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# Das Gestell and Human Autonomy: On Andrew Feenberg's Interpretation of Martin Heidegger

Zachary Peck

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# *Das Gestell* and Human Autonomy:

On Andrew Feenberg's Interpretation of Martin Heidegger

By

Zachary Peck

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
Honors in Philosophy Program  
College of Arts and Sciences  
East Tennessee State University

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The following work was certainly not brought forth by an independent mind. One of its primary conclusions is that our culture has placed too great an emphasis upon the independence of individual autonomy, and has failed to understand the interdependent and socially embedded nature of human autonomy. Thus, it would be incredibly hypocritical to present this work as the product of an individual effort. To take sole credit would be vain and would reflect the modern *hubris* that myself and others have been working to overturn. First and foremost, I must thank Dr. Leslie MacAvoy. Without her, I would have never developed the strong interest I have in European philosophy. My courses with her have deeply shaped the way I think and the way I live. Moreover, this work would have never been completed without her guidance as my thesis advisor. She has been an incredible professor and I am deeply honored to have been her student. Next, I must thank Dr. Douglas Duckworth, who has been an amazing mentor. He helped me cultivate my interest in Buddhist thought, and although it is mostly implicit, this work is deeply indebted to the Buddhist philosophical tradition. Additionally, he played a significant role in expanding my intellectual creativity by allowing me to explore some more ‘radical’ ideas in his courses. I must also thank Dr. David Harker for spending numerous hours helping me think through some of philosophy’s most abstract and difficult problems. My courses with Dr. Harker helped me, in particular, develop my reasoning abilities and logical capacities. He has been an incredible mentor, teacher, and, most importantly, friend. Finally, I owe thanks to Dr. Richard Kortum for having faith in my philosophical aptitude and encouraging me to pursue philosophy. I do not think that any person (perhaps with the exception of my parents) has ever believed in my capabilities more than Dr. Kortum. He is truly an inspiration to all of those under his tutelage.

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## Abstract

In my thesis, I examine the relationship between modern technology and human autonomy from the philosophical perspective of Martin Heidegger. He argues that the essence of modern technology is the *Gestell*. Often translated as ‘enframing,’ the *Gestell* is a mode of revealing, or understanding, being, in which all beings are revealed as, or understood as, raw materials. By revealing all beings as raw materials, we eventually understand ourselves as raw materials. I argue that this undermines human autonomy, but, unlike Andrew Feenberg, I do not believe this process is irreversible from Heidegger’s perspective. I articulate the meaning of the *Gestell* as an historical claim and how it challenges human autonomy, but may never absolutely eradicate it. Contra Feenberg’s interpretation, I argue that Heidegger’s ontology, including the *Gestell*, provides a crucial ground for understanding how we might salvage autonomy in a culture increasingly dominated by modern technology. Specifically, by drawing on Heidegger’s conception of *Gelassenheit*, I suggest that salvaging human autonomy requires a calm acceptance and opening up to the challenge of modern technology. This is not, as Feenberg suggests, a passive acceptance of the eradication of human autonomy. Rather, this is the ontological ground that provides us with the possibility of salvaging autonomy. By opening us up to the essence of modern technology, we understand the contingency of the *Gestell*, its essentially ambiguous nature, and are granted with the freedom to subordinate its reign to other human values and modes of understanding being.

## Introduction

Martin Heidegger ends his lecture “The Question Concerning Technology” by cryptically suggesting that the essence of modern technology is inherently ambiguous insofar as it poses *the* most extreme danger to humanity’s understanding of itself while simultaneously granting us the possibility of salvation from this very threat. The following essay is thus an attempt to understand this cryptic ambiguity. Pursuing an understanding of this ambiguity requires understanding the meaning of Heidegger’s notion of the *Gestell*, which he designates as the essence of modern technology. For this reason, this work is essentially an attempt to understand the meaning of the *Gestell*. Of particular importance, I believe, is Andrew Feenberg’s interpretation of Heidegger’s conception of the *Gestell*, which I believe is inadequate and fails to account for the above mentioned ambiguity. He believes that it is not a philosophically adequate understanding of the essence of modern technology, and argues that it threatens human autonomy without providing any room for saving ourselves from this threat. I disagree with Feenberg’s interpretation and argue that Heidegger’s thought accommodates Feenberg’s desire to salvage human autonomy much more than he suggests. In fact, I argue that Heidegger’s thought is crucial for salvaging human autonomy in the increasingly technologically permeated modern world.

As a critical theorist, Feenberg argues that the formal rationality that permeates technological society undermines human autonomy and should therefore be subject to critical reflection. And as a practical and politically oriented thinker, he attempts to describe a technological future that subordinates formal rationality to the pursuit of increasing human autonomy by reimagining the way in which technology is integrated into our social infrastructure. Heidegger’s claim that the *Gestell* poses the extreme danger to humanity, Feenberg rightly points out, may be interpreted as a threat to human autonomy. For this reason, he does not believe



Heidegger's philosophy can help us reimagine our relationship to technology in such a way that human autonomy is increased; on the contrary, he believes Heidegger's nihilism led him to reject the very possibility of human autonomy. In this essay, I argue that Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy is inadequate, particularly because he overlooks the essential ambiguity of the *Gestell*. Consequently, he fails to imagine how Heidegger's thought may help us reimagine our relationship to ourselves and our world and thereby increase our autonomy.

### *Outline*

In the first chapter of this essay, I attempt to place Heidegger's conception of modern technology into the context of human autonomy and freedom. I explicate what may be referred to as the technological liberation thesis and the historical evidence that supports its case. Namely, this view suggests that humans were able to liberate themselves from the reign of nature by constructing technology, which is conceptualized as a neutral means to an end. I then critique this view from a Heideggerian perspective by focusing on how technology itself may eclipse human autonomy, provided we understand its ontological essence. Next, I provide a much more detailed understanding of human autonomy by reconstructing it in Heidegger's ontological language. Specifically, I focus on the ontological possibility of authentic and inauthentic conceptions of autonomy that are shaped by a society's ontological framework and influence the way in which individual agents relate to themselves. I argue that human autonomy is grounded in our ability to understand the essential ground of our being. But the *Gestell*, however, threatens to conceal this essential ground. Thus, I motivate the claim (which I believe Feenberg endorses) that the *Gestell* threatens to absolutely eradicate human autonomy by concealing, once and for all, the essential ground of our being. By focusing on technological dystopias and more optimistic interpreters of Heidegger, however, I ultimately call this view into question.

In the second chapter, I respond to Feenberg's nihilistic interpretation of the *Gestell* by more carefully examining his reasons for thinking that the *Gestell* threatens to absolutely eradicate human autonomy. I interpret Feenberg's criticisms of Heidegger as a rejection of the *Gestell*'s adequacy as an historical claim, and its failure to provide any practical solution to technological reformation. By analyzing his criticisms, I argue that Feenberg has misunderstood the *Gestell* by exaggerating its historical implications. To demonstrate, I consider the way in which the *Gestell* may be understood as an historical explanation of early twentieth century European culture, which is obviously the culture within which Heidegger develops his philosophy. From these considerations, I make two points: first, the *Gestell*'s role in modern Europe concretely demonstrates its ambiguity; and second, it also demonstrates the absurdity of the claim that it may ever absolutely eradicate human autonomy. I conclude by arguing that Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger's prescribed response to technology as passive acceptance of technology's reign and the abandonment of our desire to be autonomous is woefully misconceived. As historical beings, we have been destined to be challenged by the *Gestell*, and therefore cannot hide from its challenge. In this sense, we must accept the *Gestell* insofar as we must accept our facticity to avoid bad faith. But particular individuals are actually granted with the opportunity of more deeply understanding the essence of their own being provided they reflectively question the essence of technology in attempt to face and understand its danger. Only in such reflective questioning may humans understand their essence and increase their autonomy. To passively accept the *Gestell* would be to fail to reflectively question its role in our lives, and thereby fail to increase our autonomy. Therefore, I argue in the final section that Feenberg's project would actually be enhanced by incorporating Heidegger's conception of the *Gestell*. It provides an ontological basis for understanding how we, as individual agents, may respond to technology's threat.

## 1 The relationship between technology (*das Gestell*) and autonomy

In this chapter, I articulate Heidegger's view concerning the relationship between technology and human autonomy. Heidegger does not actually discuss human autonomy in the above mentioned lecture, so constructing the relationship between his conception of the essence of technology and human autonomy will require some interpretive creativity. First, I will describe what I refer to as the technological liberation thesis. This thesis assumes technology is a neutral means to an end absolutely controlled by human agents. With technology's help, humans liberate themselves from nature's dominion. From a Heideggerian perspective, however, this account conceals more than it reveals. Assuming technology is neutral and absolutely controlled by human agents turns out to be false when we understand the essence of technology, i.e. the *Gestell*. By transforming all beings into exploitable material and challenging humans to order, regulate, and control said material, which Heidegger believes is the ontological source of modern technology's rampant integration into human society, human autonomy is subordinated to the self-directing logic of the *Gestell*. In contrast to the technological liberation thesis, this suggests that Heidegger endorses what some have called the autonomous technology thesis. From Feenberg's perspective, it is for this reason that Heidegger's account is antithetical to human autonomy. This is because the autonomous technology thesis is usually understood to imply that technology's autonomy eclipses and eradicates human autonomy.

Although I think it is correct to interpret the *Gestell* as a sort of self-directing force, i.e. an autonomous force, I believe it is incorrect to interpret it as entailing the absolute eradication of human autonomy. This interpretation ignores the essential ambiguity of the *Gestell* by only focusing on the threat it poses. This threat, Heidegger suggests, is the danger that the *Gestell* might conceal the human essence. Moreover, he suggests that it leads to the illusion that we have become

“lords of the earth” (332). Thus, I argue that the *Gestell* threatens human autonomy by concealing the authentic structure of autonomy and replacing it with an inauthentic conception. In contradistinction to this inauthentic conception of autonomy, I briefly articulate an authentic theory of autonomy by describing Heidegger’s conception of the essence of human being. Authentic autonomy, I argue, is both relative and interdependent upon the autonomy of others and the autonomy of being itself. But this doesn’t address Feenberg’s worry that the *Gestell* eradicates human autonomy. If it threatens to conceal the authentic structure of our autonomy by replacing it with an inauthentic conception, then it is possible that human autonomy may be completely eradicated if this threat comes to fruition.

In attempt to fully articulate the threat the *Gestell* poses, I briefly motivate the claim that it absolutely eradicates human autonomy (only to reject the adequacy of this claim however). I consider two stories (*We* and *The Machine Stops*) that portray societies in which a technical ordering of society has concealed many important aspects of human nature. Nevertheless, both novels describe momentary breaks from the technical rationality of the dominant culture in which particular individuals are reminded of their humanity. I suggest that it is this sort of threat to autonomy that the *Gestell* poses. In other words, the *Gestell* threatens to become the dominant ontological framework, but it may never eradicate the possibility that humans may experience momentary breaks from its reign. To support this claim, I consider some of the most prominent Heideggerians who would reject Feenberg’s interpretation of the *Gestell* and suggest that we may overcome the threat posed by technology. Feenberg, on the other hand, does not read Heidegger so optimistically. He argues that Heidegger’s so called ‘saving power’ is nothing but a passive acceptance of technology’s reign and the abandonment of human autonomy. A more complete

explication of Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger and a response to his interpretation will be the subject of the second chapter.

*A Heideggerian critique of the technological liberation thesis*

For the vast majority of human existence on earth, if we extend our analysis into the depths of pre-history, humans have been in constant struggle with the forces of nature. The earliest manifestations of (pseudo?)-science arose from the need for humans to predict their ever changing world. Predicting seasonal weather patterns proved necessary for humans to engage in agriculture and thus avoid the ever present threat of death. The desire to understand greater patterns led to early astronomical reasoning concerning the relationship between stellar patterns and earthly weather. Such knowledge proved indispensable for early humans as they were able to plan their actions accordingly. From this perspective, natural patterns determine human social behavior. Entire cultural traditions arose in response to the ebb and flow of natural patterns. This view of early social traditions is, however, incomplete. It stresses our negative relation to nature, namely that our lives are determined by nature. But there is also a positive relation: it is within the natural world that human behavior arises in the first place. Hence, without a world in which to live, we would not live the lives that are constrained by this world. Although this is a seemingly simple point, I think it is often overlooked and must be kept in mind as we precede into the following analysis.

Fast-forwarding to the early modern period, we find an increasingly important social desire to understand nature in a particular way, i.e. scientifically. Early proponents of science such as Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton among others delineated the newfound scientific method. Importantly for these new theorizers, modern science was to be distinguished

from the science of antiquity. A new precision and rigor, such as that found in the field of mathematics was required. Hence, the new science was grounded in mathematical analysis. Heidegger demonstrates that, unlike Aristotle's ontology, the mathematization of modern science equalized all beings by assuming they all exist according to the same principles. Aristotle argued that heavenly bodies behaved differently than earthly bodies. This is because entities are distinguished based upon their nature in the hierarchy of beings. Modern mathematics equalizes this hierarchy by assuming all entities must behave according to the same basic laws. Newton, the pioneer of mathematical physics, provides us with one such law, i.e. gravity. This allows modern physicists to treat all objects, whether heavenly or earthly, in the same manner. Doing so provides the physicist with optimal control in his pursuit to understand nature. With a firm grasp of the mathematical principles underlying all beings, one can, in principle, understand all beings.<sup>1</sup>

This story demonstrates the tendency of modernity to emphasize rigorous control over all beings. In the philosophy of Francis Bacon, we find an account of man's calling to control nature by understanding it as if it were something man-made. He writes, "she [i.e. nature] is put in constraint, molded, and made as it were new by art and the hand of man; as in things artificial" (Bacon 1870, 294). As a Christian, Bacon believed we are made in the image of God. This provides us with certain capacities that only are only attributable absolutely to God. Most notably, for our purposes, this provides man with the capacity to create according to a perfected logic, i.e. God's logic. God created the heavens according to such a logic. Humanity is thus given the power to constrain nature via creation, "as in things artificial," and by doing so we are liberated from nature in a manner we share only with the lord. God creates existence, but is not controlled by his creation.

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<sup>1</sup> For Heidegger's treatment of the mathematization of being in contrast to Aristotle's ontology, see Heidegger 2010c.

Likewise, for Bacon, when man is able to constrain nature, man is liberated from the control previously exerted by nature without being controlled by his creation. Hence, Bacon's utopia, as described in *New Atlantis*, is a society determined by the technological innovations of those scientists who have sufficiently gained control over nature. From this perspective, technology is conceptualized as an entirely liberating force. No longer will nature determine human activity because 'man' has found the ability to control 'her' via technological innovations.<sup>2</sup> Note that these technological innovations required the mathematization of nature in which all beings were equalized such that they exist according to the same laws. In other words, all beings are conceptualized from the perspective of a single ontological framework.

This position, however, assumes that technology is a neutral means to an end providing us with absolute control over technology whenever we use it. If technology were inherently value-laden, then it is possible that its values eclipse ours which would undermine any control we might've otherwise had. If this is the case, then the above description may conceal more truths concerning human autonomy than it reveals. As it stands, the above description suggests that technology does nothing but improve human autonomy by increasing the level of control we have over our own becoming. Technology will help us construct a perfectly ordered society such as Bacon's *New Atlantis* where we will presumably be as free as gods. But if technology is itself autonomous, and not merely a neutral instrument, then we may be mistaking a threat to our autonomy for an enhancement. In his lecture "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger argues that technology is not simply a neutral means to an end. Although 'correct,' this instrumental definition of technology conceals technology's ontological essence. To develop an

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent description of the contiguity of dominion over women and dominion over nature, see Merchant 2002.

authentically free relationship to technology, we must understand it ontologically as what it essentially *is*.

To understand technology's essence, according to Heidegger, we must look towards the essence of instrumentality, which as a type of causality, is ontologically grounded in causality. Whenever a means is used to bring about an end, the end is both caused and effected. All causes are the cause of an effect insofar as they are responsible for the presencing, or coming into being, of the effect. Both causality and instrumentality are thus essentially a bringing forth of something into being that was not previously there. Causality, and thus instrumentality, and thus technology, are all ontologically grounded in what has been translated as revealing, or unconcealing – i.e. *alētheia*. Heidegger argues that the primal insight hidden within our contemporary notion of truth (i.e. the Greek *alētheia*) has been lost throughout philosophy's history. He claims the *alētheia* is the essence of truth, which, in modern culture, means the correctness of a subject's representation of an object. But *alētheia*, from the Greek perspective (i.e. our intellectual ancestors), is more primordial than this description which presupposes an ontological distinction between subject and object. '*Lethe*' means concealment, or forgetfulness, which, in Greek mythology, refers to a river in Hades that eradicates all memories. *A-lētheia* thus means un-concealment.<sup>3</sup> Causality, instrumentality, and technology are all essentially grounded in unconcealment insofar as they all describe the coming into being of beings, i.e. coming out of concealment into unconcealment, which is essentially the revealing of truth prior to any ontological dualism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Socrates, one might argue, conceptualizes truth as 'un-forgetfulness' in the *Meno*.

<sup>4</sup> The unconcealment of truth refers to the event in which being itself is revealed. This ontological description of truth is thus presupposed in any account of truth as the correctness of representation of objective affairs for a subject. The event of unconcealment is an integrated whole which conceptualizes being revealed (i.e. a world composed of objects) as equi-primordial with the revealing of being (i.e. a subject experiencing a world).



Instrumentality, and thus technology, are unique modes of unconcealment. Technological unconcealment relies upon a human to bring forth that which is being unconcealed. Heidegger traces this distinction back to the Greek concepts of *physis* and *techne*. *Physis* brings itself forth, e.g. nature. Nature's incessant revealing does not depend upon humans in order to bring it forth; it simply brings itself forth. *Techne* refers to the various crafts and artworks that are brought forth by human agents. But modern technology, he argues, does not *bring forth* beings into open unconcealment wherein it becomes an infinitely unique being in itself; on the contrary, it *challenges* beings to be unconcealed as mere raw material to be ordered efficiently. The essence of modern technology is this challenge to equalize all beings as mere raw material, and order said raw material efficiently. As we saw above, modern science demands all beings to be revealed as quantifiable such that they can be understood from the perspective of mathematics. This process of revealing beings as essentially quantifiable threatens to conceal the non-quantifiable qualities of being. As essentially raw material, beings challenged by modern technology have been stripped of their non-quantifiable properties. Moreover, this challenge is not restricted to technological artifacts, but is extended to include all beings, including nature, which would have previously been revealed as *physis*. Other modes of revealing, such as *physis*, are thus eclipsed by the challenging of modern technology which equalizes all beings by transforming them into raw material. Thus, by inherently encompassing all of being and equalizing all beings by reducing them to a single ontological essence, the essence of modern technology challenges all beings by predefining them ontologically. Being is no longer brought forth and granted with a life of its own, as it were.

To continue to refer to this mode of revealing as 'technology' would be misleading. Commonly conceived, technology refers to particular beings that are created by humans. Heidegger's claim is not that technology, as commonly conceived, is a mode of revealing, but that

the existence of modern technologies is grounded in a particular mode of revealing. This is what he refers to as the *Gestell*. In German, *Gestell* may mean rack, or frame. For Heidegger, this word is used to denote the mode of revealing that ‘enframes’ all being into one all-encompassing ontological framework that challenges all beings to be raw material ordered efficiently. Thus, it is usually translated as enframing. By challenging humanity, the *Gestell* transforms our world into nothing but a large set of exploitable materials. By doing so, the world is revealed as essentially exploitable and therefore controllable. The *Gestell* is why “man, precisely as the one threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth” (332). It is the *Gestell*, as a mode of revealing, that paves the way for the development of modern science and technology and the control that these practices provide. Therefore, the *Gestell* is what liberates us from the constraints of nature. But, we have yet to understand the nature of the *Gestell*’s challenge and its relation to human autonomy. Could it be that it undermines human autonomy, while creating the illusion that we are more autonomous than before?

*Understanding the Gestell’s threat to autonomy: what is autonomy?*

Insofar as we are the ones challenged to reveal being as exploitable matter, we are challenged “more originally” than the beings with which we engage. Heidegger cites the increasing talk of “human resources” and the demand placed upon the public to consume the material that has been exploited and transformed into a consumable product.<sup>5</sup> By challenging us to reveal all beings as exploitable matter, we are challenged to reveal ourselves as exploitable matter. Yet, as we saw, the *Gestell* is essentially grounded in unconcealment – it is a mode of revealing, i.e.

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<sup>5</sup> Specifically, he describes how the public is challenged to “swallow” what is printed in newspapers, which reflects the challenge placed upon a forest to reveal itself as a collection of wood which can be exploited for a variety of purposes, one of which is paper (Heidegger 2010d, 323).

unconcealment. But by extending its reign equally across all of being, i.e. all of unconcealment, it threatens to conceal its own essence; in other words, it threatens to conceal unconcealment itself. Unconcealment is increasingly concealed the more deeply the *Gestell* becomes entrenched within our culture. As the *Gestell* is increasingly assumed as the standard mode of revealing, the event of the revelation of being itself loses its mysterious character and is assumed as necessarily given. This process of assuming the *Gestell* as the only possible mode of revealing is simultaneously the processual concealing of unconcealment. This process thus threatens to conceal our essence as the “guardians of truth” by transforming us into exploitable matter. It continuously challenges humanity to approach “the possibility of pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all [of our] standards on this basis” (331). In this sense, the *Gestell* is autonomous – it determines the way in which humans relate to all beings provided we are under its spell. For this reason, the autonomy of the *Gestell* threatens to undermine human autonomy.

But as we saw above, technology seems to liberate us thereby increasing our autonomy. Heidegger warns of this, however, when he says that we will posture ourselves as “lords of the earth” despite the fact that we are the ones originally challenged. Thus, I argue that the *Gestell* undermines human autonomy by constructing an inauthentic conception of autonomy that becomes accepted theoretically and enacted practically. This inauthentic conception is grounded in an inauthentic conception of self. Not only does the *Gesell* lead to an inauthentic conception of autonomy, but, according to its own logic, it simultaneously reduces this conception to an ontological impossibility. By challenging human beings to reveal all beings as raw materials, we are eventually challenged to understand ourselves as raw materials. Consequently, the *Gestell* leads to the conception that autonomy is impossible because there is no causally independent mind distinct from the world of material beings – all that exists is the world of material beings. In the

following, I explicate both the inauthentic conception of autonomy and the increasingly popular notion that autonomy is illusory.

What I am calling an inauthentic conception of autonomy refers to the traditional<sup>6</sup> conception of autonomy discussed by proponents of relational autonomy, which will be discussed shortly.<sup>7</sup> This traditional conception traces back to Cartesian dualism<sup>8</sup>. It supposes that humans are actually non-material souls, or minds, that are causally isolated from the material world. It is this causal independence that supposedly gives us our freedom. If we were not causally independent, we would be determined by the causal matrix that determines all events in the material world. This conception, I argue, is a product of the *Gestell*. By reducing all being to exploitable matter, there is no room for human consciousness, freedom, or autonomy. All beings are essentially matter enframed within a causal matrix. The possibility that this causal matrix may be understood and therefore absolutely controlled and manipulated by a consciousness that understands all the facts of the world leads to the worry that human freedom is impossible.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, humans are conscious, free, and autonomous (or so many of us would like to think). Therefore, many believe that we must be ontologically distinct from the material world. Moreover, it is this causal isolation that allows us to be the manipulators, regulators, controllers, and “lords of the earth”. In a world of exploitable matter, human beings are ontologically detached as the exploiters. Theoretically,

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Traditional’ autonomy, here, simply refers to non-relational conceptions of autonomy. I borrow this language from the feminist literature which distinguishes between relational and non-relational (i.e. traditional) conceptions of autonomy. See Freeman 2011.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the similarities between Heidegger’s philosophy and relational autonomy, see Freeman 2011. She critiques traditional autonomy from both a Heideggerian and a feminist perspective, which demonstrates why both perspectives should endorse a relational conception of autonomy as opposed to the traditional conception.

<sup>8</sup> It may be more precise to understand the traditional conception of autonomy and self as rooted, not only in Cartesian thought, but Kantian philosophy as well.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Dennett, for example, argues that our worry that causal determinism undermines human freedom simply reflects the irrational fear that some ‘bogeyman’ is capable of controlling human behavior provided they understand and can manipulate the causal matrix that constitutes our being (Dennett 1984).

this position has been endorsed by countless philosophers. Practically, this conception seems to permeate our egoistic modern culture which emphasizes independence, control, and the lack of reliance upon others.

This position, however, is reduced to absurdity by the increasingly assumed mode of revealing, i.e. the *Gestell*. By equalizing all beings, there is no room for human ‘privilege.’ Humans, too, are reduced to exploitable matter. The notion of an un-orderable, uncontrollable, causally isolated being that cannot be enframèd within the *Gestell* is increasingly considered impossible. From this perspective, human autonomy is an illusion. There is only the material world that inherently orders itself, and we are simply moments in its unfolding. From this perspective, we are merely materials subject to the unfolding of fate. But it is the *Gestell* that reveals the world as such. Theoretically, this position has been endorsed by an increasing number of philosophers who reject the existence of free will.<sup>10</sup> Practically, this conception seems to be enacted by people who suggest that one cannot help but do what one’s material body has fated one to do. For example, I would argue that there is reason to believe that this way of thinking is leading to an increase in pharmaceutical use to treat ‘mental disorders,’ which are increasingly being reduced to malfunctions in the brain. Psychological conditions, from this perspective, supervene on material processes, and therefore the only way to change one’s psychological condition is to alter the material processes in our nervous system.

We are thus left with two competing views concerning human autonomy from the perspective of the *Gestell*. Notice that both conceptualize autonomy in the same way – that is, to be autonomous, we must be causally isolated minds that control and regulate the material world.

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of a theoretical objection to the existence of free will for, what I believe to be, similar reasons, see Pereboom 2007.

From one perspective (let's call it autonomous dualism), we are autonomous insofar as we are ontologically distinct from the material world. From the other perspective (let's call it fatalistic materialism), this ontological distinction is simultaneously assumed to be the only possible conception of autonomy and is considered to be false, which implies that autonomy is illusory. Both are responses to the *Gestell*. Either we are distinct from the world revealed as exploitable matter, or we are not. If we are, we are autonomous minds causally independent from the material world, and it is from this position of causal isolation that we exert our control over the world. If we are not, autonomy is an illusion. This raises the following questions: What is the authentic nature of human being? Is there an authentic conception of autonomy grounded in an authentic conception of human being that avoids the problems mentioned above? And, if so, how does the *Gestell* relate to authentic human autonomy? Does the *Gestell* eradicate human autonomy by concealing the authentic essence of human being?

The notion of 'authentic autonomy' suggests a conceptualization of autonomy that is true to the ontological structure of human being. Autonomy may be defined as a sort self-direction of one's becoming. Understanding this concept requires understanding what we truly are, for it is what we truly are, if anything, that is capable of such self-direction. Theoretical constructions of the 'self' may correspond to inauthentic self-conceptions which thwart self-direction in a practical sense. For example, theoretical conceptions of self compatible with the *Gestell* may lead to an inauthentic conception of autonomy guiding humanity in our everyday lives. As suggested above, this may lead to an illusory conception autonomy that conceals the fact that our autonomy is being undermined behind the illusion of increased human control. Alternatively, authentic self-conceptions would presumably increase autonomy by revealing practical ways in which we may increase our autonomy authentically.

In his attempt to understand human being authentically, Heidegger's philosophy is essentially a post-Cartesian, or anti-Cartesian, philosophy. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes the ontological structure of human being as Da-sein, or 'being-there'. This denotes the way in which humans *are* (-sein) always *there* (Da) thrown into a world. Unlike Descartes who claims he can doubt the existence of an external world but cannot doubt his own being, Heidegger argues that Descartes' being is only revealed against the backdrop of an unconcealed world. Thus, *Dasein* is equi-primordially being-in-the-world, and not a detached causally isolated subject. Conceptual distinctions such as subject and object, mind and matter, and thought and substance are fundamentally derived from this structurally unified phenomenon. He also describes this unified phenomenon wherein a world is revealed as a temporal clearing. As *Dasein*, we find ourselves thrown into a temporal clearing wherein beings are revealed as essentially historical, i.e. within time. Each being has a necessary past, and a multiplicity of possible futures. It is this primordial structure that stands, as it were, before itself and its own becoming that constitutes the being that we are. Therefore, the ontological source of human autonomy must be understood as fundamentally rooted in our being qua temporal clearing.

As beings who have some implicit understanding of being in our being<sup>11</sup>, humans tend towards either concealing or unconcealing this implicit understanding. Concealed, we become lost within our everyday interpretation of being and simply assume its reign. Unconcealed, we are given over, as it were, to our authentic being as the temporal clearing, and the contingency of the frameworks that structure the revealing of the world is revealed. What is concealed by the *Gestell* is its ontological ground, namely the temporal clearing. And by doing so, it conceals its own contingency as a mode of revealing and asserts itself as an ontological necessity. In other words,

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<sup>11</sup> See Heidegger 2008.

the world is necessarily revealed as a set of exploitable materials. But when we become exposed to our essential self as the clearing, we are “held out into the nothing” and are thus capable of grasping the inherent emptiness of the *Gestell* (Heidegger 2010a, 103). Not only what is present, but “what is absent, too, cannot be as such unless it presences in the *free space of the clearing*” (Heidegger 2010e, 444). And what is absent in the unconcealment of the enframed world of the *Gestell* is the possibility of a world revealed that isn’t enframed. When we are opened up to the free space of the clearing, we are thus opened up to a free relation with the essence of technology insofar as we are opened to the possibility of choosing it or not.<sup>12</sup> Only in the free space of the clearing is human being opened up to an understanding of itself and the structures that shape its becoming.

Unlike the Cartesian subject, this temporal clearing is not causally independent. It is essentially interdependent as it is temporally constituted by its being thrown into the history of being. Thus, ontologically, there is no proper way to understand individual autonomy distinct from the more general autonomy of being. From one perspective, it would be accurate to say that the entire history of being manifests and understands itself through human being, and from another perspective, it would be accurate to say that human being is the manifestation of the history of being and therefore understands itself through this history. In other words, our autonomy is intimately interwoven into the autonomy of being itself – we are temporally situated beings intertwined into a history that is simultaneously directing its own becoming and granting us a mode of revealing to understand being and direct our own becoming. In this sense, both the *Gestell* and

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre develops this insight by arguing that the ontological source of human freedom is our being on the cusp, as it were, of both being and nothingness. See Sartre 1984.



human autonomy are participants in a sort of interdependent actor network.<sup>13</sup> Nothing in the network has absolutely autonomy; it is always relative. Quite similarly, in Buddhist philosophy, the absolute interdependence of being is considered to imply the groundlessness of any essential self. Alan Wallace argues that, because of this, Buddhist debates concerning ‘freedom’ do not concern its absolute existence or non-existence, but ways that increase it and ways that decrease it.<sup>14</sup> Autonomy is thus never absolute, but relative. So as a temporal clearing always shaped by the history of being, our autonomy is both relative and interdependent upon the autonomy of others and the ontological free space opened up by the unconcealment of being in general.

Given this account of authentic autonomy, what is its relationship to the *Gestell*? As we saw in the first section, the *Gestell* threatens to conceal its own ontological ground by concealing unconcealment itself. In this way, it threatens to conceal the human essence (as the temporal clearing) as well. Humans are transformed into either exploitable material or ontologically distinct minds causally isolated from the material world. By transforming our conception of our self as such, the *Gestell* either creates an inauthentic conception of autonomy or reduces the conception of autonomy to absurdity. But if the *Gestell*'s autonomy is ontologically grounded in the autonomy of being itself, which also acts as the ground of human autonomy, can the *Gestell* ever truly eradicate human autonomy?

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<sup>13</sup> Bruno Latour argues that humans do not absolutely control technology, nor does technology absolutely control humans. Both, he suggests, are parts within an actor network, wherein technology (and nature for that matter) transforms, and integrates itself into, the agency of human being, but does not eradicate said agency. Here, I have appropriated this notion by suggesting that humans and the *Gestell* are self-directing forces within a larger matrix that also self-directs its own becoming. The autonomy of the matrix, and others within the matrix, does not undermine human autonomy, it simply demonstrates its interdependence upon the autonomy of others. (Latour 2009)

<sup>14</sup> See Wallace 2011.

*Does the Gestell absolutely eradicate human autonomy?*

To truly eradicate human autonomy, the *Gestell* must absolutely conceal its own ontological ground from the very being in which it is grounded, namely human being qua temporal clearing. The equalizing nature of the *Gestell* suggests that this is an actual possibility. With all beings challenged, there is no room for any being to avoid the challenge, including human being. The history of being, i.e. the history of unconcealment, may reach its pinnacle in the absolute concealment of unconcealment itself. Once this happens, humans would no longer be autonomous. The *Gestell* would reveal the world as orderable, and humans would go along ordering it. Captivated by the illusion that we are in absolute control, there would be room for questioning the reign of the *Gestell*. Slowly, as its reign became more deeply entrenched in human thought, we would lose the possibility of unconcealing our true essence.

Many dystopian depictions of our future seem to reflect this possibility. In the novel *We*, for example, Yevgeny Zamyatin describes a future society wherein humans are no longer named, but numbered, and are challenged to perpetuate the technological society that has been efficiently organized to maximize stability. The citizens of this society have no other duty than the rational ordering of a world already revealed and understood ontologically as essentially exploitable. Their existence is not only necessary for the perpetuation of the technological state, but the perpetuation of the state is necessary for their continued existence. Similarly, in the novel *The Machine Stops*, E.M. Forster depicts an underground society wherein all humans live out their days in utter isolation, connected to the world via an elaborate machine that provides for their every need. Interestingly, the characters in the novel are no longer captivated by what Heidegger calls the mystery of being. Knowledge has been reduced to the simple accumulation of facts. But as the machine begins to fail, the overly dependent humans are incapable of anticipating such failure.

They are incapable of conceiving an existence beyond their lives in the machine. Challenged to be mere parts in the perpetuation of the machine, they have no viable way of existing once it fails.

Although these are fictitious representations of the relationship between humans and technology, they demonstrate a culturally present fear that technology could undermine human autonomy absolutely and make us subservient to its reign. Moreover, they demonstrate a very practical reason for believing we may become subservient. Once our existence becomes materially dependent upon technology, we may have no other choice but to reveal the world from the perspective of the *Gestell* in order to perpetuate the modern technological infrastructure upon which we are necessarily dependent. For a similar reason, Andrew Feenberg rejects Heidegger's account of the *Gestell*. From his perspective, the *Gestell* leaves us no way to salvage human autonomy in any culture permeated by modern technology. Once the shared essence of the *Gestell* and human being is concealed, it is forever lost. Feenberg interprets Heidegger's response to the *Gestell* as one of passivity.<sup>15</sup> We simply allow the reign of the *Gestell* to take over, presumably because we have no other choice.

However, both of the above mentioned novels describe personal struggles to move beyond the technological world dominating their lives. In *We*, for example, the protagonist, D-503, meets a young woman who defies the law by smoking, drinking, and openly expressing her sexual desires. At one point, the two characters escape the technologically enframed society by visiting an ancient site, which suggests the continuing presence of a pre-technological culture. The anxiety caused by these illegal actions lead D-503 to start having dreams, a sign of mental illness from the perspective of the overly rationalized culture. Towards the end, D-503's brain is mechanically

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<sup>15</sup> See Feenberg 2000.

reorganized so that he will perform more efficiently as the human resource that he is. Despite this transformation in the protagonist, the society begins to unravel, as a rebel group begins to develop strength and birds begin to reenter the city that had literally been enclosed within a technological bubble which had concealed the sky. The theme of the novel is captured in the young woman's proclamation that there is no highest number, and therefore no final revolution. Zamyatin, at least, does not seem to think that modern technology may ever absolutely transform our understanding of being. In other words, it may never absolutely conceal its ontological ground in the free space of the clearing.

Similarly, in *The Machine Stops*, the protagonist yearns to escape the isolation of his place in the machine. He desires to use his body, unlike the majority of his fellow comrades who spend most of their lives in a single room engaging only their rational intellect. Upon escaping from the machine, he is captivated by the air circulating on the surface which he believes embodies the spirits of the past. Unlike his mother who cannot appreciate seeing stars in the sky, he is enamored with his experience on the earth's surface. In the end, when the machine actually stops, we learn that a society of people had been surviving on the earth's surface all along. Forster, too, seems to reject the possibility that the *Gestell* will ever reign absolutely. Both authors warn only of human arrogance and the possibility that we will be swept away by the false promises offered by the *Gestell*. Ultimately, any constructed human society will fail if it is incapable of responding to change. This raises the following questions: Does Heidegger conceptualize the *Gestell* in a similar fashion? Can it ever reign absolutely? Or is there no final mode of revealing that conceals, once and for all, unconcealment itself?

Many Heideggerians, I believe, would argue that the *Gestell* does not necessarily conceal itself absolutely. For example, Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa cite Heidegger's optimistic

description of the autobahn. Winding through the country side, the autobahn is no mere technological device. Contrasted with the endlessly straight roads that stretch across America's mid-west, the autobahn was not constructed solely upon the value of efficiency. As a cultural work of art, it gathers the German people and countryside revealing itself as more than exploitable matter, but as a national work of art.<sup>16</sup> This implies that there is some room for cultural autonomy even in highly technological scenarios. Likewise, Albert Borgmann argues that technologies are not fated to be revealed as 'devices' but may be revealed as 'focal things' capable of being integrated in an autonomously chosen human practice.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Dreyfus argues that the free relation to technology for which Heidegger is searching in his lecture requires a new god, or culturally unifying conception of the meaning of being. This 'god' is thus capable of reestablishing our autonomy and overcoming the threat posed by the *Gestell*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Heidegger scholars certainly seem to think that the *Gestell* will not necessarily eradicate human autonomy, even if we become materially dependent upon technologies.

So does the *Gestell* universally enframe our entire conception of being? To be clear, there are two conceptions of 'universal' that must be distinguished. According to one conception of 'universal', the answer is obviously yes. By challenging us to equalize all beings as exploitable matter, there is no being that is not challenged by the *Gestell*, including ourselves. In this sense, the *Gestell* universally enframes all beings. On the other hand, however, the *Gestell* seems entirely compatible with momentary breaks by individual agents from its reign in the increasingly technologically permeated world. As Dreyfus and Spinoza suggest, we can temporarily break from

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<sup>16</sup> See Dreyfus and Spinoza 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Although Borgmann distinguishes his account from Heidegger's, he is certainly influenced by Heidegger. Thus understanding his view may help us understand Heidegger's, provided we are cautious not to conflate the two positions. In this case, I would argue that his account is compatible with Heidegger's. (Borgmann 2009)

<sup>18</sup> See Dreyfus 2009.

the *Gestell*'s reign by appreciating the gathering capacity of modern technological devices, such as a highway bridge. The first sense in which the *Gestell* enframes our entire conception of being concerns its universal reach into the world of beings. The second sense in which it does not seem to enframe our entire conception of being reflects the possibility that the *Gestell* may fail to universally extend its reign to encompass all people at all times in a given society. In both of the above novels, all beings are certainly enframed from the perspective of many people most of the time. But, there are also temporary breaks from such enframing in which the world is revealed from a different perspective.

With that said, how are we to make sense of Heidegger's claim that the *Gestell* threatens to impose itself absolutely? Is this an absolute imposition in the first sense, but not the second? If so, then the *Gestell* does not pose such a dire threat to human autonomy as suggested by Feenberg. As long as we can temporarily escape the reign of the *Gestell* in our day to day lives, we are capable of maintaining some autonomy. Feenberg, as I will demonstrate in the next section, believes that the universality of the *Gestell* in the first sense implies that it is universal in the second sense. Contra Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger, I believe that we may have to rely on the *Gestell*, but as long as we can break from its reign and choose *when* to rely on it, we remain autonomous. As we saw in the first section, nature not only threatens our autonomy but is an essential background condition for our autonomy. Both nature and the *Gestell* certainly restrict our freedom to some extent (when we conceptualize our relationship to them in negative terms), but they also open up possibilities providing us with a free space in which we may live autonomously (when we conceptualize our relationship to them in positive terms). This is what is meant by the claim that authentic autonomy must be conceptualized as interdependent and relative. But, the danger the *Gestell* poses seems to be a threat in the second sense – it threatens to reveal the world as

exploitable matter at all times. Heidegger claims, “the rule of enframing 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” (Heidegger 2010d, 333). In other words, the *Gestell* threatens us with the possibility that we may never unconceal the world from any other perspective.

Nevertheless, Heidegger maintains that the essence of the *Gestell* is ambiguous and holds within it not only the extreme danger, but also the saving power. Feenberg suggests that this saving power is simply the passivity of giving up autonomy and accepting the reign of the *Gestell*. Others, such as Dreyfus, Spinoza, and Iain Thomson, interpret Heidegger much more optimistically. To adjudicate this debate, I believe we must understand that the *Gestell* is inherently an historical claim concerning the ontological understanding of entire societies. Thus, we must be careful to avoid exaggerating the claim by oversimplifying human history. In the next section, I articulate the meaning of the *Gestell* as an historical claim by interpreting Feenberg’s criticism of Heidegger as an objection to the its validity as an historical claim. I argue that Feenberg misunderstands the *Gestell* by failing to understand its relationship, as a culturally *dominant* mode of revealing, with the existing individual who is necessarily capable of reflectively questioning.

## **2 Responding to Andrew Feenberg's interpretation (and criticism) of Heidegger**

In this chapter, I explicate more carefully Feenberg's interpretation of Heidegger. Specifically, I draw attention to the emphasis he places on understanding the *Gestell* as an historical claim. Heidegger argues that *Gestell* is a mode of revealing grounded in the history of being. It is contingent insofar as it is a culturally relative phenomenon. In other words, the *Gestell* only 'holds sway' in certain historical and cultural eras. Heidegger's claim is that this mode of revealing characterizes contemporary Western civilization, and its development into its current state can be traced back to the original ontological theorizing of the ancient Greeks. Feenberg argues that, as an historical claim, the *Gestell* is false. He demonstrates this by citing examples of contemporary modern technologies that do not seem to be 'enframed' in the way in which Heidegger suggests they should be. Explicating this argument is the goal of the first section of the second chapter.

In the second section, I describe how we can understand the *Gestell* as an historical claim by outlining its role in recent European history, particularly from the perspective of German history. I argue that the *Gestell* can certainly not determine the unconcealment of every particular clearing, i.e. every particular person, in a given society at all times. On the contrary, it can only be understood to challenge every given person at some point or another insofar as they are interwoven into the dominant culture (and insofar as the *Gestell* characterizes the dominant culture). Therefore, the above described stories would be excellent representations of fictitious struggles with the *Gestell*. The threat of enframing is the threat that enframing will become the dominant mode of relating to the world within a particular culture, but it will never undermine its own essential



ground in the clearing granted to human beings. It can never steal the rebellious spirit of humanity wherein the dominant culture is critically called into question by some minority of people.

Thus, in the final section, I argue that Feenberg's critical theory of technology wherein he hopes to salvage human autonomy from the threat posed by overemphasizing, what he refers to as, formal rationality may only be supported and more deeply understood by examining its interdependence upon the ontological framework described by Heidegger. Moreover, I argue that Feenberg's project of salvaging human autonomy needs an ontological basis wherein the essence of human being is more carefully taken into consideration. And given the argument presented in the first chapter concerning the interdependence between human autonomy and the mode of revealing granted to us, I argue that Heidegger's conception of *Gelassenheit* is precisely the attitude to cultivate in order to salvage human autonomy from the threat posed by the *Gestell*. Only by 'calmly releasing ourselves,' 'opening up to,' and 'accepting' our ontological facticity as a culture can we respond to the above mentioned threat. It is in the 'free space of the clearing' that we understand our essence and stand before, as it were, the modes of revealing determining our being. Therefore, it is only within this free space that we may come to truly subordinate the autonomy of the *Gestell* to a wider array of human values and a more deeply constructed conception of human being. Without this ontological component, Feenberg's political campaign to salvage human autonomy from the threat posed by modern technologies is, I believe, incomplete.

#### *Feenberg's interpretation (and critique) of the Gestell*

Feenberg has critiqued Heidegger's notion of the *Gestell* for, what I believe to be, two primary reasons. First, he argues that the *Gestell*, as an historical claim, is simply false. One such

example he provides concerns Heidegger's prediction that, upon entering into the digital age, knowledge will be reduced to brute information, and technologies such as the computer and internet will be solely used to distribute information stripped of human significance.<sup>19</sup> Quite to the contrary, however, cyberspace has become the home for many different activities rife with human significance. Moreover, as a social constructivist thesis might suggest, the claim that some overarching technical way of viewing the world has determined an entire society's history, or perhaps is increasingly determining social history and will absolutely determine it at some future point, is empirically false.<sup>20</sup> There are a plethora of factors determining social history, and our technical relation to the world is only one factor among many. Although, I agree with Feenberg that the *Gestell* should be understood as an historical claim, I do not agree with his interpretation of its implications as an historical claim.

To defend his interpretation, Feenberg makes an interesting argument. Conceding to Iain Thomson, he admits that he had previously mistaken Heidegger's 'essence of technology' for a mere generic type, or simple generalization. Upon this basis, he had critiqued, as I suggested above, Heidegger's conception of the *Gestell* for being too fatalistic and providing no room for reform. Despite his concession, he states that he is still compelled to endorse the same conclusion. He argues that Heidegger's conception of essence wherein the *Gestell* 'holds sway' in technological settings is akin to Hegel's notion of concrete universals, which are contrasted with simple generalizations. Concrete universals are enacted in their instantiations. For example, he discusses language and culture, and suggests that instances of these are not simply particulars reflecting some abstract generality, but concrete instances in which culture and language actually come into

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<sup>19</sup> See Feenberg 2000.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent description of the social constructivist methodology as a program of research and the implications of such an approach, see Pinch and Bijker 2003.

being. The *Gestell*, he argues, seems to be a sort of concrete universal. If so, then we should expect the *Gestell* to, in some way, be “enacted in particular technological arrangements and technically inspired behaviors” (Feenberg 2000, 447).

Iain Thomson, Feenberg claims, misuses the ontological difference, i.e. the distinction between what is ontological and what is ontic, to defend Heidegger’s ontological theory without addressing its ontic implications. In other words, one may argue that Heidegger’s abstract arrangement of concepts is internally consistent, and ignore his overly nihilistic descriptions of particular technological situations, which is what Feenberg accuses Thomson of doing. What makes the *Gestell* so worrisome is that it inherently tends towards holding sway in all human relations insofar as it is a concrete universal. This is what gives it its seeming fatalism. For this reason, Heidegger may be interpreted as making a very specific historical claim. If the *Gestell* is enacted in all particular instances of modern technology, and it inherently threatens to hold sway in all human relations, then one would expect to see all human relations, at all times, to be enframed by the *Gestell* in any society permeated by modern technology.

Whether or not the *Gestell* holds sway in any particular situation, it seems to me, can be determined by an ontological analysis of the participants in any technical setting. Feenberg worries that Heidegger’s description of modern technological situations is exaggerated and overly nihilistic because it understands technology from the perspective of the false essence he has construct, i.e. the *Gestell*. Certainly, hydroelectric dams may be revealed to engineers as mere matter functionally arranged to extract energy from the river which itself has been transformed into mere matter standing by waiting to be used. This, however, doesn’t reflect the technology itself, i.e. the dam, but reflects the way in which the people are relating to the dam. Therefore, the dam, and any particular technology for that matter, may not be revealed as mere exploitable matter, but may

become a cultural focal point for a community that draws its energy from the river. If this is possible, then the *Gestell* hardly seems to be the essence of modern technology insofar as any particular technology may exist without the *Gestell* holding sway within its being. Heidegger, of course, could object and argue that it is not possible. Contra Feenberg, he may claim that the *Gestell* holds sway in all technical situations in the modern world. This would imply that he endorses the interpretation that suggests that the *Gestell* threatens to hold sway at all times for all people in a given society, which would undermine human autonomy indefinitely and entirely. Supposing he would respond to Feenberg in this manner, we are left with an historical debate to be settled by analyzing the extent to which the *Gestell* holds sway in modern industrialized societies. Feenberg, as we have seen, argues that this position is untenable given the ontic facts. In other words, he believes that an ontological analysis of the participants in many technological scenarios (e.g. cyberspace) reveals that enframing fails to hold sway. As I suggested above, I believe that he is right – the *Gestell* does fail to hold sway in *all* scenarios involving modern technologies. However, I am not convinced that Feenberg's interpretation of the *Gestell* is adequate.

Before explicating why I think this, we must first understand Feenberg's second reason for critiquing Heidegger's *Gestell*. Primarily interested in our technological policies, Feenberg approaches the question of modern technology from a very practical perspective. He is concerned with the organization of people and technology and the relations between them. Overcoming problems associated with modern technology is a political task from Feenberg's perspective. Practically oriented, he thus believes that we must accept and embrace modern technology. We no longer have the choice to reject it outright. For this reason, Feenberg is interested in technological reformation. The *Gestell*, according to his interpretation of Heidegger, isn't quite useful for such

a program. From Feenberg's perspective, we must either reject technology outright, or we must accept the dehumanizing force of the *Gestell* and allow it to transform and determine our lives.

Although they have their merits, Feenberg's criticisms conceal more than they reveal. As a critical theorist, Feenberg is often concerned with the cultural parameters defining what is 'rational' and how this influences social organization, human well-being, and, importantly for our purposes, human autonomy. Heidegger, on the other hand, is concerned with our understanding of being. Rationality, however, compels us towards accepting and understanding truths concerning what is. The *Gestell* shapes and determines the way in which what *is* is revealed, which certainly shapes what is considered true and rational. Therefore, Feenberg's critique of technical rationality, I believe, can only be supported by Heidegger's critique of technological revealing. If this is the case, however, we must respond to Feenberg's argument that the *Gestell*, as an historical claim, is false which is supported by his interpretation of the *Gestell*. Perhaps, as I believe to be the case, his interpretation of the *Gestell* is inadequate. Feenberg conceptualizes it so fatalistically that he expects all instances of culture since the development of modern technology to be instances of the *Gestell*'s holding sway. Heidegger, however, never claimed that the *Gestell* *does* determine all human relations; rather, he argued that the *Gestell* *threatened* to determine all human relations. This threat is due to its innate tendency to conceal itself as a mode of revealing. It challenges humans to unreflectively adopt its perspective in our relation to the world. And although this threat tends to undermine our reflective capacities and our understanding of being, it cannot eradicate the source of its own autonomy, namely the autonomy of being itself. Ontologically, human existence is the clearing wherein being is revealed, understood, and directed in its becoming. Therefore, humans may be threatened by the *Gestell*, but may never be completely overtaken by it.

*Understanding the Gestell as an historical claim*

To understand how the *Gestell* may pose a major threat to human relations without completely determining them, a brief description of Heidegger's cultural context is in order. Moreover, I believe such a description will demonstrate the actual meaning of the *Gestell* as an historical claim. In the early twentieth century, Germany was rapidly developing industrially. Threatened by the imperial forces of France and Russia who lusted after hegemony in the lands directly beyond their borders, Germany's existence as a nation, from the perspective of many Germans, depended upon having adequate quantities of resources to defend and sustain the rapidly growing number of people. More efficiently organizing the military's resources, both its technological and human resources, became a top priority, and this must be done in union with a more efficiently organized industry and agriculture. But why was such a gathering and 'enframing' of resources necessary for Germany to maintain its identity in the modern world?

I would argue that the *Gestell* may be understood as an historical explanation capable of answering such a question. So how should we understand the *Gestell* as an historical claim? Heidegger argues that it refers to the present condition of an ontological development tracing back to ancient Greece. Thus, it is deeply embedded into the history of European culture, and not simply Germany. Over time, European culture has been slowly dominated by the *Gestell*. Of course, humans throughout history have related to beings as mere resources to be used, and thus were challenged by the *Gestell*.<sup>21</sup> But in Europe, it was increasingly being developed and consolidated as the 'correct' mode of revealing. Those under its spell were incredibly successful – that is,

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<sup>21</sup> Soren Riis, for example, argues that the challenge posed by the *Gestell* is an essential aspect of human being. Although I believe this is correct, Riis seems to overlook Heidegger's primary point – namely, that the *Gestell* is becoming increasingly assumed as the standard ontological framework, and is therefore threatening to dominate our lives. (Riis 2011)

scientists, technicians, technocrats, engineers, accountants, businessmen, and so on. Naturally, those folks were led to a felt need to expand in order to enframe more resources, which were often human resources that would be used for the cultivation of agricultural resources such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton. The earth became a finite collection of raw materials (including human beings) that could be manipulated and transformed into commodities.

But due to the earth's finitude, (often violent) competition for these exploitable lands filled with resources (human, animal, plant, and mineral) became a political standard. The nations that tended to endorse the *Gestell* and reveal the world as such began to supplant other cultures spreading modern technology's reign. Germany, Britain, France, America, Russia, Italy, the suddenly 'Europeanized Japan', and others, as time went on, were simply responding to the pressures created as beings were increasingly revealed as exploitable. Even the sense of cultural superiority and the notion of a civilizing mission can be understood as a sort of 'equalization' wherein one way of living is considered more rational and therefore should be spread everywhere. And of course one of the cultural notions most commonly spread was that the world is not composed of spiritually infused beings as many 'natives' and 'savages' thought, but merely exploitable matter.

The above account reflects the rise in dominance of the *Gestell* as a mode of revealing, and for that reason must be understood against the backdrop of a much more complicated history than might be suggested above. It certainly isn't to suggest that other modes did not persist. Music, art, handmade artifacts, and poetry continue to be an integral part of culture, but they were increasingly marginalized and overshadowed by modern technology, consumerism, militarization, and the efficient ordering of society in general. As mentioned earlier, Feenberg critiques Heidegger (and Jean-François Lyotard for that matter) for predicting that the computer's integration into society

will transform language into symbolic code stripped of human significance. Feenberg points out, and rightly so, that this does not reflect the way in which the computer has been used given the prominence of social media, online blogs, news, and so on. Therefore, the *Gestell*, if we are to understand it adequately as an historical explanation, must not be understood as the only mode of revealing possible for all people in a social setting. Rather, it may only be understood as the dominant and ‘most rational’ mode of revealing. Primo Levi, for example, explains that, despite the rampant dehumanization during the Holocaust wherein human beings were reduced to, not only exploitable, but also disposable, raw material, a sense of humanity could be salvaged and found by communicating with others in one’s native language, which temporarily concealed the aggressive German commands that dominated one’s linguistic interactions.

When we consider Heidegger’s philosophy as a response to, and an attempt to understand, European society in the early twentieth century, we can certainly understand his worry that the *Gestell* was becoming increasingly dominant. And of course this was reaffirmed by his understanding of recent European history, which had rapidly changed over the past few centuries, accompanied by his understanding of the history of philosophy culminating in the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche. What is increasingly assumed as obvious is that the world is a collection of exploitable matter stripped of qualitative characteristics and reduced to only those features that are quantifiable. Stripped of meaning, human beings are reduced to detached and isolated egos compelled to rationally order the world of exploitable matter as they are driven by their will to power. This, according to Heidegger and Nietzsche, is the ontological world-view embedded in Western culture.

Recalling our authentic nature as a temporal clearing, we should remember that we essentially stand before, as it were, modes of revealing in our being. We are of course thrown into



cultures that determine our exposure to various ways of understanding the world, and therefore, we can never stray beyond our horizon. Nevertheless, we have an implicit understanding of being in our being, and by reflectively opening up to a questioning of our basic assumptions concerning being, being itself is opened up to the possibility of understanding itself through us, which in turn opens us up to a free space. But what occurs in such a free space? Iain Thomson describes the *Gestell* as akin to an ambiguous image, such as Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit.<sup>22</sup> Hidden within it is the potential to be unconcealed as either a duck or a rabbit, but not both simultaneously. Likewise, the *Gestell*, when reflectively understood for what it is, reveals itself in its ambiguity. As both the extreme danger and saving power, the *Gestell* is essentially ambiguous. The threat it poses is its tendency to conceal itself by extending its reign equally throughout the entire realm of being. When this happens, we are not opened up to the free space wherein we can choose the *Gestell* in its saving capacity, for it is this choice that the free space provides insofar as it reveals the ambiguity. Failing to reflectively interact with the *Gestell* in our everyday assumption that it is simply given leads to the erratic unfolding of the *Gestell* in both its saving and dangerous capacities. Technology certainly helped liberate us from certain natural restrictions increasing our quality of life, but it also helped create some of the most tragic and cataclysmic events in human history. The more deeply entrenched its reign is in human affairs, the more likely we are to create societies in which children grow up incapable of reflectively questioning the *Gestell*'s basic assumptions. My worry is that if we do not learn to reflectively question the *Gestell* we will not only continue to conceal our humanity, but we will also perpetuate the erratic unfolding of modern technology that has characterized its historical genealogy.

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<sup>22</sup> See Thomson 2009.

Let me explain. The history of modern technology is a history of wonderful human achievement and liberation alongside human catastrophe and enslavement. The industrial revolution was first preceded by violent imperial expansion and enslavement of other humans, mostly those in the Southern hemisphere (Africans, Asians, and native South Americans). This process provided the material basis for the revolution. Although controversial, some historians argue that slavery was only abandoned due to growing economic pressures to turn slaves, i.e. workers, into consumers, a notion adopted by Henry Ford.<sup>23</sup> What is crucial here is how material improvements in the quality of life brought about by modern technology were accompanied by the transformation of human beings into exploitable material slaves and then into exploitable workers and consumers. Whether or not this was necessary for the development of modern technology, I am uncertain, but I do not believe its perpetuation is necessary. Moreover, after modern industry hit its first major peak at the turn of the twentieth century, Europe (and the rest of its global empire) was thrust into two wars that, due to modern technology, were the most catastrophic wars in human history. But from these catastrophic wars arose many technologies that were later used to increase the well-being of many humans, e.g. nuclear energy, various chemicals and medicines, etc. This, I believe, demonstrates the essential ambiguity of modern technology and its erratic consequences when the *Gestell* holds sway as the dominant framework.

The reason for modern technology's erratic unfolding, I contend, is because we have failed, as a society, to adequately reveal, rather unconceal, the essence of the *Gestell*. It has been increasingly assumed to be the 'right' mode of revealing. Poetry, the arts, music, literature,

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<sup>23</sup> Although I do not believe this account explains abolition, I do believe it demonstrates that liberal principles, moral considerations, and humanistic arguments were not the sole reasons behind abolition. For an argument that slavery *was* abolished for economic reasons, see Williams 1994. For an argument that slavery *should* be abolished due to economic considerations, see Smith 1993.

philosophy, and so on have been reduced to purposelessness unless they can produce some material benefits, usually in the form of capital. But to salvage human autonomy, I argue, requires us to open ourselves up to technology's essence, wherein the ambiguity and contingency of the *Gestell* may reveal itself. From the vantage point of the clearing, the essential holding sway of modern technology is brought into the light, as it were. And in this free space, humans are truly capable of *choosing* when to understand beings as raw material, which allows us to subordinate the *Gestell* to other human values and modes of understanding being. Thus, if we recall Feenberg's criticism that the *Gestell* provides no basis for a practical reorganization of society and a salvaging of human autonomy, we can now see that this criticism is unfounded. If we are to salvage human autonomy, and thereby reintegrate modern technology into human society more effectively, we must accept the challenge of the *Gestell*. For it is only by accepting its challenge, facing the danger, and understanding its ontological essence that we can truly move beyond its reign. Both Heidegger and Feenberg agree, modern technology is here to stay – we may only reorient ourselves with respect to its presence. But I disagree with Feenberg that Heidegger's account calls for passive acceptance of the eradication of human autonomy. On the contrary, I argue that this acceptance is the ground for salvaging human autonomy.

#### *The compatibility between Feenberg's project and Heidegger's ontology*

For this reason, I believe Heidegger's account and Feenberg's are much more congruent than Feenberg suggests. He writes, "Heidegger, for example, condemns modern society as nihilistic and attempts to conceive a philosophical alternative to autonomy" (177). However, as I have suggested, I argue that Heidegger's account only tries to reconceive a philosophical alternative to autonomy insofar as autonomy is conceptualized as what I have referred to as inauthentic autonomy. His philosophy can be understood as an attempt to understand human being

ontologically, and thus an attempt to understand autonomy ontologically.<sup>24</sup> This leads to conclusions that an ego-centered culture may not accept. The interdependent matrix from which we have poetically sprung forth is a history of being self-directing its own becoming through humanity. Our autonomy is always relative and shared with this historical becoming. The autonomy of the *Gestell* reflects the autonomy of the subject, both of which trace their origin to the autonomy of being. The entire history of being, I would argue, has been an attempt to self-direct itself into the attainment of the ultimate good, what Aristotelians have referred to as flourishing. We are only one link in the chain free to pursue our own flourishing. If we are to understand our autonomy adequately, we must understand that it is intimately interwoven into the autonomy of being itself. As some Buddhist philosophers have argued, we may only increase individual freedom by striving to increase the freedom of all beings.<sup>25</sup> Heidegger's account is thus akin to a critical theory. By critiquing a traditional conception of autonomy, we may be able to articulate a more primordial and undistorted conception. And in doing so, we increase the likelihood that we will flourish.

Feenberg argues that we need a technological holism wherein contextual aspects of technology's integration into social contexts are taken into consideration. What he refers to as formal rationality strips beings of their interdependence in its attempt to equalize all relations by separating technical objects from their context, primary from secondary qualities, and subject from

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger makes a similar argument concerning truth. He argues that *alētheia* does not correspond to truth insofar as truth refers the "traditional 'natural' sense as the correspondence of knowledge with beings." Rather, he suggests, *alētheia* "first grants the possibility of truth" (Heidegger 2010e, 446). Likewise, we can understand Heidegger to be rejecting the traditional conception of autonomy, but only to replace it with an ontologically adequate conception of autonomy.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Wallace makes this point by arguing that absolute freedom, according to Buddhist doctrine, is attained by *bodhisattvas* which are human beings who have authentically resolved to end all suffering and increase freedom in general (Wallace 2011).

object. Notice how compatible this account is with the *Gestell*!<sup>26</sup> As mere exploitable matter, technical objects designed for a particular end do not need to vary with respect to particular contexts as long as the matter to be manipulated may be efficiently manipulated. Likewise, secondary qualities, which are “everything that is unimportant to the technical project,” i.e. everything except its qualities as the resource that it is being exploited as, become increasingly irrelevant as the *Gestell* begins to dominate (Feenberg 2010, 187). And the particular human subject is irrelevant when it comes to his or her role as a manipulator of objects, so long as the objects can be manipulated as needed. In opposition to this historical trend, Feenberg argues that we need to reintegrate context, secondary qualities, and subjective considerations into our creation of technology. I see this as a call to quit relating to beings as essentially exploitable matter, but as meaningful focal points that gather a multiplicity of modes of revealing into the determination of our becoming.

For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, which may be translated as a sort of calm composure, or as is commonly used for Heidegger’s technical use of the term – releasement, is the appropriate response to the reign of the *Gestell*. As I suggested earlier, Feenberg interprets *Gelassenheit* as a sort of passive acceptance of the reign of the *Gestell*. Alternatively, I argue that the ‘acceptance of technology’ implied by Heidegger’s conception of *Gelassenheit* is simply an acceptance of our facticity, which is a necessary feature of authenticity. Being challenged by the *Gestell* is our facticity, and we must accept it. To passively accept its reign is to avoid facing the extreme danger which is to avoid understanding the *Gestell* in its essential ambiguity. When we do this, the *Gestell* reigns erratically in human affairs by simultaneously creating a society that is increasingly

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<sup>26</sup> To be clear, Feenberg certainly acknowledges his debt to Heidegger, and thus would recognize and agree that his account of technology shares many structural similarities. See Feenberg 2005.

improving the standard of life by liberating us from natural threats and threatening our autonomy by dehumanizing us, which has historically compelled us into some of the most violent relationships between humans themselves and between humanity and nature. When we calmly compose ourselves, accept the fact that we are necessarily challenged by the *Gestell*, and release ourselves to a free relation to the *Gestell* by opening up to our essential nature as temporal clearings, we are able to direct our own becoming more so than before. By understanding the essence of technology as enframing, and relating to it as one possible mode of revealing among others, we are able to choose when it is appropriate to enframe the world, and when it is not.

To be clear, this does not provide us with absolute control. What is crucial is understanding that we become more autonomous by developing a deeper understanding of our essential constitution. By recovering insights hidden within the dawn of Western philosophy, we are not returning to an ancient understanding. We truly do understand many aspects of the world that the Greeks could not, but only at the expense of concealing many insights they understood that we do not. Heidegger writes, “a painstaking effort to think through still more primally what was primally thought is not the absurd wish to revive what is past, but rather the sober readiness to be astounded before the coming of the dawn” (Heidegger 2010d, 327). By understanding the ontological source of the *Gestell*, we open ourselves up to a deeper understanding of ourselves as the temporal manifestation of a history of being in its becoming and therefore develop a higher degree of autonomy over the future of our own becoming. This not a self-generated autonomy, but an autonomy granted to us by the history of being. It is the autonomy of being itself manifesting itself through us. But this is our ontological essence – we are the guardians of truth, and the directors of the becoming of being. To be authentic is to take responsibility for what we essentially are, and what we essentially are, among other things, is beings challenged by the *Gestell*.

Thus, with respect to Feenberg's technological reform, the social cultivation of *Gelassenheit* will help us direct ourselves into a healthier relationship with technology. In other words, *Gelassenheit* is precisely what Feenberg's account promotes. By opening up to the free space wherein we may more creatively interact with the structures that determine our relation to being, we are more capable of integrating technology practically into our everyday lives. By opening ourselves up to an understanding of the way technical objects reveal themselves as more than mere resources, i.e. the way in which they may be revealed as aesthetic objects or focal things in our everyday practices, we increase our ability to appropriately contextualize our technical objects. And by opening up to the multiplicity of ways in which beings may be revealed, we are essentially opening up to the secondary qualities concealed by the *Gestell*. Moreover, this is accomplished by anticipating the multiplicity of ways in which objects are revealed for subjects. It is no longer assumed that the object will reveal itself as a mere resource. The *Gestell* challenges us to assume something that is always false – i.e. that it is the only mode of revealing. And it is by challenging us to make such a faulty assumption that we are threatened by its extreme danger. But by understanding why it poses such a threat, we come to understand the *Gestell*'s contingency and open ourselves up to a deeper understanding of ourselves and what shapes our relation to being. *Gelassenheit* is thus an essential component to technological reform.

To understand what I mean by the social cultivation of *Gelassenheit*, I will briefly describe some practical applications. Stefaan Cuypers has argued that an authentic education requires the teacher to cultivate authentic understanding as opposed to an indoctrinated understanding.<sup>27</sup> If I understand him correctly, this implies that a student must authentically accept what is being taught for reasons they understand and can articulate instead of implicitly assuming them. I would

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<sup>27</sup> See Cuypers 2009.

contend that this may never be done absolutely but is nonetheless the ideal epistemic foundation of education. If we consider STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), it seems as if, from a Heideggerian perspective, that the mode of revealing that makes these subjects possible is assumed implicitly and is therefore an understanding that is indoctrinated as opposed to authentically accepted. Thus, a way to reorganize technical education to salvage human autonomy from the reign of modern technology would be to integrate the cultivation of *Gelassenheit* into STEM education, and education in general. This, I argue, should involve the cultivating within scientists, technologists, engineers, and mathematicians an awareness and acceptance of the contingency and ambiguity of the mode of revealing that holds sway within their disciplines. This might involve a deeper awareness of ethical and political considerations inherent to the application of science and technology; and perhaps even the cultivation of an artistic and aesthetic awareness within domains such as engineering and architecture. Although programs of this nature already exist within these fields, technological considerations and formal rationality still seem to override all other human values. But by opening up ‘technocrats’ to a richer understanding of human values and an authentic understanding and acceptance of the *Gestell*’s contingent and ambiguous nature, we can subordinate the *Gestell* and formal rationality to a richer array of human values and modes of understanding being. But this can only be done if the ‘technocrats’ themselves authentically accept the contingency and ambiguity of modern technology, i.e. the technocrats must develop *Gelassenheit* with respect to the *Gestell*.

Another application, among many others that could be developed, is within the realm of psychiatry and psychological disorders. A common trend in the psychiatric community is to treat human beings as raw material wherein all mental disorders, or ‘illnesses,’ are reduced to a material



aberration in the person's biological constitution. Increasingly, our understanding of mental illnesses is being determined by the technological solutions created to 'fix' such physical aberrations. This has been particularly prevalent with respect to depression, which is, many argue, a universal phenomenon that can often be treated effectively via therapy. I would argue, however, that such an account tends to bolster many humans' inauthentic conception of their own autonomy. Reduced to raw material, the only way to 'control' one's body is by materially intervening. The more we prescribe pharmaceuticals when therapy would be more appropriate, the more likely we are to undermine human autonomy by increasing the number of addicts who cannot direct their own becoming without pharmaceutical intervention. Moreover, as pharmaceutical prescription becomes a social norm, the assumed validity of this inauthentic conception of autonomy will become more entrenched into society. I contend that a way to structurally reorganize clinical psychiatry to increase human autonomy, as opposed to subordinating it to the will of the *Gestell*, is by reorienting its focus upon the therapeutic cultivation of *Gelassenheit* wherein patients are taught to calmly accept the person that they are. This involves treating mental illness as a human problem as opposed to a technical problem. As Vesna Pejnović so elegantly states it (describing Nietzsche's conception of autonomy), "Someone who has the spirit to become free is capable of accepting and affirming oneself as a whole, and rather than seeing the necessity or accepting the fate of one's character as an obstacle to action, one sees it as an opportunity for true self expression" (Pejnović 2014, 27).

The above examples are not intended to provide detailed analyses or prescriptions of how to go about reorganizing modern society such that human autonomy is salvaged from the reign of the technological revealing of the world. Rather, they are only intended to provide examples of the relevance of *Gelassenheit* in responding to challenges posed and created by the cultural dominance

of the *Gestell*. The crucial points can be summarized in the following manner: we must accept the contingency and ambiguity of the *Gestell*, which allows us to subordinate it to other human values and modes of understanding being and thereby avoid the catastrophes caused by its erratic unfolding when its essence remains concealed; we must cultivate a calm acceptance of who we are and what we are in order to live autonomously; and we must open ourselves up to the free space of the clearing wherein we can truly autonomously direct our own becoming by standing before, as it were, the various possible modes of revealing that have been granted to us. These points, I argue, are only captured by an understanding of the ontological essence of modern technology wherein beings are revealed as raw material, i.e. the *Gestell*, and an understanding that the proper response to this mode of revealing is an open acceptance of its challenge and a striving to understand and autonomously respond to said challenge, i.e. *Gelassenheit*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe it is important to remember that humans are necessarily challenged by the *Gestell* and therefore it is an essential part of our being. Overcoming its reign is not eradicating it from our lives, but transforming its role. Since human autonomy is relative, it can only be increased or decreased within a set of contextual parameters. Autonomy is grounded in the human capacity for thought, and reflection upon the meaning of being. Without reflectively engaging with the various structures that determine the revealing of the world, our becoming is determined by these structures. Heidegger's philosophy, in my view, is a warning concerning the danger of unreflectively allowing the *Gestell* to become the dominant mode of revealing. As Marcuse argues, technological rationality has led to a one dimensional society wherein only one system of rationality supplants all other human values.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Marcuse, Heidegger thinks that the *Gestell* is threatening to supplant all other modes of revealing, which threatens to transform our understanding of ourselves and others into mere exploitable matter. Due to our interdependent nature as social beings, this undermines our capacity for relating to others qua other, which thwarts our autonomy as beings who self-direct their own becoming by interacting and depending upon their fellow beings. Moreover, by transforming ourselves into mere exploitable material, the notion of autonomy is diluted into a sort of regulative and technical control of our material bodies by a causally independent subject, or is simply dismissed as an illusion due to the impossibility of a causally independent subject. Furthermore, the revealing of being is increasingly presupposed and the authentic source of our being is therefore concealed. Inauthentically, we are held "out into the nothing" (Heidegger 2010a, 103) as if our "Being has [already] been interpreted in some manner"

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<sup>28</sup> See Marcuse 1964.

(Heidegger 2008, 36). Authentically, we stand before, as it were, the revealing of the world and the ontological framework that structures its revealing, which grants us the ontic possibility of reflectively interacting with both being and the structures that determine our understanding of being. Heidegger's worry is that the *Gestell*, which is deeply embedded into the history of being, is increasingly being assumed unreflectively in the modern era, and this results in the concealing of our authentic nature and the subordination of our reflective autonomy to the self-direction of the *Gestell*.

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