

Framing Heidegger: Technology and the Notebooks¹

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The question is one of framing, en-framing, positioning, placement, and coercion of life and discussion. It is raised at the intersection of human freedom and technology, of justice and war, and of thought and action. It spills over from the halls of academic philosophy and into the mainstream of public concern and news media headlines. The question is: *Is Heidegger's philosophy connected to his support for the Nazi regime? Is he a Nazi philosopher? Is his philosophy fascist?*

With the release of Heidegger's notebooks from the 30's and 40's, this is the question that everyone expects to be answered. But the question, innocent as it sounds, already forges a path toward certain possibilities of answering. We do not ask this question disinterestedly but with focused interest in the answer, because we suspect, even fear, that our own projects depend on it. What I am talking about here is the attempt to pathologize the philosopher for fear of infection—something I discuss in “Philosophy and Ethical Life.” Such a desire to coax the texts, the notebooks, and the life into offering up an answer, and not just any answer but *our answer*, is a kind of framing of the conversation, and of all the people involved, beginning with the very formulation of the question. This should be obvious to everyone, especially philosophers!

Surely if we are going to frame a person for their philosophy, or rather, frame a philosophy for the person, the minimal requirements of justice prescribe that we give the philosophy under suspicion a chance to respond to the charges. The objection will be that Heidegger was already given a chance to respond and he remained silent, and this silence now convicts him. Let me clarify that we are not here concerned with a defense of Heidegger any more than his conviction. The court has already ruled, and we are here in the aftermath, looking for the best way to move forward. It is now to the philosophy and the texts which are being implicated in the crimes, we ask: *what of this framing?* As we know, Heidegger talks often about framing, most explicitly in the 1953 lecture *The Question Concerning Technology*. The word is *Gestell*, and we find it, in the intersection of forces mentioned above, translated as “enframing,” which suggests the meaning of ordinary objects like frames and bookshelves but also something more abstract like orientation and positioning. Indeed, as the essence of modern technology, Heidegger wants to bring to mind both the threat of the phenomenon of enframing and at the same time its familiarity as something essential.

¹ Originally appeared at <http://notphilosophy.com/framing-heidegger-technology-and-the-notebooks/>, March 9, 2014.

The enframing that distinguishes technology is "the challenging claim that gathers man with a view to ordering the self-revealing as standing-reserve."² In the following, I want to unpack this definition of enframing and see what it might say to our leading question and whether this is related to the framing of our discussion of Heidegger's notebooks. So in what way does technology challenge the human person and what is the ordering to standing-reserve? Says Heidegger, "the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such." The challenge is the demand imposed upon nature to be converted and reduced to its potential as material ready for market, and this demand is everywhere felt in all aspects of life: "even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which *sets upon* nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be unleashed either for destructive or for peaceful purposes." This demand, which later is used for both life-giving and life-taking, enframes nature for an immediate "expediting" that "is always itself directed from the beginning toward furthering something else, i.e., toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense."³

So we see here that "enframing" as the challenge of technology makes a demand upon nature to gather itself up and be converted into a form most easily put into service, first, by the "setting-in-order" and putting in place of everything within the whole order, and second, by the industrial fabrication process. This gathering up of nature toward technological ends is the treatment of nature as standing-reserve, as live-stock. "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]."⁴ One might at this point start to see a theme emerging around all the movements of this phenomenon of *Gestell* that Heidegger wants to describe as essential to technology. Enframing, challenging, demanding, ordering—what do these bring to mind? For one, a sense of control over nature and life. But Heidegger does not want us to think only of the control of technology as instrument in the mastery of material. Such instrumental control is derived from a more basic enframing as a way of being in and relating to the world, first explicitly demonstrated in the scientific attitude:

Modern science's way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces. Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. The reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it orders its

2 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (HarperCollins: 1993), p. 324.

3 Ibid., 320-321.

4 Ibid., 322.

experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.⁵

The implication is that the essence of technology is to be found in something previous to the appearance of modern technology. It is found, for Heidegger, in this phenomenon of enframing (*Gestell*) which constitutes a fundamental mode of human being toward the world, wherein nature exists to be at the disposal of the ordering and processing toward a maximized yield—with no remainder, that is, a total conversion of life into standing-reserve. In the total demand of enframing, there is no subtlety: all possibilities are framed into a singular outlook. It may be clear now that the thematic at work in this enframing, what implicitly runs through Heidegger's discussion of technology, joining all these aspects together, is *force*. And to not leave any doubt, it is a force *against* life yet arising from within life itself; it is both our doing and our un-doing.

It is important to listen a bit to what Heidegger says about framing because it is this that is at stake: the framing of his thought and thus the framing of enframing. We're overdue for an example to clarify the relation between this enframing and the original question at stake in the current discussion. In "Release of Heidegger's 'Black Notebooks' Reignites Debate Over Nazi Ideology,"⁶ Paul Hockenos pits critics of Heidegger against his, mostly French, "loyalists" concerning racist comments in his wartime notebooks. This is a common framing of the discussion, by the way: that the whole of Heidegger's philosophy is infected by fascism is obvious to all except the French, and any attempt to add subtlety to our interpretation of the Heideggerian texts can be dismissed by appeal to this national-ethnic category.⁷ That topic will have to be taken up at a later time or by someone else. Here I want to draw our attention to another type of framing in this article. After mentioning the "French" objection to Trawny's (the editor of the notebooks) statements about the connection between Nazi racism and Heidegger's philosophy, Hockenos writes:

To be sure, Heidegger's critics had already assembled a significant trove of evidence against him. For one, Heidegger was elected rector of the University of Freiburg in early 1933, just a few months after Adolf Hitler came to power. Heidegger joined the Nazi party shortly after that and remained a member until the end of the war, even though he stepped down from the rectorship in early 1934. As late as 1949, he talked about the "fabrication of corpses in gas chambers and death camps."

This paragraph claims to be discussing "a significant trove of evidence against Heidegger," which then leads to the next section of the article that intends to show Heideggerian concepts that overlap with fascism. What immediately grabs our attention in this paragraph is naturally the report that Heidegger

5 Ibid., 326.

6 <http://chronicle.com/article/Release-of-Heidegger-s/144897/>. February 24, 2014.

7 See <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/derbyshire/heidegger-in-france-nazism-and-philosophy/> and <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/derbyshire/heidegger-and-nazism-redux-error-and-apology/>.

talked about *the fabrication of corpses in gas chambers and death camps*. A shocking phrase by itself, even without its original surrounding sentence. The indifferent force of the *fabrication* imposed on what we know to be millions of human beings, like a machine merely processing material for market, *forces* an emotional response. We want to know: what about this fabrication? Did Heidegger defend it? Did he apologize for it? This phrase is an egregious and unashamed journalistic cliffhanger, for Hockenos offers no further comment on nor context for, not even a citation to the source of, this "fabrication of corpses" that the reader feels has the potential to reveal so much about Heidegger and about the question at stake.

If anything, the reader is left to infer that, situated as it is in the article between "a significant trove of evidence against him" and the section headlined *Overlap With Fascism*, Heidegger must have employed this phrase with the same indifferent, unapologetic force that fabricated the corpses. To frame the discussion of Heidegger's texts in this way, by denying the reader context at just the moment when they most need the text of the quotation, does not encourage a healthy discussion. As it happens, perhaps for a reason, the quote in question comes from the original 1949 version of the same lecture on the enframing nature of technology that we looked at above. In the interest of adding con-text to this debate (no, I'm not French), that is, in the interest of understanding the texts that are being quoted, and as a resource for the journalists that will no doubt refer to this shocking phrase, I offer an extended quote from this earlier lecture on technology and framing. After discussing the same challenging, positioning and ordering of nature and human being that we have seen defines enframing, Heidegger says:

What does "to place, position, set" [*stellen*] mean? Let us first consider it from production. The carpenter produces a table, but also a coffin. What is produced, set here, is not tantamount to the merely finished. What is set here stands in the purview of what concernfully approaches us. It is set here in a nearness. The carpenter in the village does not complete a box for a corpse. The coffin is from the outset placed in a privileged spot of the farmhouse where the dead peasant still lingers. There, a coffin is still called a "death-tree" [*Totenbaum*]. The death of the deceased flourishes in it. This flourishing determines the house and farmstead, the ones who dwell there, their kin, and the neighborhood.

Everything is otherwise in the motorized burial industry of the big city. Here no death-trees are produced.

A peasant positions his ox to drag fallen tree trunks out of the forest onto the path. He does not place the ox here just so that it would stand somewhere. He positions what is placed here in such a manner that it is directed toward application.

Men and women must place themselves in a work service. They are ordered. They are met by a positioning that places them, i.e., commandeers them. One places the other. He retains him. He positions him. He requires information and an accounting from him. He challenges

him forth. Let us now enter into the meaning of this word "to position, place, set" so as to experience what comes to pass in that requisitioning through which an inventory arises [der *Bestand steht*] and is thus a standing reserve.

To place, position, set means here: to challenge forth, to demand, to compel toward self-positioning. This positioning occurs as a conscription [die *Gestellung*]. The demand for conscription is directed at the human. But within the whole of what presences, the human is not the only presence approached by conscription.

A tract of land is imposed upon, namely for the coal and ore that subsists in it. The subsistence of stone is presumably already conceived within the horizon of such a positioning and even only conceivable in terms of this. The subsisting stone that, as such, is already evaluated for a self-positioning is challenged forth and subsequently expedited along. The earth's soil is drawn into such a placing and is attacked by it. It is ordered, forced into conscription. This is how we understand the word "ordering" [*bestellen*] here and in what follows.

Through such requisitioning [*Bestellen*] the land becomes a coal reserve, the soil an ore depository. This requisitioning is already of a different sort from that whereby the peasant had previously tended his field. Peasant activity does not challenge the farmland; rather it leaves the crops to the discretion of the growing forces; it protects them in their thriving. In the meantime, however, even the tending of the fields [die *Feldbestellung*] has gone over to the same requisitioning [*Be-Stellen*] that imposes upon the air for nitrogen, the soil for coal and ore, the ore for uranium, the uranium for atomic energy, and the latter for orderable destruction. Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs.⁸

Requisitioning and conscription, positioning and imposition, ordering and conscription, all related to the *Gestell* (enframing from the 1953 lecture) and to the activity *stellen* (the putting and placing) which gives meaning to all these derived words. In the final paragraph above, this *Gestell* appears as a force both near and against life. To what end does this force aim? Heidegger defines "force" as "that which imposes upon something so that something else follows from it in an assessable manner."⁹ The aim of the ordering force is nothing in particular, but it orders for the sake of total order itself. Picking up further along in the lecture:

Again we ask: where does the chain of such requisitioning finally run out to? It runs out to nothing; for requisitioning produces nothing that could have, or would be allowed to have, a presence for itself outside of such positioning. What is ordered is always already and

8 Heidegger, "Positionality," in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking* (Indiana University Press: 2012), 26-27. I recommend anyone with interest in this discussion to read this lecture and make up their own mind.

9 Ibid., 39.

always only imposed upon to place another in the succession as its consequence. . . The Rhine river, for example, is there only as something ordered in the requisitioning just mentioned. The hydroelectric plant is not built in the Rhine river, but rather the river is built into the power plant and is what it is there due to the power plant's essence. In order to somewhat gauge the monstrosity that reigns here, let us attend only for a moment to the opposition expressed in the two names: The Rhine, built into the power plant—"The Rhine," as said in the artwork of Hölderlin's eponymous hymn.¹⁰

Heidegger is talking, then, about an all-encompassing ordering that converts the very essence of something—the land, the river, the being—into positioning in the chain of technological process. Such process "has wrestled away all that presences and placed it into complete orderability, whether what presences in the particular case is especially positioned or not. This violence of requisitioning, outstripping everything, drags the particular acts of requisitioning only further along behind itself."¹¹ It is a self-replicating process of conversion of everything into orderability, and it extends to all forms of life, especially to humans as both masters and victims of the requisitioning forces:

The human is thereby an employee of requisitioning. Humans are thus, individually and in masses, assigned into this. The human is now the one ordered in, by, and for the requisitioning. . . Requisitioning not only assaults the materials and forces of nature with a conscripting. Requisitioning assaults at the same time the destiny of the human. The essence of the human is imposed upon to collaborate in carrying out the requisitioning in a human manner. Requisitioning comes upon nature and history, all that is, and in every way that whatever presences is. What presences is imposed upon as such for orderability and thus represented in advance as something steady, whose standing essences from requisitioning.¹²

The requisitioning (*Bestellen*) that assaults and does violence to life, and of which the "production of corpses" is an example, is what the enframing (*Gestell*) essence of modern technology promotes. Here in this 1949 lecture, the word is "positionality," a translation of the same *Gestell* that is translated as enframing in the 1953 text. "Positionality essences as the plundering drive that orders the constant orderability of the complete standing reserve. What we thereby think as *positionality* is the essence of technology." The language of coercion and force now transitions into that of drive and machine, but, Heidegger emphasizes, the common conception of modern technology as constituted by machines should be reversed.¹³ It is rather the essence of technology as the enframing of the whole of nature as stock standing by for requisition that drives the world toward the total orderability of *machination*. And elsewhere Heidegger describes *machination* as a mode of being itself that distorts the essence of being

10 Ibid., 27.

11 Ibid., 28.

12 Ibid., 29-30.

13 Ibid., 31-32.

by reducing all possibility to the potential for making.¹⁴ In summary, having traced technology to its essence as enframing, which appears as both a demand arising from and a threat against life, technology reveals *being as machine*.

I give these extended quotations to add depth to the type of framing of philosophy that happens in reporting on things like the Heideggerian notebooks and the relation between the philosopher's thought and life. It is always difficult to ask the question of the bottom line or final say with Heidegger. In the same way that life in its moment of being lived offers no reassurance about the final judgment, so with the philosophical text the goal of which is to describe those experiences which later inform the prescriptions we make about how to live. I certainly do not want to force Heidegger to say something he did not. I can say one thing, though, that should be clear on most readings of these texts. If Heidegger has equated, in essence, the deaths of millions of Jews by the Nazi regime to the conversion of agriculture into a mechanized industry, to the production of the hydrogen bomb, to the imposition of forces against nature, to the ordering of human beings into a standing-reserve, and to the machination that distorts being, in short, to the enframing essence of technology that requisitions, conscripts, positions, orders and imposes—and I believe this is indeed the equation being made in the paragraph in question—then I find it difficult to argue for any other conclusion than the following. Despite any allegiance he gave to the regime in 1933, despite any enduring belief in the principles of National Socialism as he saw them or wanted to see them, and despite his refusal to take responsibility in the manner of apology, the Holocaust was for Heidegger the furthest thing from a celebration of Being that one can imagine, representing a categorical lack of understanding of human freedom; and thus it is not "compatible," if we must use the word, with his "philosophy." Being totally withdrawn, absent in the sense of the greatest of that which is possible for the human in their being to be, denied. The natural and human forces of life squeezed through the technological machinery of war. The Jew was deprived of a natural, human death, and thus of life, by being forced into death by technological conversion. It is, indeed, an assault upon humanity and a violence done to the beings that were already present there with their own purposes for their lives.

If we take this "fabrication of corpses" as a reduction of human life to lower forms with which it is compared, then I believe we have not yet read the rest of the lecture and are instead already imposing upon it the biological anti-Semitism that we want to find. On the contrary, in this comparison, the land, soil, air, agriculture and hungry peoples are *raised up* to the highest value and to the greatest urgency: that of life and the possibility of life ripped away. All these things are, for the purposes of the texts at hand, examples of the "extreme danger" posed by the technology that "challenges forth into the frenziedness of ordering that blocks every view into the propriative event of revealing and so radically

14 See Heidegger on machination in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (Indiana University Press: 2012), beginning on page 99.

endangers the relation to the essence of truth."¹⁵ This blocking of the view of truth is a blocking of that which "lets man see and enter into the highest dignity of his essence," for the enframing of technology "threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the ostensibly sole way of revealing, and so thrusts man into the danger of the surrender of his free essence."¹⁶

Heidegger insists, though, that this is not a critique in the sense of a disapproval of technology in general. In recognizing the essence of technology as the enframing force that threatens freedom, a "saving power" is necessarily revealed: "the essential unfolding of technology gives man entry into something which, of himself, he can neither invent nor in any way make. For there is no such thing as a man who exists singly and solely on his own."¹⁷ What enframing gives us entry into is the understanding of our own essence through the challenge of technology, because "it is technology itself that makes the demand on us to think in another way what is usually understood by 'essence.'"¹⁸ And so, "the essence of technology is in a lofty sense ambiguous. Such ambiguity points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth." As a way in which we ourselves are, enframing is not merely an external threat as from the machines and tools that give technology its utility, but it is first a distorting of being that positions us toward our own possibility for machination. Yet in this very distortion, even because of it, the *other possibilities* that have been blocked off are made all the more clear, and in this way we come to an understanding of our essential being and our greater possibilities. Thus, the task in such a situation between extreme danger and life-giving potential is that we "watch over" the rise of technology: "catching site of the essential unfolding in technology, instead of merely gaping at the technological. So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology."¹⁹ That is, to understand technology in its essence, not merely in its individual manifestations (this computer here, that machine there), is to understand *us* and watch over our own requisitioning demand and our own enframing drive toward total orderability. The advance of technology challenges us toward a responsibility beyond standing by in observance of everything new, as mere spectators conscripted in the service of its march, and beyond the will to master being-as-machination.

Is this "watching over" the same responsibility we find, in the writings from the 20's, at the intersection of Dasein's freedom, capacity-to-be, and capacity-to-be-with? It seems like it could be:

As ecstatic self-projection on its own capacity-for-being, freedom understands itself from out of this capacity and at the same time holds this capacity before itself as responsibility. Freedom is consequently the *origin of anything like ground*. We can make this pithy by saying freedom is the metaphysical essence of transcending, existing Dasein. But freedom

15 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 338.

16 Ibid., 337.

17 Ibid., 337.

18 Ibid., 335.

19 Ibid., 337.

is qua transcendental freedom toward ground. To be free is to understand oneself from out of one's own capacity-to-be; but "oneself" and "one's own" are not understood individually or egoistically, but metaphysically. They are understood in the basic possibilities of transcending Dasein, in the capacity-to-be-with with others. . .²⁰

Such responsibility would challenge, first and foremost, those who, in the midst of the totalitarian march and the technological conversion of life into death, did not speak up, even though they saw the threat to Dasein's free capacities to be, be with, and understand. Was this mention of the "production of corpses" in 1949 an attempt to answer the challenge? Is Heidegger here fostering the saving power through the understanding of the essence of technology and the danger posed to our very being?

But what help is it to us to look into the constellation of truth? We look into the danger and see the growth of the saving power.

Through this we are not yet saved. But we are thereupon summoned to hope in the growing light of the saving power. How can this happen? Here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase. This includes holding always before our eyes the extreme danger.²¹

Holding the danger before our eyes. But—we can hear Heidegger saying in a footnote that he never wrote—not merely gaping at the danger, lest our very gazing conscript us into the total orderability of enframing that holds us back and blocks us off. We have seen how the lectures on technology might respond to our opening question and the framing of the discussion of Heidegger, and now his own texts challenge him. But the saving power is of no use when it arrives late, so our interpretation of the "production of corpses" now directs its challenge to us, first of all, because it asks us to stop marching and to question the unquestioning technological positivism that all areas of thought, work, and politics now require; and second, because it means that responsibility does not end, as Derrida says, in that European black forest where "the shadow of big trees" and "the shelter of their silence" nourished the terrible political ideology.²² The burden of this history extends to wherever the challenge of enframing, the technological conversion of life into death, and the ordering of beings into mere stock-value marches on. As such, and in an ironic twist to this story, it is Heidegger who from his texts makes a final call to not surrender to the fateful march of being toward machination and thus to not forget the Holocaust, for the same technology that converts the coal into energy to run a factory can be used to convert the animal into live-stock and the human into corpse.

Some might say that none of this matters—the enframing and how we frame Heidegger—because no one has read the notebooks yet, and the notebooks will reveal all. I disagree. The notebooks matter, and their contents cannot be excused. But to pretend that a notebook holds the key to magically unlocking

20 Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Indiana University Press: 1984), 213-214.

21 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 338.

22 See Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (University of Chicago Press: 1989), 109.

the *historical person* with a *hidden agenda* behind the *whole philosophy* in order to stamp it all "fascist" and move on, would be an egregious imposition on the texts of a desire for total orderability. Such an attempt to once and for all "solve" the system underlying Heidegger's text is to fail to keep watch over the enframing force that conscripts beings toward a totalitarian machination of what is. What is is life, and life exceeds the requisitioning force of *Gestell*, the driving march of machination, and the anchoring weight of its worst moments.