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The Philosophical Foundations of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis

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Abstract: In one's search for the philosophical foundations of the encyclical *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis one may be surprised to find the indirect influence of thinkers like Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler on the encyclical through Romano Guardini (1885-1968). These philosophers were instrumental in fashioning the liberal thinking of Romano Guardini who in turn influenced the vision of *Laudato Si'*. Descartes told the intellectuals of Europe to stop fussing over theological matters and philosophical abstractions and to get about the business of "mastering" nature. This shift in consciousness gave rise to the modern sciences and their attendant technologies. It is the Guardinian worries about the disastrous consequences of this shift that is shared by Pope Francis in his encyclical. In his elucidations Pope Francis is heavily influenced by Romano Guardini's *End of the Modern World*, which presents a sort of nightmarish vision of humanity, in which human power gives rise to a kind of technology which itself operates by its own logic of progress, liberating itself from human control in the process, and eventually returns to plague the inventor. Many readers of Guardini may not know that in these technological views Guardini was himself heavily indebted to Martin Heidegger's critique of modernity's technological view of thinking? The present essay makes an attempt to show that in the final analysis the foundational philosophical vision of Laudato *Si* is influenced by the critique of Martin Heidegger on the "machinational" interpretation of beings that subjugates hu-

mans and commodifies nature as well as Heidegger's philosophical insights into the way of overcoming it.

Key words: Commodification of nature, technology, being, machi-national and relational interpretation, meditational character

Introduction

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* has definitely provoked ripples in the collective conscience of humanity. An interesting question in this context would be: who is the immediate philosophical mind behind *Laudato Si'*? In answering this question, it would be apt to turn our attention to another historical event that took place on February 28, 2013. In his last act as Pope, while officially renouncing the Papacy and bidding farewell to the College of Cardinals in the Vatican's Clementine Hall, Pope Benedict XVI quoted Romano Guardini in the short speech he delivered. Quoting from Guardini's book *The Church of the Lord*, he said "the Church is not an institution devised and built at table, but a living reality. She lives along the course of time, evolving, like any living being, transforming herself. Yet her nature remains the same."[1]

1. Guardini's Critique of Technological Approach to Nature

Guardini, as we know, was a known modernist, who was even under suspicion of heresy before Vatican II. After the Council, Guardini found a warm reception in the Church. In fact, Paul VI wanted to elevate him to the college of Cardinals, something that he politely refused. Thinkers like Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler were instrumental in fashioning the liberal thinking of Guardini. In turn, he had a definitive influence on Pope Paul VI, Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger and the present Pope Francis. It is common knowledge that Guardini played a key role in the theological

and liturgical movements of the '30s and '40s of the twentieth century that led to Vatican II. He had redesigned a chapel at Burg Rothenfels. Discarding the Gothic altars and elaborate décor, he stripped the church, painted the walls white and installed a moveable altar surrounded on three sides by simple stools. The focus was entirely on the congregation and the priest, together forming a community gathered for worship with no separation between them. We see that he was a worthy precursor of the Council's Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and Paul VI's liturgical reform. Guardini feared that the popular devotions that had energized the Catholic revival of the nineteenth century had fostered anarchic spiritual individualism in which prayer had become simply a tool for attaining merit in the quest for individual salvation. Communism offered an alternative to this anarchy, but only at the expense of eliminating individual freedom. Against these extremes, he emphasised that the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ, an organic union of persons that made possible the full flourishing of the "free personality," which is "the presupposition of all true community." The spirit of the liturgy is above all a spirit of community, uniting the faithful with each other even as it unites them to God. This side of Guardini is known to all.

But there is another unknown side of Guardini that is made remarkably visible by the encyclical *Laudato Si*. Guardini loved nature and took particular delight in the lake region around Milan. Besides being enchanted by the physical beauty of the area, what intrigued him above all was the manner in which human beings, through their architecture and craftsmanship, **interacted non-invasively and respectfully with nature**. When he first came to the region, he noticed, for example, how the homes along Lake Como imitated the lines and rhythms of the landscape and how the boats that plied the lake did so in response to the swelling and falling of the waves. But by the 1920's, he had begun to notice a change.

The homes being built were not only larger, but more "aggressive," indifferent to the surrounding environment, no longer accommodating themselves to the natural setting. And the motor-driven boats on the lake were no longer moving in rhythm with the waves, but rather cutting through them indifferently.

In these unhappy changes, Guardini noted the emergence of a distinctively modern sensibility. He meant that the attitudes first articulated by Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century and René Descartes in the seventeenth were coming to dominate the mentality of twentieth-century men and women. Consciously departing from Aristotle, for whom knowledge was a modality of contemplation, Bacon opined that knowledge is power, more precisely power to control the natural environment. This is why he infamously insisted that the scientist's task is to put nature "on the rack" so that she might give up her secrets.Just a few decades later, Descartes told the intellectuals of Europe to stop fussing over theological matters and philosophical abstractions and to get about the business of "mastering" nature. This shift in consciousness gave rise to the modern sciences and their attendant technologies. It is the Guardinian worries about the disastrous consequences of this shift that is shared by Pope Francis in his encyclical.

The Encyclical *Laudato Si* with the thematic title "On Care for our common Home" moves away from the customary practice of being addressed to the bishops of the Church or the lay faithful, but similar to Pope Saint John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, is addressed to all people in order"to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (#3). The primary focus is not the ecological dangers that the modern world faces, but our mistaken understanding of nature, and of our place and role in nature. We have of ourselves an inflated image and a criminally commodified vision of nature. We regard it, in essence, as a kind of accident demanding technological mastery and manipulation for our own self-

centered purposes. Attempts were also made to justify such a criminal approach by referring to the creation account in Genesis (1:28) that apparently grants man "dominion" over the earth. It is not without reason that the objection was raised that the Judaeo-Christian tradition based on this account has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by man.

The encyclical sets out first to correct such mis-readings of the biblical accounts. "The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. .. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (*Gen* 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. *Gen* 3:17-19)." (LS, 66)

As the next step, the encyclical turns to the problem of modern ecological crisis? It begins by acknowledging the contribution of modern technology as it "has remedied countless evils," and the genuine progress it has effected, "especially in the fields of medicine, engineering, and communications" (102). But the cost that is being paid for it is unjustifiably high. The Pope writes, "Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic"; "in the most radical sense of the term, power is its motive—a lordship over all" (108).This results in a serious problem. It manipulates and commodifies everything in nature. This commodification poisons everything, not only our environment but our self-

understanding. It affects our use of our own bodies, our grasp of the meaning and purpose of our sexuality, the relations between the sexes, and our attitude toward children, marriage and family life. This commodification of nature causes us not only to abuse and dispose of the poor and marginalized through sheer selfishness. And worse still, it causes us to abuse and dispose of ourselves.

The problem for modernity is that it vacillates between two extremes—between envisioning humanity as lord and master over the raw material that is nature and seeing the human animal as the enemy of the rest of the natural order. Francis focuses on the former error: "Modernity," he writes, "has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism" (116). Separating the human from the natural, one direction in modernity promotes manipulation of nature without limits (118), whereas another direction sees humans as the chief threat to the cosmos. Accordingly, Francis observes, we find ourselves in a "constant schizophrenia, wherein a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings."

Now to return to our initial question: who is the philosophical inspiration behind these insights? It is no doubt that in his elucidations Pope Francis is heavily influenced by Romano Guardini's *End of the Modern World*, which presents a sort of nightmarish vision of humanity, in which human power gives rise to a kind of technology which itself operates by its own logic of progress, liberating itself from human control in the process, and eventually returns to plague the inventor. But how many readers of Guardini will know that in these technological views Guardini was himself heavily indebted to Martin Heidegger's critique of modernity's technological view of thinking? It is here that this essay proposes to make a small note.

2. Heidegger and the Machinational and Relational Interpretation of Beings

Heidegger begins his reflections on modern technology with the candid observation that today, all over the world the humans remain "unfree and chained to technology."[2] This has resulted in a dangerous situation, viz. the further the technology advances, the more it "threatens to slip from human control." (QT, 5) It is this sad situation that necessitates a questioning of the essence of modern technology and the threat it poses. Pointing out the current understanding of technology in its "instrumental character" "as a means to an end" or in its "anthropological character" as "a human activity", though correct, still fails to show what is really *ownmost* to technology. "Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to sway [essences] in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens."(QT, 13)Heidegger calls our attention to the essential difference between modern and past technologies. Whereas in its original sense technology was a mode of revealing, a "bringing-forth in the sense of *poiēsis*," the "revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging." (QT, 14)The windmill is a classic example of the old technology. It needs wind to turn its sails. But it does not unlock energy from the wind. It just goes along the play of things as they are. Or, placing a bridge across a river does not do violence to the river, but rather it allows the river to be what it is. In coal production, in contrast, what is aimed at is to extract the energy stored in coal to generate heat, which in turn is meant to generate steam out of water, with which the wheels of some machines can be turned for some other purpose. Or, take the case of installing a dam across a river for generating hydroelectric energy. In both cases, violence is done to the things and they are manipulated. It is this characteristic of the modern technology that becomes the object of scrutiny by Heidegger.

According to Heidegger, our age is characterized by a machinational interpretation of beings. That is, modern technology comes across to us predominantly in a "machinational" character, that includes such activities of objectifying, making, producing, ordering, etc. (GA 65:115/91) In the process, what is ownmost to technology gets disguised (of course not eliminated.)Here, technology becomes absolutely anthropocentric, representing absolute human domination and mastery over everything, all beings and nature. This total subjugation by man, naturally abetted by technology, leaves no room for other things to be on their own. Everything is there to be exploited to serve the needs of the human subject. This machinational perspective of beings as mere makeable and exchangeable objects is nothing short of nihilism, where man is made the ground of everything amidst a negation of all transcendent ground and values. When man considers himself the measure of everything else in the cosmos, man becomes an unbridled monster, who replaces every transcendental values with technological powers.

In the 50s Heidegger speaks of the essence of modern technology in terms of another "disclosive framework", viz. Ge-stell which is variously translated as "en-framing" or "positionality." The World War II heralded a new framework of "standing reserve" (GA 79:32/31) in the place of the subject-object framework that let everything including humans be understood in terms of how it can be represented, arranged, mobilized, exchanged, or replaced for a specific goal, a framework in terms of which everything gets degenerated into mere raw-materials. Everything is positioned or framed into a horizon, where everything, including humans, is just replaceable commodities for global consumption. Just recollect the times we grew up with small riverlets, paddy fields, ponds, where life was really lived. Everything had an intrinsic worth, they formed an essential aspect of that "home" for the humans and other living beings around it. And today?

While machinational interpretation of beings revolved around the subject-object relation that exalted the hegemony of anthropocentrism and reduced everything else to orderable and makeable objects, in enframing the subject-object framework disappears and everything is assimilated into a frame for which everything comes to presence as part of a stockpile that can be manipulated. In the former, human beings as the productive agents or representing subjects had some sort of a prominence, whereas in the enframing technological attitude human beings are just resources within the totalising technological disclosure of reality. As standing reserve everything is pieces of stockpiles to be ordered or replaced, parts to be assembled or disassembled. There is no such thing as a part-whole relation as in a living organism, but everything is a mere part that can be exchanged or replaced. We know how our electronic gadgets come to us today. They come to us as packets of various pieces. If one piece does not work, it gets replaced. Neither parts, nor the whole as such, has any individual identity. They are all parts of a stockpile that can be consumed, exchanged, or replaced.

Human beings are no exception to this circuit of orderability. Days may not be far off, where the attention moves from cloning human beings to erecting factories that produce human beings. The essence of technology as enframing does not leave man alone as in charge of technology. He himself is devoured by the same process of framing, that had in fact facilitated man's domination of the rest of the nature. Not only that a worker is seen as an instrument for production, but even the top brass of companies, who plan and organize, are so easily and ruthlessly fired and replaced. They are mere resources to be ordered, arranged, disposed of or replaced. For Heidegger, the tragedy of such a technological interpretation is that every person and everything in the world loses its individual identity, distinctive independence and uniqueness. Everything is po-

sitioned within a horizon of global commodification. Each and every being is transformed into mere replaceable stockpile.

What then is the main danger of modern technology? For Heidegger, the primary danger is not so much the atomic or other destructive weaponry or even the environmental disasters resulting from the application of modern technology. They can only bring about a physical destruction. But the real problem is the spiritual destruction of man living under the sway of such technological attitude. Through an abject surrender to such a technological attitude, man lives under the illusion that they are the masters and everything is in their perfect control. This illusion is the result of their belief that everything before them is just objects and means to be ordered and organized by them. But they are oblivious to the truth that under this illusion, they reduce themselves to mere resources, subject to the same process of being ordered or replaced. To dispel the illusion that we are the masters of the world and to respond appropriately to the domination of technology, what is needed first is to realize that we are not before or beyond the complex of technological relationships, but rather we are inescapably chained to such relationships.

How do we respond to this technological interpretation of being appropriately? Technology can never be overcome, because it is no more under our power; we are not its masters. Heidegger favours rather a free relation to technology. This free relation to technology begins with the realization that today the first challenge is to disclose technology in its one dimensionality, where the humans are dangerously enslaved by technology, negating any role for their free will. Becoming aware of this danger opens up the possibility for a free relation to technology in the sense that it will free us from any compulsion to continue with it unconditionally or to rebel against it as something devilish. We can use technology or any technical devices, without being enslaved to them, without

being controlled by them. This amounts to experiencing the 'technological'in terms of its limitations. Experiencing the limits of technology would make us so free in our dealings with them that we can let go of them at any time. Such a free relationship implies an "yes" and "no" at the same time, an yes to the unavoidable use of technical devices, but with a no to any right on their part to dominate us, to enslave us.

Indeed technology has its inherent danger. The way to overcome its danger is not by rejecting technology, but by perceiving the danger it poses and allowing ourselves to be ourselves. Realizing its danger itself opens the possibility of a "turn" away from it. It is in this sense that he quotes the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin: "But where the danger is, there grows also what saves." (QT, 28) What is decisive in the process, warns Heidegger, is to remember that "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent."[3] This could easily be illustrated with what happens in most of our human communities today. A cell phone easily reduces distances across the globe. But for that we often sacrifice the nearness of one another, say at a dining table, when each one is busy with their electronic gadgets. In order to truly experience and maintain nearness, we must encounter things in their respective truth, understand them in what they are. Only then will we be saved from the danger of technology, from being reduced, both things as well as ourselves, to mere supplies and reserves.

Having taken this detour, let us ask the question: Is the encyclical a corrective to the excesses of modern technology? No. It is true, that the Pope gently but firmly states that modern technology is fundamentally flawed. The very philosophy behind it is cancerous. However, the key thrust of the encyclical is much more than being a cry of protest against the evils of modernity or modern technology. For the Encyclical the ecological crisis is as much a crisis of

human person, who is now lost in the cosmos, increasingly alienated from self, others, nature, and God. "If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural, and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships" (119). What makes this a truly great and moving and beautiful encyclical is the magnificent exposition of another view of reality: a description of the true nature of the created order, in all its marvellous and interconnected glory, and of the true role of man as the gardener of this garden of wonders. The heart of the encyclical revolves around the question of how to move away from an exploitative technological relation to a caring relation to our entire environment.

It is again here that the Heideggerian insights on the relational character of everything finite could throw further lights on the encyclical. With the notion of the "fourfold" (Thing, 173f.)[4] Heidegger attempts to highlight how the entire finite existence -- that includes humans as well as every aspect of the entire universe -- stands so interrelated that it opens ways of authentic relationships away from the dangerous technological one that consider things as mere stockpile under our domination.

With the notion of the fourfold, Heidegger tries to show that what we encounter in our universe is not lonely objects out there, but essentially things that "gather" in themselves earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. In every finite existence, "earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell *together all at once*. These four, at one because of what they themselves are, belong together. Preceding everything that is present, they are enfolded into a single fourfold." (Thing, 173) "Earth" stands for the very "matter" of existence, but not in the sense of the solid ground, but in the sense of non-quantifiable sensuous appearing. It is not the substantial basis from which everything

evolves, but rather, it is that which shines or radiates in a thing while making it appear. This shining or radiating of a thing requires a medium to appear and that medium is the sky. The sky represents the mediation of the appearance of a thing in terms of such elements like the weather patterns, variable lighting, as well as the temporal exposure to night and day and seasonal changes. Thus, one can say that the appearance of a thing is always 'weathered' by the sky. But these two constitutive elements are not all that is there to the appearance of a thing. There is, then, the dimension of the divinities that indicates the disclosure of the finite, mediated appearance as essentially meaningful. According to Heidegger, the reason why every single thing is inherently meaningful is because of the participation of divinities in its constitution. We know that it is the relatedness among things that give things their initial meaning. But such relatedness is possible only because they are exposed to a beyond and are addressable by it, viz. the mystery of grace. When Heidegger says that divinities are a constitutive element of a thing, he is underlining the fact that all things, not just humans, are exposed to the surprise of grace. All finite existence is always already immersed in a "hermeneutics of message." It is this exposure to grace, it is this immersion in a message that makes any meaningful existence possible at all. The fourth constitutive element for a thing is the mortals. Things appear as meaningful to man. In turn, they cannot appear as meaningful if man is not exposed to them. For Heidegger, what is unique to man is that he is a being-in-the-world, whose ownmost possibility is death. No one can die our deaths for us. Death is a possibility that we can neither evade, nor possess. It is a possibility that makes all our other possibilities impossible. It is this fact that what is most my own remains outside me that draws me outside of me and opens me essentially to the world. As mortals, we exist as members of a community who participate in the world. With this notion of the 'fourfold' Heidegger highlights how

everything finite stands essentially interrelated into a onefold. "Each of the four mirrors in its own way the presence of the others" and in doing this, each of it "sets each of the four free into its own" in their "essential being toward one another." (Thing, 179)

Heidegger's thinking of a thing in its mediational and relational character is in effect a thinking of finitude itself. When we speak of something as finite, we think of it as limited and this limitation as something negative. But for Heidegger, the finitude of a thing is to be understood positively as that surface or interface of its exposure to the world beyond it. Taken this way, finitude stands for the extension of a thing beyond itself and the many relations it has entered into and is open to. For Heidegger, thus, for a thing to be finite means for it to exist beyond itself. This beyond that supports this ecstatic character of things is the world. To appear as a thing is to be exposed to other things as well as to the world as the beyond that facilitates this exposure. Everything that shares finite existence does so in its interrelatedness to everything else around it within the world that surrounds them.

It is the fourfold that opens the thing to this beyond and makes it addressable by that world in turn. The world that addresses things in this age of technological domination is precisely that one-dimensional framework that robs the things of their relationality and reduces them to a status of mere replaceable pieces of a stockpile solely at the service of the consumeristic and power-hungry self-interests of man. An appropriate response to the dangers of such a technological approach would realize the essential interrelatedness of all finite existence and allow the things to disclose themselves as they are. It would be a response that opens the possibility for them to show themselves not only as existing within a cluster of relations that draws them out into innumerable directions of varying degrees (spatial, temporal, affective, associative,

etc.) of relations, but also as bridges between our surroundings and ourselves, touching us and transforming us in the process. A response in terms of such a "releasement" from the will to dominate would also enable man to "dwell" within the world, not as its master or its exploiter, but as its "servant" allowing everything to presence themselves in their own glory and as its "shepherd" concern fully nurturing and protecting them *to be* what they are. Thus, things in the world "do not appear *by means* of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents . . . to the thinking that responds and recalls." (Thing, 181). This step back will begin, when the mortals really learn to dwell, in the sense of cherishing, protecting, preserving and caring for, and "build out of dwelling, and think for the sake of dwelling" (BDT, 161).

3. Conclusion

In an age, where most of the initiatives to protect our environment against its senseless exploitation and mindless destruction still share the assumption that man has a "right" to manipulate nature without causing much damage to it, Heidegger's views challenge this very assumption. We need a kind of conversion, a conversion from being harbingers of the technological attitude, driven by the hunger for power over all things and a compulsion to reduce everything to mere commodities to a new vision of reality and ourselves that would facilitate everything in the world to manifest themselves in their own intrinsic worth. That could be the first step, according to Heidegger, for the emergence of an authentic ecological consciousness.

On similar ontological foundations, and in the true spirit of the author of the book of Genesis, the Biblical prophets, Irenaeus, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis wants to recover a properly cosmological sensibility, whereby

the human being and her projects are in vibrant, integrated relation with the world that surrounds her. "The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. (67) Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures. (68) Everything has its place, everything is relational.

Notes

1 Cf. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130228_congedo-cardinali.html.

2 Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977, p.4. (hereafter cited as QT and will be incorporated into the text.)

3 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971, p. 166. (Hereafter referred to as Thing/ and will be incorporated into the text.)

4 This notion of the 'fourfold' is further elaborated in his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, *op. cit.,* pp. 150ff. (Hereafter BDT). For a very detailed presentation of this theme, cf. Andrew J. Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015.

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