

SYMPATHY FOR THE SCIENTIST:
RE-CALIBRATING A HEIDEGGERIAN CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS

by Jonathan Morgan

11 April 2017

Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts

jmorgan@idsva.edu

Word Count: 3,155

This paper attempts to develop an ethico-aesthetic framework for enriching one's life and ethical outlook. Drawing primarily from Nietzsche, Foucault, and Heidegger, an argument is made that Heidegger's understanding of this issue was mistaken. The ontological crisis of modernity is not the overt influence of mathematics as a worldview over poetics and more traditionally aesthetic approaches. It is the rampant mis- and over-application of abstraction within one's view of the world while denying the material realities of life as we live it. This runaway abstractive worldview leads to the misapplication of mathematics and other sciences which in turn facilitate the dehumanization of life and those within it. When we try to solve the real problems of our material human lives through overly abstractive means, then we arrive at inauthentic arguments that fuel popular disdain for philosophy as irrelevant and nothing more than the purview of the elite. The goal is a recalibration of the argument toward addressing the denial of materiality within Modernism.

If something sacred can be made unsacred, then perhaps it should not be sacred in the first place. A rather worn-out critique of the sciences is that they do just that. They demystify the world and destroy humanity's notions of what is sacred, what is spiritual, and what is true. Often this critique comes from religious communities whose doctrines are challenged by scientific discoveries, most notably those of astronomy regarding the age of the universe and its possible origins. However, there is another source of tension to be found within philosophy that scientists have long been aware of. It is the critique of a mathematical view of the universe and what is perceived as the resulting limitations and distortions of Being that such a view produces. Metaphysics, which was once considered a proper science, is similarly attacked for applying mathematical logic to the study of Being and obfuscating essential qualitative truths within a fog of quantified results. For an inquiry into ethico-aesthetics, this may seem to be a strange starting point, but the goal is to re-calibrate this critique.

The issue is not mathematization itself. The issue is the inappropriate application of mathematics and logic toward ends that cannot be measured as such. If I am to deliver my vision of what an ethico-aesthetic critique should be and how it is to function in my life, then it will be through embracing an aesthetic appreciation for the wonders of mathematics geared towards engendering the ethical treatment of the Other as part of the same material reality I inhabit. It is not that mensuration is a negative praxis to apply to one's life. It is that mathematics is envisioned as an immaterial field of knowledge instead of the expression of real material relationships between entities. This kind of inaccurate abstraction of the material world has led to flawed ethical arguments and missed opportunities for aesthetic interpretations. One may think

that the conflict at hand is between logic/math and poetics, but this is only one expression of the deeper fight between material and ideal realities.

Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* focuses on revealing what he calls the essence of modern technology: *gestell*. *Gestell*, or enframing, and technology are not the same thing. The Heideggerian understanding of technology is taken from the Greek *techne*, which is a type of *poiesis*, or revealing of truth, that involves the use of tools and skills associated with them (Heidegger 318-9). To understand what is meant by *modern* technology in contrast—which is where *gestell* enters—Heidegger points out that pre-modern technologies were more passive by nature.

The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such. But does this not hold for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it (320).

His argument connects this challenging relationship with nature to a collective delusion that the world exists only to serve of resources to satisfy the desires of humanity (332). *Gestell* is a manipulative force that reduces people and materials into resources to be used/exploited and limits their perceived potential as anything else. Heidegger uses the term "standing-reserve" to describe the *gestell* view of people and things, which is an effective summation of this effect (322). *Gestell* is the hyper-capitalist approach to interacting with the world and Heidegger calls it out as dangerous since it can come to dominate one's entire worldview. To measure all of existence with the sole intention of exploiting its resources reshapes one's understanding of life and makes such behavior seem totally natural (339). It is similar to a disease that infects the brain in order to hide that one has the disease in the first place—like a psychological parasitic virus.

Heidegger points out that along with technology in a broad sense “art was simply called *techne*” in ancient Greece before the dawn of aesthetics (ibid). About the same time that Kant began his work in aesthetics, others began to discuss art on aesthetic and philosophical terms. Before this, none of the ‘art practices’ we envision today were seen as anything distinct from handicraft traditions. The reason the craft traditions are more readily seen as ‘technological’ is because of the lack of aesthetic attention paid to them in contrast to what we consider art in the Western world. Craft’s avoidance of this sort of scrutiny allowed it to have a more organic and material relationship with technology simply as one facet of a larger problem-solving praxis. The *poiesis* that took place was equally rooted in the material world as a sort of lived or embodied knowledge of one’s connection to the world around them.

That is why Heidegger uses the word ‘modern’ when talking about *gestell* and technology. He recognizes a shift from archaic to modern capitalist-adjacent technological behaviors that allow *gestell* to rise up at a rate never before experienced. Even though it has always been a part of the human psyche, the *gestell* virus—to continue the earlier metaphor—is now able to spread and strengthen faster than ever. To illustrate, consider that other diseases like the recent Ebola outbreak became epidemic crises mainly due to air/sea travel and urban population shifts that provided fast-tracks for their spread. Bacterial infections like Staph have become more deadly not due to their nature, but as the result of our simultaneous tendencies to reduce healthy exposure to bacteria as children and the widespread overuse of antibiotics. We have created conditions for these already existent dangers to grow in power and threat. I argue that modern technology is not the source of *gestell*. It is not even the first way that this pattern of

behavior has entered into the history of our species. It is just the most violent and accelerated vector for its growth.

Peter Sloterdijk's concept of atmo-terrorism is an example of how technology can be distorted and perverted when combined with an abstracted view of human beings. He recounts how in the early twentieth century the neutral tools of pest control were twisted into the means of exterminating people as pests. Chemicals like hydrogen cyanide and the infamous Zyklon A were developed with the sole intention of helping people (Sloterdijk 30-4). Though these poisonous gasses are objectively harmful substances to most living creatures, with regard to human society they were intended to make life healthier and safer by limiting insect infestation and the damage of such situations. The tragic turn was when Nazi officials began branding Jewish and other marginal groups as 'pests' and 'vermin' instead of human beings. Sloterdijk points out that these descriptors, "having been a constitutive element of the Hitler-forged Nazi party rhetoric since the early twenties, after 1933 [...] became a sort of official rule of language for a subjugated German public" (43). The genocide against entire populations within Nazi Germany was then justified as an act of protection and sanitation. The mathematization of this process via body counts, fine-tuning facilities of mass execution, and the implementation of Zyklon B as a more effective 'pest-control' measure were only possible after the victims of this genocide were abstracted into faceless elements within a larger grouping. Both the people and the technologies were 'enframed,' or bound into a limited definition of what each could be, in order to feed a desire for exploitation and domination. Nuclear power is another example of this process. While nuclear warfare is a horrid and irredeemable strategy, the tool of nuclear fission is also capable of great good as seen in nuclear power plants, medical radiography, and countless

scientific and industrial uses that demonstrably improve human life. The tool one uses is not the source of the evil we recognize in such perversions of technology and science. The source is the confluence of conditions that enframe those tools toward a specific and dehumanized end. To ignore this is an unethical treatment of the tool being assessed which enframes its objecthood just as a person can have done to their personhood.

Michel Foucault's analysis of torture through newly developed punishments and non-invasive environmental punishment is another example of how the application of technology is secondary to the societal conditions it is enacted within. When “the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared,” a process began within Western justice systems that sought to disembody the act of doling out punishment (Foucault 8). The soul or the mind of the one being punished became the actual target of this justice system as the spectacle of public punishment was deemphasized (16). Even when execution were public during this transition, it was carried out in a detached manner with little to no human contact with the condemned.

The guillotine takes life almost without touching the body, just as the prison deprives of liberty or a fine reduces wealth. It is intended to apply the law not so much to a real body capable of feeling pain as to a juridical subject, the possessor, among other rights, of the right to exist. It had to have the abstraction of the law itself (13).

This abstraction has had a terrifying ripple effect that we still feel today in how prisons are so easily seen not as places to help real people correct ill-begotten behaviors and delusions, but as places to quarantine dangerous criminal ‘elements’ that endanger those whose personhood we agree to recognize. This was the very same approach the Nazis took towards Jewish peoples that Sloterdijk reminds us of. When Foucault points out a 1958 ruling that resulted in judgements being predicated on a subjects susceptibility to punishment, the curability of their criminal

condition, and the danger they pose to society, one could argue it as *gestell* or rampant mensuration at the core of a dehumanizing practice (21). Yet, it is not the measuring of the person that is to blame here. That sort of quantification of a person is only possible if one accepts an abstracted view of the subject as something other than a thinking breathing being made of flesh and bone and therefore open to all the flaws and misdirections of a material body. To imagine the soul or mind of the criminal as separate from their body allows one to ignore the material conditions of their life and the neurobiological impacts of those conditions. It allows one to ignore systemic issues of real social groups that fall victim to exploitation and marginalization via material means and the way that exploitation manifests as social unrest and decay.

When Hannah Arendt states that “while a temptation where one’s life is at stake may be a legal excuse for a crime, it certainly is not a moral justification,” she enacts the very same abstractive methodology at work in the dehumanizing penal system and a *gestell*-based worldview (Arendt 18). To understand her stance in *Responsibility and Judgement*, it is important to remember Arendt’s lived experience as a Jewish woman carrying out a philosophical project informed by the atrocities and subsequent trials of Nazi war criminals. The statement above on temptation and moral justification is made from a place seeking to prevent any sort of legal trickery that could possibly excuse the likes of Eichmann, other Nazis, and their sympathizers. Arendt makes her argument rather effectively by attacking the logical fallacies of collective/cultural guilt and the flawed notion that blaming an individual as personally responsible for acts of great magnitude is harmful to the notion of free agency (20-1, 28-9).

At times, it would seem that this project attempts to bring material reality into a deep ethical discourse by not allowing individuals to become abstracted into anthropological units that express some ideal aspect of an entire culture. However, her failure to sympathize with the situation of African-American families in Little Rock during the desegregation of US public schools reveals that her ethical system bears the same mark of immateriality as those previously mentioned. The notion of free agency is treated as an absolute and almost sacred human feature and fuels her argument that forced desegregation is harmful to all those involved (194-5).

To force parents to send their children to an integrated school against their will means to deprive them of rights which clearly belong to them in all free societies—the private right over their children and the social right to free association (212).

Such a stance places individual needs, desires, and assumed rights above those of the collective. Arendt is correct in that desegregation overrode the free agency of many in the American South who would have preferred to maintain the status quo of racial isolation. However, her sanctification of free agency results in her ethical system being unable to tolerate any challenge to said freedom no matter the social benefit to be gained. The reality of desegregation was a systemic pattern of racial oppression of African-Americans that deprived their schools and communities of resources, stability, government support, and police protection. The isolation of these communities from White society—which wielded this oppressive power—bred ignorance of this situation and perpetuated falsehoods about the nature of African-American culture designed to make segregation and racial oppression seem natural and justifiable. They were enframed according to the dominant White narrative of the time. Arendt herself falls victim to some degree of this very mindset, despite her own experiences of cultural discrimination. The

sanctity of free agency creates a critical flaw in this ethical structure that allows personal liberty to overshadow the horror of racism and the real harm it inflicts upon entire social groups.

In a 1996 piece for *Skeptical Inquirer*, Carl Sagan relates a story about the physicist Robert W. Wood in which Wood is asked to respond to a toast of, “To physics and metaphysics.” Wood briefly lays out the basis of the scientific method and how a scientist in this situation “is devoted only to what the experiment teaches,” not to proving that his idea is in fact true (Sagan). Towards the end of his response, Wood explains the key difference between metaphysics and physics.

The difference between physics and metaphysics, Wood concluded as he raised his glass high, is not that the practitioners of one are smarter than the practitioners of the other. The difference is that the metaphysicist has no laboratory (ibid).

Science, physics, mathematics, logic, whatever specific term we use for this praxis is rather irrelevant to the current argument. All of them are distinct from metaphysics in that they are materially-bound in their reasoning. There are, of course, areas of flawed practice within each and theories that may yet be unraveled as erroneous or based on false pretenses. That should not, however, be used as a foil to blame a perceived dehumanization of contemporary life on the entirety of logical and scientific practice.

In the same article, Sagan briefly references Nietzsche’s hostility towards science due to its ability to dethrone humanity from a place of superiority.

Has not man’s self-deprecation, his *will* to self-deprecation, been untoppably on the increase since Copernicus? Gone, alas, is his faith in his dignity, uniqueness, irreplaceableness in the rank of beings - he has become *animal*, literally, unqualifiedly and unreservedly an animal, man who in his earlier faiths was almost God (Nietzsche 115).

This is similar to Heidegger's worry regarding "the current emptiness of the word 'being,' the disappearance of its original strength of calling and presentness" (qtd. Smith 45). Perhaps this devaluing of existential Being is traceable back to a scientific and mathematized view of the world. Maybe such views are indeed to blame for the desanctification of Being. Is this truly a bad thing, though? I propose an ethico-aesthetic praxis based on Sagan's stance that "it is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring" (Sagan). The phrase 'as it really is,' refers to *material* reality. This is my breaking point with traditional metaphysics as I find no benefit in treating immaterial concepts as if they are real outside of our minds. The notion of Being, in its proper noun sense, tacitly invites us to assume it has some real and measurable property, that we can perceive it in a manner similar to our physical health. It is the way in which metaphysics presents itself that causes the misuse of logic and mensuration. If "mathism and scientism [are] in fact the cause of worldwide dehumanization" then it is only because of their inappropriate use (Smith 38). To attack logic or mathematics misses the real problem at hand. Seeing the concepts of logic, *gestell*, technology, etc as singular monolithic things outside of material human life perpetuates the problem of false immateriality. Metaphysicians are open to criticism not because of their use of mensuration, but because of their use of it upon immaterial and incalculable concepts. If someone tries to drive a nail into wood with a screwdriver, one should not blame the nail or the tool in hand for any lack of progress. Blame rests squarely with person holding the screwdriver and their assumption that it is the best tool for their current task.

If we look to Smith's claim that "Greek consciousness had been, in the time of Parmenides, a living dialogic between Dionysian wonderment and Apollonian logic," then we

see a stark similarity to that of a scientifically-informed ethico-aesthetic praxis (42). Using logic and empirical data as a backdrop, we should endeavour toward a form of ethics that is supported by an aesthetic appreciation of the complexity and nuance to be found in a materially-bound view of existence. To reduce our entire species to that of animals capable of logic, agency, etc, is not something to fear as Nietzsche would have us believe. It makes human capacity all the more precious and wonderful as the beautiful coalescence of random events that have generated the very ability to recognize that pattern of causality. Any ethical stance must take this into account in order to recognize how complicated and interconnected life is; how there are always systemic issues at work that are informed by material factors and other systemic processes. We cannot generalize such complexity and have it be reflective of reality. I see Heidegger's caution about *gestell* carrying a deeper warning. When we try to solve the real problems of our material human lives—the ethics of bodies, minds, ideas, technologies, cultures, and more—through means that do not follow the same basic rules and limitations of those lives, then we arrive at inauthentic arguments that fuel popular disdain for philosophy as irrelevant to real life and nothing more than the purview of the elite. An ethico-aesthetic praxis as laid out here actively resists such inauthenticity and re-calibrates the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics away from mathism and scientism towards reconciling the discipline with our own blatant materiality.

Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. *Responsibility and Judgement*. Edited by Jerome Kohn, Schocken Books, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." *Basic Writings: Ten Key Essays, plus the Introduction to Being and Time*. Edited by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins, 1993. 307-341.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Translated by Carol Diethe, 2007.
- Sagan, Carl. "Does Truth Matter? Science, Pseudoscience, and Civilization." *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 20, no. 2, March/April 1997.
- Smith, George. "Heidegger's Calling." *The Artist Philosopher and New Philosophy*. Routledge, Forthcoming.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Terror from the Air*. Translated by Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran, Semiotext, 2009.