

Language and Technology: Heideggerian Reflections

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Since at least the late 18th century there has been a growing sense of anxiety around the relationship between technology and language. This anxiety is intimately connected with the fear that the ever greater acceleration and complexification of life and the increasingly dominant role of technology in both work and personal spheres is having negative effects on our experience of being human and, in particular, on the development of a humane politics. Clearly, I do not have time to explore all of these topics here (nor is this the occasion to do so), but since language is key to what is going on in a manifold of interrelated spheres of theory and practice, focussing on the changes that technology is or may be bringing about in our relation to language will therefore also provide important perspectives on other aspects of the contemporary crisis of human beings' relation to their technology.

Schiller's essay on the aesthetic education of mankind is an early and still exceptionally clear statement of the sense that social and industrial development is bringing about the fragmentation of human life at both societal and individual levels. As a result of the increasing division of labour in society, contemporary human beings, Schiller complains, are becoming compartmentalized. One person is nothing but a brain, another nothing but a hand—a complaint that would be echoed a century later by Nietzsche's Zarathustra when he looked around and saw nothing but fragments of human beings, chances and riddles, but no real human beings. Schiller's own response to this situation would become paradigmatic for important subsequent developments in Western cultural discourse. Our only remedy, he argued, is to learn from an age when things were otherwise, when the warrior could also be a poet, a philosopher, and a statesman. And, for Schiller, this meant returning to Greece so as to learn what it could mean to be a rounded, whole human being.

Schiller's classicism would, of course, have significant ongoing effects, not least with regard to what has been called the tyranny of Greece over the German mind, but an important part of his response was that such a return was possible only in the mode of poetry. In this regard, Schiller's programme would be taken up by many who did not feel the pull of Hellenic antiquity. Romantics more oriented towards the Middle Ages, to the humble lives of the Lakeland poor, or to exotic oriental scenarios could share the exultation of poetry as the primary means of restoring the lost wholeness of human life. Other arts would also have their champions, and both painting and music could variously be promoted as offering some kind of salvation to human beings in this hour of need but,

tellingly, this was often argued in terms, precisely, of the ‘poetic’ character of the art in question.

In these terms, then, the crisis of modernity is precisely a crisis of language and at the centre of this crisis is the question as to whether it is ultimately language or mathematics that is best suited to tell us the truth about ourselves. To the extent that human beings can indeed be quantified according to the procedures of science and applied science, as the objects of biological, physiological, psychological or social science, mathematics would seem to have a clear pre-eminence in the study of the human as much as in any area of ‘hard’ science. And if some applications (one thinks of Malthusian economics) are obviously questionable, others seem to have become well-embedded in what is widely regarded as normal and unquestionable science. We might also note a penumbra of applications where life-processes are subject to metrics that may not always be rooted in robustly exact mathematics but that are nevertheless deemed to be sufficiently quantified to eliminate or reduce the vagaries of subjective or corrupt manipulation. Such are, for example the metrics now more or less normally used in appointment procedures or the assessment of academic research.

Yet few, including few mathematicians, would argue that mathematics can answer every question and questions remain—indeed, they are arguably multiplying—around the limits appropriate to the application of mathematical models. If social statistics are today an essential part of governmental functioning, the example of Malthus reminds us that these need to be handled with exceptional care and there are many areas where the prevalence of the mathematical is felt to be intrusive and inappropriate. This is especially the case in areas where we can see a certain kind of objectification, reification, or quantification taking place but where there are few clear rules for determining what elements of the original phenomenon in question are most appropriate for treating in this way. In other words, the application of a mathematical procedure presupposes what remains, in fact, a qualitative human judgement. However, the application of the mathematical procedure functions precisely to obscure its actual dependence on such judgements and consequently to devalue the need to develop the skills and attitudes that they require. One example here would be the previously mentioned examples of appointments and research assessment.

One area where the tension between what can and what can’t be quantified is especially profound, although not always openly recognized as such, is in relation to the kinds of communication favoured by electronic media. We can see how this is bringing about changes in the actual production of text with regard to such requirements as the elimination of formulae such as ‘See p. 20 above’ in favour of reference to sections that are standard in electronic and print versions, the provision of key words for online

searching, and forms of indexing. These are probably neither good nor bad in themselves, but more questionable is a general and, I believe, connected tendency towards the formulaic approach to the production of academic text that standardizes the structuring of articles or books (or, as we increasingly call them, outputs) in ways geared towards their being quantitatively assessed by governmentally-funded research panels. Of course, neither is this all bad. Working with some students who have difficulties in constructing half-way coherent texts, it's obvious that a certain objectification can be a helpful tool in increasing students' performance—not just in the quantitative sense but also in terms of their understanding of what is going on and the self-esteem associated with being able to do a good job. Musicians have to do their scales.

A more questionable manifestation of the same tendency are the Facebook entries or text messages that forgo efforts in the direction of nuanced sentence structure in favour of globally standardized formulae (OMG!) matched with relentlessly monotonous selfies and dancing cats. Words like objectification and reification seem to fit some of the tendencies of this new communication, often, it seems, with clear negative outcomes for, e.g., attitudes to sexuality, the capacity for attention to others in their concrete being-there, and—an argument already clearly formulated by Hannah Arendt—for politics. As Arendt wrote in *The Human Condition*, 'speech is what makes man a political being' and science, whatever its other virtues, operates in a world of mathematical symbols in which 'speech has lost its power' (3-4). In this connection, we might ponder whether the current popularity of referenda as a means of deciding complex political issues is not also a sign of the loss of speech-based politics.

Given the role that Descartes played in arguing for the role of mathematics as a key to understanding the nature of human beings and their world, it is easy to see that when the crisis of modernity is seen in these terms and identified with the kind of phenomena I have just listed, Descartes is easily identified as Public Enemy Number 1. It is therefore no surprise that the theoretical revolt against the diminution of the living human being to the thinking Cartesian Ego will often accompany or underpin the kind of litany I have just set out. In this perspective, La Mettrie's 'machine man', philosophical brains in vats, and Ray Kurzweil's notion of the singularity event in which human beings merge with their machines are predictable, if perverse, expressions of a view in which meaning, value, and lived sensibility are not allowed to count as offering genuine knowledge about who we are.

However, we should not approach this complex of issues as if it is some kind of externally-driven assault on humanity. As Romano Guardini wrote in his reflections—nearly a hundred years ago—on technology and humanity 'Our age is not just an external path that we

tread; it is ourselves.’¹ Attractive as the jeremiad may be to the prophetically-inclined, caution is advisable. We recall that Walter Ong’s account of the ‘technologization of the word’ focussed primarily on the impact of printing and that, indeed, not only printing but, e.g., the superseding of the scroll by the book and of vellum by paper are already major events in the technologizing of language. What we are dealing with, in other words, is a process that long predates the advent of email and the iPhone and as Ong already pointed out, traditional features of academic writing such as contents pages, tables, and indexes are themselves products of the age of print. We must also beware of becoming over-eager in identifying what’s wrong or potentially wrong with the new communication technologies; each of the negative features ascribed to these technologies is arguable, and optimists are quick to highlight the multiple positive impacts these can have. The debate is wide open and because, as Hegel argued, historical events can only fully be understood when they are over, none of us is in a position to reach a final verdict.

Nevertheless, even if we are still underway we are not only capable of but arguably also obliged to articulate and take account of our own experience of the manifold and conflicting currents in play around us. Even in the absence of knowledge regarding long-term outcomes, the imperatives of self-knowledge and of responsibility to ourselves and to others requires making decisions.

When Guardini wrote that ‘Our age is not just an external path that we tread; it is ourselves’ he indicated that technology is not just something out there that we have to deal with as a kind of external obstruction or, it may be, opportunity; it is, or it has developed to the point at which how we are with our technology defines who we are. Recognition of this situation has several consequences. Firstly, it puts a question mark against any view of the human being based on a supposed timeless or non-historical nature or essence. Technology has in our time penetrated so deeply into the ‘nature’ of human being that just about everything about us is in some degree affected by it. But, secondly, this also reveals something that really has been true about human beings all along, namely, that we do not exist apart from our world and our interaction with it. To take just one example, it is not the case that there was in the beginning a human being who learned the skill of tool-making and tool-use. Rather, the process of learning tool-making and tool-using itself contributed to the forming of the being we now know as the human being. To

¹ Guardini, *Lake Como*, p. 81,

reckon with technology is therefore in the end to be reckoning with ourselves, about who we are and what we are capable of.

All of this has fairly clear implications for our relation to language. Even more than in the case of the tool, language belongs at the very centre of our sense of self, our sense of humanity. Aristotle famously defined the human as the living being having logos, which, as Heidegger pointed out, is something quite different from the traditional translation: 'man is the rational animal'. The privileged place of language in understanding of what it is to be human is witnessed by the view that language is a purely spiritual attribute of human being; and whilst this most easily fits with an idealist anthropology, where language is pre-eminently the vehicle for non-material thoughts, it is distantly echoed in the till recently near-universal resistance (even in the community of evolutionary science) to allowing that non-human animals might have a capacity for language. Ideal or material, language is what makes us human.

But, just as in the case of the tool—and to a higher degree—it follows that language is not something external that we can pick up or put down according to the requirements of the situation. Heidegger thus objects to Wilhelm von Humboldt's view (as he sees it) that language is a kind of instrument serving to establish and represent humanity's world and world-view.² Rather than an instrument in the service of what we take to be a determinate cosmic entity named 'Man', it is rather the case that, as Heidegger puts it elsewhere, 'human beings belong to language'. In attending to language it is therefore less a matter of trying to find out what you or I are intending to say but to take heed of what language itself is saying.

Although these kinds of formulations may be taken as typical of his later writings, they are effectively implicit in the basic approach of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger repeatedly uses such everyday phrases such as '*Man sagt ...*' or plays on the etymologies of such key terms as phenomenology and *alētheia* to progress his argument. It is therefore unsurprising when Heidegger also sees language as especially revelatory of the character of our age of technology, which is precisely

² Cristina Lafont has challenged the view that Heidegger has correctly interpreted von Humboldt in this regard. See *CL Heidegger, Language and World-Disclosure*, CUP, 2000, pp, 102ff.

to reduce not only language but all human relations and activities to ‘instruments of interplanetary information. Meta-language and Sputnik, meta-linguistics and rocket science are one and the same’, he writes.

Signs of this technicization are everywhere: ‘A symptom, at first sight quite superficial, of the growing power of one-track thinking is the increase everywhere of designations consisting of abbreviations of words, or combinations of their initials. Presumably no one here has ever given serious thought to what has already come to pass when you, instead of University, simply say ‘Uni.’ ‘Uni’—that is like ‘movie’. True, the moving picture theatre continues to be different from the academy of the sciences. Still, the designation ‘Uni’ is not accidental, let alone harmless. It may even be in order for you to go in and out of the ‘Uni’ and study ‘nat-sci.’ But the question remains what kind of order is heralded here in the spreading of this kind of language. Perhaps it is an order into which we are drawn, and to which we are abandoned, by that which withdraws from us’.³

This last sentence points to a broad range of themes that come to dominate much of Heidegger’s later thought (from the mid-1930s onwards), in which the present age is portrayed as an age given over to a technological world-view that is the ultimate working-out of Greek metaphysics and that is marked by what he calls ‘planetary homelessness’ and multi-sided belligerence, a development connected also with his critique of onto-theo-logy. Here it is easy to see Heidegger as the conservative, rural pessimist, bewailing everything modern, but it is important to note that he insists that it is not technology itself that is the problem or, as he puts it, ‘the danger’, but the outlook with which we typically approach our technology, ‘bedazzled’ by it, as we so typically are (he thinks). Thus, it is not the Atom Bomb that is the real danger, but the basic orientation towards ourselves and our world that has made it possible for Atom Bombs to be developed. Even if a universal disarmament accord were to be reached, this attitude would continue to generate new dangers, such as the dangers of television-induced conformism highlighted in *Brave New World* and that some see manifest in our age of emails, twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and so on. Here, it could be argued, humanity is as much at risk as in the brinkmanship of nuclear confrontation. This will not kill us, but it will

³ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* pp. 34-5 (adapted).

(the argument goes) diminish and even eliminate what makes us truly human—especially by what it does to language. Or, to be more precise, it is already a slippage in language, a deterioration in the quality of our belonging, in language, to being that lies at the root of the danger manifest in Atom Bombs and Facebook.

So, if the danger is actually in language, how might we address it? In a phrase of Hölderlin that Heidegger (like C. G. Jung) several times quotes, ‘Where danger is/ there grows the saving power’. If the danger is in the self- and self-world relation of human beings constituted in language, then it must be in language that we will also find the ‘saving power’.

And this, is indeed Heidegger’s solution, especially and above all by what he sees as the poetic character of authentic language. In another favoured expression of Hölderlin it is a matter of ‘poetically man dwells’. As should be clear, this does not mean that, living in the age of technology as we do, we can at least console ourselves by spending our evenings reading our favourite works of poetry (though there could be worse things to do). Rather, poetry points us towards another way of being in the world. Arch romanticism, you may say, and maybe that’s true—although such labels don’t of themselves determine whether it is an appropriate or truthful response.

In any case, from the mid-1930s onwards, Hölderlin becomes a constant companion on Heidegger’s path of thinking. This is because Heidegger sees in Hölderlin the pre-eminent poet of the German language and of German identity. But what is it that makes him so value the poetic and so value Hölderlin in particular?

An important element in answering this question is to note that Heidegger’s privileging of ‘the poetic’ is rather different from much of what we are familiar with from recent Anglophone attempts to re-invigorate the language of theology through a return to the poetic. In the British context especially, S. T. Coleridge’s theory of imagination has played an important and deserved role in providing an alternative to the supposedly value-free factual or constative language privileged by ‘hard-nosed’ naturalist philosophers. For Coleridge, we are never confronted with a world of bare facts but with a world that we always imagine in one way or the other: imagination enters into the most vital and central processes of

perception and if the poet raises these to a new level, each of us echoes the divinely creative 'Let there be light' in each and every word we speak.

For Heidegger, however, it is not imagination that is decisive. Indeed, given the Kantian and German Idealist provenance of the idea of imagination as conceived by Coleridge he would certainly be likely to see in this a further outworking of ontotheology. More important, in Heidegger's view, is the idea of the poet as one who is called—called on by the gods to speak a particular word to the people and, in doing so, gather them into the community of those to whom the god's favour extends. Commenting on the opening words of Hölderlin's poem 'The Ister'—'Now come, fire'—Heidegger states that 'Only those called to a calling can truly call: "come." And this calling that is called alone has a proper necessity to it' (8). The opening invocation may make it seem as if the poet imagines himself to be calling forth the sun, as if he had power over it—perhaps, though Heidegger doesn't say it, in the manner of a sovereign agent of technological dominion—but, as Heidegger understands this invocation, it is rather to be understood as a declaration of readiness: 'we, the ones thus calling, are ready ... [and] are so because we are called by the coming fire itself' (7). Far from it being the case that such poets imagine themselves to be empowered to name their world, they are rather 'summoned to hear' (7), that is, to practice the 'belonging', i.e., 'listening' (*Gehören*), in language, to being that Heidegger elsewhere argues is definitive of the human relation to being.

In these terms, the poet is not a creative 'I' bringing forth new words in the power of his productive imagination. Rather, the poet is a kind of translator who finds his right words through attending to the divine language, the language of thunder, mountain, and river, and rendering them as human words, interpretations open for interpretation. But, as the reference to the 'proper necessity' of poetic vocation implies, this is not just a case of inventing words that can be interpreted in an infinity of different ways. Instead, it is a word that speaks from and to a concrete conjunction of human possibilities in a particular historical moment. And it is precisely the need of this historical moment, of a time marked by the disenchantment of the divine world and the delay of the divine Parousia that Heidegger sees as the defining theme of Hölderlin's calling. In other words, poetic

language of this kind is precisely language that speaks for and to a situation in which human beings seek new foundations for community in the wake of the death of God. It is poetry that keeps open the possibility of a saving power, a new God-to-come, even in the time of God's eclipse and absence.

There is much to question here. As ever in Heidegger, there are possible political implications of the Hölderlin lectures that we are likely to find uncomfortable. We might also doubt whether, given his insistence on the ubiquity and likely longevity of the age of technology, Heidegger has really advanced far beyond Schiller's double-edged lament for the gods of Greece, namely, that 'what lives undyingly in song, in life must pass away', i.e., whether he has offered more than a purely poetic reconciliation, a reconciliation that last only as long as the spell of reading itself.

I leave these questions for discussion. But I do wish to touch on one further feature of Heidegger's argument, namely, his insistence on speech, the spoken word, as the primary mode in which language is manifest. It is in this connection that we can interpret the perhaps surprising fact that Heidegger gave a broadcast reading of a selection of Hölderlin poems. In the light of what he says elsewhere about technology, one might wonder that he agreed to use such a technological medium with which to share the words of his favoured poet. However, whatever reservations he may have had about the medium of radio, he clearly believed that it was, nevertheless, a means by which to give speech to the poetic word. In this connection it is significant that in his introductory words he asked 'What does the poet *say* to us?' (to which, interestingly, the answer was 'he says the Holy'). To be in language otherwise than in the mode of technology is to be in language as a speaker of language, as giving voice to language.⁴

In this regard it is therefore rather consistent with some of the basic differences between them, that amongst the phenomena that Derrida lists at the start of *De la Grammatologie* as marking the conquest of language by writing are cinematography, cybernetics, and genetics, that is, broadly the same phenomena

⁴ In fact, the strategy of these broadcasts is entirely consistent with Heidegger's repeated view that he is not simply against technology and that the task is not, as it were, to get rid of technology but to relate to it thoughtfully (rather than, as he believed to be more typical, thoughtlessly).

in which Heidegger discerns the ‘danger’ of a technicization of language. Yet later in his career Derrida too will sound a note of caution with regard to what he calls the ‘artefactuality’ of contemporary communication, a term combining artificiality and virtuality, and that he sees as especially sinister in relation to political life, pointing out that ‘when a journalist or politician appears to be addressing us, in our homes, looking us straight in the eyes, he (or she) is actually reading from a screen, under the command of a “prompt”, a text worked out elsewhere, at another time, sometimes by others, and checked over by a whole network of anonymous editors’.⁵

Again we might recall Arendt’s warning about the fundamental difference between science and politics as regards language. In these terms, the recovery of the living voice, of the voice that is spoken and owned by the speaker, for which the speaker takes responsibility in his or her own body, the body that resonates with the effort of their speaking, is also at the centre of the political crisis of our time. Clearly, we cannot reproduce the face-to-face of Athenian democracy and, as in the case of Heidegger’s poetry broadcasts, it is not a matter of abandoning the age of technology but of finding a comportment that preserves what is essential as we seek to orientate ourselves within it. But, if Heidegger is right, this is also connected with the question of calling, that is, of speaking in a manner otherwise than the arbitrary assertion of individual or sectional interests, speaking under the constraints of what, in the case of the poet, Heidegger calls ‘necessity’. Authentic politics cannot be conjured forth. That this was already the false promise of the teachers of rhetoric in the ancient world, reminds us that the task of philosophy in sifting the false and the true is nothing new. And, if we can extend Ong’s words to the emergence of the sophists and teachers of rhetoric, their practice too evidences a certain technologizing of the word, even in, with, and under a situation in which the word was still, for the most part, spoken—although also a situation in which the advance of writing was already having its effect.⁶ Here then, we might see the philosophical questioning of the functioning of contemporary

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision (Entretiens filmés)*, Paris, Galilée, 1996, p. 12.

⁶ In early lectures on Aristotle, Heidegger himself sees this as the situation that, as it were, called forth the need for philosophy.

media as returning us to the very sources of philosophy itself; a perennial vocation, perhaps, challenged into life by new tasks.