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# Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection

Ladelle McWhorter

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**MARTIN HEIDEGGER** was born in 1889 in Messkirch, Germany, a small town in the Black Forest. He died in 1976. As these dates indicate, Heidegger lived through a time when Western civilization was undergoing a series of upheavals probably now only dimly imaginable to those of us who are the products of them. His life spanned a technological revolution that changed even the most basic patterns of human (and certainly not only human) life in the industrialized world.

Heidegger often refers in his writings to the dramatic changes to which he was witness – the loss of rootedness to place that came with the invention of the automobile, then the airplane, and now our various vehicles for travel in interplanetary space; the conquering of distances that has accompanied the development of communications technologies such as radio, television, and film, and of course, the changes in our thinking of and with the natural world that have come as we have become seemingly more and more independent of the earth's forces, more and more capable of outwitting them and even of harnessing them and forcing them to conform to our wills. These changes – but more especially human beings' unreflective incorporation of these changes into our daily lives – struck Heidegger as strange and very dangerous. It may well be that there is nothing really wrong with using a tractor to plow one's land or with using a computer to write one's book, but there is something ominous, Heidegger believed, about our not giving any thought to what is happening to ourselves and to the world when we do those things, or our not noticing or at least not caring about the disruptions these changes bring about in the fabric of things.

Heidegger calls us to give thought to – or give ourselves over to thought of – the strangeness of our technological being within the world. His works resound with calls for human beings to grow more thoughtful, to take heed, to notice and reflect upon where we are and what we are doing, lest human possibility and the most beautiful of possibilities for thought be lost irretrievably in forces we do not understand and only pretend we can control.

Heidegger's admonitions are sometimes somewhat harsh. "Let us not fool ourselves," he wrote in 1955. "All of us, including those who think

professionally, as it were, are often enough thought-poor; we all are far too easily thought-less. Thoughtlessness is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world. For nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly."<sup>1</sup>

Some might find this unnecessarily harsh. We academicians may wish to contest the accusation. Surely, in the universities of all places, thinking is going on. But Heidegger had no respect for that or any other kind of complacency. The thinking he saw as essential is no more likely, perhaps unfortunately, to be found in universities or among philosophers than anywhere else. For the thinking he saw as essential is not the simple amassing and digesting of facts or even the mastering of complex relationships or the producing of ever more powerful and inclusive theories. The thinking Heidegger saw as essential, the thinking his works call us to, is not a thinking that seeks to master anything, not a thinking that results from a drive to grasp and know and shape the world; it is a thinking that disciplines itself to allow the world – the earth, *things* – to show themselves on their own terms. Heidegger called this kind of thinking 'reflection'. In 1936 he wrote, "Reflection is the courage to make the truth of our own presuppositions and the realm of our own goals into the things that most deserve to be called in question."<sup>2</sup> Reflection is thinking that never rests complacently in the conclusions reached yesterday; it is thinking that continues to think, that never stops with a satisfied smile and announces: We can cease; we have the right answer now. On the contrary, it is thinking that loves its own life, its own occurring, that does not quickly put a stop to itself, as thinking intent on a quick solution always tries to do.

Thinking today must concern itself with the earth. Wherever we turn – on newsstands, on the airwaves, and in even the most casual of conversations everywhere – we are inundated by predictions of ecological catastrophe and omnicidal doom. And many of these predictions bear themselves out in our own experience. We now live with the ugly, painful, and impoverishing consequences of decades of technological innovation and expansion without restraint, of at least a century of disastrous "natural resource management" policies, and of more than two centuries of virtually unchecked industrial pollution – consequences that include the fact that millions of us on any given day are suffering, many of us dying of diseases and malnutrition that are the results of humanly produced ecological devastation; the fact that thousands of species now in existence will no longer exist on this planet by the turn of the century; the fact that our planet's climate has been altered, probably irreversibly, by the carbon dioxide and chloro-fluorocarbons we have heedlessly poured into our atmosphere; and the mind-boggling fact that it may now be within humanity's power to destroy all life on this globe.

Our usual response to such prophecies of doom is to ignore them or, when we cannot do that, to scramble to find some way to manage our problems, some quick solution, some technological fix. But over and over again new resource management techniques, new solutions, new technologies disrupt delicate systems even further, doing still more damage to a planet already dangerously out of ecological balance. Our ceaseless interventions seem only to make things worse, to perpetuate a cycle of human activity followed by ecological disaster followed by human intervention followed by a new disaster of another kind. In fact, it would appear that our trying to do things, change things, fix things cannot be the solution, because it is part of the problem itself. But, if we cannot act to solve our problems, what should we do?

Heidegger's work is a call to reflect, to think in some way other than calculatively, technologically, pragmatically. Once we begin to move with and into Heidegger's call and begin to see our trying to seize control and solve problems as itself a problematic approach, if we still believe that thinking's only real purpose is to function as a prelude to action, we who attempt to think will twist within the agonizing grip of paradox, feeling nothing but frustration, unable to conceive of ourselves as anything but paralyzed. However, as so many peoples before us have known, paradox is not only a trap; it is also a scattering point and passageway. Paradox invites examination of its own constitution (hence of the patterns of thinking within which it occurs) and thereby breaks a way of thinking open, revealing the configurations of power that propel it and hold it on track. And thus it makes possible the dissipation of that power and the deflection of thinking into new paths and new possibilities.

Heidegger frustrates us. At a time when the stakes are so very high and decisive action is so loudly and urgently called for, Heidegger apparently calls us to do – nothing. If we get beyond the revulsion and anger that such a call initially inspires and actually examine the feasibility of response, we begin to undergo the frustration attendant upon paradox; how is it possible, we ask, to choose, to will, to *do nothing*? The call itself places in question the bimodal logic of activity and passivity; it points up the paradoxical nature of our passion for action, of our passion for maintaining control. The call itself suggests that our drive for acting decisively and forcefully is part of what must be thought through, that the narrow option of will versus surrender is one of the power configurations of current thinking that must be allowed to dissipate.

But of course, those drives and those conceptual dichotomies are part of the very structure of our self-understanding both as individuals and as a tradition and a civilization. Hence, Heidegger's call is a threatening one, requiring great courage, "the courage to make the truth of our own presuppositions and the realm of our own goals into the things that most

deserve to be called in question.”<sup>3</sup> Heidegger’s work pushes thinking to think through the assumptions that underlie both our ecological vandalism and our love of scientific solutions, assumptions that also ground the most basic patterns of our current ways of being human.

What is most illustrative is often also what is most common. Today, on all sides of ecological debate we hear, with greater and greater frequency, the word *management*. On the one hand, business people want to manage natural resources so as to keep up profits. On the other hand, conservationists want to manage natural resources so that there will be plenty of coal and oil and recreational facilities for future generations. These groups and factions within them debate vociferously over which management policies are the best, that is, the most efficient and manageable. Radical environmentalists damn both groups and claim it is human population growth and rising expectations that are in need of management. But wherever we look, wherever we listen, we see and hear the term *management*.

We are living in a veritable age of management. Before a middle class child graduates from high school she or he is already preliminarily trained in the arts of weight management, stress management, and time management, to name just a few. As we approach middle age we continue to practice these essential arts, refining and adapting our regulatory regimes as the pressures of life increase and the body begins to break down. We have become a society of managers – of our homes, careers, portfolios, estates, even of our own bodies – so is it surprising that we set ourselves up as the managers of the earth itself? And yet, as thoughtful earth-dwellers we must ask, what does this signify?

In numerous essays – in particular the beautiful 1953 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology” – Heidegger speaks of what he sees as the danger of dangers in this, our, age. This danger is a kind of forgetfulness – a forgetfulness that Heidegger thought could result not only in nuclear disaster or environmental catastrophe, but in the loss of what makes us the kind of beings we are, beings who can think and who can stand in thoughtful relationship to things. This forgetfulness is not a forgetting of facts and their relationships; it is a forgetfulness of something far more important and far more fundamental than that. He called it forgetfulness of ‘the mystery’.

It would be easy to imagine that by ‘the mystery’ Heidegger means some sort of entity, some *thing*, temporarily hidden or permanently ineffable. But ‘the mystery’ is not the name of some thing; it is the event of the occurring together of revealing and concealing.

Every academic discipline, whether it be biology or history, anthropology or mathematics, is interested in discovery, in the revelation of new truths. Knowledge, at least as it is institutionalized in the modern world, is concerned, then, with what Heidegger would call revealing, the bringing

to light, or the coming to presence of things. However, in order for any of this revealing to occur, Heidegger says, concealing must also occur. Revealing and concealing belong together.

Now, what does this mean? We know that in order to pay attention to one thing, we must stop paying close attention to something else. In order to read philosophy we must stop reading cereal boxes. In order to attend to the needs of students we must sacrifice some of our research time. Allowing for one thing to reveal itself means allowing for the concealing of something else. All revealing comes at the price of concomitant concealment. But this is more than just a kind of Kantian acknowledgment of human limitation. Heidegger is not simply dressing up the obvious, that is, the fact that no individual can undergo two different experiences simultaneously. His is not a point about human subjectivity at all. Rather, it is a point about revealing itself. When revealing reveals itself as temporally linear and causally ordered, for example, it cannot simultaneously reveal itself as ordered by song and unfolding in dream. Furthermore, in revealing, revealing itself is concealed in order for what is revealed to come forth. Thus, when revealing occurs concealing occurs as well. The two events are one and cannot be separated.<sup>4</sup>

Too often we forget. The radiance of revelation blinds us both to its own event and to the shadows that it casts, so that revealing conceals itself and its self-concealing conceals itself, and we fall prey to that strange power of vision to consign to oblivion whatever cannot be seen. Even our forgetting is forgotten, and all traces of absence absent themselves from our world.

The noted physicist Stephen Hawking, in his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, writes, "The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe."<sup>5</sup> Such a theory, many people would assert, would be a systematic arrangement of all knowledge both already acquired and theoretically possible. It would be a theory to end all theories, outside of which no information, no revelation could, or would need to, occur. And the advent of such a theory would be as the shining of a light into every corner of being. Nothing would remain concealed.

This dream of Hawking's is a dream of power; in fact, it is a dream of absolute power, absolute control. It is a dream of the ultimate managerial utopia. This, Heidegger would contend, is the dream of technological thought in the modern age. We dream of knowing, grasping everything, for then we can control, then we can manage, everything.

But it is only a dream, itself predicated, ironically enough, upon concealment, the self-concealing of the mystery. We can never control the mystery, the belonging together of revealing and concealing. In order to approach the world in a manner exclusively technological, calculative, mathematical, scientific, we must already have given up (or lost, or been expelled by, or perhaps ways of being such as *we* are even impossible within)

other approaches or modes of revealing that would unfold into knowledges of other sorts. Those other approaches or paths of thinking must already have been obliterated; those other knowledges must already have concealed themselves in order for technological or scientific revelation to occur.

The danger of a managerial approach to the world lies not, then, in what it knows – not in its penetration into the secrets of galactic emergence or nuclear fission – but in what it forgets, what it itself conceals. It forgets that any other truths are possible, and it forgets that the belonging together of revealing with concealing is forever beyond the power of human management. We can never have, or know, it all; we can never manage everything.

What is now especially dangerous about this sense of our own managerial power, born of forgetfulness, is that it results in our viewing the world as mere resources to be stored or consumed. Managerial or technological thinkers, Heidegger says, view the earth, the world, all things as mere *Bestand*, standing-reserve.

All is here simply for human use. No plant, no animal, no ecosystem has a life of its own, has any significance, apart from human desire and need. Nothing, we say, other than human beings, has any intrinsic value. All things are instruments for the working out of human will. Whether we believe that God gave Man dominion or simply that human might (sometimes called intelligence or rationality) in the face of ecological fragility makes us always right, we managerial, technological thinkers tend to believe that the earth is only a stockpile or a set of commodities to be managed, bought, and sold. The forest is timber; the river, a power source. Even people have become resources, human resources, personnel to be managed, or populations to be controlled.

This managerial, technological mode of revealing, Heidegger says, is embedded in and constitutive of Western culture and has been gathering strength for centuries. Now it is well on its way to extinguishing all other modes of revealing, all other ways of being human and being earth. It will take tremendous effort to think through this danger, to think past it and beyond, tremendous courage and resolve to allow thought of the mystery to come forth; thought of the inevitability, along with revealing, of concealment, of loss, of ignorance; thought of the occurring of things and their passage as events not ultimately under human control. And of course even the call to allow this thinking – couched as it so often must be in a grammatical imperative appealing to an agent – is itself a paradox, the first that must be faced and allowed to speak to us and to shatter us as it scatters thinking in new directions, directions of which we have not yet dreamed, directions of which *we* may never dream.

And shattered we may be, for our self-understanding is at stake; in fact, our very selves – selves engineered by the technologies of power that shaped, that are, modernity – are at stake. Any thinking that threatens the

notion of human being as modernity has posited it – as rationally self-interested individual, as self-possessed bearer of rights and obligations, as active mental and moral agent – is thinking that threatens our very being, the configurations of subjective existence in our age.

Those configurations of forces will resist this thinking. Their resistance will occur in many forms. However, one of the most common ways that modern calculative selfhood will attempt to reinstate itself in the face of Heidegger's paradoxical call to think the earth is by employing a strategy that has worked so well so many times before: it will feel guilty.

Those of us who are white know this strategy very well. Confronted with our racism, we respond not by working to dismantle the structures that perpetuate racism but rather by feeling guilty. Our energy goes into self-rebuke, and the problems pointed out to us become so painful for us to contemplate that we keep our distance from them. Through guilt we paralyze ourselves. Thus guilt is a marvelous strategy for maintaining the white racist self.

Those of us who are women have sometimes watched this strategy employed by the caring, liberal-minded men in our lives. When we have exposed sexism, pressed our criticisms and our claims, we have seen such men – the 'good' men, by far the most responsive men – deflate, apologize, and ask us to forgive. But seldom have we seen honest attempts at change. Instead we have seen guilt deployed as a cry for mercy or pity on the status quo; and when pity is not forthcoming we have seen guilt turn to rage, and we have heard men ask, "Why are you punishing us?" The primary issue then becomes the need to attend to the feelings of those criticized rather than to their oppressive institutions and behaviors. Guilt thus protects the guilty. Guilt is a facet of power; it is not a reordering of power or a signal of oppression's end. Guilt is one of the modern managerial self's maneuvers of self-defense.

Of course guilt does not *feel* that way. It feels like something unchosen, something we undergo. It feels much more like self-abuse than self-defense. But we are shaped, informed, produced in our very selves by the same forces of history that have created calculative, technological revealing. Inevitably, whenever we are confronted with the unacceptability of what is foundational for our lives, those foundations exert force to protect themselves. The exertion, which occurs as and in the midst of very real pain, is not a conscious choice; but that does not lessen – in fact it strengthens – its power as a strategy of self-defense. Calculative, technological thinking struggles to defend and maintain itself *through* us and *as* us.

Some men feel guilty about sexism; many white people feel guilty about racism; most of us feel guilty about all sorts of habits and idiosyncracies that we tell ourselves we firmly believe should be changed. For many of us guilt is a constant constraint upon our lives, a seemingly permanent

state. As a result, guilt is familiar, and, though somewhat uncomfortable at times, it comes to feel almost safe. It is no surprise, then, that whenever caring people think hard about how to live with/in/on the earth, we find ourselves growing anxious and, usually, feeling guilty about the way we conduct ourselves in relation to the natural world. Guilt is a standard defense against the call for change as it takes root within us. But, if we are to think with Heidegger, if we are to heed his call to reflect, we must not respond to it simply by deploring our decadent life-styles and indulging ourselves in a fit of remorse. Heidegger's call is not a moral condemnation, nor is it a call to take up some politically correct position or some privileged ethical stance.

When we respond to Heidegger's call as if it were a moral condemnation, we reinstate a discourse in which active agency and its projects and responsibilities take precedence over any other way of being with the earth. In other words, we *insist* on remaining within the discourses, the power configurations, of the modern managerial self. Guilt is a concept whose heritage and meaning occur within the ethical tradition of the Western world. But the history of ethical theory in the West (and it could be argued that ethical theory only occurs in the West) is one with the history of technological thought. The revelation of things as to-be-managed and the imperative to be in control work themselves out in the history of ethics just as surely as they work themselves out in the history of the natural and human sciences.

It is probably quite true that in many different cultures, times, and places human beings have asked the question: How shall I best live my life? But in the West, and in relatively modern times, we have reformulated that question so as to ask: How shall I conduct myself? How shall I behave? How shall I *manage* my actions, my relationships, my desires? And how shall I make sure my neighbors do the same? Alongside technologies of the earth have grown up technologies of the soul, theories of human behavioral control of which current ethical theories are a significant subset. Ethics in the modern world at least very frequently functions as just another field of scientific study yielding just another set of engineering goals.

Therefore, when we react to problems like ecological crises by retreating into the familiar discomfort of our Western sense of guilt, we are not placing ourselves in opposition to technological thinking and its ugly consequences. On the contrary, we are simply reasserting our technological dream of perfect managerial control. How so? Our guilt professes our enduring faith in the managerial dream by insisting that problems – problems like oil spills, acid rain, groundwater pollution, the extinction of whales, the destruction of the ozone, the rain forests, the wetlands – lie simply in mismanagement or in a failure to manage (to manage ourselves in this case) and by reaffirming to ourselves that if we had used our power to manage our behavior better in the first place we could have avoided this mess. In

other words, when we respond to Heidegger's call by indulging in feelings of guilt about how we have been treating the object earth, we are really just telling ourselves how truly powerful we, as agents, are. We are telling ourselves that we really could have done differently; we had the power to make things work, if only we had stuck closer to the principles of good management. And in so saying we are in yet a new and more stubborn way refusing to hear the real message, the message that human beings are not, never have been, and never can be in complete control, that the dream of that sort of managerial omnipotence is itself the very danger of which Heidegger warns.

Thus guilt – as affirmation of human agential power over against passive matter – is just another way of covering over the mystery. Thus guilt is just another way of refusing to face the fact that we human beings are finite and that we must begin to live *with* the earth instead of trying to maintain total control. Guilt is part and parcel of a managerial approach to the world.

Thinking along Heidegger's paths means resisting the power of guilt, resisting the desire to close ourselves off from the possibility of being with our own finitude. It means finding "the courage to make the truth of our own presuppositions and the realm of our own goals into the things that most deserve to be called in question." It means holding ourselves resolutely open for the shattering power of the event of thinking, even if what is shattered eventually is ourselves.