

Novelty and Sameness: Heidegger-Inspired Critiques of Modern Education

Nassim Noroozi
Concordia University

In his article, “Heidegger and Technology: On Thinking and Teaching Anew,” Sailer traces the “loss of meaning” of our times in the enframing ethos of modern thought, and examines the manifestation of its legacy in today’s education: what counts is set up and set forth by humans, and what can’t be framed or consumed will not count at all. Essential to maintaining this legacy is a heavy reliance on calculative reason and the conception of subjects and things as *bestands*: objects that are seen or counted *in-order-to* be used as reserves for our thinking, and our research. Sailer subsequently builds on Heidegger’s suggestions on ways to surpass the calculative climate of modern thinking: a re-assigning of the “protruding and concealing,” “unmanageable,” “never fully intelligible,” “always-exceeding-our-grasp” notion of the *earth* onto our conception of “the underwhelming, manageable, and uncontemplatively graspable” *world*.¹ The importance of taking note of a characteristically Heideggerian call for a return to Greek thought is also recognized in order to achieve a “doing of intelligence” beyond the enframing confinements of modernity.

Correspondingly, Sailer calls for a need for a new and different way of thinking and understanding reality in education: a mindfulness towards what he calls reality, towards things and their hidden depth. The fundamental step to a new and different way of thinking and of overcoming the dominance of technology, Sailer concludes, is the practice of recognition of the sheer mystery and miracle of reality.

Sailer recommends the latter in order to “achieve a distinct human ability of catching a glimpse of the inexhaustible, the ability to respond with awe and wonder, to instill a hunger for the inexhaustible through education.”² The author’s conclusion is inspired by Heidegger’s worry that modern

knowledge, in its quest for mastery, embodies an impotence of the will and does not reflect knowledge at its peak.

The author cautions us that if the mystery of reality is not recognized, humans, and particularly those thinking about education, “clos[e] themselves off to other ways of revealing; and the subsequent closing off of ourselves to the depth of being human.”³ This brings the reasoning at the beginning of the article to full circle, where he originally traced the malaise of enframing to a specific lack of a depth, or character upon which the salience of thought depends.

There is a benefit in conversing back and forth with Heidegger with regards to the malaise of modern education. Heidegger will provide us with a generous understanding of modernity’s calculative climate of thinking in educational thought: Sailer’s article and his Heideggerian critiques are testaments to that. I would even take the author’s well-crafted reflection a step further: Heideggerian phenomenology of modernity can potentially recalibrate our thinking about a few things, namely the righteousness of what we consider good in education and what we deem as knowledge (e.g., research, data, or answers to problems).

Even more so, with its care for the presence of awe and wonder, Heideggerian reflections can engender inquiries that can potentially take us to other-than-calculative climates of thinking in philosophizing about education.⁴ Committing to a sense of wonder to acquire a more original stance towards reality is indeed a Heideggerian undertaking: he himself had hoped to detrivialize philosophy through a reassessment of the place of wonder in it.⁵ This however can happen if only a more exhaustive Heideggerian analysis gets conducted on the author’s part; specifically one that undoes his initial conceptual pairings of awe and wonder. Heidegger has reminded us, after all, of the “essential” difference between wonder and its other conceptual affiliates such as awe or curiosity.⁶ He also has meticulously detached wonder from its commonly assumed conceptual affiliates on the premise of such associations being objectionable and insufficient, and established original associations like seeing the concept of distress (and not awe) as an essential conceptual affiliate for wonder.⁷

However, staying merely with Heideggerian critiques of modernity and his propositions will not engender a radically different approach that is needed to disrupt the very modern mechanism that initially reduced events, subjects, and objects to standing reserves. In fact, with Heidegger, and with Sailer's subsequent recommendations of mindfulness towards the mystery of reality, one might solely suspend modern thinking and not unsettle it. Dwelling with Heidegger can therefore delude us into taking the old (as in the old practices of perceiving and understanding) and assuming them as new.

In the rest of my response I will argue how what seems to be a different-than-modern route that Heidegger guides us to can eventually make us end up in the same terrain of intellectual ambitions of modernity. The argument is premised on Levinas' critique of the ecstatic nature of Heideggerian authentic understanding.⁸ I will briefly sketch the reasons for this argument and later examine a potential culprit in Sailer's reasoning that brought us here.

This should be a dangerous move for a two-page response; primarily because we cannot sufficiently acknowledge the liberatory character of Heidegger's analytic of existential projections or temporal understanding, nor can we expand on the axial role he assigns to others while advocating for the "Dasein-with" essence of Dasein.⁹ It might also seem as if we are taking ecstasis in its literal meaning and therefore problematizing it on the grounds of it simply *sounding* diametrically opposed to inwardness, which is not the case. Furthermore, we are not rigidly following the conceptual (*temporal*) makeup of Levinas' critique of Heideggerian ecstasis, nor are we by any means looking at the *temporal* nature of ecstasis itself. It is worth noting that, the questionable role that the world and others play in the formation of Heidegger's understanding initially seems both hard-to-detect and unimaginable. Levinas himself very cautiously calls it an "ambiguity."¹⁰ However, once he draws our attention to it, it is hard not to see it any longer. All in all, that this response is not a scholastic muscle-flexing on Heidegger and is—similar to Sailer's article—a genuine educational concern should shield us to a certain degree.

In order to make my argument clearer I will go back to Heidegger's expounding on the centrality that wonder should have in thinking.¹¹ It is true that

Heidegger calls attention to the stringency of calculative reason and invites us to grasp reality or beings “as emerging out of themselves in the way they show themselves,” “to care for beings themselves and let them grow,” and expects us to be “displaced into the sustaining of unconcealedness of beings.”¹² It is also true that through this unconcealedness, Heidegger wants the entities and beings to approach us not as preformulated or to-be-formulated entities and ideas but as “beings as beings.” But, in Heidegger’s own words, such attempts for the disclosure of beings have one elementary aspiration: the primary aim (beyond necessitating a need for a more original primordial questioning and thinking) is to displace *us* as thinkers into a new essence; “the essence of *one who perceives* and *gathers* in the open and thereby first *experiences* the hidden and closed as such.”¹³ Heidegger’s ecstatic understanding is therefore essentially about freeing the thought of the subject-as-*thinker* from the calculations: the sustained unconcealedness of beings is called for in-order-for them to remind us how we humans forgot that our task was to “become prepared for the necessity of the question and the necessity for the inexplicability of the truth.”¹⁴ It is not ultimately about those who, because of our insistence on gaining mastery and knowledge of the world, got explained or enframed.

In a Heideggerian move, Sailer also initially asks us to pay attention to those who, in education and through its enframing mechanisms, got “left out of the picture.”¹⁵ Later, however, he too abandons them in his calls (to us as thinkers) for a recognition of the mystery of reality. Sailer calls for a halt to enframing, because closing ourselves off to other ways of revealing will ultimately deprive *us* (educational philosophers) from reaching the depths of being human.

It is such particular inner workings of Heideggerian thought (and in our case Sailer’s) that lead Levinas to conclude that despite Heidegger’s presentation of the other/s as fundamental, Heideggerian ontology is eventually a philosophy of solitude. The modern mechanism of mastery—that sees in subjects *bestands* and standing-reserves—is also visible in *ecstatic* understanding: this time, the beings of beings are there to help us gain a more authentic understanding of the world. This mechanism can echo a modernity-with-a-delay, one that can be seen in the relationship with the other in Heidegger’s formulaic of wonder,

in his presenting of the Dasein-with essence of the Dasein, or in his ecstatic understanding: a mechanism in which “the subject is absorbed in the object and recovers itself in its unity.” That is, a recovery in unity, which, like enframing, results in a contraction and an “eventual disappearance of the other.”¹⁶

This is how Levinas observes that despite Dasein’s projections unto the world and with (*mit*) others,¹⁷ the other has no fundamental role in Heideggerian authentic understanding: “all the analyses of *Being and Time* are worked out either for the sake of the impersonality of everyday life or for the sake of solitary *Dasein*.”¹⁸

Similarly, we are subject to dwell in the same territory of modern thinking if we follow Sailer’s trajectory of “thinking anew.” In our eventual giving up of enframing for the sake of reaching the depths of being human, the enframed will not find a chance to recover from having been enframed. Sailer’s recognition is not for the standing reserves and the objectified to become subjects and to speak to us in a “face-to-face” relationship.¹⁹ Renouncing enframing is for the sake of finding out a better way of questioning, or for discovering new depths of being human. Hence the concern about dwelling with Heidegger’s suggestion and the risk of them being in the same terrain of modern intellectual ambitions of fusion and subjectivity. The relationship with the other—and in Sailer’s case, with the enframed—is essentially a relationship without (an actual) relation.²⁰ Sailer’s recommendation can thus be in the similar danger of falling in the category of the modern again.

We might be able to trace why Sailer got here in the first place. There is a chance that, instead of a care for those harmed by modern ways of thinking, Sailer was (more or less like Heidegger) in search of an ambiguous retrieval: a pre-modern, pre-industrial, pre-technological inwardness infused with Greek thought. Such nostalgia might have been the reason why recognizing reality-as-miracle posed itself as a fundamental step to a *new* and different way of overcoming the dominance of enframing and technology. We started with a pre-modern nostalgia, examined a current harm, and suggested we should instead look at the mystery of reality *in-order-to* get a glimpse of our depth. We left those standing-reserves and enframed hanging in a relationship without a

relation. Such is a procedure of “fusion” which has dominated the nature and outcome of the relationship with the new in Western thought, either in modern times or in Heidegger’s idea of ecstatic authentic understanding. A relationship which, ultimately, and despite its claims to novelty, is the old delayed “time of subjectivity,”²¹ guised under new thinking.

This makes us wonder. If our Heideggerian approaches along with the returns to the Greeks have given us the old and a mere interruption of the enframing mechanism of modernity, rather than a radical disruption of it, then what does thinking anew really look like? Can a *difficult* recognition of the harm inflicted upon those at the “underside of modernity”²² and calculative reason eventually give our thought the new turn that it needs to address the problematic? Consequentially, does this difficult recognition and doing intelligence entail asking “distressing”²³ questions about the continuation of the harm that not just enframing and modernity, but dwelling in the European critiques of modernity (and its relationships without relation), can have for the enframed?

Maybe it is not a new dwelling in mysteries and miracles that would make philosophers of education reach the depths of being human or would help them think anew. A new turn might entail and necessitate gathering some courage to step a bit outside of the European critiques of the modern. I say courage, because such stepping out is frowned upon and often assumed as a relegation of rigorous authentic thought by—ironically—the very thinkers and the very structures of thinking that gave us the modern (enframed) world and sustained it to this date.

1 John Sailer, “Heidegger and Technology: On Thinking and Teaching Anew,” *Philosophy of Education* 2019, ed. Kurt Stenhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Nassim Noroozi, “Counteracting Epistemic Totality and Weakening Mental Rigidities: The Anti-totalitarian Nature of Wonderment,” *Philosophy of Education Society* 2015, ed. Eduardo Duarte (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2016).

5 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected “Problems” of “Logic,”* trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

- 6 Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 158.
- 7 Nassim Noroozi, "Heidegger and Wonder," in *Springer Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, ed. Michael A. Peters (New Delhi: Springer 2016).
- 8 Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 9 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 144.
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 41.
- 11 For example, I will not follow how Levinas observes Heidegger's conception of death as a tool to help us reach our potential, and suggest how he thinks death should be perceived instead: as a completely unknown event that should encourage a substantial passivity. Instead, philosophers—Heidegger being one of them—used it in-order to theorize how it can actualize freedom and authenticity (in other words, death functioned as a standing reserve). This is also primarily done because wonder and discussions of it can be more pertinent in this educational context and it has a central presence in Sailer's reasoning.
- 12 Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 155.
- 13 Ibid., 146, (emphasis added).
- 14 Ibid., 141.
- 15 Sailer, "Heidegger and Technology."
- 16 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 41.
- 17 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 144.
- 18 Levinas, *Time and The Other*, 40.
- 19 Ibid., 41.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Richard Cohen, "Introduction," in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 41.
- 22 Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, & the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1998).
- 23 Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 131.