

Unit Four: Putting it All Together

“Memorial Address,” by Martin Heidegger

[M]an today is in flight from thinking. This flight-from-thought is the ground of thoughtlessness. (p. 45)

Writers sometimes find ideas from different historical moments that can be applied, directly or indirectly, to a critical examination of issues significant to their own time. Heidegger, for example, in this simple speech made at a hometown celebration in the early 1950s, delivers a powerful critique of his culture’s preoccupation, and dysfunctional relationship, with the technology of his day. He specifically mentions television and radio as threats to thinking. This same critique has subsequently been applied to newer media: video games, the internet, computers, cell phones, etc. We live now in an age in which technology is ubiquitous in a way Heidegger could never have imagined. More and more we see arguments declaring that the “digital generation” thinks in a fundamentally different way from its predecessors, are even, as the popular press likes to report “wired differently.” As we read his piece, then, we are invited to reflect on this matter of the relationship between technology and thinking; and to decide how, or if, Heidegger’s critique is pertinent to our world and our time.

Exercise 1: Write 1-2 pages, due 11/2

There are, then, two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: calculative thinking and meditative thinking.

This meditative thinking is what we have in mind when we say that contemporary man is in flight-from-thinking. (p. 46)

Heidegger provides a pretty clear definition of calculative thinking. He spends a lot more time trying to define meditative thinking. Give an interpretation, using passages from his text, of what you think he means by meditative thinking and why he feels it’s so important.

How does his definition compare or contrast with Emerson’s Man Thinking? Or what would Plato or Woolf say about his distinction and the importance of “meditative” thinking? Do you believe meditative thinking, as Heidegger defines it, remains important today? Or is it outdated?

Exercise 2: Write 1-2 pages, due 11/7

The power concealed in modern technology determines the relation of man to that which exists. It rules the whole earth. . . In all areas of his existence, man will be encircled ever more tightly by forces of technology. . . Is man, then, a defenseless and perplexed victim at the mercy of the irresistible superior power of technology?

...

We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature. (pp. 50, 51, 52-53, 54)

Heidegger is writing these warnings in the 1950s, with specific reference to the threat of the “atomic age.” Heidegger identifies two different aspects of the “comportment toward technology” that he believes will protect us from its tendency to “dominate, warp and confuse us: “releasement toward things” and “openness to the mystery.”

First, pick one of these two and provide as practical a definition as you can of what you think this means, using familiar examples. Then consider whether you think his sense of concern about technology remains credible. Does the digital culture similarly threaten our sovereignty, or has this threat been diminished, even eliminated, precisely by advances in technology that he had no way of imagining?

Exercise 3: Write 1-2 pages, due 11/9

Many Germans have lost their homeland . . . Countless others whose homeland was saved, have yet wandered off. They have been caught up in the turmoil of the big cities, and have resettled in the wastelands of industrial districts. They are strangers now to their former homeland. And those who have stayed on in their homeland? Often they are still more homeless than those who have been driven from their homeland. Hourly and daily they are chained to radio and television . . . [T]he rootedness, the autochthony, of man is threatened today to its core! (pp. 48-49)

Heidegger is writing this in Germany, in the aftermath of WWII, during which “homes” and a “homeland” were literally destroyed, scattering inhabitants. But he clearly implies that his notion of “homelessness” applies to everyone in the “radio and television” culture, all of whom might be made “homeless” in some sense by those technologies. He proffers “rootedness” as an antidote for this. What do you think he means by this term? Do you think this same problem applies to our world, which is considerably more media-saturated than his? That is, are we “homeless” still in this way? Or do you think he’s just wrong about this particular effect of media on our connectedness to the world? Do you think Heidegger would consider us dangerously rootless these days, in need of greater autochthony? Or is he wrong about that, too?

Essay #4: 5-6 pages, due 11/14

Write an extended essay deriving from one or more of your responses to Heidegger’s “Memorial Address.” It should include ample reference to this text and to at least one other source (or more, even better) either from our syllabus or of your own choice. You need to take a position on the large question at hand and reference your own experience (or that of your “generation”) as part of the body of evidence to support your claims