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# The Tragic Double Bind of Heidegger's *Technē*

DAVID EDWARD TABACHNICK

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## I.

Despite the fact that “the tragic” is an important theme in Heidegger, there are few specific discussions of tragedy in his work. While he often refers to tragic poets and playwrights, he nowhere explicitly analyzes the concept of the tragic or provides a theory of tragedy (Gelvin 555). Nonetheless, some scholars have had success locating the larger significance of tragedy in Heidegger (e.g., see Gelvin; Schürmann; McNeill; Schmidt). Schürmann, for one, understands Heidegger’s description of human existence as indicative of a tragic “double bind,” suggesting an irreconcilable denial and embrace of fate. In this paper, I further explore this “double bind” in Heidegger’s discussion of *technē*, technical knowledge, as it relates to the revealing of technology.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Heidegger identifies Plato’s articulation of *technē* as the foundation upon which contemporary technology builds. And, according to Heidegger, technology is “the extreme danger” that “threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (“The Question” 333). Yet, on the other hand, technology also holds within it a “saving power” that may push us to recapture the “original Greek essence of science” which, I will argue, is akin to a pre-Platonic *technē* that may allow us to return to a more authentic way of being, free of the aforementioned danger of technology. “Thus,” Heidegger decides, “the essential unfolding of technology harbors in itself what we least suspect, the possible rise of the saving power” (“The Question” 337). So, oddly, *technē* is both the start and the finish of, the contagion and the cure for, the most profound threat to human existence.

It seems then, for Heidegger, that not all *technai* are built the same: one *techne* endangers and another *techne* saves. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, for example, he presents *techne* as a way for humans to be reminded of their impotence in the face of overwhelming nature or *physis*. This radical interpretation of *techne* is derived from an analysis of the choral “ode to man” in Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone*. Here are a few lines from Heidegger’s translation:

He set sail on the frothing waters amid the south winds of winter . . . and [he] hunts the beasts of the wilderness and the native creatures of the sea . . . And he has found his way to the resonance of the word, and to wind-swift all-understanding, and to the courage of rule over cities (Heidegger, *Metaphysics* 146-165; Sophocles lines 332-75).<sup>2</sup>

On the surface, the ode to man might be taken as the story of man’s steady technical development and achievement, as he moves from primitive sailor, to prehistoric hunter, to a builder of great cities. By this account, the ode mirrors our traditional, anthropological, understanding of the accumulation of new knowledge and skills over generations, leading us inexorably to our present technological age. However, Heidegger flatly dismisses this interpretation. Rather than the story of a progressive escape from or mastery of nature, Heidegger understands the sailing, hunting, and city building described in the ode not as representative stages of human development but as places or “scenes of disclosure” for the breaking in of what he calls the “overpowering.” Remarkably, he dismisses the idea that early humans built their boats, their spears and arrows, their houses and cities primarily for the purposes of transportation, procuring food, and finding shelter. Instead, these things were first and foremost built as means to commune with nature, highlighting or bringing to light the primal truth of existence or Being.<sup>3</sup>

This is all the more strange in that Heidegger also sees these products of *techne* in their initial articulation as violence against nature. The sailor, by harnessing and manipulating the wind and water, is coercing the elements to do his bidding. Likewise, the farmer, hunter and city builder are taking hold of the movement of nature and violently imposing form onto it. But this imposition of form is merely temporary. Eventually, the violence of *techne* is countered by the violent return of

the movement of nature: these products of *techne* become targets of nature's wrath, destroyed or swept away by the very elements they temporarily harnessed. The products of *techne* are "scenes of disclosure" in the sense that, through their destruction, human beings come to recognize the temporality of all things and come to think about or question the authentic or primal truth of all of existence. So, by sailing we bring to light the overpowering force of the sea, by hunting we highlight the overpowering pain of hunger, and by building cities that inevitably fall to some sort of disaster we recognize the power of nature to destroy all the more. In all of these things, the limits and finitude of beings come to light through a pushing back by nature. Presumably, without the building of technical products, this coming to light, this disclosure would not occur.

Of course, this description of *techne* is not so strange when considered within the larger context of Heidegger's work. In *Being and Time*, he identifies humans as *Dasein*, the being with the unique capacity to ask the question of Being. And, in his "Letter on Humanism," he writes:

Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this 'less'; rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth (245).

Here, we can see a parallel between Heidegger's fundamental ontology, where he describes our relationship to Being, and his description of *techne* as a "scene of disclosure" that highlights the nature of existence. Just as *Dasein* shepherds or attends to the revelation of Being rather than controls its revealing, in our building we are not trying to master nature or become "the lord" of the things we build, but are instead inviting Being to show, bring-forth, or un-conceal itself, again serving as the "shepherd of Being." But, as will be discussed below, technology as "enframing" *does* seek a lording over and total mastery of nature.

Plainly, there is something profoundly tragic going on here. We humans have been given the uncanny capacity to use tools and build, not for our own good, advancement or betterment, but as a way for existence to be understood or thought as fleeting, in flux, coming into being and going

out of being. Even though it is difficult to believe the earliest humans had any sense that by making fire or building a wheel or a mud hut they were participating in such a process, from Heidegger's perspective, experiences of cold, pain, hunger, and fear that spurred such inventiveness were necessary for a revealing of Being. We all must suffer in order for Being to be revealed (to be shepherded) in this unique way. What is more, our efforts to hinder or halt this suffering through the building of artifacts (things that might endure the fluctuations of the natural world) give nature the opportunity to "overpower" and thus once again highlight the temporality of existence. So, rather than allowing us to escape from the painful limitations of nature, *techne* is an invitation to nature's destructive power. Our technical products are merely temporary impositions of form onto matter, and they are destined to be violently taken back into the manifold of the natural world.

We need not limit this analysis to the ode to man. Other ancient texts similarly describe the transient character of our artifacts. For example, the great wall of the Achaeans in Homer's *Iliad* seems to be a scene of disclosure for the overpowering:

Built against the will of the immortals  
The wall could not endure for long ...  
...  
It is destined to disappear from the landscape without a trace: Apollo and  
Poseidon will cover it with water and bury it in sand (12.10–33).

The powerful wall is built against the gods only to be overpowered by the gods. Again, *techne* is violence against nature and an invitation or openness to nature.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the city of Thebes, the setting for *Antigone*, is itself indicative of this tragic double bind of creation and destruction. Creon defies the gods with his emergency decree banning the traditional performance of sacred burial rites for his nephew Polyneices, an apparent traitor to his city. But, by introducing this hubristic law, he invites destruction into the city. Clare Pearson Geiman explains that "Human activity as *techne*, then, is caught in a paradoxical necessity. On one hand, it must order the possibility and standards of justice and governance on a human level. On the other, it must respond to a higher ordinance that

compels the continual destruction and reforming of such orders” (171). In other words, all forms of human making, whether of boats and spears or of laws and politics are caught in a tragic paradox—the technical imposition of human order is the spur for the violent renewal of the natural order. This explains the strange warning found in the fourth and final stasimon of the ode to man: “When he weaves in the laws of the land, and the justice of the gods that binds his oaths together he and his city rise high—but the city casts out that man who weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring” (Sophocles, 368-375).

The first three stasimons describe how man eliminated the traditional limitations to his activity: the earth, the beasts, the elements, and disease. We conquer the land through agriculture, the animals through hunting and trapping, the cold and rain through house and city building, and sickness with medicine. Now, the chorus tells us, only death serves as a limit to human inventiveness. And, one might suppose, even that limitation could one day be overcome. At this point, *technē* may no longer be a scene of disclosure or a temporary imposition but is on the cusp of becoming an enduring and permanent fixture. Once the violent counterforce of nature can no longer destroy our artifacts, we are no longer witness to the temporality of existence and are thus cut off from the most essential experience of being human. We have escaped the natural elements, and we all but eliminate the element of the tragic from our lives. In the process, we have also blocked or forgotten our own nature, essence or purpose. We have conquered nature but, strangely, we have also conquered ourselves: as the ode puts it, *technē* has produced a result “beyond expectation” or “beyond our dreams,” suggesting that our technical knowledge is not necessarily under our control. Instead, it has produced both the bad and the good, the base and the noble, destruction and greatness.

It is from here that the chorus warns us to weave the law of the gods into the fabric of the city to remind us of our limitations and thus keep us in tune with our essence. The ode introduces

this weaving as remedy for the equivocal, paradoxical and amoral character of our technical achievements. We progress out of nature, are freed from the harshness of the elements, only to be subsumed by our own innovation. The chorus is suggesting a solution. Weaving natural law and divine justice into the texture of the city restores a limit or a boundary to human innovation while still allowing for some respite from the harshness of the natural elements.

It might be said that Heidegger's infamous rectoral address, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," works from the premise that we have ignored the warning from the ode to man. Arguably, in our technological age, any sense of limitation has been lost. Rather than a temporary imposition of form onto matter, human artifacts in the twentieth century are the products of a permanent imposition, without limitation. In turn, Heidegger calls for the recapturing of the lost *techné*, saying that it can and should be retrieved (31). He quotes the words of Prometheus, "But knowledge is far less powerful than necessity.' That means: all knowledge of things remains beforehand at the mercy of overpowering fate and fails before it" (31). Heidegger wants us to move away from an emphasis on the permanent and enduring, which is indicative of our technology, toward the fleeting and violent character of the *techné* described in *Antigone*. Here, we can see some disturbing implications for Nazi Germany and World War II. For Heidegger, the massive technological feat of remilitarizing Germany will somehow allow for a return of the essence of the German *ethos* or *Volk* lost in the "technological frenzy" of twenty-first century civilization.<sup>5</sup> Could militarization approximate *techné* sufficiently to present an opening to the overpowering? It may be that for Heidegger, while the peril of world war risked the destruction of his homeland, this danger could have also delivered a greater or more authentic Germany.

From this perspective, we can understand his controversial translation of 497d9 of Plato's *Republic* at the end of the rectoral address: "All that is great stands in the storm (*episphalês*)" (39).<sup>6</sup> His translation of *episphalês* as "stands in the storm" is particularly provocative.<sup>7</sup> Allan Bloom, for

one, translates the same line as “For surely all great things carry with them the risk of a fall (*episphalês*), and, really as the saying goes, fine things are hard.” As Bloom explains in his “Interpretive Essay” on the *Republic*, this section of the text is extremely important because it is where Socrates seems to convince some of his interlocutors that, while fraught with great danger and difficulty, it might be possible to bring philosophy and the city together: “How the city can take philosophy in hand without being destroyed” (Plato 497d9; Bloom 397-401). Of course, the larger project of the *Republic* as laid out in Book V is to fundamentally transform the city, severely limiting private property and establishing communal rearing and parenting. In essence, the triumph of philosophy in the *polis* will require its destruction and reformulation. Likewise, for Heidegger, the triumph of Nazi ideology and its goal of a supreme Germany is possible only because Germany is great enough to “stand in the storm” of a required war and destruction. For Heidegger, our thinking, our building, our politics, and our art must be engaged in the same way the Achaeans built their wall. It must be *episphalês* (prone to fall and precarious)—not to protect against or hide from, but to stand firm against, the collapse and confusion of Western thinking and civilization in preparation for a “new beginning.”<sup>8</sup>

## II.

But if Heidegger is calling for the return of this *episphalês technê* we might wonder why it went away in the first place. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” he identifies the unconcealment of “enframing” (*Ge-stell*), the essence of modern technology, as the barrier to the original Greek sense of *technê*. Where ancient *technê* was a scene of disclosure for nature as overpowering, contemporary technology invites no such disclosure. In the same essay, Heidegger describes the ancient craftsman’s art as a “bringing-forth,” a working in partnership or co-operation with the nature of materials to construct an artifact, such as a chair or a house, while the

contemporary technologist is described as “challenging-forth,” changing, the nature of materials to make them stronger, more flexible, longer lasting, etc. Whereas ancient *techne* discloses, contemporary technology enframes. Earlier human inventions were still bound by natural characteristics because nature would still “shine through” the imposition of the craftsman. For example, a carpenter imposed the form of a chair onto wood but once the chair was finished the wood retained its natural characteristics to rot and decompose in the same way a fallen tree rots and decomposes on the forest floor; the craftsman’s chair is a site of openness, a scene of disclosure for the revealing of nature.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, we might look to the growing list of contemporary technologies that do not co-operate with nature but attempt to replace it. A nuclear engineer can manipulate the structure of natural elements to produce artificial elements. Plutonium, for instance, is designed never to abide by or return to the characteristics of the uranium from which it was derived; the character of plutonium (i.e., its level of radioactivity) is always artificial. Likewise, the genetically altered human is designed never to return to the natural characteristics of the material from which it was derived (e.g., a sick or weak body) and thus is always artificial. In turn, contemporary technological artifacts do not disclose nature. And, because in a technological society so much of our world is filled with these “undisclosing artifacts,” we are cut off from, become unaware of, have forgotten the essential movement and transience of existence. As Heidegger writes, “Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth” (“The Question” 333).<sup>10</sup>

According to Heidegger, well before the advent of computers, cars, and other machines, this enframing essence of technology began to reveal itself in what might be considered a rather strange place: in the ancient Greek philosophy of Plato. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger describes how Platonic emphasis on the enduring and permanent character of the *eidos*—the Platonic idea or form—narrows our conception of and relationship to nature (*physis*) and clears the way for the unlimited instrumental application of human knowledge onto the world. He asks, “But



if the essential consequence is exalted to the level of the essence itself and takes the place of the essence, what then?" He continues, "The crux of the matter is not that *physis* should have been characterized as idea but that idea should have become the sole and decisive interpretation of being" (182). Heidegger explains that the idea is initially understood as the visible appearance of what he calls the growth, "movedness" or "emerging power" of nature (*physis*).<sup>11</sup> In this way, it is only a mere consequence of nature. Plato's "theory of ideas" comes to exalt the merely visible and thus: "The vision makes the thing. Now this vision becomes decisive, instead of the thing itself" (183). From here, *physis* as movedness is ignored in lieu of the superficial, unmoving *eidos*. The idea then becomes a *paradeigma*, a model or prototype for the world as we wish it to be. Heidegger concludes, "Because the actual repository of being is the idea and this is the prototype, all disclosure of being must aim at assimilation to the model, accommodation to idea" (185). In other words, Plato's theory of the ideas or forms and, really, human thinking itself become a storehouse for the way the world should be—they contain a blueprint for a better or perfect world. Under this impression, we then set off to transform the world to make it match up with our ideas for it, to assimilate it to the model or accommodate it to our ideas. Through the lens of Plato's philosophy, then, nature is conceived of as raw material, ready to be molded and shaped in any way we see fit.<sup>12</sup>

From here, the essence of technology begins to reveal itself as something akin to contemporary technology. Even though there are no "technologies" as such, the perspective by which technologies manifest has been established. Put another way, the philosophy of Plato, the way he thought and understood the world, is the lens through which existence becomes technological. In ancient Athens most beings have yet to be filtered through the lens and thus remain unaffected. However, as this type of thinking becomes more and more prevalent, more and more of existence is transformed. Subsequent stages of science are simply a result of time in the development of this perspective from Aristotelian science to Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and

Einstein. Likewise, it is simply a matter of time to move from the most basic products of Platonic instrumental thinking to global technology. For Heidegger, Plato's *techne* becomes "a process of reflection in service to doing and making" ("Humanism" 218) that transforms the world because, through it, existence is assimilated to the technological model. Now *techne* no longer reveals nature, but instead narrows it to raw material waiting for technical transformation, what Heidegger calls "standing reserve." According to Heidegger, this turn lends itself to modern science, which is understood as the objectification and manipulation of nature, a technological thinking—enframing (*Ge-stell*). Whereas *techne* used to be able to toss man "back and forth between structure and the structureless, order and mischief, between the evil and noble" (*Metaphysics* 161) as described in *Antigone* and other ancient works, it now transforms, assimilates and accommodates the world to the model or prototype (i.e., the *eidos*). Significantly, this transformation also includes man himself.

As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve ("The Question" 332).

While it is not entirely clear here whether Heidegger is thinking of the burgeoning possibilities of genetic engineering or merely repeating the familiar motif of human beings as cogs in the machinery of the "satanic mills" of industry, in other places he does specifically relate issues of cloning and biotechnology to his analysis of technology. In his 1939 essay "On the Essence and Concept of  $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  in Aristotle's *Physics*", for instance, he contends:

If humanity achieves this [cloning themselves], it will have exploded itself, i.e., its essence qua subjectivity, into thin air, into a region where the absolutely meaningless is valued as the one and only 'meaning' and where preserving this value appears as the human 'domination' of the globe (197).

In other words, when the unlimited ability "to make" artifacts becomes the singular *modus operandi* of humanity, anything that limits making—whether traditions, laws, or other values—must be eliminated. Yes, by eliminating the limitations imposed by disease and anxiety we gain more

freedom over how we live our lives. But by the same logic, the limitations imposed by given conceptions of health and happiness must also be eliminated to facilitate that same freedom. Indeed, why should we be bound by human mortality or a particular emotion or state of being? According to Heidegger, everything, the planet and humans themselves, must be understood as standing-reserve, as nothing more than material to be molded. There can be no happiness, no standard, no final good, and no higher thing whatsoever to guide, direct or limit our making. Hence, the absolutely meaningless is valued as the one and only “meaning” because it is the only thing that does not impose anything, any limits upon us. In a later interview, Heidegger explains:

I think about what is developing today as biophysics, that in the foreseeable future, we will be in a position to make man in a certain way i.e., to construct him, purely in his organic being, according to the way we need him: skilled and unskilled, intelligent and . . . stupid. It will come to that! . . . So, above all, the misunderstanding that I am against technology is to be rejected. I see technology in its essence as a power which challenges man and, in opposition to which, he is not free any longer—that something is being announced here, namely a relationship of Being to man—and that this relationship, which is concealed in the essence of technology, may come to light someday in its undisguised form. I do not know whether it is going to happen! (*Conversation 43*).

The ability to make without limitation means that humanity must be both skilled and unskilled, intelligent and stupid, without any barriers or encumbrances. Even if we do not like this idea, Heidegger argues that it is our “fate.”

### III.

How then does Heidegger propose we overcome the reign of Plato’s metaphysics, recapture the lost tragic sense of *techne*, and save ourselves from a world of clones and technological nihilism? As suggested above, the rectoral address indicates that through the violence of war our technological age can be knocked back to make way for some kind of new beginning. His unwillingness to explicitly disavow the goals of the National Socialist revolution suggests perhaps that he held out the faint hope that sometime in the distant future a similar planetary effort to knock

back and destroy the technological establishment would be possible.<sup>13</sup> In an oft quoted interview given well after the war, the 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, he cryptically explains that the Nazis were “far too limited in their thinking” to fully realize and take advantage of the opportunity presented to them.<sup>14</sup>

Essentially, the defeat of the Nazis brought Heidegger to question the very possibility of any contemporary political response to technology.<sup>15</sup> In the *Der Spiegel* interview he asks “how can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which system would this be? . . . [W]e still have no way to respond to the essence of technology” (104). From here, Heidegger is led to a far more passive approach. The recognition of the ineffectuality of a political or social response to technology leads him both to move away from the call for a violent recapturing of a primordial *techne*, and to suggest instead that within the enframing essence of technology lies an opportunity to once again experience the disclosure of a sense of limitation. As he explains in the passage quoted above, in the dominance of technology “something is being announced . . . namely a relationship of Being to man—and . . . this relationship, which is concealed in the essence of technology, may come to light someday in its undisguised form. I do not know whether it is going to happen!”

By realizing that technology now dominates us, that we are not in control of technology, we *might* once again come to know what it is to be in the grasp of a fate beyond our control. As Michael Zimmerman explains, “Despite his descriptions of how the old world was being obliterated by the advance of the technological one, Heidegger did not finally despair. Rather, he held out the hope that a saving power could grow from out of the dangerous depths of technological nihilism” (133). As Catherine Zuckert concludes, “What he had learned both from his study of the history of philosophy and the outcome of World War II was the impossibility of checking this technological leveling with ‘will’ or force” (72).<sup>16</sup>

In turn, instead of an active recapturing, Heidegger calls for detachment or passivity (*Gelassenheit*). “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become” (“The Question” 341). Only when we become fully cognizant of the extreme danger of technology will we be prepared to take a new course away from technological nihilism.

For Heidegger, passivity is simply a way for us to become open to the revealing of technology. This is what he means when he quotes Hölderlin’s poem: “But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also” (“The Question” 340). Strangely, even though technology is what threatens us the most, it is also the thing through which we might again appreciate the disclosure of Being. When we come to realize, through our own reduction to standing reserve, that we do not control the revealing of technology, but merely participate in that overwhelming revealing, we may be able to return to a more authentic and free relationship with technology, and thus with Being itself.

Just as the primordial *techne* of the ode to man gives way to creation and destruction, so too does contemporary technology. For Heidegger, we must come to the brink of annihilation so that we can once again experience the anxiety and terror of the primitive sailor tossed helplessly by the awesome and overwhelming power of a cosmos far greater than ourselves.

#### IV.

In conclusion, in both *techne* and technology we find a tragic double bind. *Techne* is both the source of our escape from nature and the scene for our violent return to nature. It is the source of our forgetfulness of Being via the unconcealment of the essence of technology as enframing through the lens of Plato’s metaphysics. Yet, the playing out of technology may also return us to the original Greek sense of *techne* as a scene of disclosure: both an extreme danger and a saving power. In a sense, either the un-checked march of self-concealing technology, the essence of technology

itself, will blind-side us with catastrophe, or the saving power concealed within technology will point us back to itself as disclosure of our radical finitude. The former alternative must draw all too near before the latter may make itself known, and we cannot make it happen. We stand in the storm, tragically.\*

### Notes

\* This essay builds upon some similar ideas found in my earlier essay “Techne, Technology and Tragedy.”

<sup>1</sup> Generally, the ancient Greek word *techne* is translated as “craft” or “art” but also “technical knowledge.” While sometimes used interchangeably, *techne* is distinct from *episteme*, which means “scientific knowledge.” Where *episteme* may be “knowledge for the sake of knowledge,” *techne* is instrumental, oriented towards the deliberate production of something. Furthermore, not only are products wrought via *techne* different from things produced by nature (*physis*), but they are also different from things produced by chance (*tuche*). While something could be made of the etymological meeting of the compound *techne* and *logos* (reason) in the modern word technology, the Greek sense of *techne* already implies the application of reason. Aristotle, for example, defines *techne* in the *Ethics* as “a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning (*logos*)” (Aristotle 1958, 1140a10).

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of the unique character of Heidegger’s translation see Warminski.

<sup>3</sup> In his analysis of Heidegger’s interpretation of *Antigone*, Capobianco adds: “In authenticity, Dasein must ‘contend’ with the Overpowering with ‘power’ and ‘violence’ in order ‘to manifest Being in the work as a being.’ Dasein is structured by a ‘need’ or ‘want’ or even ‘affliction’ (*Not*)—compelled by Being itself—which ‘drives him beyond himself to venture forth toward Being,’ and even though this Not ‘creates the possibility of downfall into the issueless and placeless: disaster,’ it is at the same time the source of Dasein’s originality, creativity, and authenticity; indeed, the condition of the possibility of ‘true historical greatness,’ as was achieved by the ancient Greeks. Thus, for Heidegger, Sophocles’ words and the figure of Antigone call our attention to the tragic greatness of being human” (19).

<sup>4</sup> For the ancient Greeks, the gods and nature were deeply related, virtually equivalent.

<sup>5</sup> Wolin quotes Heidegger on the Nazis: “I saw in the movement that had just come to power [in 1933] the possibility of a spiritual rallying and renewal of the Volk and a way of finding its western-historical destiny” (“Over the Line” 6).

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word *episphalês* seems to hold within it the meaning of the tragic double bind. It is also used in the New Testament at Acts 27: [9]: “When much time was spent, and the voyage was now dangerous (*episphalês*), because the Fast had now already gone by, Paul admonished them, [10] and said to them, ‘Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the

cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” Here, the apostle Paul is traveling late in the year, after the Jewish Day of Atonement or fast. He faces the rough seas of the Mediterranean and “stands in the storm” on his journey to Rome. Earlier, Jesus appeared to Paul in Jerusalem and asked him to go to Rome to speak to the emperor. Yet, if Paul is carrying out the Lord’s work, why would not his passage to Rome be cleared and without danger? Why not like God parting the Red Sea for Moses, was Paul provided with a steady wind at his back to expedite his journey? Again, we may answer that “fine things are hard” or that “all that is great stands in the storm.”

From a Christian perspective, the familiar motif of the trial or tribulation represents both a test of our faith and a coming to recognize the fleeting character of the material world. *Episphalês* also makes an appearance in the Greek Torah. In The Wisdom of Solomon 9:14: “For the thoughts of mortal men are miserable, and our devices are but uncertain (*episphalês*).” This passage again reminds us of the fleeting character of human making. Thus, it suggests that we should put less faith in our own devices and more in the infinite wisdom of a greater power.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Löwith goes so far as to call Heidegger’s translation “violently twisted” (218).

<sup>8</sup> Although there is controversy over whether Heidegger was actually promoting “war and destruction” (i.e., World War II), Hans Sluga and Theodore Kisiel do well to illustrate the connection between Heidegger’s identification of the spiritual decline of the West at the hands of America and Russia and the Nazis’ military effort to destroy these same enemies as a way to establish a true and authentic Germany. When Heidegger talks about “the same dreary technological frenzy” found in America and Russia in his 1935 lectures (published in 1953 as *An Introduction to Metaphysics*), he seems to provide a link between (his endorsement or acceptance of) the obvious military efforts of the Nazis and his own philosophical effort to overcome technology. Simply put, it is highly unlikely that Heidegger was unaware of the accelerated militarization happening right under his nose. In the same year as Heidegger’s lectures (1935), Hitler publicly announced he was reintroducing universal conscription, ordered German troops into Saarland (an area of Germany previously outside of the control of the Third Reich), announced the formation of the new Luftwaffe (German Air Force), renounced the Treaty of Versailles’ disarmament clauses, and introduced the dreaded Nuremberg laws. How could Heidegger have not known?

<sup>9</sup> For more on the relationship between *physis*, *techne* and technology see Glazebrook’s excellent essay.

<sup>10</sup> See my “Techne, Technology and Tragedy.” In my “Heidegger’s Essentialist Responses to the Challenge of Technology” I highlight the links between *physis*, unconcealment (*a-letheia*), and enframing: “Heidegger explains that all essence participates in a larger movement, movedness, or ‘emerging power’ of nature or *physis*. Now, the essence of technology is unique or distinctive in that, rather than indicating a parity of essence and nature, it instead challenges nature. Like all other things, the essence of technology also unconceals and conceals itself. But, unlike any other coming into being or revealing of essence, the unconcealment of the essence of technology is characterized by the concealment of the essence of all other beings or what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, ‘enframing.’”

<sup>11</sup> For Heidegger’s analysis of *physis* as movedness see “On the Essence and Concept of φύσις in Aristotle’s *Physics* B, I.”

<sup>12</sup> In a similar consideration, Heidegger explains that, under the influence of the *eidos*, *physis* no longer “possesses the unique quality of delivering over to itself that which through it is first transformed from something orderable (e.g., water, light, air) into something appropriate for it alone (for example, into nutriment and so into sap or bones),” but is conceived of as raw “material.” Just as philosophy focuses on the visible, modern science “seizes upon the most extreme non-essence of *physis* and inflates it into the real and only essence” (“On the Essence and Concept” 227-228).

<sup>13</sup> As suggested in note 8 above, the connection between Heidegger’s support of the National Socialist movement and his analysis of technology is the subject of controversy. In *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*, for example, Michael Zimmerman explains that Heidegger “glided over the fact the Holocaust was a *German* phenomenon involving the slaughter of millions of *Jews*. Instead, he chose to view the Holocaust as a *typical* episode in the technological era afflicting the entire West” (43). In *The Politics of Being*, Richard Wolin calls Heidegger’s drawing of equivalence between technology and the Holocaust “not only a monumental *non sequitur* in historical reasoning; it suggests a fundamental incapacity for both moral and theoretical discernment” (168). Alexander Schwan presents a less damning assessment of the Nazi-technology connection by revisiting the controversy through the lens of Heidegger’s *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, concluding that Heidegger fully “retracted” his support for National Socialism as a mistake or “*philosophical error*” (84). For a general overview of Heidegger’s Nazism see Richard Wolin’s introduction to *The Heidegger Controversy* “‘Over the Line:’ Reflections on Heidegger and National Socialism.” For a discussion of some of the scholarly debates surrounding this issue see Wolin’s “French Heidegger Wars” in the same volume.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us.” The larger context of the quote provides more insight: “It seems to me that you are taking technology too absolutely. I do not see the situation of man in the world of global technology as a fate which cannot be escaped or unraveled. On the contrary, I see the task of thought to consist in helping man in general, within the limits allotted to thought, to achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology. National Socialism, to be sure, moved in this direction. But those people were far too limited in their thinking to acquire an explicit relationship to what is really happening today and has been underway for three centuries.” In his book *On Heidegger and Nazism*, Tom Rockmore explains: “Here, in his own way, Heidegger is signaling, as clearly as he can—candidly, and accurately—that his theory of technology is meant to carry out the ideas which the National Socialists were too limited to develop through a theory of technology with political consequences” (206).

<sup>15</sup> For a consideration of whether Heidegger articulates any way to actively direct the fate of humanity in light of the enframing essence of technology, see my “Heidegger’s Essentialist Responses to the Challenge of Technology.”

<sup>16</sup> See also my “Heidegger’s Essentialist Responses.”



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