

MODULE 1

WHITE PAPER: POIESIS AS THE RULE OF TECHNE

I. NORMATIVE SYNTHESIS

THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

We begin by establishing the governing principle for the entire inquiry: namely, by affecting a linguistic and therefore conceptual return of technology to the root meaning of τέχνη itself. Rather than beginning from the most visible products of contemporary technological culture—such as devices, digital platforms, infrastructures, and AI systems—we are inquiring after the focal intelligibility through which we can understand the essence of technology, and thereby by what principle or principles it can be rightly ordered.

The central claim advanced is that τέχνη and the specific technologies developed by human making cannot be understood adequately through their effects, outputs, or instrumental capacities. Rather, their proper intelligibility appears to us only when they are rooted in ποίησις. Put in other words, the essential formal object signified by the term “technology” is not principally any set of devices; nor is it a matter of external power, of procedural efficiency, nor of control over materials or environments; rather, it belongs originally to a mode of human making that brings forth meaningful possibility in forms proportionate to human life. We derive this position in our inquiry through a close reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Heidegger’s essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking”. From these two thinkers, long-separated in time but often close in approach, we see the importance of recovering ποίησις if we are to redeem τέχνη.

The importance of this recovery can be seen in the fact that contemporary discourse about any given technology tends to begin too late. In other words, it ordinarily presupposes that a given technology is already understood—perhaps not completely (or in terms of its functioning, as in the case of AI), but at least sufficiently as regards its effects—and then proceeds immediately to discuss possible uses, ethical compliance, policy, regulation, or implementation. But if the very fundamental and essential concept of technology has been obscured or lost from view, then these downstream discussions remain necessarily unstable. They lack a true and mind-independent foundation as a basis from which technological developments and activities may be evaluated. The practical consequences are familiar: public reflection oscillates between enthusiasm (“hype”) and despair (“panic”), between celebration of innovation and denunciation of technological power. In this module’s conversation, we identified this polarized condition and rejected both alternatives as not only inadequate, but as further obfuscating the reality. Neither technological doomerism nor technological accelerationism reaches the heart of the difficulty, because both accept without sufficient questioning the prevailing assumption that technology is fundamentally a power to be either feared or maximized. This subsequently prevents reaching any meaningful *opportunity* for our technologies as well. Instead, we propose that the first task is **radical conceptual correction**: to understand technology neither as inherently ruinous nor as inherently salvific, but as a human making whose goodness depends on its proportion to the true goods of human life.

At the center of this reconceptualization is the retrieval of *ποίησις*. Here, *ποίησις* must not be reduced to “poetry” in the narrow literary sense, nor treated as a merely aesthetic supplement to more serious technical activity. Rather, *ποίησις* names a mode of bringing-forth by which something latent in possibility is disclosed in intelligible form, and specifically the bringing-forth of a *whole*. Aristotle’s treatment of tragedy proves crucial to this reconceptualization, because he shows that poetic making does not simply fabricate an object or recount an event. It presents action in such a way that its real structure becomes intelligible: what *could* happen according to probability or necessity, ordered into a *unified* whole with a fitting beginning, middle, and end. In this sense, *ποίησις* does not essentially consist in aesthetic ornament, expression, or the production of some novel story, but rather in a specific kind of formal disclosure. Put otherwise, **it reveals a meaningful possibility of human action.** The relevance of this formal disclosure to the activities of *τέχνη* is direct and immediate. If and when making suffers severance from this poetic disclosure, then it may retain its productive capacity while losing the very principle by which that capacity remains proportioned to humanity. A thing may still be made, and made effectively—perhaps *much more effectively* than from within a view wherein *ποίησις* yet governs—while no longer being made under the rule of a form proportionate to either human dwelling or understanding.

Therefore, *τέχνη* can only be rightly understood under the rule or measure provided by *ποίησις*. This does not mean that every technology must itself be “artistic” or “poetic” in the contemporary vernacular senses of those terms, nor that technical disciplines must be dissolved into literary or aesthetic practices. It means, rather, that all genuine human making must remain intelligibly resolvable to the disclosure of a meaningful whole, at the center of which stands the human person. Technical production is not self-justifying. It receives its only valid measure from the form of human life to which it belongs and which it helps to articulate as an extension of nature human capacities. Any tool, system, or environment is not good *for human beings* simply because it works, nor even because it extends power, saves labor, works more efficiently, or increases the choices available to an end-user. Rather, it can be good only insofar as it can contribute to a world suited for human habitation: a world in which actions belong within a web of intelligible relations structuring the dwelling of a human person—lest the totality of these relations be reduced to functionality defined by inhuman measures. This is why our inquiry’s concern with opportunity is not “what can technology do?” but “what does technology do if understood from within the governance of *ποίησις*?” Only from this more original question can the opportunities of technology be identified without collapsing into a naïve techno-optimism.

Heidegger’s reflections on building and dwelling allow us to emphasize this particular point by exposing the poverty of modern accounts of “building”. That is, today “building” is primarily understood as a procedure: assembling materials, imposing forms on them, and eventually realizing their plan. Yet Heidegger insists that genuine building belongs more originally to what he calls “dwelling”. Human beings do not first build and then happen to dwell in what they have made; rather, building has its truth in making-possible a certain way of dwelling. If building becomes detached from the original status of dwelling, then it becomes an exercise in production prior to habitation, thus demanding that habitation adapts to the produced building, thereby altering the end of production to be defined by technologies themselves rather than by their relation to the human person (this becomes a prominent theme in later modules of our inquiry, too). Such activities of building detached from dwelling may be technologically sophisticated and materially successful, while remaining profoundly inadequate for the bettering of human life. Heidegger therefore provides us not merely an evocative philosophical image

but an intelligible criterion: not only the built physical environment, but indeed *all* technical making must be judged according to whether it serves “dwelling”, so long as we understand “dwelling” broadly enough: that is, the meaningful being-at-home of the human person in a world. In this respect, we establish a principle governing of subsequent modules as well: technologies cannot be adequately assessed by artificially-circumscribed “efficiencies”, but must always be resolved to the broader world-relations they produce, enable, enhance, distort, or erode.

Language occupies a particularly important place in this argument. Language must not be understood as simply one more instrument among others, nor merely a neutral vehicle for transmitting already completed thought. Rather, language gathers together the intelligibly-grasped elements of our experience which, without such articulation, would otherwise remain dispersed or scattered. It binds together diverse entities, discovers relations, marks the distinctions between and within things, and thus enables us to identify and navigate the intelligibility of a world unbound by sense perception alone. Latent in this linguistic signification is a truth essential for rightly construing the activities of τέχνη: the poietic character of human making is inseparable from linguistic articulation. Human beings do not merely manipulate the material objects of our world into arrangements useful for one or another aim; rather, we must name, order, and interpret the arrangements of these formal structures so as to identify whether they fit or not our dwelling; that is, we dwell linguistically, even if we are not ourselves poets or wordsmiths. Consequently, when technical myopia or technological environments degrade language into mere pragmatic efficiency or information exchange, this does not merely narrow the channels of specifically-human communication but damages the very medium through which human dwelling is made *human*. This point is of special importance in the present context, where digital and computational environments frequently encourage us to have a flattened relation to language—treating words as prompts, tokens, or units of social currency rather than as participations in the articulation of meaning. The opportunities of technology depend not only on what is built, but on whether our activities of “building” remain answerable to the linguistic and semiotic disclosure of what is meaningful for human living.

From these considerations follows one of the most significant theoretical conclusions, initially discovered in the Difficulties of Technology seminar but restated here: the principal danger in technology is disproportion. Technical powers can be expanded far beyond the forms by which they are appropriately integrated into human living. When that disproportioning occurs, human beings begin to conform themselves to the structures of their own technologies rather than ordering those systems to furthering human flourishing. But this disproportion is not inevitable. Technology need not be governed by the logic of acceleration and efficiency, extraction of the useful, or the total optimization of all materials. If τέχνη remains subordinate to ποίησις, then technical capacities can be received into a more comprehensive order in which they not only help structure but even to disclose a world fit for dwelling. The positive possibility of technology unfolds from within the governance of ποίησις: not in surpassing the limits of embodied and communal life, but in helping shape the environments, customs, and institutions that make such life more intelligible and more fully human.

Later modules take up detailed treatment of pattern-recognition, environment, communication and information, economic production and exchange, education and questioning, memory, and time. But first it is necessary, in this module, to establish the principle by which all such analyses can proceed. Without recovering the rule of

ποίησις over τέχνη, later inquiries would risk treating each faculty or domain in isolation, asking only how technology affects this or that part of life without considering the more basic principle of integration; or worse yet, would lose the sense of proportion that a habit of ποίησις alone can provide. Human life is misunderstood if approached as an aggregate of detachable functions. It is always a meaningful whole, and all technologies must therefore be judged in relation to that whole. From this principle we may navigate between simplistic rejection and simplistic embrace of technological advance. Technology provides us opportunities only when it belongs to an ordered account of the human person and the world wherein he dwells.

Thus, a reformulation of the question of technology itself: not whether technology should be used, nor how much of it should be permitted, nor whether specific devices are beneficial or harmful. More fundamentally, the question is whether the activities and products of human making remain securely resolved to more primordial disclosures of meaningful possibilities for human living. When such resolution is present, τέχνη may serve the human good by aiding in the articulation and extension of those ways of life already rightly proportioned to our nature. But if such guidance is absent, τέχνη tends toward autonomy, and technical success becomes detached from human significance. The foundations of our broken relationship to technology are found not in which particularly technologies have been produced or even which have become dominant, but in the loss of a rule by which any of them can actually fit what it is to be human.

This is the first and governing principle of our investigation: technology is properly understood neither as a neutral set of tools nor as an autonomous order of technological augmentation, but as human making that must be ruled by ποίησις. Ποίησις provides the measure because it concerns the disclosure of meaningful possibility in ways proportionate to properly human action, especially those of language and dwelling. When τέχνη is ruled by ποίησις, technology becomes capable of producing genuine opportunity. It can contribute to the shaping of worlds in which human beings do not merely perform discrete functions within a system, but rather attain genuine dwelling and understanding, and the capacity for moral judgment uncompromised by the demands of those systems. When τέχνη is severed from ποίησις, by contrast, technical activity loses its inner order and begins to generate forms of artifice no longer answerable to human habitation; indeed, they distort that habitation to conform to the system of technology in place. The remainder of the modules depend upon this initial conclusion, for only on its basis can later analyses distinguish between technological developments that deepen human flourishing and those that deform it.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS INDICATED

1. Subject technological adoption to communal judgment rather than private impulse

Technological adoption should not be treated as an isolated matter of private convenience. One can learn much from the Amish practice of communal deliberation prior to admitting a new technology into common life: the relevant question is not simply whether a device can perform some useful function, but whether its incorporation alters the identity, habits, and the proper proportionality of communal living.

This principle stands in direct opposition to the dominant contemporary pattern, wherein technologies enter life first under a narrow justification—efficiency, safety, emergency use; or commonly convenience, market demands and rewards, and the absence of direct physical harm—and only later reveal the broader reordering they impose

upon our habits of dwelling. The mobile phone exemplifies this progression well: introduced by many persons to their lives as a limited instrument for emergency communication, it quickly expands into navigation, messaging, work, entertainment, and becomes the primary instrument of social relation, such that the user ceases to remain master of the device but becomes thoroughly conformed to its “demands”. The practical action indicated, therefore, is the recovery of institutions of deliberate judgment before incorporation: households, schools, churches, and local communities should ask not merely what a given technology enables, but what way of life it promotes or distorts.

2. Evaluate technologies by how they shape dwelling, not merely by what they accomplish

The claim that “building” is properly ordered to “dwelling” gives a direct criterion for practical discernment: technologies should be judged less by immediate functionality than by whether they help constitute places and patterns of life in which human beings can genuinely dwell. This criterion extends beyond architecture in the narrow sense to the broader relation between user and environment. A technology may be efficient, impressive, or even beloved while nonetheless disfiguring the conditions in which a human being properly lives.

The first question therefore should not be not whether a thing “works”, but whether it allows the person to inhabit a world more fittingly. Design, selection, and use of technologies should be governed by a non-technical qualitative question: does this product improve the relations by which someone lives, or does it render habitation “thinner”, more distracted, more distant from one’s real environment, and less proportionate to the genuine goods of human life? This criterion should be applied not only to large-scale systems but to ordinary choices about software, communication platforms, furnishings, tools, domestic arrangements, etc., and should be revisited periodically even after adopting some technological extension.

3. Recover beauty, comfort, and fitting proportion as genuine standards of design

A further practical implication concerns the built environment and the objects that populate it. Utilitarian adequacy is not sufficient for good practices of making. Examples drawn from institutional architecture show that designs governed narrowly by abstraction, ideology, or functional minimalism often fail in their inability to account for the lived experience of the human being: buildings become uncomfortable, alienating, and even defective in their ordinary use. The objection is not merely that these detract from aesthetic pleasure, but a basic recognition that comfort, beauty, and a sense of belonging are not accidental embellishments added after the fact, but belong to the goodness of the things made.

Reference to the thought of Christopher Alexander—focal in the next two modules—helps make this point explicit: absent an immediate sense of belonging, one suffers a kind of sensory dissonance that impedes the experience of being at home. The discussion of abstract public sculpture and unsettling modern styles (such as brutalism) reinforces the claim: environments can be rendered aesthetically unusable even without any structural defects. Thus we must always keep humane criteria focused in our practices of design—especially in schools, churches, homes, parks, and civic settings—ordering these places towards fittingness rather than novelty, ideology, or mere possibility.

4. Re-order digital mediation according to the proper proportions of presence and nearness

There is also a need to become far more conscious of digital technologies' organizational effects on habits of presence, distance, and asymmetric social relations. Networked devices can bring the geographically distant into real familiarity, while leaving one's nearest physical neighbors comparatively unknown. This does not mean digital presence is "unreal" or that it is not a part of "real life"; on the contrary, the point is that it truly modifies the structure of dwelling. The question, then, is not whether such mediation should simply be rejected, but first just what this reality actually is, and second how it ought to be proportioned. The reality of this mediation is a question explored in a further module.

As to the proportionality, it can be seen that, if the technologically-mediated distant relation comes to displace or shatter the ordinary structures of one's own local communal life, then the result is a disordered imitation of actual human community. We come to inhabit psychologically an environment divorced from the actual physically-real by which we are surrounded. Social media offers the most obvious example, but the principle extends to all forms of digital mediation that compress distance while weakening the integrity of physical human communities. The practical implication is that individuals and communities must intentionally order digital relations so that they extend rather than supplant embodied life: remote communication should serve concrete common goods, stable collaboration, and genuine friendship, while remaining subordinate to the local forms of dwelling from within which alone do we have a proportion to our actual natures as corporeal beings.

5. Restore a poietic vocabulary to ordinary speech about technology

Finally, practical reform must begin at the level of language. Clothing, language, and ordinary cultural forms are already technological in a broad and proper sense, which helps dislodge the assumption that "technology" names only advanced machinery or digital devices. This broader understanding helps us shift the question to making-well in general. Now, if language itself can be understood as the principal instrument through which ποίησις is exercised, then we may *articulate* a return of technology to its roots in ποίησις and therefore back to the pursuit of the goods of dwelling. A reform of how we speak proves essential, here: rather than speaking of innovation, disruption, or building in the flattened contemporary idiom, we should recover terms such as making, fittingness, belonging, proportion, beauty, use, and dwelling as the primary lexicon for τέχνη. This linguistic reform is not a "merely semantic" shift but provides a clarified nomenclature that allows for making prudent distinctions about how technology is used.

II. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

CENTRAL QUESTION

What is technology when understood from its root in human making, and why does τέχνη become genuinely human only when governed by ποίησις rather than by mere functionality, efficiency, or force?

PRINCIPAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readings:

- Aristotle c.335BC: *Poetics*, c.1-9.
- Heidegger 1951: “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”.

Recommended Reading:

- Aristotle c.335BC: *Poetics*, c.10-26 (not included in packet or PDF).
- Kemple 2026: “The Soul and the Machine: Thomistic Psychology and Technological Environments”.

ORIENTATION

We begin our inquiry into the opportunities of technology by refusing to identify “technology” immediately with contemporary machinery, computation, digital systems, or any of the other most-recent advances. Instead, we seek to find the focal meaning of τέχνη through a return to the broader and more originary question of human making. This is a necessary starting point: modern discourse about technology generally proceeds from derivative instances and therefore mistakes what is most essential and truly foundational. It sees devices, infrastructures, media, and procedures governed by dictates of efficiency—but not the principles by which such things become intelligible as properly human productions, and therefore mistakes the deviations from those principles and their negative consequences as merely local effects to be technologically rectified. Rather than any explicitly technological text, or anything pertaining to modern making, we exhort everyone first to turn to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where making is understood in relation to the disclosure of intelligible action, and then to Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking”, where building is understood in relation to dwelling, as the atmosphere in which thinking occurs, rather than mere construction. Together, these texts establish the conceptual framework needed for the whole of our investigation: technology is not fundamentally a collection of instruments, but a mode of human making whose truth depends upon whether it remains proportioned to meaningful human habitation.

To bring this abstract thesis into relation with ordinary experience: the chief problem is not simply whether technologies are useful or dangerous, but whether they become incorporated into life without prior judgment concerning the patterns of dwelling they impose. We may see this incomplete incorporation through reflections on the Amish, on smartphones, on language, on architecture, on social nearness and distance, and on the question of what makes a built environment feel fitting or alien. In each case, the same principle emerges: technological artifacts and systems must be considered not only as tools for achieving local ends, but as formative participants in the shape of human life as lived.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. The prevailing concept of technology is derivative and therefore inadequate.

The modern tendency to define technology by its most advanced or conspicuous manifestations obscures its focal meaning. If “technology” is taken to mean primarily digital systems, industrial machinery, automated devices, or other recent innovations only, one begins from technology’s effects rather than its principles. The result is that discussion becomes reactionary and always unstable: technology appears either as a neutral collection of means or as an overwhelming external force, but not as a mode of human making that must itself be understood according to a human end. A retrieval of τέχνη as a mode of ποίησις therefore corrects a conceptual narrowing deeply embedded in contemporary ordinary speech.

2. Poiesis concerns the disclosure of meaningful possibility, not merely aesthetic production.

Through Aristotle, we see that the art of poietic making produces verbal ornament and fictional amusement only as something superadded to a more fundamentally human act of **narration**. In other words, poietic making at its most fundamental level presents human action in an intelligibly presented form: what could happen according to probability or necessity so as to see the essential structures of human life insofar as we have understood it concretely. This is why *ποίησις* is essential to the understanding of *τέχνη* in all its manifestations. That is, *τέχνη* names a bringing-forth governed by formal coherence and meaningful unity (grasped by the vision of *ποίησις*). Without this poietic dimension, making may continue as production, but loses the principle by which it discloses something worthy of human apprehension and habitation. Technology then risks degenerating into fabrication governed only by *extrinsic* forms: most often, those of ideology, commercial success, or the satisfaction of base and animalistic desire.

3. Building is properly ordered to dwelling, not simply to construction.

Heidegger's contribution to this inquiry shows us that the truth of building is not exhausted by assembling structures or arranging materials. Human beings build primarily in order to dwell, and dwelling concerns the way human life abides meaningfully within a world—a meaning always discovered through activities of thinking. Thus making cannot be judged simply by the product's completion, durability, or economic efficiency. A building—or by extension any designed environment, system, or other form of produced mediation—must be assessed according to its support for or contribution in ordering human habitation. We see this through reflections on institutional architecture, public spaces, and the often implicit but nevertheless consistently *felt* difference (i.e., something realized through cognition and cathexis even if it is not at the surface of our conscious minds) between places that invite belonging and those that estrange us from our surroundings and from one another.

4. Community judgment is a necessary corrective to unreflective technological incorporation.

Communal discernment in technological adoption is always important—evinced clearly most notably through in the still-exercised Amish practices. But the significance of this example lies less in direct imitation than in principle: technologies should be admitted into life only after reflection on the kinds of relation, attention, and dependence they introduce which must be matters of **communal conversation**. We can imitate this most readily in our immediate families, but also within the local communities of our religious and educational institutions. By contrast, contemporary societies tend to accept technologies under restricted but presupposed justifications—convenience, emergency use, productivity—without considering the wider patterns they establish. The smartphone provides a paradigmatic case: initially limited in scope, it expands into a general interface for work, communication, navigation, and entertainment, thereby reshaping the user's relation to time, place, and others. This finding supports the larger claim that technologies are formative not only by what they do, but by the structures of use and dependence they induce us to normalize.

5. Beauty and fittingness are integral, not accidental, to good making.

Beauty, comfort, and a sense of belonging are not luxuries appended to technical adequacy. They belong to the very intelligibility of what it means to make well. References to Christopher Alexander and New Urbanism, to alienating public art, and to inhospitable academic architecture indicate for us how environments can fail at

accommodating what is truly human even when they satisfy narrow requirements of mere efficient functionality. Such failures reveal the severance of construction as an art from dwelling as something human: such environments often satisfy quantitative criteria for security or function but remain alienating and spiritually corrosive; inhabiting them drains us. The module therefore proposes a different claim about something necessarily presupposed in the aims of rightfully-ordered making: namely, that truly *good* making always requires attentiveness to the lived coherence of a place and to the affective-intellectual experience of those who inhabit it *prior* to any concerns over efficiency or function (excepting, of course, emergency conditions).

6. Digital mediation alters the proportions of distance and nearness.

Today we experience a more subtle transformation in contemporary technological life than that of the built environment: the restructuring of human nearness. Digital systems often make distant persons, institutions, or events cognitively present while leaving proximate persons, events, and institutions at an unnatural (because disproportionate to our sensory modalities of inhabiting the physical) social remove. This does not imply that mediated relations are *unreal* or *fake*; rather, it reveals that technologies reshape the semiotic and practical conditions of our psychological environments, and not always in ways conducive to our well-being. The result may be an ambiguous gain coupled with a genuine loss: one can be more connected, and more easily, across great distances while simultaneously becoming less well-rooted in immediate physical places. There are genuine goods to this connectedness, especially with loved ones drawn apart by necessity; but an unthinking habit of dwelling in the digital tends to disorder our lives as a whole. This demonstrates to us that technology must be understood not only in relation to objects and functions, but in relation to the orders of presence and absence through which communities are constituted.

KEY EXPLANATORY CLAIMS

1. **Technology is intelligible only when traced back to human making.**

Derivative definitions of “technology” centered on machines, systems, instruments, or the capacity for new innovations fail because they begin from products or effects rather than acts or principles. The proper explanatory starting point is τέχνη as a mode of making and what shapes or enables that mode.

2. **Ποίησις provides the form that keeps τέχνη proportionate to human life.**

Technical activity becomes disordered when detached from the disclosure of meaningful possibility. Ποίησις names the capacity by which making or bringing-forth remains proportioned to intelligible wholeness rather than calculated as mere quantitative output.

3. **Dwelling is the criterion for judging building.**

Whether an artifact, environment, or system is good cannot be determined solely by functionality. The more essential criterion is whether it helps constitute a world in which human beings may truly live according to what makes them human and what enables them to thrive in that humanity.

4. **Technological harms and opportunities are often communal before they are individual.**

Because technologies reshape shared patterns of life, their evaluation cannot be left solely to private

decision. Community standards and institutions of judgment are needed to assess what kinds of effects on human life is had by the introduction and adoption of technologies.

5. **Beauty and fittingness disclose truths that functional metrics miss.**

Alienation, discomfort, and estrangement within built environments are not merely subjective reactions. They often indicate that something has gone fundamentally awry in the process of making, such that it has been conducted without being rooted in consideration of the conditions of proportionate human habitation.

6. **Digital technologies restructure social and spatial relations by altering patterns of nearness.**

Modern technological mediation changes not only what human beings can do with information, but whom and what they experience as present and significant for their cognitive lives. This restructuring must be part of any adequate account of technology's opportunities and dangers.