

Freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of: Technology's Gift to Humanity

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[E]verywhere we remain free and chained to technology..... We must find a way of living in a free relationship with technology.

Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology"

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the vita activa spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human maker.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

[I]t could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do. In this case, it would be as though our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts, were unable to follow what we do, so that from now on we would indeed need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking. If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

As we frame our investigation into technology's relationship to human society in the 21st century Sri Lanka under the theme 'Technological Development and Sustainable Communities' we seem to assume a specific relation between technology and community a relation that has come under close scrutiny in attempts to theorise the place of technology in human society under modernity. Such theorising focus on the ambivalence of relation the humans have come to perceive between themselves and technology, that technology holds both the promise for humanity's advancement and a grave threat to it. The threat is aptly illustrated by the case of the nuclear bomb; the promise is manifested in the advances in science in general and medicine related areas in particular, benefitting human life both in the material world and the biological realm. One of the most recent contributions of technology to the advance of humanity is information technology whose political benefits to community the world witnessed in the social networking that facilitated the now legendary 'Arab Spring'.

It is this ambivalence the humans have come to perceive in relation to technology that has drawn attention of theorists since the latter part of the 20th century whose responses invite us to cultivate an attitude towards technology that is one of being reflective of both the danger and promise so that we may not sacrifice the world for the advantages technology brings to individual humans. While the prevailing common sense understanding takes a means and ends attitude towards technology perceived as tools or instruments that enable humans to achieve

desired ends, what it seems to ignore is whether any given item of technology makes our lives necessarily better beyond the ends it helps us achieve.

This paper attempts to develop a conversation between the ideas of two leading theorists within the phenomenological tradition namely Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt who opened up the space of ambivalence that lies between the realms of technology and community.

It is Heidegger who in modern times most forcefully drew our attention to the idea that technology means more than simply a tool or a means to an end, that it is an attitude that takes control of our lives (“The Question Concerning Technology”). Heidegger saw technology’s essence “as a way of revealing the totality of being, is enframing which both endangers and saves being.” He posited the idea that in modernity we are living in a technological society where technology defines the epoch. Modern technology not only reorders the world, but also reorganizes our understanding of the reality of the world. While technology is an overpowering intervention in man’s authentic relation to being, it inhibits us from appreciating non-technological ways of apprehending the world and obscures the character of the all-encompassing technological enframing itself.

For Heidegger, technology determines how we view our world and this tears apart man’s authentic relation to being. Humans are not in control of technology (“The Question Concerning Technology”). Technology is the destiny of humans in our age. Technology’s approach to nature is to control it. For people to demand to “get in control” of technology simply reinforces the technological attitude. Within this attitude we are unaware that technological attitude is merely one approach of many we have come up with in understanding the world around us. Under modernity it is taken to be coterminous with sound or correct thinking which is manifested in taking scientific method as determining truth for human society. Heidegger concedes that we cannot retreat to a pre-technological society or culture. But it is possible to grasp the essence of technology. He hints at a new attitude to technology that will allow us to use technology while freeing us from domination by it.

Thus while it is Heidegger who invited us to reflect on how technology takes us into its grip, it is Arendt who takes up Heidegger’s cue and reflect on his ideas to raise political questions about technology and community. For Hannah Arendt questions concerning the nature of technology, are political questions because technology affects our collective life in the community (*The Human Condition*). They are not matters to be resolved either through science or by relating to technicalities involved, but only through political debate, in the exchange of diverse opinions among people who share a common world but yet may differ on their perspectives on the world. Arendt’s analysis of labour, work and action in *The Human Condition* invites us to look at technology from the perspective of worldliness whereas our technological attitude focuses on the services that technology renders to humans ignoring the impact of technology on the world and things. In modern times technology has transformed work in to labour tying work to life away from concerns with the world and also into a form of action through new technologies which produce ‘things that owe their existence exclusively to men....[which] constantly condition their human maker’ and that release boundless and unpredictable forces into the world heightening uncertainly in the world.

With a view to examining the question of the good of the community in facing technological modernity, this conversation will be constructed partly through the voices of several contemporary interlocutors namely Albert Borgman, Langdon Winner and Roger Berkovitz who

differently but relatedly represent the approaches of Heidegger and Arendt. In constructing such a conversation this paper aims at examining concepts such as ‘device paradigm’ (Borgman), mythinformation, optimistic technophilia, technological determinism vs. social circumstances (Winner) and ‘exchanging freedom for behaviour’ (Berkovitz).

References

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