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Thinking of the Philosophy of Environment and Technology

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Taşköprülüzade (d. 1561), one of the most prominent scholars and thinkers of the Period of Sulayman the Magnificent, says: "Learning is the worship of the mind." Four centuries after him, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the leading German philosopher who questioned technology in terms of moral values said "searching is the religion of thinking." Even though what he meant by religion was the kind of belief Ancient Greeks had, I understand from the way Taşköprülüzade used the word that this meeting is worth to be considered as "the worship of the mind."

Technology is an important element when the relationship between humans and environment is considered. The people with environmental-oriented consciousness hold technology responsible for the most significant problems of 21st century. That is why, when the reasons of environmental issues are discussed, we need to question modern science and the result of it which is the technology itself. Talking about the philosophy of environment and technology, the first thinker that comes to mind is Heidegger. For, he considered this issue before the negative results of human-environment relationship (*fasâd fi'l-âra*), which is also defined as environmental problems, became widespread and he became one of the first thinkers, who "questioned" environment and technology thoroughly. Heidegger pointed out eagerly: "Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology."¹

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1 Heidegger's "Questioning Technology" article was written after his sequential conferences that took place in Bremen in 1949. Heidegger studied on rough copies and published a book called *Die Technik und die Kehre* in 1961. The book was translated into Turkish as *Tekniğe İlişkin Soruşturma* by Doğan Özlem (Istanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 1998). English translation by William Lovitt as *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Troch Book, 1977), 4. The references are to the English translation.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who was a nature-lover and stood up for natural and plain life, argued that people, who are alienated from nature and tried to dominate it, started contaminating the earth, destroying it and became miserable as a result. Like ancient Greeks, he thought that “the source of happiness is to understand nature and live in compliance with it in the simplest way possible.” According to Rousseau, natural living equals for happiness. Contamination begins with deviation from the natural. With civilization and creation of the concept of personal property, science and arts developed, thus the foundation of misery and contamination was laid sooner than expected.²

The number of people who argue that environmental issues were born and became widespread due to the dominant sense of science and world view (which Heidegger defines as metaphysics) is more than we mentioned in this article. Therefore, we need to take the concept of technology into consideration and question this concept. If we consider the famous quote of Socrates “an unquestioned life is not worth living,” which was said in another context, and create our own motto: “Unquestioned technology is not worth using” we will have much better conception of technology and origin of our perception, and we will free ourselves from the negative and passive effect of technology, which we can consider as slavery. However, Heidegger was not that hopeful about this as much as we are now.

I. Criticism of Technology

I have already mentioned that Heidegger was one of the most prominent thinkers, who tried to understand and explain the origin of technology and criticized its effect on human and nature. For he developed his opinions of modern technology with reckoning and internal feud. In other words, Heidegger analyzed modern technology “by settling scores with Western philosophy, especially Western metaphysic.”³ For this reason, his criticism of technology can also be considered as the criticism of Western philosophy and metaphysics. The majority of environmentalist thinkers looked for the cause of environmental problems by being inspired/affected

2 Afşar Timuçin. “Kirlenmiş Bir Dünyada”, *Felsefelogos Dergisi*, 6: 1 (1999).

3 Doğan Özlem. *Tekniğe İlişkin Soruşturma* (Istanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 1998), Introduction to the translation, 16.

by Heidegger and they felt the need to argue with Cartesian view of philosophy and modern science.

Moreover, they were inspired by the criticism of Western philosophy in general and specifically of technology, put forward by Heidegger and they considered him as the master. According to these thinkers, Heidegger’s most important contributions to environmentalist thinking can be classified into three broad areas: First, he made the most comprehensive criticism to Western philosophy since the time of Plato. According to his point of view, the human-oriented perception of dominating over nature resulted from that philosophical tradition. His second most important idea was that Taoist understanding, separated from analytical customs of the West, encouraged us to consider things with the viewpoint of “letting things go.” The third was his invitation urging us to settle down on earth and live in it with an ease of mind (naturally/ as a part of nature). One of the lessons learnt from these perceptions was that we are not the lords of nature, but only a humble member and due to this fact, we need to watch out the process of nature with a careful eye.⁴

Going back to where we started, the first steps of the technology era were taken when the science understanding of ancient Greeks started to change. With Descartes, who is considered to be father of modern/new philosophy, the understanding of science changed as well as the subject-object relation, in favor of the “subject”. Science (*Wissenschaft*) means discipline or a branch of information in modern sense, yet for Greeks, it meant “Considering matters thoroughly” due to one of the meanings of logos, thus science meant the act of thinking about Being. However, according to Heidegger, “science does not think” when its appearance in the new age is considered. For science has become the discipline of the subject, which defined nature and historical events as causative sequence, separating itself from nature with self-consciousness and alienated it.⁵

In that case, technology is not just a tool. Technology is the style of revealing mysteries. When we pay attention to this fact, we come across with a completely different perspective of the origin of technology. This is the field of revealing mysteries and reality (*Wahrheit*).⁶

4 Bill Devall and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Press, 1985), 98.

5 Özlem, op. cit.

6 Heidegger, *Question Concerning Technology*, 12.

We also need to be careful about two things when the meaning of this word is considered. First of all, this word is not only used for activities related to handcraft and manual skills, but also for mental and fine arts. (...) The other important fact we need to consider about the word *tekhne* is much more important. *Tekhne* had been connected with the word *episteme* since early ages, until the time of Plato. Both words mean “knowing” in the most comprehensive sense. They mean being completely in the perfect sense, comprehending something and being competent at something. Such kind of knowing provides an unfolding.⁷

At this point, Heidegger asks: “What is modern technology?” It is the unfolding of mysteries. When we pay attention to this basic characteristic feature, something new is revealed from modern technology. Revealing mysteries, which is the dominant element of modern technology, does not mean a prominent unfolding or *revealing* like *poiesis*. Revelation of mysteries in modern technology creates a challenge to nature by forcing an unreasonable request to provide an energy that can be reaped and stored.⁸

“The urge of modern human to dominate over everything that comes across to his way” rises with the perception.⁹ The thing we call “technology” tries to handle and understand everything with “objectivity” and then tries to control it.¹⁰ Modern technicians are expected to create order with all data provided, to help improve the operation of all kinds of humane/inhumane beings and offer solutions to problems. Even he also expects this from himself and tries to keep everything under control. As Çüçen puts forward: “Heidegger’s opinion of technology is based on the criticism of the technology notion of modern science and *tekhne* concept of ancient Greeks. The purpose of modern subject-oriented philosophy introduced by Descartes is to comprehend the dominant laws of nature. Dominating over nature and the desire to comprehend its laws were formed on the basis of exposing oneself wide open and self-consciousness... Cogito exposes everything with its own design. Modern philosophy and science was based on the image of how the subject sees itself.”¹¹

7 Ibid, 53.

8 Ibid, 55.

9 Özlem, op. cit., 20.

10 Ibid, 20.

11 A. Kadir Çüçen. *Heidegger’de Varlık ve Zaman* (Bursa: Asa Kitabevi, 2003), 175.

According to Capra, the most significant feature of Cartesian differentiation is the domination of “soul” over “body”, which also shaped the following developments.¹² From this point of view, new opinions such as all beings are completely different from humans, that they do not have any more value than how much the subject appreciates them and that the subject has no moral responsibility against nature started to prevail. And because of this, some thinkers defined it as “self-divinization of the subject.” According to this point of view, the modern human does not need anything other than himself to ground reality. The subject alone is the sole criterion of reality and information. Nothing should be relied upon other than this fact. Taking only experiment and observation into account, Positivist philosophy and science, which rejects all kinds of metaphysical values that are not subjected to human experience, is the result of human-oriented understanding.¹³

One of the most important results of this understanding is that the human is the source of all information and values. Other than humans, the nature and its constituents (intrinsically) are not valuable. The utility and happiness offered to humans by nature is only valuable to its size and measure. In other words, the value of nature is instrumental, not intrinsic or actual. The value of nature is measured with the amount of utility and happiness offered to the human, thus he can do anything he desires to increase happiness and it is rightful to abuse nature for this purpose.

With this perception, “the mystic conception of nature” by the ancient cultures, “the nurturing nature” (*natura naturans*) concept of the Renaissance and “the nature as God’s creation” understanding of monotheistic religions give its place to a different perception of nature. This perception is the result of modern philosophy and it is brand new. The most fundamental feature of it is its human-oriented approach. This approach, which alienates intrinsic and metaphysical dimension of nature and offers that it is only valuable as an instrument, has now been assessed as “the loss of earth.”¹⁴

Heidegger argues that this approach of modern science is in conflict with the origin of science. Science protests against reality being

12 Fritjof Capra. *The Turning Point* (London: Bantam Books, 1982), 59.

13 Michael Zimmerman. “Heidegger and Marcuse: Technology as Ideology”, in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 2 (1979), 248.

14 Ibid.

manipulated. Science defends the comprehension of reality in the purist sense. Science should not approach reality with the purpose of changing it. However, according to Heidegger, modern science assaults reality. By rearranging reality, science shapes it to be examined and followed. Modern scientists do not let things exist as they are. He invades things, objectifies and comes face to face with them and shapes them. The existing things are taking a form in front of our noses.¹⁵ Most of the environmental issues are nothing more than misuse of the power the subject yields as a result of his “oblivion” and crosses the boundaries of nature.¹⁶

As a result, the human (industrialized and developed, so to speak) has reached a power that could change the balance in ecosystem with the help of technology and information. In this context, we need to define the boundaries and responsibilities of his actions and also identify the good and bad. The modern human has not started to damage others with his actions and the style of life he chose to live, at least not in this period of time, yet it will not be the same for future generations. As a result of our life style, natural balance started to deteriorate and many live specimen became extinct and all these show how serious the consequences will be.

II. Environmental Morals

The decisive factor in the discipline we have today, which, now as a new subdivision of morality, we define as “environmental ethics” is the construction of a previous moral understanding on a different basis from the human-centered understanding and the attempt to re-establish human-human, human-nature and human-God relationship. However, in modern sense of morals, we do not witness to any kind of moral responsibility of the human to future generations, let alone his responsibility to nature.

Taken from a different point of view, it could be possible to understand this perception to some extent. When we consider the informational aspect, where moral theories are formulated and developed, the modern human itself, defined briefly above, has information related to himself and the outside world. When considered from this aspect, the human did not

15 Tuğba Genç. “Heidegger, Modern Bilim ve Sanat”, *Ethos: Felsefe ve Toplumsal Bilimlerde Diyaloglar*, 2: 4 (2008).

16 İbrahim Özdemir. *Yalnız Gezegen* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2001).

know that the future generations would be affected negatively from what he did at that moment. For example; it can be observed that as a result of the philosophical ideas of 17th century, deontological, opportunistic, hedonistic and similar moral theories do not hold future situations under morally responsible. Morally, “good” is limited to the meaning of “satisfying desires and capturing happiness.” And responsibility was asserted to be limited only to humans when morality is considered.¹⁷ In other words, the basics of human actions and the standard of good or bad, decided by the seen and the observable. That is why, when an action is determined to be good or bad, only the things at that exact moment and in that exact place were taken into consideration. Discussing the basic features of classical moral system, Hans Jones argues that the actions taken “now and here” are only evaluated in terms of good and bad, yet the future good/bad results of the actions in question are not considered. From his point of view, we are in dire need of a new moral understanding.¹⁸

As environmental problems point out and environmental science has proven, the fundamentals of our actions have changed dramatically. Our current actions and life style affect both future generations and the whole ecosystem we live in. For this reason, environmentalist moralists try to re-define “moral responsibility.” By doing this, they are also re-defining the boundaries of moral responsibility in a way that could cover its future effects and possible results. These actions do not only cause legal problems for the ones, who are here right now, but also for future generations and people, who live in other continents.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, Heidegger defines Cartesian “subject” as the “subject” of technology, which threaten and damage our environment, world and finally each other. When we examine/question the features of this subject, I believe we can reach clues that can help us overcome this problem. Qur’an-oriented human and universe perception created by

17 Errol Harris. “Ethical Implications of Newtonian Science” in *Philosophical Perspective of Newtonian Science*, ed. by Philip Bricker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 211-225.

18 Hans Jones. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6; also see Zimmerman, op. cit., 43-53.

Muslim thinkers can alter our perception of environment and technology. As Nasr rightfully points out, the intake of science and technology without questioning will only make us dependent on the West and take our traditions for granted. As a result, we will face the same results as the West does: Destruction of the earth and humans.

In this context, it is required to question and define Islamic world view and the concept of universe. Moreover, the concepts of Allah-universe-human, caliphate, trust and connection should be questioned and examined. What is the meaning of “vicegerent”, as this is a status given to human beings in the Qur’an, and what is its boundary? How should we relate to the nature that was entrusted to us? How can we relate to nature, defined as “ready as it is” by Heidegger, yet written in Quran to be created by Allah for us and bestowed upon us and for all creatures living in it? According to Heidegger, our knowledge of ourselves and being (*Dasein*) is defined by science and technology. However, when look from the perspective of Islamic world view, what kind of science concept and technology can we see? I believe that another way to do this is to question Islamic philosophical traditions and try to comprehend it, just as Heidegger did with Western philosophical traditions.

There are certain important subjects in the famous interview (1966) of Heidegger in *Der Spiegel*, which was agreed to be published after his death. The interviewers asked the pessimistic philosopher whether philosophy could save us or not and the answer given by Heidegger has still been a topic of controversy ever since. According to him; “Philosophy cannot create an effect that could change the current situation of the world. This is applicable for not only philosophy, but also for everything that is related to human worries and wishes. Only God can save us.”¹⁹

From this point of view, the dynamic Allah-universe-human conception of Islamic knowledge and tradition, represented perfectly by Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, Mevlana, Mulla Sadra, Muhammed Iqbal, Said Nursi etc. indicates that we can create a new standpoint and perception of universe and environment by taking energy from our own traditions. That is why, unlike Heidegger, I am quite hopeful about future.

19 *Der Spiegel* interview was translated into English by Maria Alter and John D. Caputo and published in *Philosophy Today* 20 (1976), 267-284.

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