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# Existentialism and Technology

**Dominic Smith**

This chapter has a twofold aim: to survey how technology features as a theme for several key existentialists, and to give a sense of how this work has inflected the contemporary field of philosophy of technology. A productive tension is going to emerge. As we will see, engagements with technology are prominent across nineteenth century proto-existentialists and thinkers associated with the twentieth-century highpoint of the existentialist 'movement' alike; what's more, this work has left important marks on philosophy of technology. However, these connections are often downplayed in philosophy of technology today.

A key reason for this is the radically ambivalent legacy of one figure: Martin Heidegger.[i] There is no doubt that Heidegger's fabled 'tool analysis' from *Being and Time* has been deeply influential. From the Actor-Network Theory of Latour (2005) and the Critical Constructivism of Feenberg (2002; 2005), to the Extended Mind Thesis of Clark and Chalmers (2011, p. 216-217) and, especially, the postphenomenology of Ihde and Verbeek (Ihde 2010; Verbeek 2005), this aspect of Heidegger's early work has been an important touchstone for key approaches in philosophy of technology.[ii] But Heidegger's later views on technology as a 'way of revealing' - as expressed most famously in his 1954 essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' – stand in stark contrast (1977b). Especially since an 'empirical turn' in philosophy of technology in the 1990s, these approaches have been deeply criticized, to the point where Heidegger today connotes something mainly negative in much philosophy of technology (Achterhuis, 2001, p. 3; Verbeek, 2005, p. 7; Brey, 2016, p. 129; Mitcham, 2022, pp. 19-34; Howard, 2022, p. 78; Franssen, 2022 pp. 60-61). On this view, 'Heidegger' and 'Heideggerianism' are shorthands for a dated form of 'classical' philosophy of technology that abstracts from concrete engagements with particular artifacts, and that instead privileges an abstract, monolithic, and otherworldly view of 'Technology' as a totalising force (Ihde, 1979, p. 128; Smith, 2018; Lemmens, 2021).

A further reason for the downplaying of existentialism has to do with general connotations of the term. Many '-isms' vie for attention in philosophy of technology today. These range from transhumanism (Savulescu and Bostrom, 2009) and posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013), to accelerationism (Mackay and Avanessian, 2014; Williams and Srnicek, 2013) and new directions in feminism (Loh and Coeckelbergh, 2019), as well as various new forms of realism (Harman, 2018) and materialism (Ferraris, 2013; Bennett, 2009). Compared with these approaches, which can appear exciting and future-oriented, **[p 237]** 'existentialism' can appear as a *passé* signifier for a movement that is of historical interest at best. And there is, of course, a much worse suspicion: that 'existentialism' acts as a kind of Trojan horse malware for other problematic '-isms' ('individualism', 'humanism', 'eurocentrism', 'pessimism', 'elitism', or 'technological determinism', for instance).

In contrast to these negative perspectives, this chapter aims to show that philosophy of technology's connections with existentialism are worth foregrounding, and that existentialist approaches can underpin important developments in how we engage technologies today. The chapter therefore undertakes to work *around* the negative image of Heidegger outlined above, on the following premise: what is most problematic about this image – all academic turf wars on whether it does justice to Heidegger aside – is that it functions to englobe other key existentialists as 'classical' philosophers of technology, and to obscure what is distinctive about their approaches. Instead of focusing on Heidegger, this chapter focuses on precisely some of these others that his legacy has tended to obscure. What emerges is far from homogeneous, 'classical', or obviously 'Heideggerian'. To be sure, there are similarities of style and theme among the thinkers looked at in this chapter, along the lines of the 'family resemblance' approach outlined in the general introduction to the present book. What we are also going to observe, however, is an exciting spectrum of nuanced and relevant contributions.

Part one focuses on Kierkegaard's concept of 'levelling', drawing in Dreyfus and Nietzsche. Part two focuses on Ortega's account of technology as 'supernature' before drawing in others including Husserl and Marx. Part three focuses on Arendt's concept of 'earth alienation'. Part four concludes by considering 'existential risk'. According to received usage, existential risks are ones that are either technological or natural, and civilizational in scope (Bostrom and Cirkovic, 2008). I draw together the themes of this chapter by arguing that philosophers of technology today would do well to recall another sense: that of taking what the existentialists had to say too much for granted.

**Levelling**

In a 1970 survey of existentialism, Mary Warnock writes:

> The common ancestry of Existentialism must be divided into two parts. First, there is … the ethical tradition whose emphasis was upon man as the possessor of a will, man as a voluntary agent. [In relation to this] I mean to discuss first Kierkegaard and then Nietzsche…. The second element in the common Existentialist ancestry is completely different from, and in many ways diametrically opposed to, ethical voluntarism. It is the phenomenology of Husserl (1970, p. 3).

This account usefully reemphasizes the genealogy of existentialism outlined in the general introduction to the present book. It also acts as an instructive entry point for this chapter. In the next part, we will look at how technology features across a range of philosophers who were inspired by Husserl, starting with Ortega. In this part, we will look at Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, through a focus on the former's concept of 'levelling'.

What does Warnock mean by 'ethical voluntarism'? First, that the proto-existentialist approaches of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are concerned with *ethos* in the ancient sense of the problem of 'how to live well'. Second, that they are interested in the conditions, scope and power of 'will' [**p 238].** By virtue of how Nietzsche problematizes precisely these issues of will's conditions, scope and power across different phases of his work, there are reasons to quibble with the description of his thought in these terms. As a heuristic for foregrounding aspects of Kierkegaard's approach, however, 'ethical voluntarism' is instructive. With this in mind, we will begin this part by giving a summary of Kierkegaard's famous views on the three 'stages' or 'spheres' of existence, before turning to show how these relate to technology, with reference to the process of 'levelling' in particular.[iii]

For Kierkegaard, the will is the power of decision, and the key condition for its exercise is that human beings find themselves thrown into the world as finite beings 'unto death' who cannot avoid making choices (Kierkegaard, 2004). The scope of much of Kierkegaard's philosophical writing, therefore, is focused on how the anguished individual is to accede from this position, through decision, to authentic 'subjectivity' - that is, to *selfhood* (Kierkegaard, 1992a, 1992b). The power of willing, in turn, is that it enables the individual to make decisions, not merely or primarily on the strength of objective reason or consensus, but, much more fundamentally, on that of faith and paradox.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard famously asserts that '[o]ne should not think slightingly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without the paradox is like a lover without a feeling' (1969, p. 46). What Kierkegaard means by paradox here is that which runs counter (*para*) to accepted opinion or common sense (*doxa*). Already indicated in the account of irony given in his 1841 dissertation on Socrates, this sense of paradox plays an increasingly important role in Kierkegaard's writings from 1843's *Either/Or* onwards. Put schematically, paradox is the engine through which 'leaps to faith' between what Kierkegaard describes as the three 'stages' or 'spheres' of existence - Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious - become possible (1992a, 1992b).

The ‘Aesthetic’ is the lowest of Kierkegaard’s stages, and its defining characteristics neatly emerge in terms of an ambiguity between ‘aesthetics’ in the specialized sense of art appreciation, and the wider sense of *aesthesis* as ‘feeling’ or ‘perception’. Kierkegaard’s main point is that, at the Aesthetic stage of existence, individuals encounter life in general in the same way that dilettantes appreciate art and that hedonists encounter pleasure: they dabble and seek more of it, but they do so without any real sense of discrimination or commitment (Pattison, 2005, pp. 33-37). The dominant mode of life at this stage, then, is the possible: the aesthetic individual entertains all possibilities, to the point where all options become indifferently entertaining or boring (Dreyfus, 2014, p. 643; Pattison, 2005, p. 36). This is the point at which despair ensues, and a transition to the higher sphere of the Ethical is demanded.

The ‘Ethical’ is characterized by a greater degree of ‘actuality’. What is achieved here are principles of selection for living well. Individuals who have achieved the Ethical stage are in a position to make informed choices based on commitments. Crucially, however, these are conditional commitments: they are often the kinds of socially-sanctioned commitments that one can feel bound to make at the various ‘stages on life’s way’ (to get married, or take on a particular career, for instance). In this sense, possibility returns to haunt actuality at the level of the Ethical, and individuals here are caught in a form of what Sartre would later diagnose as ‘bad faith’: they recognize that other possibilities exist, and this means that they encounter the choices they have actually made in ‘experimental’ and provisional terms, not as existentially binding.

The dominant mode of life at the ‘Religious’ stage is that of contingency converted into – and experienced as – a kind of necessity. Thrown into the contingency of existence, **[p 239]** with all its possibilities and actualities (aesthetic, socially-sanctioned, or otherwise), what is definitive of the self here is the kind of unconditional commitment that actualizes possibilities and makes them concrete, and lived *as if* necessary. Notwithstanding the explicitly Christian message of Kierkegaard’s own approach, this kind of commitment arguably need not point in a particular metaphysical direction (Dreyfus, 2014, p. 645; Pattison 2005, p. 38). In principle, a ‘religious’ commitment could be made to any of the putatively ‘inauthentic’ choices mentioned so far (one could commit to being an excellent art critic, a food connoisseur, or a dedicated and loving spouse). What matters more is how decision and the commitments it entails are experienced and lived by the subject. ‘Religious’ choices are not, as such, the kind of choices that need to be signposted ‘from the outside’, and that others could, in principle, always call into question with regard to authenticity; they are rather the kinds of choices that define what Kierkegaard calls ‘inwardness’. The *sine qua non* of a religious choice, in this respect, is that it is the kind of choice that is experienced in solitude, as binding for the self that has made it, and that it works out from here – as a kind of existential vocation - to inflect and engage the world in which the religious self lives.

For Kierkegaard, it would be perfectly possible to live out the whole of one’s life at either the Aesthetic or the Ethical stage (indeed, many do). His evaluative claim, however, is that such lives are inevitably marked by despair, because they are lacking in commitment and the senses of relevance, risk and authenticity it brings. So, how does one move between the stages? Kierkegaard’s claim is that one is forced to do so in the face of rising despair, on the strength of paradox and actual decision. What this means, in practical terms, is that, from the perspective of the Aesthetic sphere, it will always seem absurd to want to make certain commitments over others and to limit one’s possibilities (that is, to move to the Ethical sphere). Likewise, from the perspective of the Ethical sphere, it will always seem absurd to want to make one’s commitments more binding, rather than just conditionally so (that is, to move to the Religious sphere). What is required to *actually* move between the spheres, then, is the force of an actual practical decision of the will made by the individual (an ‘either/or’ or ‘leap to faith’). And, crucially, this decision can always be decried as ‘absurd’ or ‘paradoxical’ from the perspective of the other stages.

What does technology have to do with this picture? To see this, it is necessary to add Kierkegaard's concept of 'levelling' to the mix. In his 1846 book, *Two Ages*, he writes:

> Whereas a passionate age *accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases*, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, *it stifles and impedes, it levels*. Levelling is a quiet, mathematical, abstract enterprise that avoids all agitation…. A particular individual can take the lead in an insurrection, but no particular individual can take the lead in levelling, for then he would, after all, become the commander and escape the levelling. Particular individuals may contribute to levelling, each in his own little group, but levelling is an abstract power and is abstraction's victory over individuals (1978, p. 84, original emphasis).

Levelling emerges here as a process that is deeply antithetical to the core of Kierkegaard's philosophical project: the individual's capacity to accede to authentic subjectivity. And the crucial point here is that levelling is a technologically mediated process. That this is the case becomes clear through Kierkegaard's elaboration of the related concepts of 'the press' and 'the public' **[p 240]**:

> For levelling really to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of levelling**,** a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – and this phantom is *the public.* Only in a passionless but reflective age can this phantom develop with the aid of the press, when the press itself becomes a phantom. There is no such thing as a public in spirited, passionate, tumultuous times…. [T]he public is a monstrous non-entity (1978, pp. 90-91, original emphasis).

The growth of 'the press' is the key technological condition for the sociological emergence of 'the public'. But this is not to say that a unidirectional causal account is involved here. Rather, Kierkegaard's point is that the press and the public are co-constitutive of one another in driving the process of levelling: 'the press' will, on this account, cater to – and therefore *construct* - common and average opinion in order to grow, and, in doing so, will enter into a self-sustaining feedback loop with 'the public'. The whole tendency of this process, Kierkegaard thinks, will be away from the lived concerns of the individual, towards abstraction and the norms of what would later be called 'mass society'.

What is immediately striking about this tripartite process is its proximity to the kinds of abstractions associated with the caricatural image of 'classical' philosophy of technology. The worry here is that Kierkegaard might simply be indulging unempirical 'classical' tropes that tend towards endorsing the thesis of autonomous technology (the view that technology develops according to an inscrutable logic unto its own) and/or technological determinism (the view that technology determines all other aspects of thought, society and culture) (Scharff and Dusek 2014, pp. 426-429). Beyond this, the worry is that Kierkegaard might simply be tending towards pessimism and conservatism about the role of technology in shaping human life. But note that the tendency towards abstraction is precisely what Kierkegaard is exposing and criticising, not endorsing. In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard consistently underlines the status of 'levelling', 'the press' and 'the public' as abstractions (indeed, 'monstrous' ones) (1978, pp. 60-112). Instead of merely indulging a fallacy of 'misplaced concreteness' that turns these terms into autonomous or determining agencies, then, Kierkegaard's account is sufficiently reflexive to act as a provocation to foreground the status of abstraction, and to engage critical de-reification of these processes.

It is useful here to contrast Kierkegaard on levelling with the later Heidegger on the essence of technology as '*Gestell'* ('positionality' or 'enframing'). The accounts are superficially similar: both levelling and *Gestell* are processes that go beyond the individual, yet that play an important role in conditioning the individual's lived experience. The crucial differences relate to the scale of the conditioning, and what can be done about it. For Heidegger, *Gestell* is an ontological process pertaining to our contemporary epoch in the 'history of Being' (1977a). This means that *Gestell* is not

an abstraction on Heidegger's account. As a 'way of revealing' that permeates every revealed thing in the contemporary epoch, *Gestell* is in fact *desperately concrete* on Heidegger's account, and it can only be overcome, not through subjective action, but by the dawning of a new epoch of Being (Sheehan, 1981). For Kierkegaard, levelling is not an ontological process. On the contrary, it is an abstraction generated by specific technological and sociological conditions that threatens to interfere with the capacity of the individual to properly achieve the potentialities of their own 'being', through a transition between the Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious spheres.

A pithy way of summing this up would be to say that 'levelling' is the kind of account of technology that Heidegger might have arrived at had he stuck with the earlier and **[p 241]** more 'existentialist' approach of *Being and Time.* What is particularly striking here are the resonances between Kierkegaard on levelling and what Heidegger had to say on the topics of the 'they' and 'idle chatter' in *Being and Time* (2005, pp. 149-168). But such a comparison would stray too far towards turning the present reflection into one on Heidegger. Let us therefore close this part differently, by making a connection between Kierkegaard and that other proto-existentialist mentioned by Warnock at the start of this part: Nietzsche.

In a still powerful and suggestive account in his 2001 book *On the Internet*, Hubert Dreyfus links Kierkegaard's account of the Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious stages to a topic that has not ceased to grow in topicality since 2001: online education. In making his argument, Dreyfus convincingly maps Kierkegaard's Aesthetic and Ethical spheres in particular to aspects of the Internet that have also not ceased to grow in topicality: the capacity to enjoy the Internet as a hyperconnected aesthetic spectacle (Dreyfus still calls it 'surfing'), and the capacity to enter into all sorts of conditional and pseudonymous relations online (2014, p. 645). The core of Dreyfus' argument, however, relates to the kinds of unconditional commitments at stake at the Religious stage. As he puts it:

> [W]hile the Internet *allows* unconditional commitments, it does not support them…. Our imaginations can be drawn in, as they are in playing games and watching movies. And no doubt game simulations sharpen our responses for non-game situations. But so far as games work by capturing our imaginations, they will fail to give us serious commitments…. Far from encouraging unconditional commitments, the Net tends to turn all of life into a risk-free game. So, in the end, although Information Technology does not *prohibit* unconditional commitments, it does *inhibit* them (2014, p. 645, original emphasis).

There is a deep irony here. On the one hand, Dreyfus' argument involves a – provocative and interesting – attempt to underscore the *timeliness* of Kierkegaard's account of the three spheres. In doing this, however, he commits to an account of 'the Net' that, over 20 years on, can only appear deeply anachronistic. When *On the Internet* was published, Google had existed as an incorporated company for three years, 'social media' was a meaningless term, and the first iPhone would not be launched for another six years. What Dreyfus had in mind by 'the Internet', in other words, was a network of desktop computers, not the world wrought by ubiquitous and mobile computing. To make this point is not to condemn Dreyfus for failing to foretell the future. The point, rather, is that it would be inaccurate to model the Internet on video games and movies today, or to describe it as a 'risk-free' game that 'fail[s] to give us serious commitments'. In a context where the computing power in the pocket of the average citizen of a so-called 'developed country' exceeds that of a year 2000 desktop by many orders of magnitude, and where biometric, banking, and contractual 'clickwrap' data are routinely exchanged as part of our daily networked relations, such a picture is untenable (Frischmann and Selinger, 2018, pp. 60-80).

The irony, then, is that Dreyfus' attempt to make Kierkegaard's account of the three stages timely ignores one of the key lessons to emerge from Kierkegaard's account of levelling: that of our

tendency to treat abstractions – whether 'the press', 'the public', or 'the Internet' – as if they were concrete and stable things. The way out of this problem is to stress not merely the timely aspects of Kierkegaard's account, but also the *untimely* ones, in Nietzsche's sense of that term (Nietzsche, 1997).[iv] Instead of unempirical 'classical' philosophy of technology that can easily be discounted as so **[p 242]** much antiquarian 'history of ideas', what we get from Kierkegaard's account on this view is rather a nuanced provocation – an 'untimely meditation' – that propels us to think *hyper-empirically* about technology. That is, it is an account not merely of how particular concrete technologies and innovations (this printing press, that newspaper, or this iteration of the Internet at timeslice X) inform the human capacity for thought and action, but also a provocation to think about how technologically mediated abstractions – *qua* abstractions – are involved in conditioning the lived experience of individuals and the behaviours of groups.

In a hyperconnected contemporary world where technologically mediated abstractions have not ceased to proliferate and grow in their topicality, agency and effects (think merely of brand power, 'Big tech', 'the Internet', 'the market', 'social media' and 'the cloud') there may be every reason to engage with Kierkegaard in this way. Viewed like this, his approach would emerge not as so much 'classical' philosophy of technology, but rather as continuous with the concerns of a whole range of approaches, from Nietzsche's attempt at 'critical history' (1997, pp. 72-80) and phenomenological approaches to social life (Schutz, 1972), to canonical approaches in sociology and political economy that emphasize the very real agency of governing abstractions (Simmel on money (2004), Marx on capital (2021), or Weber on rationalization (2003), for instance). Viewed in this company, what Kierkegaard's account of 'levelling' offers is not some 'classical' version of 'autonomous technology' or 'technological determinism'; it is rather a nuanced and reflexive identification of an important philosophical problem, with historically shifting ramifications and implications that are to be engaged and critiqued anew.

**Supernature**

Let us switch attention to the phenomenology of Husserl, Warnock's 'second element in the common Existentialist ancestry'. There is once again a temptation to make Heidegger the star of the show. This would involve telling a well-known story: Heidegger started out as Husserl's most brilliant student, but went on to betray him. While there are elements of this story that ought to be told and retold – not least Heidegger's complicity with National Socialism - it ought not to be our focus here.[v] This is because telling it would obscure not merely Husserl, but also a cluster of other thinkers associated with existentialism who were influenced by his work. Let us therefore focus on another thinker who described Husserl as his 'master' (Müller and Holanda, 2020, p. 97): Ortega y Gasset.

In his 1940 essay, 'Man the Technician', Ortega writes:

> Present-day man – I refer not to the individual but to the totality of men – has no choice of whether to live in nature or to take advantage of ... *supernature*. He is as irremediably dependent on, and lodged in, the latter as primitive man is in his natural environment. And this entails certain dangers. Since present-day man, as soon as he opens his eyes to life, finds himself surrounded by a superabundance of technical objects and procedures forming an artificial environment of such compactness that primordial nature is hidden behind it, he will tend to believe that all these things are there in the same way as nature itself is there without further effort on his part: that aspirin and automobiles grow on trees like apples. That is to say, he may easily lose sight of technology and of the conditions – the moral conditions, for example – under which it is produced and return to the primitive attitude of taking it for the gift of nature which is simply there (1962, pp. 152-153, my emphasis). **[p 243]**

Warnock remarked that phenomenology was in many ways 'diametrically opposed' to ethical voluntarism. What did she mean by this, and how does it relate to this passage from Ortega? The core of the matter resides with the fact that, whereas the primary task of the ethical voluntarist is to *prescribe* how the subject ought to live in the world, that of the phenomenologist is to *describe* the intersubjective structures and conditions in terms of which they take the world to be 'given'. In the above quote from Ortega, this difference is foregrounded starkly in the first sentence: 'Present-day man – I refer not to the individual but to the totality of men – has no choice of whether to live in nature or to take advantage of ... *supernature*.'

The most instructive contrast for drawing out what is at stake here is with the later Husserl's concept of the 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*). As developed in Husserl's *Crisis* era work of 1934-37, the lifeworld refers to the common world of 'naive' lived experience (1970, p. 281); that is, to the world encountered prior to its theoretical representation by the conceptual 'idealities' of the natural sciences (1970, p. 48).[vi] The 'crisis of the European sciences' that Husserl diagnosed, in turn, refers to a historical split and reversal in lived human experience: since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, Husserl maintained, the advances of the natural sciences had been so successful that its idealities were now increasingly taken for the true objective 'nature' of the world. And what was problematic with this picture, for Husserl, was not so much the issue of its correctness, but that of its incompleteness. The aim of Husserl's *Crisis* era work, as such, was not to disqualify the objective idealities of natural science; it was rather to show that access to them was dependent upon subjective and intersubjective forms of pre-theoretical 'lifeworld' experience that acted as their conditions of possibility.

Although Ortega's remarks on supernature are much more promissory than Husserl's extensive – and at times tortured (Carr 1970, pp. xl-xli) – deliberations on the lifeworld, there are several crucial respects in which they offer important correctives. This is especially true with respect to the role that technologies play. Note, first, that Ortega takes his contemporaries to be 'lodged in' 'supernature', not in the manner of Husserlian rationalist philosophers who have somehow mistaken their representations of the world for a complete picture of it, but in the manner of 'primitives' who are bound to the world by shared habits, customs and practices they have formed around their 'technological objects and procedures'. To be sure, Husserl had important things to say on both habit and technology in the *Crisis* (1970, p. 31; p. 92). The key point, however, is that recourse to a *more* 'naïve' picture of our shared forms of lifeworld experience is, on Ortega's account, destined to be insufficient to address the core nature of the crisis of lived experience at stake here: first, because it underestimates a tendency towards 'naivety' that is already present in our habits, customs and practices, as mediated by artifacts; second, because it takes a crisis in the foundations of 'the European sciences' to be essential when, on Ortega's account, such a crisis is entangled within other implied dangers of 'supernature' (towards overconsumption, overproduction, and overpopulation, for instance).

These aspects of Ortega's approach are very much *in nuce* in the above passage, but they are consistent with the poetics and politics of his wider work. Perhaps Ortega's most famous phrase is 'I am I and my circumstances' (2000, p. 45). Taken in isolation, this reads like a generic existentialist credo, along the lines of Sartre's 'essence precedes existence'. When set in the context of Ortega's wider poetics, however, it has a different hue. To describe the 'thrownness' of the contemporary human being into the lifeworld of supernature, for instance, Ortega pictured the thrown 'I' as a kind of 'shipwreck', and circumstances as an 'ocean' (Holmes, 2021). Whereas Husserl had recourse to a lifeworld **[p 244]** of shared 'pre-theoretical' experience, then, Ortega's account of thrownness avoids such tendencies towards 'pure experience', 'presence', or 'myths of the given' (Derrida, 1973; Sellars, 1997). Instead, Ortega takes cognisance of the always already *artifactual* nature of our existential predicament (see also Ortega, 1925). Indeed, through this emphasis, his account emerges as consistent with more recent approaches to myth, metaphor and anthropology in philosophy of technology (see Stiegler, 1998).

What Ortega's conception of supernature offers us, viewed in this way, is an historicized account of the lifeworld that seeks to take better note of the role of technologies than Husserl, not merely as instruments of natural science, but as vectors of culture, economy and social mores. That this is the case can be seen through a contrast with the approaches of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Unlike the 'press', 'public' and 'levelling', which are *aspects* of the modern world in Kierkegaard's account, the *whole* of the contemporary lifeworld takes on the experiential character of 'supernature' on Ortega's account. Lest this should immediately tempt us to conflate 'supernature' with Heidegger on *Gestell*, however, it is worth noting that the closing lines of the passage quoted above point in several very different directions: towards a critique of the Lockean view of property, for instance, or towards a phenomenology that would be consistent with what Marx had to say on 'commodity fetishism'.

In *Capital,* Marx famously claimed that 'a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (2021). What Ortega's account of supernature offers – despite political differences with Marxism that he never shied away from[vii] - is a complementary phenomenological account of a commodity-driven world. What does it mean to experience one's lifeworld 'supernaturally'? Ortega's point seems to be that it involves not merely the kind of 'disenchantment of the world' that Max Weber had pointed towards with his rationalization thesis (2003); rather, it involves wildly oscillating forms of disenchantment and enchantment that are pointed towards in Marx's account of the commodity. On the one hand, all sorts of 'trivial things' - whether aspirin, automobiles, apples or trees – are experienced in this lifeworld in ways that obscure, mystify and enchant the social and material relations that go into their production. On the other, there will always be something irremediably 'hidden', uncanny (in the sense of 'unhomely'), *ersatz* and precarious about the experience of this kind of 'artificial environment', on Ortega's account.

**Earth Alienation**

To conclude, let us turn to Hannah Arendt's concept of 'earth alienation', as developed in her 1958 classic, *The Human Condition*. Before doing so, a qualification. Arendt did not identify as an existentialist, and in fact rejected the label 'philosopher', preferring instead to see her work as a form of political activism (Moran 2000, p. 290). Arendt was also acerbically critical of key existentialists, especially Sartre (Arendt, 1970). However, Arendt studied with both Husserl and Heidegger, and had a rigorous background in phenomenology; what's more, it is possible to see *The Human Condition's* core shift from the *vita contemplativa* to the *vita activa* as a historical account of the conditions for the emergence of existentialism in general and the type of ethical voluntarism found in Kierkegaard in particular.[viii] What Arendt offers, then, is both an exemplary bringing together of what Warnock referred to as the 'two elements' informing the common ancestry of existentialism, and an approach that points beyond them. **[p 245]**

'Earth alienation' (to be distinguished from the related process of 'world alienation') bears these points out in microcosm. Although the concept surfaces most explicitly in the final chapter of *The Human Condition*, it features implicitly yet dramatically from the first few sentences of the book. In her prologue, Arendt famously allegorizes the 1957 launch of Sputnik as a moment when both sides in the Cold War reached unwitting ideological consensus: instead of viewing Sputnik in terms of positive liberty (freedom *to* express 'human mastery' over the skies), Arendt contends that both sides viewed it primarily in terms of negative liberty (freedom *from* 'men's imprisonment to the earth'[ix]). That both sides could, despite their alienations from one another, express such a shared relation was, for Arendt, a clear sign of how 'earth alienation' features as a much deeper shared condition of modern life.

In what, then, does the concept consist? Primarily in this: while it was possible to accept the earth as a gift of nature (or, indeed, Ortegian 'supernature') under the conditions set by the ancient forms of contemplative life (the *vita contemplativa*), the human condition in modernity (the *vita activa*) is, Arendt contends, marked by 'unquiet' forms of will to power that seek, first, to represent the world as a bounded whole, and, second, to actively transcend dependence on it (1998, p. 15; pp. 264-265). Whereas the first of these trajectories feeds into what Arendt calls 'world alienation' and 'the rise of the social', the second, building on the first, leads to 'earth alienation' and the victory of '*animal laborans'* (1998, pp. 248-268, pp. 320-325; Holmes, 2021). How and why this is case, and what it portends, emerges through a consideration of interrelations between the three forms of activity Arendt takes to be constitutive of the *vita activa*: labour, work, and action (1998, pp. 7-21). Whereas labour refers to humanity's dependence on the earth, work refers to the human capacity to produce cultural worlds ('lifeworlds', in Husserl's terms). In *The Human Condition*, one of Arendt's key claims is that modernity conflates and confuses these separate but interrelated activities, and that they need to be disambiguated.

Arendt's contention is that, with modernity, humanity comes to frame toilsome and unrewarding labour as the means for transcending both 'world' (and, therefore, culture and value) and 'earth' (and, therefore, dependence and finitude), with and through technology.[x] On Arendt's account, this sought-after transcendence (a victory of *animal laborans* of which she takes Marxism to be the most complete ideological expression (1998, p. 78)) is in fact indicative of deep and self-defeating forms of 'world' and 'earth' alienation. It is crucial to pay attention to Arendt's reasons for making this claim. They emerge clearly from this passage:

> This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given…, which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians (1998, pp. 2-3).

Note the shift in pronouns: we start with the description of an archetypal 'future man' in the singular, and end with a gesture towards human beings in the plural (from 'his wishes' to 'our wishes'). What is behind this is Arendt's concern for the third interrelated aspect **[p 246]** of *vita activa*, which she takes in many ways to be both the most precious and precarious: action.

Action relates to what Arendt calls 'political questions of the first order' in the above passage; that is, to politics insofar as it concerns the thoroughgoing plurality of human beings, and insofar as it takes place in genuine 'spaces of appearance' where political grievances can be confessed, agonized over, and decided upon, in public (1998, pp. 199- 212). What renders such spaces precious for Arendt is their evanescence. What renders them precarious, as is palpable from the above passage, is the drift towards technocracy and technical idioms that Arendt takes to underpin forms of world and earth alienation; this is because these are inimical to the reciprocal exchange of understanding, culture and speech on her account and oblivious, at best, to the kinds of spaces required to sustain such activities.

It is worth considering how Arendt's overall approach in *The Human Condition* relates to the accounts of Ortega and Kierkegaard here. The first thing to note is that 'the rise of the social' corresponds to Kierkegaard's views on levelling: on Arendt's account, with the rise of the social (that is: of 'mass society') the distinction between 'public' and 'private' is irremediably blurred, leading to a levelling of the capacity for Kierkegaardian 'inwardness'. The second thing to note is that 'world

alienation' corresponds to Ortega's concept of supernature: supernature is wrought by viewing the world as a 'bounded whole' that is, in Ortega's terms, 'of such compactness that primordial nature is hidden behind it'.[xi] But also note what is missing. There is, for instance, no direct parallel for *animal laborans* in Kierkegaard's account, because *animal laborans* is the kind of being who strives to be religiously committed to labour itself. Furthermore, there is no Arendtian distinction between 'earth' and 'world' alienation in Ortega's account, meaning that it lacks her important account of the differences between these processes (whereas nature is primarily something we conceal our dependence upon for Ortega, whatever s 'given' – whether 'natural' or 'supernatural' - is what we actively seek to escape on Arendt's account of earth alienation).

These omissions are explicable in terms of historical change. Earth alienation – as symbolized by the launch of Sputnik – placed twentieth century humanity in a new epoch on Arendt's account, and neither Kierkegaard nor Ortega was able to foresee it. But this does not mean that Arendt would be uncritical of their approaches, nor, indeed of the broader existentialist lineage in terms of which this chapter has situated them.

Consider, for instance, the differences between the above passage on 'future man' from Arendt, and the passage we dwelt on from Ortega's 'Man the Technician'. Whereas the passage from Arendt moves from the singular to the plural, the passage from Ortega does the opposite: it starts with a parenthetical gesture 'not to the individual but to the totality of men' before going on to condense that totality into a metonym (a heroic 'he'). Consider, moreover, this passage from Arendt's 1951 book *The Origin of Totalitarianism*:

> What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever growing masses of our century (1951, p. 478).

A key question concerns how this relates to Kierkegaard on inwardness. Granted that the existentially earnest individual might be able to achieve religious commitments on Kierkegaard's account, the key concern for Arendt would be that such commitments **[p 247]** are logically and outwardly compatible with quietism, isolation, resignation, and the preconditions of totalitarianism.

Ortega was a member of the Republican government during the period of the Spanish Civil War, and the most obviously politically 'active' of all three key thinkers looked at in this chapter. Kierkegaard was a prolific writer who, for all his railing against the 'press', was arguably able to use it to his advantage as a kind of 'space of appearance'. To indicate potential points of critique from an Arendtian perspective, then, is not to deny either of these thinkers a right of reply. On the contrary, such a right could not consistently be denied by Arendt in order for her to remain true to her account of action. And this is precisely the point: what an approach like that of Arendt offers in an epoch of earth alienation is a *prise de conscience* for existentialism – both specifically, and in the round – not to fall into a distinctively modern confusion of 'labour' and 'work', and to be attentive to issues concerning action, pluralism, and communication.

**Existential Risk**

This chapter has tried to negotiate what, at the risk of punning badly, might be viewed as several forms of 'existential risk': the risk of overestimating Heidegger to the exclusion of other thinkers associated with existentialism, and the risk of trying to cover a reasonably representative set of thinkers in a short space.[xii] How does this relate to our received contemporary sense of 'existential risk'?

As defined by the Future of Life Institute (FLI), an existential risk is:

> [A]ny risk that has the potential to eliminate all of humanity or, at the very least, kill large swaths of the global population, leaving the survivors without sufficient means to rebuild society to current standards of living…. Until relatively recently, most existential risks…. were natural, such as the supervolcanoes and asteroid impacts that led to mass extinctions millions of years ago. The technological advances of the last century, while responsible for great progress and achievements, have also opened us up to new existential risks (FLI 2021).[xiii]

What, in the face of this, can the existentialists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offer but bad puns? What, in the face of threats such as global warming and the rise of Artificial Intelligence, can they really offer but armchair philosophical musings that are irrelevant and irreverent towards the forms of 'bare life' that our received sense of existential risk places front and centre?

The takeaway point of this chapter is this: when we differentiate 'existentialist' approaches and view them as legitimate contributions to a broader ongoing philosophical engagement with technology, they have a great deal to offer. To see why, consider a final example: the 2021 'billionaire space race' that occurred between Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk, as a step towards largescale privately-financed space tourism and exploration (Stirone, 2021).

What do we have here if not an instance of 'earth alienation' *par excellence*, underpinned by a view of our shared planet as 'supernature', and carried out in spite of all sorts of 'levelling' vituperation and praise pouring down from mainstream and social media platforms alike? At exactly the same moment that governments globally wondered about where to place the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to our twenty-first century sense of an 'existential risk', several rich individuals did not stop thinking of themselves as **[p 248]** entrepreneurs of the self, with their own idiosyncratic projects to carry out. That is: they did not cease to think of themselves as 'existentialists', on a very crude understanding of the nineteenth and twentieth century connotations of that term. What better approach for thinking through the explosion of epistemological blindspots and moral conundrums raised by these events than existentialism, then, if only that we might reach a more nuanced appreciation of what is at stake in that term? And what, one wonders, might the space of appearance for doing that look like?

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[i] As is well known, Heidegger rejected the label of 'existentialist' (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 219-221). Warnock writes: 'while it is perfectly legitimate to regard Heidegger as the author of one Existentialist text [*Being and Time*], his mature work could not be so described' (Warnock, 1970, p. 46).
[ii] 'Tool analysis' here refers to *Being and Time's* famous distinction between 'present-at-hand' (*Vorhandenheit)* and 'ready-to-hand' (*Zuhandenheit)* (Heidegger, 2005, pp. 78-148). This account has been enduringly influential by virtue of the way it emphasizes the relational and 'networked' aspects of artifacts that commonly go unnoticed. For more on tool analysis in relation to philosophy of technology, see Van Den Eede, 2019, pp. 17-39.
[iii] The exploration of this relationship is not novel (Vallor, 2022), and has as an important inspiration and precedent in Dreyfus, 2014. The second half of this part develops a critique of Dreyfus' paper.
[iv] That is: 'untimely' in the sense of out of step with the voice of consensus, critically acquainted with history, and concerned with the future.
[v] See Safranski, 1998.
[vi] The *Crisis* was only published in 1954 (1970, p. xviii).
[vii] Ortega was a liberal journalist and politician, serving in the Republican Cortes in 1931-32.
[viii] Arendt had longstanding relations with other key figures in existentialism, including Karl Jaspers and Hans Jonas.
[ix] Arendt cites two sources: an unnamed US headline that frames Sputnik as the first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth', and the funeral obelisk of a great Russian scientist, which proclaimed 'Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever' (Arendt 1998, p. 1).
[x] Of all political philosophies, Arendt takes Marxism to be the acme of this confusion (1998, p. 78).

[xi] Ortega died in 1955, two years before the launch of Sputnik. Tantalisingly, he writes the following in 'Man the Technician':

> Whenever we imagine some utterly extravagant feat, we catch ourselves in a feeling almost of apprehension lest our reckless dream – say a voyage to the starts – should come true. Who knows but that tomorrow morning's paper will spring upon us the news that it has been possible to send a projectile to the moon (1962, p. 120).

[xii] Other thinkers who deserve greater attention in this connection include Karl Jaspers, Erich Fromm, Jacques Ellul, Simone Weil and Ivan Illich.

[xiii] As instances of the kinds of 'technological advances' under consideration, the FLI cites nuclear war, biotechnology, artificial intelligence and climate change. This is the sense of 'existential risk' most current in contemporary academic and political debate, and the FLI is far from the only research institute to be focused on studying it; there is also, for instance, the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at Cambridge (https://www.cser.ac.uk/), and the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford (https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/).

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