

# Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art"

## I. The investigation begins with a hermeneutic circle. [17-20]<sup>1</sup>

A. We must look for the **origin** of the work *in* the work.

1. To infer what art is from the work we must first determine what to examine, i.e. we must identify something as a work of art.
2. But to do that, we must **already know** which objects are works of art and which are not.
3. But if we can do this successfully, we must already know what art **is**.
4. Thus, it appears that our investigation is moving in a circle by presupposing knowledge of what it is we are trying to understand.

B. According to Heidegger, this circle is a "virtuous circle" not a "vicious circle". The recognition of the circularity is a moment of truth, not a logical problem or an error on our part. What it means is that we must learn to think differently. The question, then, is not how to get around the circle, but **how to break into it**. [18f]

C. Heidegger suggests that we break into this circle by considering an actual work of art and looking into the "thingly character of the work of art", one of a work's more obvious features.

## II. The Thingly Character of the Work of Art. [20-39]

A. Any work of art is a "thing" of some sort. (A thing is that which is—that which is not simply nothing.) But the work of art is something more as well. Heidegger suggests that it functions both **allegorically**, i.e. as something more than the mere thing we see before us, and as a **symbol**, i.e. a "bringing together" of the thing and something else.

B. Three traditional interpretations of "thing" and the "thingliness of things".<sup>2</sup>

1. Substance with properties or attributes: There is, going back to the Greeks, the concept of a thing as a **substance** to which various **qualities** are attached, e.g. a chair (substance) which is red, made of wood, has four legs, etc. (its qualities). These relations of substance and quality are expressed in sentences by means of the grammatical **subject**, which identifies a particular thing or substance that one is talking about, and the **predicate**, which characterizes the quality or property associated with this thing. [22ff]
2. A unity of the "manifold" or bundle of sensations: There is also the notion of a thing as the unity or bundle of sensations in the mind that provide us with a perception, or a thing as **an object of thought**, e.g. an apple, unicorn or next week's reading assignment. [25ff]
3. Formed matter: Finally, there is a concept of a thing as **matter** that has a certain **form** imposed on it. [26ff]

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1 Page numbers in square brackets refer to the Hofstadter translation. See *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Martin Heidegger (trans. Albert Hofstadter), New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

2 "Thingliness" is another way of talking about the "inner nature" or essence of things, i.e. what makes them what they are. As we'll see, Heidegger tries to talk about this without slipping into traditional ways of thinking and talking. Thus, he does not want to talk about the property or quality of a thing that makes it the thing it is. That would amount to a falling back into the old way of thinking about things, viz. as a "something" (substance) to which something else (a property, characteristic, or quality) is attached.

C. While all three of these approaches to the nature of a thing are misleading, the notion of formed matter contains a clue to the real nature of the things. The definition of the thing is derived from the concept of **equipment** and the "equipmental being of equipment".<sup>3</sup> [29ff]

D. Equipment is intermediate between **thing** and **work**. To see this, we must do a phenomenological analysis of a work of art. [32ff]



E. Search for the "equipmental character of equipment".

1. Consider a painting of a pair of peasant shoes by Van Gogh.
2. Equipmental character consists in its usefulness. Thus, we must consider the shoes *as they are used*, not in some abstract or formal sense. [33]
3. The equipmental being of equipment is **reliability**. [34]
4. This is discovered by an imaginative engagement with Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes. In other words, the work of art allowed us to understand "what shoes are in truth".<sup>4</sup> [36]
5. Thus, the work of art has allowed the entity to emerge "into the unconcealedness [or "truth"] of its being".

F. The nature of art is "the truth of beings setting itself to work". The work is not the reproduction of an entity that happens to be present. It is "the reproduction of the thing's general essence". [36]

G. If we look for a thingly substructure in the work, we take the work as equipment (that which is useful for some purpose) with artistic quality added on to the substance or substructure (thing).

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3 Like the "thingliness of things", Heidegger's notion of the "equipmental being of equipment" is his way of talking about the "real nature" of equipment, its essence, what makes it equipment.

4 Notice how, in the description of the peasant shoes, Heidegger includes a reference to the earth to which the shoes belong, and the world of the peasant woman in which they are "protected". This distinction will play a central role in Heidegger's discussion of art.

H. But a work of art is not a piece of equipment with aesthetic quality. To look at it in this way is to fall back into the traditional misconception. [See above.]

I. Thus, Heidegger claims that to understand a thing according to its "authentic" or real nature, we must "think differently", i.e. we must "think the Being of beings" and look into the notion of truth and its relation to the work of art.

### III. The Work and Truth. [39-57]

A. The context of the work affects its "mode of being"—the way it presents itself—the way it speaks. The artist is the first to recognize this by releasing the work to "its pure self-subsistence".<sup>5</sup>

B. Heidegger looks at a Greek temple as a key to the understanding of the relation between work and truth. [41]



C. Work functions like a **symbol**, i.e. something is made present in it. [43]

D. Two essential features of the work of art.

1. The work "sets up a world and keeps it in force". (The work "holds open the Open of the world".) [44ff]

2. "The work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*"[46ff]

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger says, "It is precisely in great art—and only such art is under consideration here—that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge". [40] This is reminiscent of the remarks made by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* concerning the self-abnegation, elimination or loss of self of the artist in the creation of art: "With reference to these immediate art-states of nature, every artist is an 'imitator', that is to say, either an Apollinian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies, or finally - as for example in Greek tragedy - at once artist in both dreams and ecstasies; so we may perhaps picture him sinking down in his Dionysian intoxication and mystical self-abnegation..." [Nietzsche, BT, 38.]

- a. In equipment, the material is put to the service of the tool. The material "disappears into the tool"—it is used up.
- b. In a work of art, the material does not disappear but "shines forth [as if?] for the first time". The material becomes present in a dramatic way.
- c. Thus, in setting up a world, "the work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there".
- d. The "setting forth of the earth" happens in such a way so that the work "sets itself back into it". In other words, there is a kind of reciprocal and symbiotic relation between the work and the earth. (Such dialectical relations come up frequently in Heidegger's analyses.)
- e. Why is there such a relation between the earth and the work? This has to do with the nature of stone, color, metal, etc. Matter is transformed into its "undiscloseable presence" as the "self-secluding" earth.

[Examine carefully the section from the top of 43 ("In what, then, does the work-being...") to the top of 48 ("...unitary repose of self-support."), paying close attention to Heidegger's notions of "setting up a world" and "the setting forth of the earth".]

- E. These two essential features—the setting up of a world and the setting forth of the earth—appear together in the *unity* of the "work-being" of the work of art. [48]
- F. What is the relation between the setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth in the work of art? [48ff]
  - 1. The world strives to surmount the earth. This is the nature of world as **self-opening**. [48]
  - 2. The earth tends to draw the world into itself and keep it there. This is its nature as **concealing**. [49]
  - 3. Thus, the *self-opening* and *concealing* are in a constant productive **strife**. [49]
  - 4. The "work-being" of the work of art is this intimate struggle between world and earth. [49f]
- G. If in an artwork "truth is set to work", we must understand the nature of truth. [50]
  - 1. Truth as "correctness in representation" already presupposes the notion of truth as **unconcealedness** (in Greek *Alētheia*). To recognize that two things agree (are congruent, similar, equal, etc.) one must first "see" that they agree. Their agreement must be apparent or "in the open—unconcealed". [50f]
  - 2. **Clearing**—concealing and unconcealing: The dialectical nature of truth includes both opening and hiding or obscuring something. (Heidegger allows as well for the possibility of error.) [53f]
  - 3. Beauty is the "shining forth" for the "self-concealing being" in the work [as an increase of being]. Beauty is one way in which truth occurs. [56f]

#### IV. Truth and Art ("What is truth that it can happen as art?") [57-78]

- A. To understand the origin of the work of art we must consider not only the work itself but also **the process of creation**, i.e. the activity of the artist. [57f]
- B. Equipment is not the same as work, yet both involve a "bringing forth" of something. The difference between the bringing forth of equipment and the bringing forth of art lies in the difference between **making** and **creating**. [58ff]

1. We must first keep distinct the notion of a **craft** object and the notion of a **work** (of art). Heidegger maintains that the craft object is not the same thing as a work of art in spite of the fact that the Greeks used the same word (*techne*) for art and craft and called both producers *technites*. So what's going on here? How can Heidegger maintain the distinction between art and craft? He attempts to do it by examining what lies hidden in the concept of *techne*.

2. *Techne* denotes a mode of knowing. According to the Greeks, to know is to see what is present as such, in its "unconcealed" nature—to uncover the being which is hidden (*Alētheia*). *Techne* is, thus, not a form of making but a "bringing forth of the being" of something—making it present in its appearance.<sup>6</sup> [59]

3. Thus, the artist is a *technites* not by means of craftsmanship but by bringing forth being in the appearance [or physical reality] of a thing. [Heidegger hasn't told us enough about craftsmanship at this point to make the distinction between art and craft clear.]

4. However, the bringing forth of the *technites* is an example of *phusis* (spontaneous growth). This is what distinguishes art from craft. [This claim is not fully developed and, thus, left obscure.] [59]

5. But if craft is not the key to understanding the nature of creation as opposed to making, what is? Heidegger's claim is that the nature of creation is determined by the nature of the work. Even though the work must be created, creation must be defined in terms of "the work-being of the work". [60]

C. So what is the "work-being of the work"? Heidegger attempts to describe this in terms of the relation between the **work** and **truth**.

1. To create is to cause something to emerge. [60]

2. A work's becoming a work is a form of truth happening.

3. The occurrence or "happening" of truth in a work is the creative bringing forth of a **unique being**—it occurs once and only once.

4. What is the nature of this "createdness"? It is described **dialectically** by Heidegger as part of the intimate relation (**rift**) of conflict and belonging between **earth** and **world**. [62ff]

5. It is in this relation that Truth establishes itself. Thus, the createdness of the work is truth being "fixed in place in the figure" (i.e. in the work's structure or *Gestalt*). This is accomplished by the use of the earth, which in being used is not used up but set forth or "set free to be nothing but itself". [64]

6. While this may appear to be the same thing as craft, it is not. That's because the work involves truth—the unconcealing of being. Craft and equipment do not have this characteristic—the materials employed to make them are used up in the process.

7. In other words, a tool is finished, complete or "made ready" when its design has been made concrete or material. There's nothing more to it except to use it to perform a certain task. Take, for example, a paper-cutter. We take no interest in it as an object or a form (*Gestalt*). Its purpose is to do the job it was designed to do, i.e. to cut paper efficiently. That's its reason for being.

8. On the other hand, the work of art is not "finished" when its structure is complete. The work makes present or unconceals the being of that which is presented (truth).

9. Thus, "art...is the becoming and happening of truth". [71]

## V. Earth and World

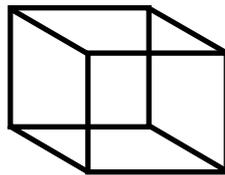
A. The work of art is the happening of truth.

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6 It may be worthwhile to review the handout on the classical conception of art and the discussion of *techne*.

B. Truth is disclosure.

C. Each disclosure precludes other possible disclosures. Cf. the following simple example of a Necker cube. The object can be seen as a transparent three-dimensional box viewed from the bottom-right or the top-left. The orientation as such is indeterminate. The data given to the viewer is consistent with either view. There is no sense in which one view is the "correct" one. But when one of the two views is disclosed, the other is hidden.



D. World is the horizon of all our horizons—a totality of possible disclosures which constitute intelligibility for us.

E. But this also implies other horizons of disclosure that lie outside our world—that are concealed. Perhaps this is what Heidegger means by "earth". It is the other side of the clearing—the "unfathomable". [See Julian Young, 40.]

F. This distinction between world and earth is not unlike Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

## VI. The Sublime

A. On 68, Heidegger says that in the work of art, "truth happens...with extraordinary awesomeness". It has been argued, by Julian Young, that Heidegger introduces the concept of earth to account for both the awe and the reverence associated with great art.

B. Both of these concepts are linked with "infinite mystery". To grasp something as "holy" or awesome is to grasp it in its infinite unintelligibility.

C. That which exceeds our power to fully apprehend it is the sublime.

D. The rising up of that which is infinitely unintelligible is earth.

E. So, while the world is "set up" and comes into the open in the work, at the same time the earth "rises up through" the work and is "set forth". [Cf. iceberg as perceived by the experienced mariner, rather than as an ice floe experienced by the novice.]

F. This is what gives the great work authority.

G. Cf. genius and the role of the sacred in religious works of art.

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