

Heidegger's Philosophy of Art

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1 'The Origin of the Work of Art'

1. As mentioned in the introduction, Heidegger first turned to extended thinking about art in the mid-1930s.¹ In close proximity to each other he produced the lectures on Hölderlin's 'Germania' and 'The Rhine' (*GA* 39) of 1934–5, the *Introduction to Metaphysics (IM)* of 1935, in which art receives considerable attention, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry' (*HE*) of early 1936, the final (of three²) versions of 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (*PLT* pp. 17–87) of late 1936, and *The Will to Power as Art (NI)* (the first volume of the four-volume Nietzsche study) of 1936–7.

Of all these works, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (hereafter 'The Origin') has received by far the greatest amount of attention, an attention which can only be described as obsessive. (Its reverie on Van Gogh's painting of shoes – a testament to Heidegger's early love of Van Gogh but almost completely irrelevant to, indeed, as we shall see, inconsistent with, the real thrust of the essay – has given rise to a baroque foliage of secondary literature that has had progressively less and less to do with Heidegger.) Discussions of Heidegger's philosophy of art usually confine themselves to this work, taking it to be the full and final statement of that philosophy. This, as already intimated, is for several reasons a highly unfortunate assumption. First, because the only hope of producing an intelligible reading of this tortuously enigmatic work lies in integrating it into the surrounding texts of the same period of thinking. Second, because, as mentioned, it is only the *beginning* of Heidegger's 'path of thinking' about art. And third, because it contains fundamental

¹ A significant exception to this is the substantial discussion of a passage from Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* in the 1927 *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology (BP)* pp. 171–2.

² See Jacques Taminiaux's 'The Origin of "The Origin of the Work of Art"' in *Reading Heidegger*, ed. J. Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 392–404.

deficiencies. As, *inter alia*, the forty-two mostly sharply self-critical footnotes Heidegger insisted (*GA* 5, p. 379) on including in the final, *Gesamtausgabe* edition of the work (*GA* 5, pp. 1–74) make clear, later Heidegger was well aware of these deficiencies. In this chapter I shall be concerned to understand first the work itself, and then the most important of Heidegger's own criticisms of it.³ One of these is of particular significance since the subsequent development of his 'path' is, I shall suggest, largely determined by his awareness of the difficulty raised by the criticism and the attempt to rectify it.

Hegel and the 'death of art'

2. In the 'Epilogue' to 'The Origin' (*PLT* pp. 79–81) (completed at an unknown time between 1936 and the 1956 'Addendum' (*PLT* pp. 82–7)), as well as in chapter 13 of *The Will to Power as Art*, Heidegger indicates the fundamental concerns of the essay by positioning it in relation to Hegel's celebrated thesis of the 'death of art'. As Heidegger presents it, Hegel's thesis can be represented in terms of the following four propositions. (1) Art in its 'highest vocation' – 'great' art, Heidegger calls it (*PLT* p. 40)⁴ – is art in which 'the truth of beings as a whole i.e. the unconditioned, the absolute, opens itself up' to 'man's historical existence' (*N I*, p. 84); to, that is, a given, historically located, culture. (2) Great art (but not of course all art, or even all art of 'quality') is, for us, a thing of the past and has been since the time of Plato or, at the very

³ A further reason the obsessive attention paid to 'The Origin' has proved, in the anglophone world, unfortunate, lies in the unreliable quality of the sole English translation – by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (*PLT*). The work contains many interpolations that correspond to nothing in the German, omissions, blunders of translation, infelicities, and moments of unintended humour arising from the translator's being a non-native speaker of English, which I shall mention as and when the need arises. (It also contains many carelessnesses that have been allowed to stand for thirty years. On p. 44, for example, 'Welt' appears as 'word' rather than 'world', on p. 133 'Predikation' as 'prediction' instead of 'predication'.) The widespread anglophone belief that later Heidegger lapses into unintelligible quasi-mysticism has, I suspect, received not a little help from the failings of the Hofstadter translation. (Conversely, the much better reception of early Heidegger has, I suspect, been significantly aided by the superb quality of Macquarrie and Robinson's translation of *Being and Time*.)

⁴ Heidegger says that 'great' art is the only kind of art 'under consideration' in the essay (*PLT* p. 40), meaning that he uses 'art', 'artwork', and so on as abbreviations of 'great art' and 'great artwork'. In this chapter I shall often follow him in this practice.

latest, the end of the Middle Ages. (3) Great art (in, at least, the West) is not only dead but *must remain so*. The inexorable, dialectical laws of history that led to the supersession of its 'truth'-disclosing function by religion, which was in turn superseded by science, are inexorable. History never repeats a more primitive stage of itself but is, rather, a record of uninterrupted progress, of the ever-increasing perfection of the world. (4) Since this is so, the death of art, like the passing of childhood, while an occasion, perhaps, for nostalgia and expressions of gratitude, is no cause for serious regret.

Heidegger's endorsement of Hegel

3. Heidegger's stance towards the Hegelian position is as follows. With regard to the first proposition – the Hegelian definition of (great) art – he is in full agreement. In the Nietzsche volume he says, to repeat, that 'great art' is great insofar as it 'makes manifest' the 'truth of beings as a whole i.e. the unconditioned, the absolute' (NI, p. 84). What is important here, is the 'i.e.': it is used to equate Hegel's characteristic term 'the absolute' with his own 'truth of beings'. In 'The Origin' itself, as we will see, Heidegger's leading idea is that the great artwork is 'the happening of truth', i.e. 'truth of beings' (PLT p. 39). It is clear, therefore, that, on the side of the content of the artwork, *what* it is that it 'makes manifest', Heidegger takes himself to be repeating (or maybe interpreting) Hegel. Moreover, on the side of the receivers of the artwork, those to whom the manifestation is made, he again agrees with Hegel. Where Hegel holds that great art manifests 'truth' to (in Heidegger's *précis*) 'man's historical existence' (NI, p. 84), Heidegger himself says that great art is the 'transporting of a people into its endowment (*Mitgegebene*)' (PLT p. 77). Given, as an educated guess would suggest, that 'endowment' is another word for 'truth', what Heidegger is doing here is agreeing with Hegel that nothing less than the reception of the artwork by a culture ('people') as a whole is sufficient to establish its 'greatness'. Art is only great if, like the Greek temple or medieval cathedral, it possesses *world-historical* significance.

Heidegger also agrees with Hegel's second proposition. In the *Lecture on Aesthetics* of 1828–9 Hegel says (and Heidegger quotes) that

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself. One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit. In all these relationships art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past (*PLT* p. 80). The magnificent days of Greek art, like the golden era of the later Middle Ages, are gone. (*N I*, p. 84)

Heidegger says that, for us, this judgment is 'in force' (*PLT* p. 80). For him, as for Hegel, the totality of the art of the post-medieval, that is, modern, world is, even at its best, something less (actually a lot less) than great.

'Aesthetics' and the death of art

4. Why should this be the case? Why does none of the art of modernity qualify as 'great'? Heidegger's answer is contained in one word, 'aesthetics':

Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object, the object of *aisthesis*, of sensuous apprehension in the wide sense. Today we call this apprehension experience. The way in which man experiences art is taken to provide information as to its essence. Experience is the source that is the standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment but also for artistic creation. Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries. (*PLT* p. 79)

As a synonym for 'philosophy of art', Heidegger observes in the Nietzsche volume, 'aesthetics' came into being as the result of a division of labour first explicitly carried out in the eighteenth century.⁵ As 'logic' was understood as the establishment of systematic knowledge of *logos*, of judgment and thought, 'ethics' of character and behaviour, so 'aesthetics' was knowledge of *aisthetike*, of 'sensations and feelings and how these are determined' (*N I*, pp. 77–8). The point Heidegger seeks to emphasize is that the introduction of this synonymy (indeed, surveying the contemporary scene, the virtual *replacement* of 'philosophy of art' by 'aesthetics') is no mere matter of terminology but represents, rather, the triumph, in both theory and practice, of a particular conception of art over an older, as one might call it, 'ethical' conception which took for granted that the point of art was to be 'truth'-disclosing, to disclose to its

⁵ Specifically by Alexander Baumgarten in his *Reflections of Poetry* of 1735.

audience, at least the outline, the shape of the proper way to live. That 'aesthetics' has displaced 'philosophy of art' reveals, Heidegger believes, that we have abandoned the ethical conception of art. Art, he holds, no longer provides, nor is expected to provide, guidance as to how to live. Rather, it is designed to provide 'aesthetic experiences'.

As *theory*, Heidegger says, the aesthetic conception of art began in antiquity (*PLT* p. 79), specifically with Plato (*NI*, pp. 80–3). Only with the advent of modernity, however, did the *practice* of art become aesthetic. For Heidegger, therefore, the history of Western art, which he outlines in chapter 13 of the Nietzsche volume, the 'few centuries' in which great art died, is the history of the slow overtaking of practice by (Platonic) theory.

5. What is the 'aesthetic' conception of art? The essential thing about art, on this approach, is that it is beautiful. Post-eighteenth-century German even builds this into the definition of art: 'fine art', as opposed to 'craft', is '*die schönen Künste*'; literally, 'the beautiful arts'. A successful artwork is one which is beautiful, possesses, that is, 'aesthetic appeal'. Art is expected to produce 'aesthetic experiences', which is to say that it, and nature too, is 'examined and evaluated on the basis of its capacity to produce the aesthetic state' (*NI*, p. 90).

What is the 'aesthetic state'? According to the tradition Heidegger holds to be dominant in the modern age, the hallmark of the proper reception of art is, in Kant's word, 'disinterestedness'. Here, for example, is the famous art historian, Erwin Panofsky:

It is possible to experience every object, natural or man-made, aesthetically. We do this when we just look at it (or listen to it) without relating it, intellectually or emotionally, to anything outside itself. When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of view of an ornithologist, he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. When a man at a horse race watches the animal on which he has put his money, he will associate its performance with his desire that it may win. Only he who simply abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically.⁶

On an aesthetic approach such as this, the essential thing about aesthetic experience is decontextualization. We attend to the object of perception

⁶ *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), p. 11.

in and for itself, abstract, that is, from every relation it may have to our intellectual and practical interests.

What, one might ask, is left when we 'bracket' out all the connections which, in ordinary life, an object has? Only, one might suggest, its formal, abstract qualities. This, as Heidegger understands it, is what we are taken to respond to by the 'aesthetic state' theory: 'aestheticizing connoisseurship' of art, he says, is a matter of taking delight in 'the work's formal aspects, its qualities and charms' (*PLT* p. 68).

'Abstract' visual art did not, of course, exist in the eighteenth century. Art was always 'representational'. As art, however, representation was the occasion rather than the point of the work. Its point, according to the theory Heidegger has in mind, was to represent in a way that highlighted the formal qualities constitutive of beauty – harmony, balance, completeness, lack of superfluity, simplicity in perfect combination with complexity, and so on – to represent so as to facilitate entry into the 'aesthetic state'. (That the roots of twentieth-century abstractionism may well be seen as lying in aesthetic state theory is an important clue to understanding later Heidegger's antipathy to abstract art (see chapter 4 section 25 below).

Why is it that we find the decontextualized, 'disinterested', character of aesthetic experience pleasurable? Since objects, in such experience, are removed from all relation to our practical interests, they are removed, too, from all relation to care, to fear and hope. When the mind is wholly absorbed in aesthetic experience we become free of pain, anxiety and stress. We become, as Schopenhauer puts it, no longer the 'subject of willing' but rather the 'pure will-less subject of knowledge'. When we achieve such a state we enter

the painless state prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.⁷

⁷ *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., ed. E. F. J. Payne, (New York: Dover, 1996), I, pp. 195–6. Schopenhauer actually believes that in the aesthetic state one achieves not only peace but also a kind of insight into the 'essences' of things (see chapter 7 of my *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987)). This shows that the formalist conception of the aesthetic state is not the only possible conception. Nonetheless, Heidegger's assumption that the latter was the dominant conception throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strikes me as true.

Instead of being harried here and there by our hopes, fears and anxieties, we achieve a moment of stillness, a unique kind of peace.

6. Modern art, then – more precisely, the place of art in modernity – represents, according to Heidegger, the triumph of the aesthetic conception of art. Why, however, is aesthetic experience the 'element' in which great art 'dies'?

Heidegger asks why it is that we value aesthetic experience, and gives, essentially, Schopenhauer's answer, albeit in somewhat less elevated language. We value it because it 'reposes and relaxes' (*IM* p. 131). We enjoy the aesthetic state because it is a form of stress relief, a moment of lyric *stasis* in the midst of busyness, a holiday from the anxious world of willing and working.

But if that is all that is valuable about art then it becomes, for life, of peripheral importance. If, Heidegger says in 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', art has 'nothing about it of action', if it is 'harmless and ineffectual', then it fails to be something we need to take 'seriously' (HE pp. 294–6). In the Nietzsche volume he says that

What makes art great is not only and not in the first place the high quality of what is created. Rather, art is great because it is [answers to] an absolute need. (*NI*, p. 84)

Greek art answered such a need because, self-evidently, an understanding of how to live is something we all need. But stress relief, while pleasant, is no absolute necessity. We may choose to live without it, to be workaholics. And even if that is not our choice, it is still not the case that we stand in need of art as such. Heidegger says that, as aesthetic, art becomes the province of 'the art industry' (*PLT* p. 40), an industry aimed at providing pleasurable experiences for 'connoisseurs' (*ibid.*). As the fashion industry provides pleasurable objects to the consumers of fashion, so the 'art industry' provides pleasurable objects to the 'consumers' of art. As such, however, art becomes merely a 'sector of cultural activity' (*QCT* p. 34): merely *one* 'sector' of that which puts a little icing on the cake of life given that many other sectors are equally available; travel, recreational sex, sport, gossip, analytic philosophy, wine and food and so on. As stress relief, art takes its place as simply one option on a smorgasbord of offerings no one of which is any more or less valuable than any other. When

art becomes aesthetics it becomes, says Heidegger, 'a matter for pastry cooks' (*IM* p. 131), meaning that the provision of pleasant experiences to 'connoisseurs' of art is neither more nor less important than the provision of pleasant experiences to connoisseurs of food.⁸ (One is reminded here of Berlioz' remark that the Italians take their opera as they take their food.)

One reason, then, that 'aesthetic' art fails to be great art – becomes, in fact, a triviality – is that even in the lives of those who 'take it up' it represents, in a double way, an *option* rather than a 'need'. We do not have an 'absolute' need for stress relief of any sort, and even if we did we do not need art in order to satisfy it.

Another, related, reason, however, concerns precisely the idea of 'taking up' art. Heidegger complains that whereas the art of Homer and Sophocles gathered together and united an entire culture, art, in modernity, 'exists only for the enjoyment of a few sectors of the population' (*N I*, p. 85). This follows from what has been said already. If art exists only as a 'sector' on the smorgasbord of 'cultural activity' then, evidently, it exists only for those few 'sectors' of the population who choose to go in for that particular form of rest and recreation. Since the enjoyment of (at least fine) art requires leisure and education – the masses prefer real to metaphorical pastries – aesthetic art becomes the province of a subcultural social elite.

In two ways, then, aesthetics is the element in which great art 'dies', descends from greatness into triviality. It becomes marginal within the lives of those who choose to take it up. And it becomes marginal to the life of the culture as a whole, devoid of that world-historical significance which, for both Hegel and Heidegger, great art must have.

'Aesthetics' and 'enlightenment'

7. Aesthetics is the element in which art, as a non-trivial enterprise, dies. But Heidegger actually provides a deeper analysis of the death of art by

⁸ This, of course, is a deliberate insult to eighteenth-century thinkers like Kant who sought to elevate aesthetic over, specifically, gastronomic experience on the grounds that while the latter is a matter of pure sensation, the former involves an element of judgment. Heidegger's implied comment is: different, maybe, but no less trivial.

providing an account of why, at the beginning of the modern age, the aesthetic approach came to be the dominant climate within which art was created.

In the *Ister* lectures he says that 'aesthetics is the way in which the essence of the beautiful and of art is delimited in terms of . . . metaphysics' (*Ister* p. 88). The aesthetic view of art, he claims, is 'metaphysics' applied to art, 'metaphysics', as we might put it, in action. By 'metaphysics' Heidegger here explains, he understands 'enlightenment', the view that knowledge of the truth about the world is the exclusive province of 'reason' (*Ister* pp. 111–12).⁹ As an intellectual movement, claims Heidegger, the Enlightenment began with the Sophists, Socrates and Plato. Only, however, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did it achieve world-historical dominance, which is why, as the label of an historical epoch, it names that period (*ibid.*).

'Enlightenment' is, in more current language, 'scientism' or 'positivism'. Why does this lead to the aestheticization of art?

In the 1920s the so-called 'logical positivists' confronted ethics as a theoretical problem. Convinced that only science could possibly provide access to truth it followed that ethical utterances could not be truth-bearing, since, evidently, 'killing is wrong' is not susceptible to empirical testing, a susceptibility which is the *sine qua non* of a statement's being accorded the title 'scientific'. Evidently, however, ethical utterances play an important role in human life, so some account is required of what that is. The answer the positivists produced was a more or less sophisticated version of 'emotivism': ethical utterances rather than reporting truths evince, like cries and groans, feelings. Having expelled ethics from the domain of truth the positivists, in other words, assigned it to the domain of feeling. They 'aestheticized' ethics.

It is in a way similar to this, I take Heidegger to say, that positivism aestheticizes art. Having expelled it from the domain of truth (it was the poets', in Plato's view, unmerited reputation as truth-disclosers that led to his expelling them from the ideal state) there remains no alternative but

⁹ It is important to notice that this is a highly atypical use of 'metaphysics'. Generally, as we will see, Heidegger uses the term in such a way that 'the truth about reality is fully expressible on the "rigid grid" of "reason's concepts"' (*Ister* pp. 111–12) counts as merely one species of metaphysics.

to assign it to the realm of feeling. A great medieval altarpiece possessed, for its original receivers, at least two aspects: most importantly, it disclosed the 'truth' of the Christian cosmos but, in second place, it did so in a formally beautiful way. If, then, thinking about art in a climate of positivism, one cancels its truth-bearing function, all one is left with is its 'aesthetic' role.

For Heidegger, then, the ultimate ground of the triumph of the aesthetic view of art is the imperialism of reason, the triumph of the view that science (in the broad, German sense), and science alone, has access to truth. Notice that, in the end, this more or less repeats Hegel's analysis of the death of art. Great art died because for better or worse (better in Hegel's view, worse in Heidegger's) science took over the role that had made it great.

Heidegger's rejection of Hegel

8. With respect to Hegel's first two propositions, we have seen, Heidegger is in complete agreement. Hegel's third proposition, however, he rejects. Though currently 'in force', the judgment that great art is dead and gone *for ever* 'has not yet been decided' (*PLT* p. 80). That art might one day become, once more, 'an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence' (*ibid.*) is a possibility that nothing precludes. The reason Heidegger disagrees with Hegel here is that he rejects the idea that history happens according to Hegel's – or anyone's – laws. There is no discoverable law to history, every attempt to 'calculate' it being an, at bottom, technological, control-oriented, illusion (*QCT* p. 48). History is, rather, 'sent' to us by a 'Being' we can neither comprehend, predict, nor control. The character and timing of world-historical change is therefore something

no one knows. Nor is it necessary that we know. A knowledge of this kind would even be most ruinous for man, because his essence is to be the one who waits, who attends upon the coming to presence of Being. (*QCT* p. 42)

Heidegger also rejects Hegel's fourth proposition. Far from being something we can happily do without, it is *only* if great art returns that there can occur a 'decisive confrontation' (*QCT* pp. 34–5) with the 'desti-

tution' (*PLT* p. 91) of the age. The return of great art, therefore, is something we need more than anything else.

Heidegger says, on the final page of 'The Origin' that though reflection on the character of great art cannot force its 'coming-to-be' it is, nonetheless, the 'indispensable preparation for the becoming of art'. Only such reflection prepares a 'space' for art (*PLT* p. 78).

Unlike Arthur Danto, Heidegger does not believe that art always exists in a climate of a theory that moulds its character. The greatest age of Western art, eighth- to fourth-century Greece, existed 'without a corresponding cognitive-conceptual meditation on it'. Reflection on art only began, with Plato, as the greatest age of art came to an end (*NI*, p. 80).

Modern art, however, does exist in a climate of theory – bad theory, according to Heidegger. And though theory cannot make art, it can kill it. Given this, Heidegger's intention is to disrupt the prevailing theoretical climate by re-presenting an older theory of art – the theory, as he sees it, the Pre-Socratics would have given had they been disposed to theorize about art. Only with such a disruption is the return of great art even possible. 'The Origin' is Heidegger's contribution to creating the possibility of the rebirth of art.

The question: what is art?

9. The first of the many challenges of comprehension presented by 'The Origin' is the question of the question. What is it to which Heidegger seeks to provide an answer? According to the title it is, of course, the question of the 'origin' (*Ursprung*) of the artwork. That question is, however, answered in the first paragraph. In the sense in which Heidegger is interested, the origin of the artwork is, not the artist, but rather 'art' (*PLT* p. 17). In an, as he later admits, obscure discussion,¹⁰ Heidegger says that 'the origin of something is the source of its nature' (*ibid.*). So the thought

¹⁰ 'Capable of misunderstanding this talk of origin' a 1960 footnote dryly observes (*GA* 5, p. 1). (The footnotes in the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of 'The Origin' represent a selection from the marginal notes Heidegger wrote on his own copies of the 1957 and 1960 editions of *Holzwege*. When I refer, hereafter, to '1957' or '1960' marginalia I do not mean they were written in one or the other of those years, but rather in the margins of one or the other of those books. (Heidegger was an inveterate scribbler on books. The University of Freiburg library has, I am told, made a collection of their own books on which Heidegger scribbled – in pencil.)

is, presumably, that though the artist is undoubtedly the artwork's *causal* origin, he is not the origin of its status as an artwork and thus not the *logical* origin of its 'nature' as an artwork. In the sense that interests Heidegger, then, an 'origin' is a *logical or conceptual* origin, that in virtue of which an entity of a certain kind counts as being of that kind.

Since art, the property (or, as philosophers say, 'universal'), is fairly obviously that which enables a work of art to count as a work of *art*, 'the question of the origin of the work of art turns into a question about the nature (*Wesen*) of art' (*PLT* p. 18). Thus the initial question dissolves into the traditional question of the nature of (great) art. (After writing 'What is a thing?', 'What is art?' might well have been Heidegger's title had Tolstoy not got there first).

Traditionally, philosophers have answered this question by focusing either on the creator of art (Nietzsche's approach) or on the receiver (Kant and Schopenhauer's approach) and then extrapolating to the nature of the work from their chosen vantage point. Heidegger, however, says that he intends to do neither of these things but to focus instead on the work itself. (The reason for this, surely, is the likelihood that, on either the spectator or creator approach, the essence of art will turn out to be a psychological state and that one's philosophy of art will therefore degenerate into 'aesthetics'.) After a lot of mainly unnecessary footwork, therefore, the fundamental question that 'The Origin' seeks to answer is: 'What . . . is a work of art?' (*PLT* p. 18).

As its Socratic form suggests, this question is a request for a definition. Insofar as it possesses one, this request supplies the essay with its structure. It proceeds, in a manner vaguely reminiscent of a Platonic dialogue, by means of a series of attempted definitions of the artwork, the first rough and 'provisional' (*PLT* p. 51), the last, it is hoped, refined, deepened and completed. The initial definition, Heidegger's Hegelian *Grundgedanke* (founding idea), is that art is the 'happening of truth' (*PLT* p. 39, p. 57).

Expanding the concept of art

10. Halfway through the essay, however, Heidegger throws this understanding of the nature of his project into serious confusion. Art, it seems to transpire, is only *one* of the ways in which 'truth happens':

One essential way in which truth establishes itself . . . is truth setting itself into [the] work. Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state. Still another . . . is the nearness of that which is not simply a being, but the being that is most of all. Still another . . . is the essential sacrifice. (*PLT* p. 62)

One might, following, in part, Hubert Dreyfus,¹¹ think of these references as being to Hitler's founding of the Nazi state or Pericles' founding of Athenian democracy,¹² to God's covenant with the Jews, and to the crucifixion. Let us call events such as these, 'charismatic events'. The disconcerting suggestion, then, is that 'truth happens' in great art *and* in charismatic events.

Essentially the same point reappears at the end of the essay. As the 'projection' of 'truth', all art is, says Heidegger, 'poetry (*Dichtung*)' (*PLT* p. 72). Not, of course, linguistic poetry, 'poesy', but rather poetry in a 'broad' sense that is equivalent to the happening of truth. But, Heidegger now says, 'poetry is thought of here in so broad a sense that we must leave open whether [i.e. we must deny that] art, in all its modes from architectural to poesy exhausts the nature of poetry' (*PLT* p. 74). We have yet to see why Heidegger associates 'poetry' so closely with the projection of truth (see, further, section 18 and especially footnote 31 below). But whatever the reason, the point here, too, is that charismatic events, as much as artworks, count as poetry in the 'broad' sense, i.e. as 'happenings of truth'.

This apparent allowing of the happening of truth to occur outside artworks is disconcerting for two reasons. The first is that since definitions are supposed to provide necessary and *sufficient* conditions for identifying that which they define, one would expect, given the character of Heidegger's enterprise, that all *and only* artworks would turn out to be occasions of 'truth'. The second reason is that if truth happens outside of art it is not at all clear why we should be *bothered* by art's demise, why

¹¹ 'Heidegger on the Connection Between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. C. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 289–316, at p. 301.

¹² Already in 1935, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger had abandoned many of his illusions about Nazism, criticizing its racism, militarism and totalitarianism as well as the crassness of the Nuremberg rallies. Though it is hard to doubt that a reference to Hitler is intended here, it should be thought of as to the Hitler of Heidegger's 1933 hopes and dreams rather than to the reality of Nazism as it stood before his eyes at the end of 1936. (See *HPN* pp. 45–6, 116–17.)

we should not join Hegel in, without regret, bidding farewell to art. Yet, for Heidegger, as we have seen, it is art alone that can provide the decisive antidote to the 'destitution' of our times.

In reality, however, Heidegger is not failing to provide a sufficient condition of art, but rather expanding the concept to embrace 'world-defining' events of all sorts. Anything that provides what Hubert Dreyfus calls a 'cultural paradigm'¹³ counts, for Heidegger, as an 'artwork'. That he is doing this quite deliberately is made clear by the fact that at one point, the Greek temple, Greek drama *and* the Olympic Games are offered as equally valid examples of 'works' (*PLT* p. 43).

Is a concept of art according to which a Greek temple, a medieval altar-piece, a Palestrina Mass, a football match, a rock concert, and perhaps even something not too unlike a Nuremberg rally, might all count as 'art-works', an artificial cobbling together of disparate things?

Heidegger points out in the Nietzsche study (and in many other places) that the Greeks had no concept corresponding to our notion of 'fine art'. Both art and craft, along with all other modes of 'truth'-disclosure were, for them, just *techne*. If we return, then, to thinking in a Greek way, 'we [will] understand the word "art" quite generally to mean every sort of capacity to "bring forth" truth, understand it, that is, so that it corresponds to the Greek concept of *techne*' (*NI*, p. 82).

The idea of 'fine art' as a distinct species first came into being in the eighteenth century; with, that is, if Heidegger is right, the transformation of art into 'aesthetics'. It follows, then, that from Heidegger's point of view the idea that 'art' is synonymous with 'fine art' is a product of decadence. That he should seek to displace this notion is, therefore, part and parcel of his enterprise of restoring us to an older and healthier conception of the nature and significance of art.

A related point is that, as Heidegger puts it in a 1960 marginal comment, 'the distinctiveness of art' in the modern sense is 'open to question (*frage-würdig*)' (*GA* 5, p. 60). Artists, that is, are constantly challenging the accepted boundaries of art, constantly suggesting that we should accept as art works which lie outside of the domain and power of the 'art industry', outside 'the realm of tradition and conser-

¹³ 'Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics', p. 298.

vation'. Those, for example, who enshroud vast public buildings and bridges may well be intending, in part, to make the Heideggerian point that art should belong, not in the museum as an object of 'aesthetic connoisseurship', but rather in the marketplace as a public 'happening of truth'. In this regard, Heidegger's revision of the notion of art looks to be quite prescient, an anticipation of aspects of the current *avant-garde*.

Art as the 'opening up of world'

11. Art, then, in the broad, Greek sense is the 'happening of truth'. The artwork is that in and through which 'truth happens'. What does this mean?

Heidegger's first step in elucidating this provisional definition is to replace 'happening of truth' with 'opening up of world'. The artwork is something which 'opens up a world' (*PLT* p. 44).

Which world is it that the artwork opens up? Heidegger says: 'the work belongs, as work, uniquely within the world opened up by itself' (*PLT* p. 41). The temple at Paestum (*PLT* p. 40) belongs to the Greek world, Bamberg Cathedral (*PLT* p. 41) to the world of medieval Christendom. In 'The Origin' itself, painting with a fairly broad brush, Heidegger distinguishes just three (Western) worlds, the Greek, the medieval and the modern (*PLT* pp. 76–7).¹⁴ Elsewhere, however, he distinguishes the Roman from the Greek and the world of 'early' from that of 'consummate' modernism.

Worlds come and go. The Greek and medieval worlds both succumbed to a process of decline and fall, have 'decayed' and 'perished' (*PLT* p. 41). This means that 'is a great artwork' is a predicate which comes and goes too. Since their worlds have disappeared, neither the temple nor the cathedral can do its 'work' of 'opening up' anymore. They have, rather, passed over into 'the realm of tradition and conservation' (*ibid.*), have become, in a word, museum pieces.

A work, then, can lose its greatness through 'world-withdrawal'. But it

¹⁴ Notice, for future reference, that not every 'world' possesses an artwork. The age of modernity represents 'a new and essential world', yet is, of course, the age in which great art is 'dead'. This means that worlds can happen without an artwork.



Plate 1 Temple of Hera II (so-called Temple of Neptune), Paestum.

can lose it, too, by, not world being withdrawn from it, but rather the reverse, its being withdrawn from world. Thus, for example, in the nineteenth century, an American Indian totem might have lost its world-disclosing power through being removed from its site and placed in a New York museum, an African fertility symbol by being relocated on the living-room sideboard. In the 1960s, Heidegger observes of Raphael's altarpiece known as the 'Sixtina' that it belongs to its church at Piacenza 'not merely in an historical-antiquarian sense, but according to its pictorial essence'. The painting 'is the appearing of . . . the place within which the sacrifice of the mass is to be celebrated' so that were it to be uprooted and relocated in a museum, and so deprived of its world, it would lose its 'authentic truth' and become instead a mere 'aesthetic object' (*D* pp. 70–1).

There are, then, two ways in which an artwork may cease to do the work it once did and so lose, as Heidegger's sees it, its greatness: either the world is withdrawn from the work or the work is withdrawn from the world.

Notice that while the proposed connection between work and world does not commit Heidegger to the view that we cannot 'appreciate' the art of alien cultures, it does commit him to the relative triviality, the 'aesthetic' character, of such appreciation. For us, unless we become something a great deal more than tourists, the Taj Mahal is merely an 'aesthetic object'. (That, in the 1950s, Heidegger became, as we will see, deeply involved with the art of Zen Buddhism is a measure of the profundity of the changes that occurred as he proceeded down his 'path of thinking' about art.)

What is a 'world'?

12. What, though, is a 'world'? Heidegger himself poses this question, and does so against the background of the famous 'temple' passage. Here is part of it:

A building, a Greek temple . . . stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple¹⁵ the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from this expanse does a people first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation.

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the raging of the surf, and its own repose brings out the surge of the sea.¹⁶ Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are . . . The temple,

¹⁵ Hofstadter's translation is true to the German, but 'figure' surely makes more sense here than 'temple'.

¹⁶ Hofstadter transposes 'raging' and 'surge' in a way that suggests someone who has never seen the sea.

in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. (*PLT* pp. 41–3)

It is important to be conscious of the fact that the overall character of this beautiful passage, like that of the equally famous (but largely irrelevant) evocation of Van Gogh's painting of shoes (*PLT* pp. 33–4), is poetic rather than analytic. A great deal of misreading of 'The Origin' derives, in my view, from a literalist reading of the temple passage. In subsequent chapters we will repeatedly encounter Heidegger's preference for philosophizing by way of interpreting poetic texts, those, for example, of Sophocles, Rilke, Trakl, George and, above all, Hölderlin. In 'The Origin' however, he, as it were, provides his own text (a text we will shortly see to be modelled on Rilke's evocation of the world of his childhood in the work mentioned in footnote 1). Its purpose, I suggest, is to provide an intuitive entry into the experience the Greek might have had before his temple, an intuitive understanding which the remainder of the essay will attempt to articulate philosophically.

13. According to the passage, 'world' is the 'all-governing . . . open relational context' of an 'historical' culture, a kind of space. What kind of space?

Since 'world' is the same as 'truth' – the 'truth of beings' or 'being of beings' as Heidegger also puts it (*PLT* p. 39) – the root understanding of 'world' lies in Heidegger's theory of truth, a theory which received its first statement in 1925,¹⁷ a major restatement in section 44 of *Being and Time*,¹⁸ a significantly developed restatement in the 1930 'Essence of Truth' (*BW* pp. 113–42) and, more briefly, in 'The Origin' itself (pp. 50–5).

The fundamental insight contained in the theory is that truth as 'correspondence' or 'adequacy' to the facts – *the* account of truth offered, since Roman times, by the philosophical tradition – actually presupposes

¹⁷ In *Plato's Sophist*, tr. R. Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Though stated in *Being and Time*, its implications, I would argue, are not there properly understood. The 1930 'Essence of Truth' represents a considerable advance in appropriating those implications into his philosophy as a whole – which is why Heidegger says it constitutes the beginning of 'the turn' (*BW* p. 208) – but their full appropriation required, I believe, the rest of Heidegger's philosophical career. A helpful 'take' on his 'path of thinking' is to see it as a continuous attempt to fully think through the implications of his own theory of truth.

a more 'primordial' truth which has the task of establishing what kind of 'facts' there are to which statements may, or may not, correspond. Heidegger calls this 'truth as disclosure' or '*aletheia*' (*PLT* p. 51), which he sometimes writes '*a-letheia*' to highlight the idea of the foundation of truth as consisting in a coming-out-of-oblivion.

Consider this table on which I write. Let us call it 'Smith'. Suppose I say, pointing at Smith, 'Smith is colourless.' It might seem obvious that I say something false. But suppose that (for my own arcane reasons) I am actually referring, not to the table, but rather to the collection of molecules which Smith also is. A further possibility is that what I am talking about is neither the table nor the collection of molecules, but rather the space-time region they exactly occupy. Or maybe I refer to the demigod whose residence is just that place. And so on. The point this example makes is that truth as correspondence presupposes reference, and reference presupposes – a point often overlooked – a 'horizon of disclosure' which, through disambiguation, first makes it possible. Only when we know what kinds of beings belong to a given domain of discourse do we know what kinds of facts there are to which propositions may or may not correspond.

My example, of course, highlights issues of reference of a relatively localized kind. Heidegger, however, thinks of every human being as born into a very fundamental, 'transcendental' (*DT* p. 63) horizon of disclosure – as it were, the horizon of all one's horizons – and it is this that he calls 'world'. After 1930, as we have seen, he thinks of world (or at least Western) history as divided up, *à la* Hegel, into quite sharply distinct epochs, historical 'worlds'. These historical worlds (Heidegger also speaks of 'the clearing' and 'the open') are defined and distinguished by different horizons of disclosure. They are embodied in what Heidegger calls 'language' (see further section 18 below); hence his frequently repeated remark that 'language is the house of being'. In sum, then, 'world' is the background, and usually unnoticed understanding which determines for the members of an historical culture what, for them, fundamentally, there *is*. It constitutes, as it were, the entry conditions, the ground plan, the 'being of beings', which something must satisfy in order to show up as a being in the world in question.

In the first version of 'The Origin' Heidegger calls world a 'framework

for the present-at-hand',¹⁹ echoing *Being and Time's* description of world as an 'ontological structure' (*BT* 74–5). We could, then, think of understanding one's world as possession of a kind of metaphysical map (world, remember, is a kind of space), a map detailing both the regions of being and the kinds of beings that dwell there, a map that is internalized by all fully-fledged members of the culture. The Greek 'map' would divide the world into (at least) earth (inhabited by mortals) and sky (inhabited by gods) (later Heidegger calls this 'the fourfold'), the medieval into earth (mortals), heaven (gods) and hell (souls of the damned).

To understand one's world is, then, to understand what, fundamentally, there is. We may call this the 'ontological' aspect of world. Heidegger often appeals to this conception in describing the disclosive activity of the artwork. The work, he says, 'make[s] manifest' what 'beings as a whole [i.e. as an organized structure] are' (*NI*, p. 84). It 'opens up . . . the being of beings' (*PLT* p. 39).

In and around the temple passage, however, Heidegger's presentation of world seems to be focused not on ontology but rather on ethics; not on what *is* but rather on what *ought to be* the case. The important thing here about understanding one's world, is understanding the difference between 'victory and disgrace', 'what is brave and what cowardly, what noble (*edel*) and what fugitive (*flüchtig*²⁰), what master and what slave' (*PLT* p. 44). In general, when the artwork opens up our world for us we understand 'what is holy and what unholy' (*ibid.*), 'the shape of destiny for human being' (*PLT* p. 42), the broad outline of the 'simple and essential decisions' (*PLT* p. 48) which constitute, for us, the proper way to live, our, as I shall call it, fundamental *ethos*.

This dual character of world reflects a thesis fundamental to all phases of Heidegger's thinking: the inseparability of ontology and ethics, of 'being' and 'the ought', the necessity for the grounding of the latter in the former. (See especially the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 196–9, and the 'Letter on Humanism' (*BW* pp. 225–39).)

There are two aspects to this claim which I shall discuss in turn: the claim that ontology is necessary to the grounding of ethics, and the claim that it is sufficient.

¹⁹ 'Von Ursprung des Kunstwerks: Erste Ausarbeitung', *Heidegger Studies* 14, 1998, pp. 6–22.

²⁰ Hofstadter's 'flighty' reveals the dangers of translating into a language of which one is not a native speaker.

Ontology and ethics

14. Modern thinking, thinking which has its beginnings in Plato's separation between the form of the good and the other forms, is, Heidegger holds, dominated by the separation between fact and value, between in Hume's language, the 'is' and the 'ought'. Once such a dichotomy sets in, however, once it becomes no mere philosopher's theory but rather the way in which people in general experience the values of their culture, then moral nihilism sets in. The reason, in brief, is the following. The realm of being, of 'fact', constitutes, for us, what we *discover*, simply *acknowledge* to be the case. If, then, values are expelled from that domain then, inevitably, they become assigned to the realm of what we *make* to be the case, the realm of human invention or, as Heidegger puts it in *the 'Letter on Humanism'*, 'fabrication' (*BW* p. 279). As such, however, they cannot be genuinely authoritative for us. If they are someone *else's* fabrications then their only source of authority is the power of the other, an authority which is quite different from, in Kant's language, the 'unconditional' character of genuinely ethical authority. If, on the other hand, one's values are one's own fabrications – Heidegger is attacking, here, in particular, Sartre's notion that one must *choose* one's own fundamental values – then, if the going gets tough, one can simply unfabricate, unchoose them so that, again, they lack genuine authority. 'Values', says Heidegger, by which he means values divorced from facts, are 'impotent'; 'no one dies for mere values' (*QCT* p. 142). What follows from this, he concludes, is that only 'the grounding of man's historical existence on beings as a whole' (*NI*, p. 90) can establish an authoritative ethic.

It might be objected to this that the choice between assigning values to either the domain of beings or the domain of choice is not one we have to make. There is, so moral 'intuitionists' insist, a third domain; the domain of 'moral facts', facts which, while being fully objective, and so independent of human choice, are yet autonomous, completely separate from the domain of non-moral facts. That killing is wrong is something we 'perceive' rather than choose to be the case yet not on account of perceiving anything about the non-moral domain.

Heidegger attacks this position, popular among his German con-

temporaries,²¹ in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (pp. 198–9). It is, he suggests, simply an attempt, through obfuscating their origins, to lend spurious authority to what are, in reality, nothing but human fabrications. That he is right about this can, I think, be gathered by examining the response of 'intuitionists' to disagreement. Someone who does not have the same moral 'perceptions' as themselves they are compelled to abuse as morally deviant, defective in their capacity for moral perception. They are compelled, in other words, to resort to power, thereby unmasking the true and sole authority behind their fabrications.

15. A grounding in ontology is, then, necessary to a genuinely authoritative ethics. But Heidegger also claims that it is sufficient. Properly understanding one's world does not, he says, 'consist in mere information and notions about something'. Rather, 'he who truly knows what is knows what he wills to do in the midst of what is' (*PLT* p. 67). And again: he who properly understands the 'truth of beings as a whole' knows his own 'position in the midst of beings' (*N I*, p. 88). Proper knowledge of one's 'ontology' is no merely 'theoretical' accomplishment. It is, rather, also 'practical'. It bears, in a decisive way, upon will and action.

To try to understand this claim let us focus on the word 'position' as it occurs in 'position in the midst of beings'. 'Position' is, of course, a spatial concept. But it is also, as one might put it, a 'straddling' notion, linking together the idea of a physical (or metaphysical) space with that of a moral space. On the one hand to know one's position is to know one's latitude and longitude, on the other it is to know one's moral position, one's rights and duties, one's, as it were, moral 'latitude and longitude'. Position, in this sense, means the same as 'station' as it occurs in the Victorian-sounding phrase 'my station and its duties'.

Position entails *structure*, usually hierarchy, a feature of the Greek world Heidegger emphasizes through his repeated quotations of the Heraclitus fragment 53: '*polemos*' (usually translated as 'conflict', 'war' or 'strife') is, Heidegger quotes Heraclitus as saying,

²¹ See *HPN* pp. 206–8.

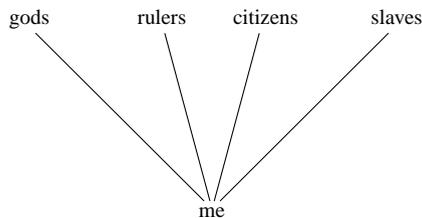
for all (that is present) the creator that causes to emerge, but (also) for all the dominant preserver. For it makes some to appear as gods, others as men; it creates (shows) some as slaves, others as free men. (*IM* pp. 61–2; Heidegger’s interpolations in parentheses)

This is the passage alluded to in ‘The Origin’ when Heidegger says that the Greek artwork makes manifest ‘what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what noble and what fugitive, what master and what slave (cf. Heraclitus, fragment 53)’ (*PLT* p. 43).

Heidegger here parses *polemos* as *Aus-einandersetzung* – in ordinary German ‘encounter’ or ‘confrontation’, but with Heidegger’s hyphen, ‘setting apart’ or ‘establishment of difference’. It is this, he says, expanding on Heraclitus, which

first caused the realm of being to separate into opposites; it first gives rise to position and order and rank . . . In th[is] *Aus-einandersetzung* world comes into being. (*IM* p. 62)

Let us suppose ourselves to be, then, ‘freemen’, citizens, in the Greek *polis*. (*Polis*, says Heidegger, is inadequately translated as ‘city state’. Thought of in a properly Greek way, it is, rather, the ‘place and scene of history’ (*IM* p. 152), in other words, the Greek ‘world’.) Understanding our world we understand ourselves to be located within a structure of which some of the nodal points can be represented as follows:



Heidegger says, to repeat, that ‘he who truly knows what is, knows what he wills in the midst of what is’. In the 1942 *Ister* lectures he puts the point in a more Greek way. To truly understand the *polis* is to understand what it is that is the ‘fitting’, or appropriate life for oneself, since it is ‘from this site and place (*Statt*) [that] there springs forth whatever is in