hinterlands are fast losing their innocence and serenity to the advancing hands of technology through urbanization. The program of invading natural farmlands and neighbourhoods and turning them into massive city outskirts destroys the ecosystem and introduces therein some imbalance. This is an enframing where nature is not revealed as something to dwell with, but as a standing-reserve for human use (Heidegger, 1977). Urbanization brings about a massive housing problem with attendant effects on families, individuals and the society. This creates a generation of newly poor struggling to survive without adequate housing over their heads. Unemployment and underemployment are some of the effects as hitherto landowners and farmers become dispossessed of their landed properties and their major means of self-employment and self-empowerment.

## **iii. Ubuntu and Individualism**

The African is naturally communitarian because he is family oriented. That explains the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*: “I am because we are.” This is opposed to the Cartesian /European emphasis on subjectivity and consciousness—*Cogito, ergo sum*: I think therefore I am, which inherently encourages individualism and the accompanying selfishness. The rise of digital technologies has severed the African propensity towards community and enslaved the African to itself by the fact of being dominated by the technology that is meant to serve him. Individuals are now isolated in ever growing virtual networks that lack authentic presence. Heidegger’s notion of ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*) mirrors African communalism, which unfortunately is a victim of the imposition of technology. By introducing what Heidegger calls ‘ontological shift,’ technology has reduced humans into “resources within a digital system” and no longer seen as “beings-in-relation.” Man is no longer in relation with fellow man but in servitude to technology.

The same impositional attitude of modern technology imposes itself upon man in the sense of making itself indispensable in the affairs of man to the extent that man becomes subservient to it. Man finds himself a dominated species by modern technology. Students in the schools can no longer do some simple mental additions without taking recourse to their calculators. Drivers can no longer navigate the streets of a city by ordinary reading of maps without depending on the immaterial voice direction of a GPS machine. Man could be claiming to be ‘master of the earth’ and yet slave to it. This condition can be avoided only when man recognises that the way to freedom begins by seeing the correct things; the condition of one’s existence. The other is by man distancing himself from the impositional attitude of modern technology and adopting that attitude of *poiēsis* – a more authentic form of revealing.

#### iv. African Morality and Technological Enframing

The African morality is inherently communal, relational, and duty based. It is not encoded in abstract principles or ideas but is manifest in daily practices, rituals, and relational obligations to the community, family, and ancestors. It anchored in values like respect, reciprocity, responsibility and social harmony. The biggest threat today to this close-knit and relational form of moral ethics is the modern technology in the particularities of the internet and the social media.

Heidegger uses the term ‘enframing’ to express the technological mindset or worldview which flattens everything including humans to ‘utility’ or ‘resources’ to be exploited and controlled and used. In social media spaces, the African morality is flattened, disregarded and subjected to technological convenience. The younger generation, by way of enframing, disconnect from rural elders and ancestral practices which serve no instrumental role. The sacred precincts of sexual ethics have been invaded and the cloud of ‘taboo’ which preserved the sacred boundaries of sexual activity, are thrown overboard. The reductionist mentality of modern technology has seen the procreative act flattened to a recreational activity leading to rise in transactional sex and the concomitant effects. Man has once more become an object of domination by technology and is thus in chains. This “is a threat deriving from the essence of technology, from the theory of ourselves as unbridled imposers and of nature as there to be imposed on” (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 12).

#### v. African Thought Process and Data Processing

The African way of thinking and passing down knowledge is quite different from the European technology driven method. In Africa, elders are seen as custodians of sacred, traditional wisdom and knowledge. These are passed down mainly orally and through folktales, proverbs, living encounters with the custodians and in some cases, through traditional rituals. All these African traditional epistemologies face the risk of disappearing under the influence of modern technology. Heidegger

is worried that the concern of modern technologies with concealing rather than revealing the fullness of being or reality and other viable ways of being, will lead to the disappearance of African epistemologies which become concealed in technological discourses.

Modern technology prioritizes data processing, which is true to its essence as enframing, standing-reserve to be exploited for its utility. Knowledge forms that are contextual, symbolic, or orally transmitted are less preferred to the systems that make use of digitized, standardized and quantified data. (Namhila & Niskala, 2013). In cases where some valuable data for example, health, consumer, or environmental data are collected from Africa by big European corporations, they suffer some form of “data colonialism” at the hands of these firms. These local data are appropriated and subjected to ‘digital enframing’ where their value depends on their utility and not their cultural or spiritual significance (Coudry & Mejias, 2019). Hence, traditional custodians of knowledge—the elders and ancestors, become sidelined and concealed in data processing-base of modern technology. Apps, platforms, and sensitive smart digital capturing systems reconfigure our lives and our most sensitive information into data and pass them over to capitalist enterprises that make profits out of them by selling them to us. Have we not entered a new era of data-accumulation race where we have become victims of pervasive form of “datafication?”

## THE POSSIBILITY OF RECLAIMING AFRICAN VALUES WITH TECHNOLOGY

Heidegger’s critique of technology does not mean he rejected technology outrightly. What it does is to draw what Okoro (2016) describes as two gloomy pictures of the technological age: first, technology destroys itself and perhaps mankind with it; second, an accidental opening to being is discovered (or revealed) and then taken (p. 397). By and large, we think that Heidegger is calling for a more thoughtful relationship with technology. The solution is a return to ancient technology, or more precisely, to the essence of ancient technology; the pious, respectful outlook, the non-chauvinistic theory which is precisely the essence of ancient technology. In that theory, human freedom does not amount to imposition but to abetting nurturing actively playing the role of Da-sein. Ancient technology is the theory of abetting causality, and it is that theory, rather than the practice of handcraft, that Heidegger sees as possessing saving power (Rojcewicz, 2006, pp. 12-13). There are some methods proposed by Heidegger which are considered valuable and friendlier to African way of relating to and being in the world. These include:

### i. Rediscovery of *Technē* as *Poiēsis*

Heidegger emphasizes a return to and appreciation of the Greek term *technē*, which refers to “artistic or craft-based creation.” This *technē* involves a gradual form of unconcealing or revealing that is unharmed to nature; it collaborates with nature to reveal what is hidden in its reserves. *Technē* is totally opposed to what modern technology has become.

‘Poiēsis’, as conceived by Heidegger, refers to “a natural or artistic unfolding” which contrasts with “challenging-forth” (*Herausfordern*)—the unreasonable demand on nature to supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 14).

### ii. *Gelassenheit* (Releasement or Letting-Be) of Nature as it is

What Heidegger does in his use of particular words, is a “conceptual critique of the epistemological and ontological presuppositions underlying technology” (Keiling, 2019, p 96). He borrowed this word from Meister Eckhart (Moore 2016) who used it to describe “a disposition of renouncing one’s will in order to let happen what God decided.” The German word is from the verb “*lassen*” meaning “to let.” ‘*Gelassenheit*’—meaning “releasement”—“defines a form of life marked by an intellectual

independence from technology” (Keiling, 2019, p. 96). Heidegger’s adoption of this word is in the sense that man should take non-coercive stance that allows space for reality, for mystery and for otherness. It is an attitude that is against the impositional will of technology on the world. It is an approach that listens, that thinks meditatively rather than dominating.

### iii. Respecting and Preserving the Natural Harmony in the Fourfold

For Africans, the symbiosis between the traditional values of land, air, water are such that they are considered sacred because they are thought to be the meeting spaces between the living and the spirits. These values are thus respected, reserved and somehow revered. Heidegger shares this African cosmology and rejects the attitude which considers the natural elements and values for their utility and functionality. In his essay, *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (Building Dwelling Thinking), Heidegger speaks of the Fourfold (Earth, Sky, Mortals, Divinities), which by a primal oneness belong together in one (Heidegger, 1971, p.149). The Earth includes nature and the material; Sky includes the cosmic order, weather, time; Mortals are humans who actualize the capacity to live and to die; Divinities represent the mysterious, the sacred. This Fourfold exists in harmony. Any technology that is authentic should strive to preserve and respect this harmony, not exploit it for profit.

### iv. Dwelling the World with Care

In the same essay as above—*Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*—Heidegger also develops the concept of ‘dwelling’. The word *bauen* “means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 147). It is a way of being in the world that is anchored in the care and preservation given to the world. Dwelling is more than just living in a house. It is about inhabiting the world with respect and care. According to Heidegger, “the fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range.” (Heidegger, 1971, p, 149) Heidegger tries providing alternative to the modern technology with its extractive, controlling and optimizing character. The alternative resonates with Africa and her indigenous way of living in harmony with the land, the community and the ancestors.

## CONCLUSION

Technology is good but when it is abused and left to abuse man and the natural order, it becomes an agent for the destruction of both man and nature. Heidegger criticizes modern technology for its character of *enframing*, that is, its tendency to reduce all things—man and nature alike—to mere resources (standing-reserve). The effects of this modern technology are seen in the destruction of the cosmic balance between the African and her values—the spirituality, community and reverence for nature. Heidegger thinks that technology can be made to be respectful, and protective of nature, rather than undermining it. The challenge is to develop technology that can serve the African in her sacred values, in respect of her mystery and in the care for her life.

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