

# Heidegger and the Role of the Body in Environmental Virtue

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In this essay, I will draw upon the later (i.e., post c. 1930) work of Martin Heidegger to argue that sustainability might be brought about by fostering a special sort of attentiveness to things which should be thought of, not just as a particular frame of mind, but also as a bodily comportment, a “frame of body,” if you will. I will begin by outlining Heidegger’s views on “technological” society, before moving on to consider his account of a non-technological understanding of the world founded on a mode of being he calls a “releasement toward things.” I will draw attention to the sensuous, bodily comportment toward nature implied in Heidegger’s account before concluding by speculating on how this mode of being could be developed in an educational context.

## I

Many radical environmental thinkers proclaim that we are at a crucial point in our historical understanding of nature. To pass beyond our current period of environmental crisis, the story runs, we must relinquish the impoverished conceptions of nature bequeathed us by the western tradition for a richer, more spiritually satisfying account of the natural world and our place in it. Heidegger would agree with this general project. On the one hand, he maintains that the modern devastation of nature is the result of the predominance of our modern “technological” understanding of the world,<sup>1</sup> which, in turn, he sees as the culmination of the western “metaphysical” tradition. On the other hand, in his later writings on “dwelling” he presents an account of a wholesome “non-technological” understanding of the world.

Briefly put,<sup>2</sup> Heidegger’s account of technology is this: In the modern world, we are increasingly finding that, to the extent that they reveal themselves as *things*

at all, things reveal themselves “technologically,” which is to say that they reveal themselves as resources for human ends, or as Heidegger puts it, as “standing-reserve.”<sup>3</sup> Revealed technologically, dandelions become weeds, old-growth forest becomes timber, a wild wooded valley becomes a tourist attraction, a stretch of meadow becomes a convenient site for a bypass, and so on. Heidegger laments the fact that in the midst of this all-engulfing instrumentalism, things increasingly reveal themselves not as worthy of attention in themselves, but only insofar as they provide the means to some end. As the cliché has it, technological man does not appreciate his journey to work, the motorway is there only to convey him from A to B. His computer keyboard is not like a treasured fountain pen — it has no value in itself, but is merely an interface, a means for him to input information.<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger, the technological world is a world in which things no longer disclose themselves as things, but a world in which they have evaporated into a groundless, constantly shifting matrix of instrumental relations.

The prevailing *telos* in the technological world is a drive toward the ever-more-efficient ordering of standing reserve. Thus practices come to be favoured in terms of their performance according to some standard of efficiency, to the extent that in many situations an appeal to efficiency — usually couched in the ubiquitous vocabulary of management-speak — is likely to provide the ultimate criterion for deciding on a course of action. In many cases, the particular standard appealed to will be quantifiable, a percentage of outpatients, perhaps, or a measure of the processing capacity of a computer. Heidegger therefore associates technology with a distinctive sort of thinking, namely, calculative thinking, a thinking that “computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in keeping with the supreme nebulousness of an appeal to efficiency, the most appropriate currencies for the exchange of standing reserve will be those that prove themselves the most malleable, the most interchangeable. It is perhaps for this reason that Heidegger introduces his account of technology in terms of the extraction of *energy*: “The way of revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Heidegger links his account of technology with the devastation of nature. To see the natural world as a reservoir of standing reserve is to see it as something that can be challenged, set upon, in short, exploited.

Although he does not use the language of sustainability, I suggest that there is much in Heidegger’s diagnosis of our modern predicament with which many advocates of sustainability would agree. That is to say that Heidegger’s technological world, in which nature can be exploited without limit, can be thought of as the metaphysical basis of a society that is, in a sense, unsustainable.

Heidegger maintains that the dominance of the technological understanding of the world manifests itself as an estrangement from the world, an existential sense of homelessness. Technological man, swept along in the blind currents of

fashion, fluid money markets and job flexibility, is portrayed as being no longer in touch with the earthiness of things. His is an all-too-human world, a world of moulded plastic, asphalt, and air-conditioned offices, in which there is no sense of “the earth.” Moreover, distracted by mobile phones, televisions, and the Internet, his attention is constantly *elsewhere*. Technological man has lost his connection with the ground beneath his feet; Heidegger claims that he has lost his rootedness in the world.

## II

To free ourselves of the alienating influence of technology and recover our rootedness in the world, Heidegger maintains that we must cultivate a mode of being he calls a “releasement toward things.”<sup>7</sup> To be “released” toward a thing is to attend to it as the particular thing that it is, rather than as a placeholder for some other thing that would serve the same function. To be released toward the hammer — to use a characteristically rustic Heideggerian example — is to treat it with respect, taking care not to ruin it on stone or metal; to ensure that, at the end of the day, it is returned to its rightful place in the workshop, and so on. To be released toward a particular stretch of road is to attend to it for what it is in itself, to appreciate the journey, rather than simply passing over it in sullen indifference on one’s way to work.

When they are “let be” in this way, Heidegger writes that things “gather world.”<sup>8</sup> The idea here is that attending to a thing can illuminate a world, a world, that is, understood not as an object (planet Earth, for instance) but as an arena within which things show up as significant things in the first place. In one sense, this idea is less abstruse than it might sound. Think here of the phenomenon of nostalgia, those moments when an old photo or a school satchel transports one to a long-forgotten world of family picnics or Tuesday mornings after double maths. But it is essential to realize that, in Heidegger’s understanding, the phenomenon of a thing’s gathering world does not primarily involve one’s simply remembering a place distant in time, it can involve the more interesting phenomenon of one’s “coming home” to the place where one is presently abiding, the phenomenon when, in a moment of clarity, one looks toward the cathedral of one’s hometown as if for the first time, and is filled with a sense of belonging. In doing this, Heidegger maintains, we have made the strange “leap” “onto the soil on which we really stand,”<sup>9</sup> and out of the alienating grip of technology.

### III

This, then, is a bare sketch of Heidegger's diagnosis and prescription. In the face of the ubiquity of the technological understanding of the world and the existential homelessness which it brings, we would do well to release ourselves toward things and thereby come to appreciate our world (or rather our respective worlds) anew.

But is releasement toward things a "frame of mind"? I do not think so. In order to describe what releasement might involve, Heidegger cites examples of certain *practices* — pouring wine from a jug, cultivating crops, and so on — which, he holds, can be thought of as the constituents of a way of life he calls "dwelling."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, releasement is exemplified not by the environmental philosopher serenely pondering the possibilities of reawakening a respect for things, but by the skilled craftsperson attuned to the materials with which he or she works — the cabinetmaker, for instance, "answering" and "responding" "to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within the wood."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, when the released individual acts, he or she acts in a certain frame of mind, she might be attentive or appreciative or something of this sort, but releasement itself would not seem to be something exclusively cognitive, it would seem to be a bodily as much as a mental comportment.<sup>12</sup>

In maintaining that releasement is not a frame of mind, I am not being simply pedantic, for it could be that speaking only in terms of environmentally virtuous (or vicious) frames of mind might obscure the manner in which the body is implicated in our relations with the natural world. Jane Howarth, for instance, has drawn attention to the fact that many of our unsustainable practices (not turning the kitchen light off, throwing the can in the waste bin rather than taking it to the recycling facility, and so on) are habitual.<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, she argues that habitual actions are not the effects of "consciousness directing bodily movement," but are rather the manifestation of an implicit kind of bodily intelligence.<sup>14</sup> In these situations, one's body knows what to do, even in the absence of a determining mental attitude. Certainly, to render these practices perspicuous we must reflect on them, however, the fact remains that these habitual practices are as much bodily comportments as they are frames of mind. In this regard, it is worth noting that the radical environmental ethics literature abounds with accounts (often caricatures) of the dominant "modern western" *mindset* — faith in the power of reason, a belief in the value of progress, a sense of separation from nature, and so on. Could one also speak of a characteristic "technological" bodily comportment? After all, it is not only our mental lives that are governed by technology. Perhaps, for instance, technological man has forgotten the sensuous pleasure intrinsic to eating, and only consumes in order to live. He grabs an energy bar on the way to work to stand in for breakfast; he gobbles down his five servings of fruit and vegetables to keep healthy. He is an efficient eater. And what of the rest of his bodily life? How does technological man move? Does he have a characteristic

posture? How does he breathe?

These thoughts suggest a further question: if unsustainable practices are bodily as well as mental, might the comportment which could bring about sustainability be, to a certain extent, a bodily comportment, not just an exclusively mental understanding of the world, but a way of acting as an embodied being?

It could be objected that one's bodily comportment is merely the effect of one's mental attitude. Clearly, someone who adopts a respectful attitude toward things will be led to act in a respectful way. But might the reverse be true? Might it be that just as one can think of mental states — moods, attitudes, et cetera — as causing distinctive sorts of action, one can also conceive of certain mental attitudes arising from certain sorts of bodily comportment? Perhaps what needs to be learnt is not just a mental attitude toward the natural world which will be expressed in sustainable action, but also a way of acting which will give rise to a mental attitude conducive to sustainability.<sup>15</sup>

With these speculations we are wandering into conceptual territory generally alien to Western philosophical traditions, a landscape dominated by East Asian thinkers.<sup>16</sup> Here I will only note, very briefly, that for its part Heidegger's conception of a releasement toward things has much in common with the Taoist idea of *wu-wei* or non-action, the spontaneous, non-deliberative action which expresses one's unity with the Tao.<sup>17</sup> Central to both is the idea that one can realize one's belonging to the world in a practical attunement to things. While Heidegger cites the example of the cabinetmaker "answering" and "responding" "to the different kinds of wood," the Taoist Chuang Tzu finds *wu-wei* exemplified by the swimmer who swims with the current or the butcher whose carving follows the natural articulations of the meat.<sup>18</sup> It does not seem right to call the harmony between man and thing conveyed in these descriptions a frame of mind. Indeed it could be that in focusing on the possibility of sustainability as a frame of mind, we overlook the implications of these practical ways of being for our relationship with the natural world.

## IV

Can releasement toward things be taught? Perhaps only so much can be taught through books and lectures. In fact, a renewed appreciation of the role of the body in relating to things might help to counter the impression, arguably common amongst students of environmental ethics, that appreciating nature must involve some sort of lofty intellectual understanding of ecological science or metaphysics. Perhaps what we need to foster is rather an intimacy with the natural world founded on a sensuous, bodily appreciation of things.<sup>19</sup> How might this be achieved? This question deserves more thought than I can give it here. Maybe it could be developed through direct contact with nature, in

art, biology or drama lessons, say, or even in physical education, which, after all, need not consist entirely of sport. But in whatever context releasement is taught, it will require teachers themselves able to appreciate and convey the thick sensuous thereness of things. And so perhaps it is to the task of educating ourselves in this respect that we should turn first.

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## Endnotes

1. The term “understanding” perhaps conveys the mistaken idea that, for Heidegger, technology is a perspective on the world that many people simply happen to have. But for Heidegger technology is not merely a way humans see the world. On this difficult point, see Heidegger 1996: 312, 323 – 4, and also his essay “The Age of the World Picture” (in Heidegger 1977: 115 – 54).
2. In this paper I only have space to present a grossly simplified account of Heidegger’s account of technology. For more comprehensive treatments, see Foltz 1995; Haar 1987; Dreyfus 1993.
3. Heidegger 1996b: 322.
4. It is tempting to interpret Heidegger as saying that we have lost sight of the intrinsic value of things, seeing them as merely possessing instrumental value. However, for reasons that would take us beyond the scope of this essay to explain, Heidegger resists articulating his position in terms of value. See Heidegger 1959: 196 – 9.
5. Heidegger 1966: 46.
6. Heidegger 1996b: 320. See also Haar 1987: 83.
7. Heidegger 1966: 54
8. See Heidegger 1971: 174, 199; Heidegger 1996: 355.
9. Heidegger 1968: 41.
10. The origins of the idea that a releasement toward things involves a practical engagement with things can be found in *Being and Time* in Heidegger’s idea that Dasein lets things ready-to-hand be by letting them be involved in a referential totality (see Heidegger 1996a: 405).
11. Heidegger 1996b: 379.
12. On Heidegger’s treatment of the body, see Haar 1987, Chapter Three.
13. In Pratt 2000: 71.
14. Ibid: 70. Merleau-Ponty is often credited with drawing out the implications for our understanding of the body of Heidegger’s analysis of human being in *Being and Time*. See Merleau-Ponty 1996.
15. Or perhaps a non-dualistic vocabulary is called for here, such as the one proposed in Merleau-Ponty 1996.
16. Consider, for instance, the role of the body in Zen meditation. As Suzuki



(2000) explains, in the sitting meditation of Soto Zen correct posture is “not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take the posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind” (26).

17. This connection should not be surprising: as May has shown in his book *Heidegger's Hidden Sources* (1989), Heidegger was greatly influenced by East Asian writers.

18. See Cooper 1994: 124.

19. Passmore (1980) argues that western thought has a generally Platonic, puritanical tenor that has undermined the possibility of a moral consideration of nature: “Only if men can first learn to look sensuously at the world will they come to care for it. Not only to look at it, but to touch it, smell it, taste it” (189).