As I have mentioned a couple of time already in class, this reading is challenging, perhaps one of the most challenging we will do this semester. At the same time, it is considered by many to be one of the most significant contributions to analyzing technology in the 20th century. Heidegger’s essay has been extremely influential and continues to provoke discussion. As with other philosophical readings, don’t go into it with the expectation that you are going to understand everything. You won’t. Few people (if any) do. Rather, try and focus on those parts of the text that seem most accessible and to which you can forge some connection, either out of your own background in philosophy or experience with technology. It will be helpful too for you to bring the reading to class, either a hardcopy or an electronic copy.

Remember that there is a very good study guide available online to supplement your reading of Heidegger:

http://www2.hawaii.edu/~zuern/demo/heidegger/

The essay can usefully be divided into three sections. **Section one** runs to about page 6 and tries to get at the essence of technology, especially trying to rethink our taken-for-granted ways of thinking about technology. Heidegger observes that the instrumental definition of technology is the most usual one but that this definition fails to fully capture the essence of technology. In order to try and recover a more basic understanding of technology, Heidegger goes back to the Greeks, especially Aristotle and his account of the four causes (which should be somewhat familiar to those of you who took the history of western philosophy course). Through his discussion of causality, Heidegger thinks he can locate a more basic understanding of technology, having to do with a tightly interlocking series of concepts: to occasion, bringing forth, revealing, and truth. He also suggests in an interesting way that there is a connection between poetry and technology, something he returns to at the end of the essay.

There’s lots of information online regarding Aristotle’s four causes. Here is one link that summarizes a lecture on the topic:

http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/4causes.htm

The **second part** of the essay runs from pages 6 to around 12 and focuses more specifically on the essence of modern technology. It is in this part that you will find Heidegger’s comments that are most relevant to characterizing our experience with modern technology. He builds on his earlier discussion of technology as a form of revealing but begins to suggest that there is something unique and specific about the kind of revealing revealed by modern technology. In this section, Heidegger also develops a rather idiosyncratic vocabulary for discussing the phenomenon of modern technology: setting-upon, challenging-forth, standing reserve, challenged, and finally enframing (pay close attention to this discussion of this concept).
Let’s see if we can get through these two sections on Tuesday, perhaps focusing some what on the contrast Heidegger draws between traditional forms of technology (the chalice, the wind mill) and modern forms of technology (the hydroelectric power plant).

The **third section** runs from page 12 to the conclusion of the essay and begins to address the question of how today we can respond to the essence of modern technology. There is a lot going on here, but perhaps for our purposes we can pay special attention to the dangers associated with modern technology and enframing, a very provocative discussion. In the final pages of essay, Heidegger questions what might save us from the destructive powers of modern technology and he crafts an argument for locating that saving power in enframing and in an alternative form of revealing, one that is perhaps present in our experience of the work of art (a theme which Heidegger takes up and develops in many other later works).

As you think about the distinctions between traditional and modern technology, you might think about the distinctions between, for example, a fine bone china tea serving set and a Styrofoam cup.

What are some significant differences between the two? Importantly, how do they call forth completely different relations to the act of drinking a hot beverage? How are they culturally situated in radically different ways? Thinking along these lines may help us to understand what Heidegger is getting at in his contrast between two kinds of technologies. This contrast is discussed in an essay by Hubert Dreyfus available at:


Dreyfus’ essays on Heidegger are particularly good and in the contrast between the tea cup and the Styrofoam cup, Dreyfus points to two different understandings of being, something at the heart of Heidegger’s analysis of technology. Here’s a brief section from Dreyfus’ essay:

> Normally we deal with things, and even sometimes people, as resources to be used until no longer needed and then put aside. A Styrofoam cup is a perfect
example. When we want a hot or cold drink it does its job, and when we are through with it we throw it away. How different this understanding of an object is from what we can suppose to be the everyday Japanese understanding of a delicate teacup. The teacup does not preserve temperature as well as its plastic replacement, and it has to be washed and protected, but it is preserved from generation to generation for its beauty and its social meaning. It is hard to picture a tea ceremony around a Styrofoam cup.

Note that the traditional Japanese understanding of what it is to be human (passive, contented, gentle, social, etc.) fits with their understanding of what it is to be a thing (delicate, beautiful, traditional, etc.). It would make no sense for us, who are active, independent, and aggressive—constantly striving to cultivate and satisfy our desires—to relate to things the way Japanese do; or for the Japanese (before their understanding of being was interfered with by ours) to invent and prefer Styrofoam teacups. In the same vein we tend to think of politics as the negotiation of individual desires while the Japanese seek consensus. In sum the social practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human self, those containing an interpretation of what it is to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. They add up to an understanding of being. (99 – 100)