

HEIDEGGER AND METAPHYSICAL AESTHETICS

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Heidegger's most precise and extensive treatment of art is to be found in his 1935 essay *The Origin of the Artwork*.¹ This is, however, no work of aesthetics as traditionally conceived. The aim of this paper is to bring to light some of the fundamental differences between Heidegger's approach to art and the traditional approach, and to do so within the context of Heidegger's project of what he calls "overcoming metaphysics". As Heidegger sees it, traditional aesthetics is metaphysical in essence. Therefore a part - indeed, a crucial part - of the project of overcoming metaphysics is the development of a non-metaphysical and hence non-aesthetic approach to art.

What does Heidegger mean by "metaphysics"? Put briefly, Heidegger uses this word to refer to, on the one hand, the particular, and still current, historical epoch of the Western world which began with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, and, on the other, the particular way of thinking that fundamentally defines and determines this epoch. This way of thinking is characterised by a particular conception of truth, and by the failure to raise what Heidegger calls "the question of being". We shall not investigate Heidegger's reasons for attempting to overcome metaphysics in this paper, and we shall be concerned with this attempt only insofar as it manifests itself in Heidegger's approach to art.

Fundamentally, claims Heidegger, metaphysics, in failing to philosophically thematise *being as such*, has failed to understand what it is to be *a being*. *Artworks*, whatever else they might be, are *beings*. The crucial failure of aesthetics, then, according to Heidegger, has to do with the understanding of what it is to be a *being* in the sense of an *artwork*.

¹ *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Routledge: 1993).

This is to say that aesthetics has misunderstood the *essence* of the artwork. It is for this reason that Heidegger's consideration of the essence of *art* orients itself around the question of what he calls "the *origin* of the artwork".

How does aesthetics misunderstand the essence of the artwork? This question can be answered only once it is clear in what way metaphysics has misunderstood the essence of beings of the type of which the artwork is. Artworks might in the first case be called *things*. What is a thing?

Heidegger distinguishes three types of thing and three understandings of what it is to be a thing. The three types of things he distinguishes are (i) *works*, (ii) *equipment*, and (iii) "*mere*" *things*, the latter being lifeless beings of nature (stones, clods of earth, etc.). The three different understandings of what it is to be a thing are (i') the thing as the bearer of traits (expressed in the Latin categories *substantia* and *accidens*), (ii') the thing as the unity of a manifold of sensations, and (iii') the thing as the conjunction of matter and form. For our purposes, only a consideration of the third of these understandings is necessary.

Heidegger claims that 'The distinction of matter and form is the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics.'² However, it stems, he claims, from a consideration of things foreign to art, namely, from the way of being of *equipment*. A piece of equipment is fabricated by the shaping of particular matter into a particular form. The particular matter and particular form are prescribed beforehand by the *use* to which the piece of equipment is to be put. It is in regard to the concept of usefulness that the being of equipment is defined. However, Heidegger asserts that historically this thing-concept - the thing as formed matter - has stepped beyond its essential relation to equipmental things and has attained a priority as the standard metaphysical understanding of the being of all things. At least one reason for this is the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the totality of all things as the work of a creative, purposeful god.

More importantly, however, this understanding of the essence of the thing is grounded in the very essence of metaphysical thinking itself. In this regard only two considerations can be mentioned here. The first is as follows. It was part of the task of *Being and Time*

² *Ibid.*, 153.

to show that equipment ontologically lies closer to man than any other type of being since the way of being of man is such that beings are primarily disclosed with regard to a *purpose* of his being, that is, with regard to possible *usefulness*. Indeed, Heidegger claims here that beings can only be disclosed in the first place within an existential framework to which the categories of usefulness and purposefulness essentially belong. Is it not inevitable, then, that the things that set the standard for the interpretation of what it is to be a thing are equipmental in essence?

The second consideration is this: Heidegger claims that of the three types of thing mentioned above, equipmental things, insofar as they are essentially determined by a conjunction of the characteristics of the other two types of thing, occupy an intermediate position between the other two types of thing. What he presumably means is that whilst equipment is fabricated, just like the artwork, it retains the “self-contained-ness” that is characteristic of “mere” things, and which the artwork, insofar as it is considered as a *work*, does not have, since it suggests some sort of reference beyond itself, either to the artist, or to the viewer, or to what it represents. The implication that Heidegger wishes to draw is that the categories proper to the being of equipment are therefore projected on to the interpretations of the other types of thing.

This appears at first to be a highly objectionable claim. More sense can be made of it perhaps if, against the background of the first consideration, it is suggested that, since the very disclosure of beings grounds a fundamental *priority* of equipment in the thematisation of what it is to be a thing, it must be in reference to equipment that non-equipmental things such as artworks and “mere” things are to be understood. What needs to be explained here is precisely the *non-equipmental* nature of “mere” things and of artworks. This is straightforward in the case of “mere” things for they are simply given with the individuation that is afforded by the mere fact of disclosure. The case of artworks, however, is different: they are created. In what sense could artworks, conceived as non-equipmental things, be a creative possibility of man when the horizon for the understanding of things as such is equipmental in essence? But perhaps the artwork is not to be conceived as a non-equipmental thing in this sense at all.

The dominant, that is, metaphysical, interpretation of things in terms of matter and form is grounded in the existential nature of the disclosure of beings. Aesthetics is one

mode in which metaphysical thinking expresses itself. It should be expected then that aesthetics interprets the artwork, as regards its “thingly” character, in terms of the schema of matter and form. Insofar as it is a thing, the artwork is matter formed according to some aesthetic value extrinsic to the work’s “thingly” character. Heidegger wants to say not simply that since this is not the understanding of “thingliness” that is applicable to artworks, this understanding of the artwork must be wrong. Rather, he wants to take the further step to the claim that, given the metaphysical understanding of the thing, *any* interpretation of the artwork that *begins* by interpreting it as a thing has already gone astray, for it implicitly thereby attributes the character of equipmentality to it. Thus, he writes: ‘As soon as we look for such a thingly substructure in the work, we have unwittingly taken the work as equipment, to which we then also ascribe a superstructure supposed to contain its artistic quality.’³ But this way of approaching the artwork is, he claims, ‘the formulation native to aesthetics.’ The attempt to overcome aesthetics thus involves the attempt to confront the artwork apart from the characterisation of it as a thing. Instead we are to ask after the character of the artwork *insofar as it is a work*, that is, we are to ask after its *work-being*. This is the turn away from aesthetics. Fundamentally, it consists in the attempt to consider the artwork along the horizon of the *being* of beings. What does this involve?

In the artwork, claims Heidegger, there is a happening of truth. It is the happening of truth in the work that defines the artwork as a work. Truth, for Heidegger, stands in an essential relation to being. Consideration of the artwork as the happening of truth is thus determined on the horizon of the being of beings, and is therefore no longer metaphysical. But in what sense is there a happening of truth in the artwork? What is truth on Heidegger’s account?

Metaphysics conceives of truth as the relationship of *correctness* between intellect and object. Heidegger points out that this conception of truth presupposes the prior disclosure or unconcealment of the object. It is in terms of this original unconcealment of beings that Heidegger understands truth. Truth is unconcealment. This accords the concept with the etymological meaning of the corresponding Greek word: *aletheia*.

To the essence of truth as unconcealment, however, belongs the basic possibility of

³ *Ibid.*, 164.

concealment. The reverse holds as well: only on the presupposition of unconcealment can there be concealment. This pair of mutually implicatory concepts form the structural dynamic within which beings are first disclosed at all, that is, come to take a stand in that which Heidegger calls the “clearing”. The clearing is “won”, Heidegger tells us, as the result of the “primal strife” between concealment and unconcealment. Beings are able to be disclosed at all only insofar as the clearing in which they presence is constituted out of the opposition of concealment and unconcealment. Truth *is* this dynamic opposition, and truth as the unconcealment of beings is *constituted* out of this dynamic opposition. Truth as unconcealment is in this sense self-grounding for Heidegger.

What is the relation of this concept of truth to the artwork? Heidegger tells us that the artwork is a “site” of the happening of truth. This could be taken to mean either one of two things: on the one hand, it could mean merely that the artwork in some sense *unconceals* particular beings; on the other hand, it could mean that the artwork itself *instigates* “strife” between unconcealment and concealment. Heidegger does not disambiguate these two meanings, and it is not clear whether the ambiguity is not essential to what he is trying to say about the artwork. In what follows we shall only go some way towards disambiguating them. To make the discussion clearer we shall borrow the somewhat paradigmatic example that Heidegger himself uses as illustration: a Greek temple. What is it that the temple unconceals?

The temple does not portray anything. But it is also not without “reference” of some kind. It “refers” to the *world* of the Greeks: to its employment in the worship of gods, to the role it played in a society; it “refers” to that which the Greeks held in the highest esteem and to that which they derided, to the development of a great civilisation and its decline; it “refers” also to the labour and care which erected it in the first place. In this character of “reference”, a *world* is unconcealed. Heidegger calls this aspect of the being of the temple the opening or “setting-up” of a world.

A world is not all that the artwork unconceals. The simple standing there of the temple reveals the solidity, strength and endurance of the stone from which it is made, it reveals the location in which it is situated, the valley or hill-top, and throws into relief the qualities of its environment: the movement of the sea, the clemency or inclemency of the weather, the firmness of the rock on which it stands. The temple illuminates or “sets-

forth” that which Heidegger calls *earth*.

The essential character of world is openness. World is the openness - the “open relational context” - that first grants the possibility of directions for decision. It is something historical and is related to Heidegger’s existential concept of freedom. The essential character of earth, on the other hand, is closedness, or what Heidegger calls “self-seclusion” [*Sichverschließen*]. Earth is the impenetrable facticity on which a world is grounded and is connected to the notion of finitude that recurs throughout Heidegger’s philosophy. The relation or opposition of world and earth is strife - the strife of openness and seclusion, that is, the strife between unconcealment and concealment. Insofar as the artwork instigates the strife between unconcealment and concealment in the setting up and setting-forth of world and earth it is a site of the happening, or “setting-into-work” of truth.

Despite this brief exposition, we have insufficiently developed Heidegger’s claims and concepts here to be able to evaluate them fairly; nor is it our concern to search for counter-examples to his analysis of the artwork in terms of world, earth and truth, although there are no doubt many. The claim that the artwork is the site of the happening of truth also remains ambiguous, although it should have become clearer in what this ambiguity consists. The important question for our purposes concerns the way in which this interpretation of the artwork offers an analysis that is demonstrably non-metaphysical - and therefore non-aesthetic - in essence.

The metaphysical concept of the artwork is grounded, as we saw, in a particular conception of what it is to be a thing. This conception is rooted in the mode of being of equipment. Since an artwork is something different from equipment, it is subsequently attributed with an extra artistic quality or value. Accounting for the nature and possibility of this extra quality or value is the task of aesthetics. Heidegger claims that this approach misunderstands the essence of the artwork from the outset. For the artwork, insofar as it is a *work*, is never a thing in this sense at all. Rather, the essence of the artwork is to be discovered in its *work-being*, that is, in regard to its *being* as an *artwork*. The metaphysical approach had neglected to ask after the being of the artwork. This revealed itself in terms of the happening, or setting-into-work of *truth* - in the characterisation of which, an important ambiguity was retained. Consistent with this new account,

Heidegger subsequently comes to conceive of the process of artistic creation as the “*bringing forth*” of unconcealment, and of the individual’s encounter with the work in terms of the “*preservation*” of the truth set in to it.

Insofar as this approach to the artwork enquires, at the outset, after the being of the artwork rather than after its “thingly” character, and insofar as it is premised upon a conception of truth as unconcealment, it is - according to Heidegger’s own definition - essentially non-metaphysical in nature. If, however, aesthetics is understood to be essentially metaphysical in nature, then it is also non-aesthetic. It can perhaps be best described, in accordance with the general project of overcoming metaphysics, as a phenomenological fundamental ontology of the artwork.