

Worlding versus Worldview: Heidegger's Thinking on Art as a Critique of German Historicism

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“Could it be that unconcealedness lays claim to the arts most primally, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power, may awaken and found anew our look into that which grants and our trust in it?” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 35; hereafter “QCT”). What does German philosopher Martin Heidegger mean by this seemingly abstruse question? How does his ultimately affirmative answer elevate the importance of art to the level of philosophy? Why is that important for his understanding of human existence as historical?

In what follows, I suggest that Heidegger's thinking about art is an integral part of his overall philosophical project critiquing dominant metaphysical views in the Germany of his time. His thinking about art is especially useful for understanding his related critique of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German historicism and its focus on the idea of historical “progress” as standing outside human existence. This is because Heidegger's understanding of the work that art does assumes a central role in his project at a critical moment in German intellectual life when critiques of historicism were, in fact, strengthening. His critique of historicism is a response to these prominent contemporary debates regarding historical knowledge. Such debates as raised by German thinkers—especially important for Heidegger in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche¹—focused on the meaning of history in the face of secularization and political issues like war and national unification. These issues in Germany challenged the historicist faith in “progress” as the basis of meaning and order, eventually bringing historicism itself into a so-called “crisis.” In his project to provide ontological grounds for an “epochal transition” in European thinking, Heidegger points out the fundamental connections between German historicism and modern philosophy (Bambach 2). It is on such ontological grounds that he then rejects historicism as a pernicious “world-view.”

With this background in mind, my contribution is to begin detailing some of what is at stake in Heidegger's thinking about art as it connects to his critique of historicism on ontological grounds, specifically in the opposition of his understanding of a "world" created through art to the historicist "worldview."² This contrast highlights the fundamental change in thinking and speaking about human existence called for in order to overcome the dangers he sees in modernity, especially from technology. Moreover, this juxtaposition of Heidegger's understandings of "world" and "worldview" demonstrates how art reveals the world in a way that might not be possible without it. Thus, I argue that the mode of thinking Heidegger associates with art is necessary for the ontological transformation needed for understanding human existence—on his definition—as the basis of history (instead of any metaphysical ideals, like historicist "progress").

My analysis begins with a brief overview of Heidegger's method of hermeneutic phenomenology, which is necessary for understanding his philosophical project and his thinking about art. I go on to illuminate a specific danger that he sees modern metaphysics, and the historicist worldview, pose for thinking of human existence as historical. This is followed by an analysis of Heidegger's thoughts on the transformative work of art, which in conclusion illustrates the goal of his overall project.³

I. Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Heidegger's stated project is to "stake out the positive possibilities" in the Western philosophical tradition of which he is a part to create a new way of thinking and speaking about human existence and the world (*Being and Time* 44; hereafter *BT*). His effort is based on the realization that dominant ways of thinking and speaking are no longer able to resolve modern problems of human existence on their own metaphysical terms. Based on this realization he challenges the "inadequate ontological foundations" of the dominant philosophical definitions of human beings as substances with fixed properties or as subjects separated from objects (*BT* 49). For this reason, his thinking can rightly be grouped with other challenges to the metaphysical, scientific, and theological theories of the time based on such definitions of humans.⁴ Many of these challenges centered on exploring the roles of emotion, imagination, belief, and, importantly for Heidegger, intuition in human experience.⁵

Heidegger's critique of modern metaphysics famously begins with the question of what is meant by the word "being." By analyzing a fundamental ontological concept, he seeks continuity with the Western philosophical tradition while opening a new path for thinking. His method for analyzing the meaning of the word "being" is then a modification of his teacher Husserl's phenomenology, which is a science of experience that begins from the "things themselves" as given in categorical intuition. According to Heidegger, "the

idea of the *intuitus* has guided all interpretation of knowledge from the beginnings of Greek ontology until today” (BT 410). Specifically for Heidegger, this is an adequate starting point for analysis of human existence since humans ineluctably operate on a vague, average, everyday intuition of being that guides all activity and gives rise to the explicit question of being (BT 25).⁶

Even though Heidegger neither claims that intuition can be fully understood, nor that human beings can figure out where intuition comes from or why it exists at all, he does claim that his update of the phenomenological method to become “hermeneutic” is decisive. Just as hermeneutic reading says that part of a text cannot be known without reference to the whole, Heidegger extends this to human existence. Humans inhabit a world in which everything encountered is already understood as something or other. Heidegger posits that humans make sense of, or understand, their world based on hermeneutic intuition through language, history, and their context of relations to the entities and other humans that surround them. This gives human understanding the central role in existence. For Heidegger, understanding then discloses meaning, defined as the possible relational significance of that which is encountered in experience (BT 184). Ultimately, such understanding of being is “woven” into humans, which makes the question of the meaning of being at all possible (BT 244).

However, the possible relational significance of anything encountered in human experience is not unlimited, but rather conditioned by determinate contexts since humans do not “stick a value on things without reference to their involvements” (BT 189). In this way, for Heidegger, understanding is always operating “within a set of already interpreted relationships,” or, “a relational whole” (Palmer 131). Working out the possibilities for significance is the task of interpretation. This is the “hermeneutic circle” where the context for interpretation entails an understanding of possible relational significance and where understanding “becomes itself in interpretation” (BT 188). Concern for the relations that embed or dis-embed, while orienting or dis-orienting, humans is then the basis for the world of everyday human existence (BT 98, 110).⁷ Given this, it has been argued that “the importance of Heidegger’s new notion of ‘world’ as a ‘referential context of significance’ cannot be over-estimated for explaining the paradigm shift from traditional to hermeneutic philosophy” in the Western tradition (Lafont xvi).

Transforming Truth: From Correspondence to Unconcealedness

In order to transform thinking and speaking about the everyday human world, Heidegger’s method of inquiry—hermeneutic phenomenology—transforms the philosophical meaning of “truth.” Specifically, Heidegger seeks to reform the dominant metaphysical view of truth as correspondence.⁸ The correspondence theory of truth equates the experience of any entity with a pre-

determined ideal of it. In this way, the truth is simply correct representation. This separates the knower from the world in removing human understanding from its context of significant relations. In order to avoid this separation, Heidegger defines truth as “unconcealedness.”⁹ His aim here is to escape fixed “categories of idea-centered thinking” (*BT* 184).

For Heidegger, an entity is unconcealed precisely when it *appears* in a certain way and is *pointed out* as something or other. All entities are, thus, intelligible. That is to say, they can present manifold aspects, which can then be pointed out. So, based on language, history, and their context of relations, humans can understand and interpret the meaning of any entity with regard to its possibilities *as possibilities*. In this way, human existence is mutually constitutive of, and coterminous with, the world. Importantly according to Heidegger, entities (along with other humans, and even oneself) have both manifold aspects and possibilities. This means there is not a single, correct way to experience or represent any one of them. Given this fact of irreducibility, what is it then that makes possible the relations allowing each entity to be understood according to its manifold aspects and its possibilities as possibilities, insofar as contexts of relations, language, and history allow? According to Heidegger, the answer is: thinking.

II. The Danger: Objectifying Thinking in the Modern Age

However, the type of thinking that is so important for truth as unconcealment is itself in danger. Specifically, the West’s adherence to the correspondence theory of truth has led to the dangerous dominance of only one kind of thinking: modern scientific thinking.¹⁰ Heidegger posits that modern scientific thinking is an objectifying system of representation when it requires that the experience of an entity conform to a pre-determined ideal about it. This thinking determines and delimits an entity in advance so that it is no longer considered according to its possibilities as possibilities; as having incalculably manifold aspects; or, as embedded in a referential context of significance.

It follows that all entities are then interpreted “in the light of a cause-effect coherence” leading to an interpretation of nature itself as a “calculable complex of the effects of forces [that] can indeed permit correct determinations” (“QCT” 21, 26). The most dangerous consequence is the rise of a mode of production that presumes to entirely capture the significance of an entity. Such a presumption can only lead to an ever more exacting, ever more restrictive, cycle of calculation and “producibility” (*Mindfulness* 20). Heidegger decries this fabrication of such “calculated objects [. . .] produced to be used up” and replaced “even more quickly and more readily” (“Poets” 129–130). His concern is that in this modern mode of production, entities are significant only for their consumption and what becomes decisive is the view that there is always a readily available substitute—everything becomes replaceable, un-

differentiated. When the possibilities of an entity are unreflectively decided and circumscribed in advance an entity is not considered according to its possibilities *as* possibilities. This means there is no room for reflection about its manifold aspects or their potential for relational significance beyond production and consumption.

This modern cycle of “planning, calculating, arranging and [molding]” subsumes entities as a whole under the auspices of “modern technicity,” which expands its dominance through coercive force as “subjugation that knows no discretion” (*Mindfulness* 20, 12). That is because it operates to produce ever more—and ever more calculatingly—so that it ultimately maintains itself only through the “unceasing overpowering of all power” (*Mindfulness* 20). It is maintained by a human fixation on objectification. It deludes humans into believing they can recognize “by a simple affirmation of the overpowering of power that is unleashed in the heightening of coercion—that which ‘is’” (*Mindfulness* 14). Objectifying thinking does not, therefore, recognize alternatives or permit inquiry into possibilities as such. This is especially because, as “purposeful self-assertion,” it “interposes before the intuitive image [of an entity] the project of the merely calculated product” (“Poets” 127). Thus, objectifying thinking is entirely calculating.¹¹

It is at this point, when the unconcealed—as the truth of being—no longer guides human inquiry, that humans themselves come to be taken as substitutable. This endangers human existence as historical—that is, as what first makes history possible through intuition, understanding, and interpretation.

Objectifying Thinking and the Critique of the Historicist Worldview

It is precisely because it denies human existence as historical that Heidegger critiques the claim to objectivity in his reading of German “historicism.” For Heidegger, the historicist supposition of a rational subject aiming for certitude about events through analysis based on modern standards of scientific truth as correspondence is misguided (“The Age of the World Picture” 125; hereafter “AWP”). The grand historicist narratives of “progress”—based on belief in such metaphysical principles as cause-effect coherence, correct representation, and the univocity of events—attempt to fit history within the frame of objectifying thinking. However, for Heidegger these modern metaphysical principles have been exhausted, and the attempt at modern scientific history is, ultimately, “a denial of the hermeneutic experience that first makes history possible” (Bambach 16).

For Heidegger, historicism as a worldview is simply an “outgrowth” of the modern era’s now obsolete metaphysics (*Contributions to Philosophy* 32; hereafter *CP*). As he explains: “metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis upon which it is essentially formed” (“AWP” 115). As a worldview, the accepted principles

of metaphysical truth work to set “experience on a definite path” without allowing themselves—or their very frame as a worldview—to be called into question (*CP* 31). The worldview of the modern era arises partly from a faith in humans as modern metaphysical subjects separated from objects in their drawing-up of pre-determined “guidelines for everything that is” (“AWP” 134). In the end, as an historical era, the modern age has accepted certain metaphysical principles and a view of truth that have coalesced into the dominant worldview. This worldview has determined what exists in its entirety without leaving room for reflection, especially on other possibilities as possible—that is, thinkable (“AWP” 130).¹²

III. The “Saving Power”: Non-objectifying Thinking and Ontological Transformation

The dangerous objectification that circumscribes thinking and obscures the question of the meaning of being also defines the human relationship to modern technology, according to Heidegger. This is because technology is, ultimately, an instrumental human activity wherein “ends are pursued and means are employed” (“QCT” 6). However, since modern technology is a way of creating entities, it is similar to art. Heidegger’s understanding of the relationship between art and technology derives in part from linking his etymology of the ancient Greek word *technē*, as the name for the activity and skill of crafts and fine arts, to the word “technology.” Heidegger says that given its provenance, *technē* belongs to *poiēsis*, which means to occasion; specifically, to occasion an entity as a creation of handcraft manufacture or poetic composition, which is the work of art.¹³ So, both art and technology are ways that humans work to create.

The main difference between technological production and artistic making is in their associated modes of thinking. Thus, exploring the mode of thinking associated with art illustrates how the danger in modern scientific thinking—as Heidegger describes it—can be overcome. Specifically, the mode of thinking associated with art is not “a purposeful self-assertion,” but in the words of Parvis Emad, “abandons and throws aside everything familiar, expecting nothing from [entities] immediately” (136). This is because, for Heidegger, “preconception[s] shackle reflection on the being of any given entity” instead of letting it be “just the being that it is” (“The Origin of a Work of Art” 31; hereafter “OWA”). This mode of thinking associated with art is not calculative and is what Heidegger instead calls “non-objectifying” (“Phenomenology and Theology” 54, *passim*; hereafter “PT”).¹⁴

Thus, art works through evoking non-objectifying thinking. Such thinking is not based on the correct representation of an entity as it corresponds to a predetermined ideal. Instead, such thinking is meditative, responsive, or inventive in pointing-out entities as intelligible in manifold ways, full of pos-

sibilities, and embedded in a referential context of significance. It follows that non-objectifying thinking recognizes what is most “question-worthy” about human existence as historical and is, ultimately, posited as a “saving power” by Heidegger.

Thinking the World through Art

For Heidegger, the non-objectifying mode of thinking associated with art is poised to be a salvific “restraint” on the “irresistibility of ordering” in the age of modern technology (“QCT” 33). Such ordering arises from human indifference to truth as unconcealedness. This indifference stems from human closedness to other ways of thinking and speaking due to the stultifying faith in a worldview fixated on metaphysical principles of objectification: truth defined as correspondence, correct representation, cause-effect coherence, and equating the significance of creating with production only for consumption. However, through non-objective thinking, art offers a way out of the metaphysics of the modern age. But how?

Firstly, art exists in the world and, thus, becomes part of the referential context of significance. Secondly, works of art create their own worlds. These worlds evoke non-objective thinking by pointing entities out as something or other as well as why they matter and what their possibilities are as possibilities. This is unconcealment. Therefore, thirdly, works of art are important in helping to critique the metaphysical principles of the modern era by pointing the way to the ontological transformation of truth as unconcealment. This is important for thinking and speaking about human existence—in all its phenomenological hermeneutic possibility—as the basis of history.

To begin, artworks are the creations of *poiēsis*. As such, they draw attention to their own mode of createdness since, for Heidegger, “if there is anything that distinguishes the work as work, it is that the work has been created” (“OWA” 56). As a creation, a work of art exists in the world, defined as a referential context of significance.

A work of art also then creates its own world. The world of a work of art necessitates its own sheer createdness to even exist. In setting up a world, the work of art “sets itself back into the earth” and draws attention to that out of which it is created (“OWA” 47). To illustrate: “the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it [. . .] but he does not use it up” (“OWA” 47). The particular relationship to that out of which the work of art is created—“earth”—is not, therefore, one of use and consumption only. Further, for Heidegger, the “world” set-up in a work of art is “ever-nonobjective” (“OWA” 42). As he writes: “causes [. . .] remain unsuitable for the world’s worlding” (“The Thing” 180; hereafter “TT”). That is to say, human explanations that invariably expect the coherence of cause and effect, or merely calculate means and ends, will only ever fall short of fully grasping the world of a work of

art. What is needed is “the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls” (“TT” 181).

This mode of thinking may bring forth questions, possibilities, or nothing; but it doesn’t provide “objectifying” answers. Ultimately, it is never even entirely thinkable since the world of a work of art “worlds” when evoking inquiry (especially about historical decisions) or relational possibilities (“OWA” 44). Therefore, a work of art always harbors a part of what is yet to be thought. In this way, the world set up in and through a work of art is intractably evocative.

The world created by a work of art is evocative for Heidegger in specific ways that connect to his critique of the modern historicist worldview as such. For example, works of art encourage questioning that relates humans to their own existence, each other, and surrounding entities. They confirm existence as question-worthy when provoking musing on the meaning, intelligibility, possibilities—and limits—presented by a creation that is “the whole of all that is not objective” (“Poets” 107). This is what Heidegger names the “open” in “the sense of a universally prevailing release from all bounds” (“Poets” 107).¹⁵ It entails a response to the work of art on its own terms, which serves to free humans from “accustomed ties to world and to earth” (*Mindfulness* 66). Moreover, the work as a creation—along with the world it creates—offers “visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar” that surprise, estrange, or mystify (“Poetically Man Dwells” 226; hereafter “PMD”). Thus, the more “open” a work, the more it prepares its interlocutors to be “ready for the unforeseen” by extending inquiry into the unknown (“PMD” 216).

It follows that the work of art is to create worlds that could not be possible without its associated, simultaneous mode of thinking. Heidegger explains that “if there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work” (“OWA” 36). He cautions that this truth “does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of [. . .] being [. . .] that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attains to unconcealedness” (“OWA” 56). In this way, works of art point the way to the ontological transformation of truth necessary for the epochal transition in thinking and speaking about existence Heidegger sees as needed to move beyond the impasse wrought by modern metaphysics and its perpetuation in the historicist worldview.

Art Transforming History

For Heidegger, the modern scientific way of measuring the world—so well contained in the historicist worldview sustaining modern technicity—is fundamentally opposed to the work that art does in evoking reflection on, inquiry

into, and interpretation of the phenomenon of the world's worlding, or human existence as historical. In fact, works of art have the potential to transform human existence and, consequently, history. Simply put, human communities often come to know and belong together through their relations to certain works of art.¹⁶ They become familiar with what those works point out, why it matters, and the possibilities for communal relations to change with regard to various aspects of a work.

As part of the world, works are common and significant points of reference that help communities understand the historical transformation of intelligibility. According to Heidegger, worlds opened-up by that which a work of art unconceals—by pointing it out in some way or another—bring humans “into affiliation with the truth happening in the work” and ground “being for and with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in reference to unconcealedness” (“OWA” 68).¹⁷

This is explicit in Heidegger's famous example of the ancient Greek temple that belongs “within the realm that is opened up by itself” (“OWA” 41). In its “standing there” the work is in relation to other entities and first gives them their “look” (“OWA” 43). That is to say, the temple contrasts with the “rocky ground” on which it stands, it reflects the “light of the day” off its stone façade, and it defines the invisible or negative “space of air” around it (“OWA” 42).

Similarly, in its “standing there” the temple is also in relation with humans and provides for them an “outlook on themselves” (“OWA” 43). That is to say, “it first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of [. . .] paths and relations in [. . .] the all-governing expanse of [an] open relational context” (“OWA” 42). For Heidegger, this means that the context of relations created through the structure and significance of the temple defines how those who gather around it know and respond to their historical context through such communal experiences as “birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline” (“OWA” 42). This makes-up part of the community's historical existence together, which does not then correspond to any pre-determined ideal, such as historicist “progress.”

Moreover, the Greek temple, as a work of art, is singular in that it “never was before and will never come to be again” (“OWA” 62). It is rather than is not, and that fact is significant for Heidegger. The event of its coming to be means that it enters history. By bringing truth with it into being it makes truth historical, too. This answers Heidegger's own rhetorical question: “Can truth happen at all and thus be historical?” (“OWA” 38). The work's influence in evoking humans to reflect on what it unconceals brings the simultaneous awareness of their own human existence together as historical. This is important in light of Heidegger's overall project to rethink the ontological foundations of modernity since, as he explains, the world only “worlds” when

historical decisions are “rediscovered by new inquiry” (“OWA” 44). This is in distinct contrast to a “worldview” given that “*only* questioning and the decision in favor of question-worthiness can be set in opposition to ‘world-view’” (CP 34; my emphasis). So it is through evoking inquiry that art is elevated to the same importance as philosophy, for Heidegger.

In sum, thinking the world through art is opposed to the metaphysical principles of a worldview, like historicism. I claim that, for Heidegger, art points the way to an ontological transformation through non-objective thinking, which is necessary for understanding human existence as truly historical. This helps us to understand Heidegger’s seemingly abstruse question with which we began: art works to unconceal the truth of being through the saving power of non-objective thinking about the possibilities for human existence together as the hermeneutic condition for history.¹⁸

¹Heidegger claims: “If in Nietzsche’s thinking the prior tradition of Western thought is gathered and completed in a decisive respect, then the confrontation with Nietzsche becomes one with all Western thought hitherto” (*Nietzsche* 4).

²The scope of my analysis is focused on “world” and “worldview” in Heidegger’s thinking as an illustrative instance of his influential critique highlighting the particular historical importance of art. This limiting condition means that I will neither offer a full analysis of Heidegger’s engagement with German historicism or *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* (see Beiser 2011 and Bambach 1995), nor will I be able to give a detailed account of Heidegger’s overall project (and specific terminology), including his thinking on art (for a list of works on this see Thompson 2015).

³Recent works on the importance of Heidegger’s thinking about art include: Bernasconi 2015; Thompson 2015 & 2011; Dreyfus 2006 & 2005; and Young 2001. However, on this topic there has not been an extended discussion of the contrast between Heidegger’s understanding of “world” and “worldview” that extends to his critique of German historicism, which is my contribution here.

⁴Existential thinkers posed major challenges to such theories and, even though Heidegger repudiated the label of existentialist in 1946, *Being and Time* is taken to be a foundational text for the movement. This is because existential thinkers do not follow the Aristotelian definition of humans as substances with fixed properties or the dualist Cartesian view of humans as subjects separate from objects. Rather, for existentialists, as for Heidegger, humans are existence (see Crowell 2015).

⁵For more on these philosophical (and political) challenges from German Romanticism and Idealism see Sturma 2000.

⁶For Heidegger, humans take priority in the inquiry into being, not through a “vicious subjectivizing of the totality of entities,” but because humans ultimately have themselves as an issue (*BT* 34).

⁷This view of everyday human existence is captured in Heidegger’s famous term, “being-in-the-world.”

⁸Heidegger explicitly opposes his understanding of truth as “unconcealedness” with that of Plato’s understanding of truth as “correspondence” in “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” (155, 168, 177–8, *passim*).

⁹Heidegger uses the Greek word, *alētheia* (on this see Sheehan 2006 and Wrathall 2011). Here I concur with Wrathall that: “Heidegger’s view of truth forms the basis both for his critique of the metaphysical tradition of philosophy, and for his own constructive account of ontology and the nature of human being” (Wrathall 12).

¹⁰For more on Heidegger’s view about the “crisis” of modern European science, in the context of other German thinkers’ views, see Veal 2005.

¹¹For a discussion of Heidegger's concern with calculation across his various writings see Elden 2006 (specifically, Chapter Three, "Number: Calculative Politics").

¹²For Heidegger, what exists in the modern era as a historical age has been decided by faith in modern science, machine technology, art as "mere subjective experience," human activity as culture, and indecision regarding God and the gods ("AWP" 116).

¹³He explains that *poiesis* means something brought-forth either "by another" [*en alloi*] or "by itself" [*physis*] ("QCT" 10–12).

¹⁴In "Phenomenology and Theology," Heidegger directly contrasts "objectifying" [*objektivierenden*] with "non-objectifying" [*nichtobjektivierenden*] thinking.

¹⁵Heidegger does not find openness in art as "installation" since it decides everything to be experienced in advance and, thus, entails objectifying thinking (*Mindfulness* 24). This distinction raises issues—not addressed here—of good versus bad art and the importance of great works of art for Heidegger.

¹⁶As Dreyfus explains: "Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wagner had already discussed the function of the artwork in giving a people a sense of their identity. But Heidegger is the first to have defined art in terms of its function of articulating the understanding of being in the practices and to have worked out the ontological implications" ("Ontology" 411).

¹⁷For details about the German Romantist preoccupation with unifying community through art given the reality of political conflict see Schmidt 2009 and Vandavelde 2012.

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