Heidegger, Art, and the Overcoming of Metaphysics

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Abstract: In this paper, I advance a new interpretation of Heidegger’s reflections on art as we find them in his essay, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’. I begin, in Section 1, by uncovering the fundamental concern that motivates Heidegger’s essay. I show that Heidegger’s reflections on art are part of his attempt to uncover a path beyond the history of metaphysics. I then suggest, in Section 2, that while Heidegger does think that art may allow for the overcoming of metaphysics, recent interpreters [Dreyfus (2005), Thomson (2011), and Young (2001)] have mistook the kind of art that Heidegger has in mind here. The kind of art that can allow for the overcoming of metaphysics, I argue, is not art that simply thematizes and/or reconfigures cultural worlds (as these interpreters have argued). It is instead what Heidegger calls ‘primal poesy’. After discussing the nature of primal poesy, I show in more detail how this kind of art may be capable of getting us beyond the history of metaphysics in Section 3. Finally, in Section 4, I reconsider the more common reading of ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in light of the interpretation I’ve offered in Sections 2 and 3.

1. Motivating the Question of the Work of Art

In his Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event) (1936–37; hereafter, Contributions)—in a passage worth quoting at length, and one that I will return to frequently throughout this paper—Heidegger tells us the following regarding his meditation on art:

The question of the origin of the work of art is not intent on an eternally valid determination of the essence of the work of art, a determination that could also serve as a guideline for the historiological survey and explanation of the history of art. Instead, the question stands in the most intrinsic connection to the task of overcoming aesthetics, i.e., overcoming a particular conception of beings—as objects of representation. The overcoming of aesthetics again results necessarily from the historical confrontation with metaphysics as such. Metaphysics contains the basic Western position towards beings and thus also the ground of the previous essence of Western art and of its works. Overcoming metaphysics means giving free rein to the priority of the question of the truth of being over every ‘ideal’, ‘causal’, ‘transcendental’, or ‘dialectical’ explanation of beings. The overcoming of metaphysics is not a repudiation of philosophy...
hitherto, but is a leap into its first beginning, although without wanting to reinstate that beginning. (GA 65: 503–04 / CP 396)1

Heidegger here situates his reflection on art within the context of ‘an historical confrontation with metaphysics as such’. And so, in order to better grasp this context of his reflection on art, let us start by briefly clarifying what Heidegger means by ‘metaphysics as such’ and by a ‘confrontation with metaphysics as such’.

‘Metaphysics’, we are here told, ‘contains the basic Western position towards beings’ (GA 65: 504 / CP 396). By saying that metaphysics contains the basic Western position towards beings, Heidegger is not referring to metaphysics as a field of academic study, nor as simply a way of thinking about beings. ‘Metaphysics’, for Heidegger, names something much more fundamental and pervasive. It names the fundamental manner in which Western humanity (and now, global humanity) has come to position itself in the midst of beings. And this fundamental manner of positioning ourselves, Heidegger suggests, comes to always already shape our existence in the midst of beings—regardless of whether we reflect upon, think about, and/or articulate this manner of positioning (GA 6.1: 408 / N2 190). So even in our pre-reflective and most basic daily interactions with things (or in our daily relating to the beings of our world)—e.g., when we buy a coffee or drive a car to work—there is a sense in which we are engaging in ‘metaphysics’, as Heidegger employs the term.

Heidegger tells us that if we were to think of metaphysics as addressing a question, it would be the question, ‘What basic character do beings manifest?’ i.e., ‘How may the Being of beings be characterized?’ (GA 6.1: 15 / N1 18). [But the metaphysical relation to beings, according to Heidegger, always already forgets an even more basic question: What is the meaning (or truth) of this Being itself?2 The fact that metaphysics forgets this question is important, and is treated further in Part 3 of this essay.] There is a sense in which our basic, underlying response to this question of metaphysics—the question of what it is for anything to be—can be understood as informing (and thus as being symptomatic of) our most basic, underlying relation to the beings of our world. As this response shifts, so does our underlying relation to the beings of our world.3 And where the basic answer to the question of metaphysics has shifted throughout the history of the West, and where this answer has historically provided humans with their most basic, underlying relation to the beings of the world (an underlying relation that informs all thinking, working, action, etc.), we can, like Heidegger, approach metaphysics as that through which ‘the history of the Western world comes to be borne out’ (GA 5: 365 / EGT 51; cf. GA 6.2: 343 / N4 205).

Heidegger traces this core of the history of the West as follows. For the ancient Greeks, the Being of beings was understood as φύσις, which Heidegger depicts as an ‘emerging abiding sway’ (GA 40: 17 / IM 16). In the medieval period, the answer is transformed into ‘a being in the sense of God’s creation’. And in the modern period, beings are thought of as ‘objects that could be controlled and seen through by calculation’ (GA 5: 65 / PLT 74).4 (So although each metaphysical epoch in a sense follows from and is prefigured by the course of metaphysics that
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Heidegger thinks we can distinguish various epochs in the course of this historical unfolding.) The idea, again, is that these transformations of the basic answer to the guiding question of metaphysics determine the human being’s basic relationship to the beings of its world; as such, Heidegger understands such metaphysical transformations to be what shapes and determines the fundamental changes in Western humanity’s historical existence.

But now, in the contemporary age, Heidegger thinks, we are at the completion of metaphysics—for ‘with Nietzsche’s metaphysics, philosophy [as metaphysics] is completed. That means it has gone through the sphere of prefigured possibilities’ (GA 7: 81 / EP 95; cf. GA 6: 201 / N4 148). And a period of ‘darkness’ and ‘decline’ happens as the completion of metaphysics (GA 40: 48 / IM 49, GA 7: 70 / EP 86). We are told that ‘[i]n the decline, everything, that is, beings in the whole of the truth of metaphysics, approaches its end’ (GA 7: 71 / EP 86), that ‘[t]he decline occurs through the collapse of the world characterized by metaphysics, and at the same time through the desolation of the earth stemming from metaphysics’ (GA 7: 70 / EP 86), and that within this collapse and desolation, the human being is turned into a mere ‘mass’ (GA 40: 48 / IM 49), or alternatively, ‘mere labor’ (GA 7: 70 / EP 86). In other words, the fact that we are at the end of metaphysics does not mean that metaphysics, and its effect upon things, has ended—in fact, just the opposite is the case. The fact that we are living at the end (or completion) of metaphysics simply means that we are living within the last possible metaphysical position—a metaphysical position through which our world and the earth can only face collapse and destruction.

And so, the question for Heidegger becomes: How do we get beyond this collapse of metaphysics? How do we truly overcome, and move past, metaphysics? Or must we simply remain forever in this age of darkening? These questions frame the ‘confrontation with metaphysics as such’ referred to in the Contributions passage (the confrontation aims to overcome metaphysics). And it is with these questions in mind that Heidegger approaches his meditation on art. His hope is that art may offer us, as he later puts it, a ‘saving power’ in the age of the completion of metaphysics, that art may allow us to overcome metaphysics, that in art we may find ‘a more primally granted revealing that could bring the saving power into its first shining forth in the midst of the danger’ (GA 7: 35 / QCT 34).

But in this hope that art may be the saving power—in this hope that in the age of the collapse of metaphysics, art might bring about an overcoming of metaphysics—Heidegger faces an immediate problem. For, as he recognizes in the Contributions passage, metaphysics—as that through which ‘the history of the Western world comes to be borne out’—has already infiltrated ‘the ground of the previous essence of Western art and of its works’ (GA 65: 503–04 / CP 396). The result of this metaphysical appropriation of art is ‘aesthetics’, in Heidegger’s sense of the term. And so we have the following problem: where art has become aesthetics, art has become an extension of metaphysics. And an extension of metaphysics (so long as it remains an extension of metaphysics) cannot itself overcome metaphysics. So how, according to Heidegger, can art be our saving power here? How can art get us past metaphysics?
Art can be the saving power, Heidegger thinks, but only if we first engage in a careful reflection on art—one that uncovers the primal essence and origin of art and that thus rescues art from aesthetics, from this ‘element in which art dies’ (GA 5: 67 / PLT 77). It is in this connection that Heidegger writes, ‘[t]he overcoming of aesthetics again results necessarily from the historical confrontation with metaphysics as such’ (GA 65: 503–04 / CP 396). In our confrontation with metaphysics as such, we must overcome aesthetics so as to reveal the true essence of art as the saving power—as that through which we may overcome metaphysics as such. Understood in this context, Heidegger’s famous essay, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (competed in 1936; hereafter, ‘The Origin’), is his (first sustained) attempt to reflect on art in a way that (a) overcomes aesthetics. His essay attempts to (a) overcome aesthetics so that it can (b) uncover a more primal essence and origin of art. And it attempts to do (a) and (b) so that it can (c) expose this primal essence and origin of art as our saving power, as that through which we may overcome metaphysics as such.

2. The Most Important Art

The central motivation behind ‘The Origin’, I have suggested, is the uncovering of art (in its essence and origin) as the saving power in the age of the collapse of metaphysics—an age that demands a confrontation with, and overcoming of, metaphysics as such. We may thus say that the central concern that motivates Heidegger’s treatment of art is the overcoming of metaphysics as such. And the solution that is suggested via this treatment of art, the solution that can allow for the overcoming of metaphysics as such, is art—not the kind of art highlighted by aesthetics, but art of a different kind: the kind of art that Heidegger wants to expose as the essence and origin of art. But what is this essence and origin of art, according to Heidegger? What kind of art is this that, according to Heidegger, we so desperately need in the contemporary age, in our attempt to overcome metaphysics as such?

According to recent interpretations, Heidegger thinks that the contemporary age needs a ‘world-disclosing’ work of art. As Hubert Dreyfus explains it, Heidegger thinks a work of art can disclose a world by disclosing the basic understanding of being (the basic sense of what it is for anything to be) that informs the world of a particular culture or epoch. In this connection, Dreyfus has us think of this basic understanding of being as the ‘style’ of a particular world, something that determines ‘the way anything shows up and makes sense for us’ in a particular world (2005: 408). And by ‘world’, we are to understand ‘the whole context of shared equipment, roles, and practices on the basis of which one can encounter entities and other people as intelligible’ (2005: 407). But what Heidegger thinks we need in the contemporary age, according to Dreyfus, is not a work of art that simply articulates or manifests a cultural world, but a work of art that reconfigures our cultural world. By a reconfiguring work of art, Dreyfus takes Heidegger to have in mind something akin to the Christian reconfiguration of the Judaic world,
or more recently, the music of Bob Dylan or the Beatles—a work of art that draws on and works with the reserve of marginal practices of a culture in such a way that ‘some practices that were marginal become central, and some central practices become marginal’ (2005: 416). Heidegger in the 1930s suggests that it is this sort of art that can save us in the contemporary age, according to Dreyfus.

The general framework of Dreyfus’ reading embodies (and remains) the mainstay amongst leading interpreters of Heidegger on art. Yet, even within this general framework there is disagreement about what Heidegger is after. Julian Young agrees that the world-disclosing function of art is what most interests Heidegger around the time of ‘The Origin’. But he takes Heidegger to be interested, not in art that creates or reconfigures worlds, but in art that thematizes and makes explicit worlds that already have been brought into existence. It is in this sense, Young argues, that great art discloses worlds (and thus interests Heidegger). And this kind of art can save us, according to Young’s reading, because it can gather an historical people together and remind them of their unified sense of meaning and direction (i.e., of their shared world).9

Iain Thomson, on the other hand, re-affirms Dreyfus’s contention that art, according to Heidegger, is world-disclosing not only in the sense that it can thematize (or articulate) worlds, but also in the sense that it can reconfigure worlds. According to Thomson’s reading,

art can accomplish its world-disclosing work on at least three different orders of magnitude: (1) micro-paradigms [. . .] which help us become aware of what matters most deeply to us; (2) paradigmatic art-works like Van Gogh’s painting and Hölderlin’s poetry, which disclose how art itself works; and (3) macro-paradigmatic ‘great’ works of art like the Greek temple and tragic drama [. . .] which succeed in fundamentally transforming an historical community’s ‘understanding of being’ (its most basic and ultimate understanding of what is and what matters, which ontotheologies can then work to universalize and secure for an epoch [. . .]). (2011: 44–45)

It is world-disclosure that reconfigures (or transforms) worlds that Thomson (like Dreyfus) understands as the fundamental source of the saving power accorded to art by Heidegger. What Heidegger understands as ‘great’ art, according to Thomson, is precisely the kind of art that can reconfigure a cultural world—i.e., art that transforms ‘an historical community’s “understanding of being”’, its ‘most basic and ultimate understanding of what is and what matters’.

So, on these prominent readings, despite their differences, Heidegger takes the greatest kind of art to be art which fulfils a world-disclosing function. The thought is that while art of this kind has occurred in the past, it is strikingly absent from the contemporary age. And if there is a sense of meaninglessness, or ‘darkness’, in the contemporary epoch—a sense of meaninglessness and darkness that was not present in prior epochs—it is (primarily) due to the lack of great, world-disclosing, art.

In the remainder of this paper, I argue against this widely-shared notion that Heidegger is most interested in the world-disclosing potential of artworks. My argument is based upon the fact that Heidegger is primarily interested in the kind
of art that may allow for the overcoming of metaphysics as such. And world-disclosing artworks (regardless of whether they articulate, manifest, or reconfigure worlds) cannot bring about the overcoming of metaphysics as such—a fact that Heidegger is quite aware of as early as the 1930s.\textsuperscript{10} So I suggest that Heidegger has in mind a different kind of art as the saving power in the age of the end of metaphysics, i.e., the sort of art that addresses our need to overcome metaphysics. The rest of this section aims to uncover just what kind of art that might be.

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I would like to begin the task of uncovering this kind of art by considering the following passage from the closing pages of ‘The Origin’. Heidegger here depicts three different happenings of art as they pertain to the history of metaphysics. He refers to a foundation [that] happened for the first time in Greece. What was in the future to be called Being was set into work, setting the standard. The realm of beings thus opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God’s creation. This happened in the Middle Ages. This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning and in the course of the modern age. Beings became objects that could be controlled and seen through by calculation. (GA 5: 64–65 / PLT 74)

Commentators tend to approach this passage as an explication of three different epochs in the West, three different essential worlds: the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. It is taken to further illustrate what Heidegger means by world, unconcealedness, the historical fixing in place of truth, etc. And this must be right. Yet, I think it also illustrates something more essential for Heidegger’s thinking on art; it illustrates the difference between art as a first foundation (or what Heidegger sometimes calls the ‘first beginning’), and art as a series of subsequent transformations of that first foundation. And, importantly for our purposes, the passage more or less explicitly approaches these kinds of art in terms of the history of metaphysics. For ease of reference, we can refer to these kinds of art as ‘art\textsubscript{1}’ and ‘art\textsubscript{2}’ respectively.

The passage tells us that art\textsubscript{1} happened in Greece and that it set the standard for all other worlds and all other happenings of unconcealment by first setting Being into work, by first opening up the realm of beings. This first foundation is not characterized as a ‘transformation’, it is worth noting. The suggestion is that such transformations—i.e., instances of art\textsubscript{2}—only occur once a realm of beings has been opened up and bestowed by the first foundation. In this sense, the transformations that take place in the Middle Ages and throughout the modern age possess a strikingly different character from that of the first foundation in Greece. For in these former cases, art takes place as a transformation of and within the ‘standard’ originally set into work by art\textsubscript{1} as the first foundation. Heidegger suggests that these transformations—i.e., instances of art\textsubscript{2}—presuppose and depend upon the first foundation set by an occurrence of art\textsubscript{1}. They cannot work without this first foundation; but the converse, it seems, does not hold.
So even though Heidegger describes all three of these happenings (the foundation in ancient Greece, the transformation in the Medieval period, and the transformation in the modern period) as instances of art happening, one of these three happenings is the happening of a different kind of art: art as a genuine beginning, as an originating foundation in the more distinctive sense. The other two happenings are examples of art of a different kind—art as the transformation of that which was bestowed by the first, original beginning. If we then attempt to combine the difference between art\textsubscript{1} and art\textsubscript{2} with the kinds of art discussed above (those emphasized by prominent readings of ‘The Origin’), we have, on the most general level, art\textsubscript{1}—art as a first genuine beginning (an original foundation in the more exclusive sense); and we have art\textsubscript{2}—art as the (a) manifestation, (b) articulation, and/or (c) reconfiguration (i.e., transformation) of that which is bestowed by an occurrence of art\textsubscript{1}.

Now, let us ask: Does Heidegger have in mind a particular occurrence of art as this founding bestowal (art\textsubscript{1}) in ancient Greece? In approaching an answer, we can begin by inquiring into the type of art Heidegger might have in mind (Was it painting, sculpture, music?). To assist us here are Heidegger’s comments in the closing section of ‘The Origin’. Here, he suddenly claims that ‘art is in essence poetry’; that ‘the arts of architecture, painting, sculpture and music must be traced back to poesy’; that ‘the linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, [thus] has a privileged position in the domain of the arts’ (GA 5: 60–61 / PLT 70–71). This marks a sudden and important turn in the essay (the role and significance of which, I suggest, is often overlooked). A few pages prior, Heidegger makes the more general shift that prepares for these claims. After having dedicated a significant chunk of the essay to detailing what he calls ‘the work being of the work’ through his discussion of Van Gogh’s painting and the Greek temple, he writes,

> The trouble we are taking over the reality of the work is intended as spade-work for discovering art and the nature of art in the actual work. The question concerning the nature of art, the way toward knowledge of it is first to be placed on a firm ground again. The answer to this question, like every genuine answer, is only the final result of the last step in a long series of questions. (GA 5: 58 / PLT 68)

In other words, his treatment up to this point is intended to tell us the reality of work in its work-being. His discussion of Van Gogh’s painting of shoes, of M.C. Meyer’s ‘Roman Fountain’ poem, of the temple—all of these discussions aim to uncover the reality of work. We learn from these discussions that what happens in the work is truth (un-concealment). But we do not thereby hit upon the nature of art itself (as Heidegger intends it). So let us ask: What, according to Heidegger, is the nature of art itself? What is the real ‘essence’ of art such that it may be set apart from other kinds of work? Or, as Heidegger now chooses to frame the question: ‘What, however, is art itself that we call it rightly an origin?’ (GA 5: 59 / PLT 69, my emphasis)
And this brings us back to Heidegger’s claim, a few pages later, that art is ‘essentially poetry’ (GA 5: 59 / PLT 70), that ‘all art [. . .] must be traced back to poesy’ where ‘poesy’ is understood as ‘the most original form of poetry’ (GA 5: 62 / PLT 72). The suggestion is that we can only understand the nature and the origin of the work of art when we begin to understand the essential relation between art and this ‘primal poesy’ (this ‘most original form of poetry’) (Ibid.). But in order to understand this relation, we must first attain a better understanding of poetry. And in order to reach a better understanding of poetry, we need to attain a better understanding of language, Heidegger tells us (GA 5: 60–61 / PLT 70–71).

So what is the right concept of language, according to Heidegger? Heidegger agrees with the common notion of language. Language is ‘an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated’ (GA 5: 61 / PLT 71). But he wants to emphasize a further, more important, feature of language. He tells us that ‘language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time’ (Ibid.). This allows us to begin gathering a better sense for why, according to Heidegger, the ‘linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts’ (Ibid.). If language, and ‘language alone’, has the ability to ‘bring what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time’, it makes sense that the poem (in the narrower sense of the term; i.e., the linguistic work of art), is privileged in just this sense: it is the art that first allows entities to show themselves as entities. It is the art that first allows beings to show themselves as beings within an Open, a clearing. So it is, it seems, this sense of firstness that belongs to the linguistic art that accords it its privileged position in Heidegger’s thinking. (We will get a better understanding of this purported ‘firstness’ below.)

But what about the claim that ‘the arts of architecture, painting, sculpture, and music must be traced back to poesy’ (GA 5: 60 / PLT 70)? As Heidegger tells us (and as we noted above), the need for this tracing back is not on account of their being varieties of the art of language. The reason they must be traced back to the art of language, we find out, is that, in an important sense, they assume the occurrence of the art of language (poesy; poetry in the narrow sense). The work of poetry is, we might say, the condition for their possibility. But how is this so? It is so because poetry first establishes the Being of beings (or, less dramatically, beings understood as beings) within an opening (or what Heidegger simply calls the ‘Open’). And the other arts (architecture, painting, sculpture, music, etc.) rely upon this Open and these beings (first set up by poetry) within which to establish their own Open. (This will, of course, become clearer as we move along.)

Heidegger tells us that

[p]rojective saying is poetry [. . .] Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world. In such saying, the concepts of an historical people’s nature, i.e., of its belonging to world history, are formed for that folk, before it. (GA 5: 61–62 / PLT 71)
He adds that

[Language is not poetry because it is the primal poesy; rather, poesy takes
place in language because language preserves the original nature of poetry.
(GA 5: 62 / PLT 72)]

In other words, the happening of language today is not to be confused with
the original occurrence of ‘primal poesy’. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which this
primal poesy is contained in (and thus ‘takes place’ in) our language today. Our
language is a preservation of this primal poesy. The original occurrence of primal
poesy ‘prepar[ed] the sayable’ for us today by forming, through poetry’s projective
saying, ‘the concepts of an historical people’s [i.e., our] nature, i.e., of [our]
belonging to world history’ (GA 5: 61–62 / PLT 71).

Heidegger continues:

Building and plastic creation, on the other hand, always happen already,
and happen only, in the Open of saying and naming. It is the Open that
pervades and guides them. But for this very reason they remain their
own ways and modes in which truth orders itself into work. They are an
ever special poetizing within the clearing of what is, which has already
happened unnoticed in language. (GA 5: 62 / PLT 72, my emphasis)

So, after telling us that ‘art is in essence poetry’ (GA 5: 60 / PLT 70), Heidegger
speaks of three different ways of poetizing: (A) the poetizing of ‘primal poesy’,
(B) the poetizing of ‘language’, and (C) the poetizing of ‘building and plastic crea-
tion’. The first kind—(A) primal poesy—in ‘preparing the sayable’, sets the standards
and basic concepts through which (B) language is enacted for (and by) an historical
people. This (B) language of an historical people—which has been prepared by (A)
primal poesy—is an ‘Open of saying and naming’; it is the ‘clearing of what is’ for
an historical people. And all poetizing in the form of (C) building and plastic crea-
tion—whether it be architecture, painting, sculpture, music, etc.—always already
takes place within (i.e., assumes) the clearing (or basic intelligibility) of what is that
has been established within the (B) language of an historical people by an occur-
rence of (A) primal poesy. So we can say that, according to Heidegger, (A) primal
poesy is a necessary condition for (B) the language of an historical people, which
is then a necessary condition for (C) the building and plastic arts of a people. And
we can say that (C) the arts of building and plastic creation always already take
place within the sphere opened up by an occurrence of (A) primal poesy.

But we began considering these passages in order to address our question
concerning the special occurrence of art in ancient Greece, the occurrence of a spe-
cial kind of artwork that grounds and endows Western historical existence, that
thus prefigures the later articulations, manifestations, and reconfigurations that
might take place within that historical endowment. Now, what might this occur-
rence have looked like? What sort of artwork was it? Of course, we now know
that this must have been an occurrence of ‘poetizing’—for Heidegger has now
defined *all* art as a poetizing. But what *kind* of poetizing might this occurrence have been?

The answer should be clear: this original occurrence of art₁ in ancient Greece, Heidegger seems to think, was an occurrence of art in the form of (A) primal poesy. For we are told that it is in (A) primal poesy’s projective saying that ‘the concepts of an historical people’s nature, i.e., of its belonging to world history, are formed for [i.e., bestowed to] that folk, before it’ (GA 5: 62 / PLT 71). And we are told that this primal poesy, in bestowing the fundamental concepts of an historical people, bestows the clearing within which the arts of building and plastic creation (i.e., architecture, sculpture, painting, music, etc. which may then articulate, manifest, or reconfigure the space of this Open) always already take place.

We thus have an account of how art as primal poesy ‘grounds history’ (GA 5: 65 / PLT 75). Where history is understood as humanity’s enactment of the preserving (manifesting, articulating, reconfiguring, etc.) of that which it has been bestowed, Heidegger understands that which originates and grounds history as a *bestowal*. The art of primal poesy thus grounds history in that it forms and bestows the basic concepts with (or within) which an historical people manifest, articulate, and reconfigure their worlds. These basic concepts, Heidegger thinks, ground and delimit the possible ways that a historical group of people can speak, think, relate to, and work with beings; these basic concepts prefigure the possible ways that beings may show up for an historical people.¹² These basic concepts thus ground our Western history—which is always understood by Heidegger as the history of metaphysics.

Now, in ‘The Origin’, Heidegger does not explicitly tell us which poet(s) and which basic concepts he has in mind as grounding the history of the West (i.e., the history of metaphysics and thus the history of all of Western thinking, working, art, etc.). His aim in ‘The Origin’ is only to uncover the *kind* of art that is the essence and origin of all art in the West. But elsewhere, Heidegger makes it clear that he has in mind the poetic thinking and saying of the pre-Socratics—particularly, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides—¹³—and the basic concepts that their sayings bestow: e.g., ἐόν, τὰ ἐόντα, ἐν, λόγος, φύσις, ἔννοια, μοῖρα, ἐρις, ἀλήθεια, etc.¹⁴

3. The First Forgetfulness and the New Beginning

Now, as was briefly mentioned in Part 1, Heidegger takes metaphysics to be grounded on a certain forgetfulness, a certain oblivion. So, if our reading is to be coherent, we will need to show how Heidegger relates this oblivion back to the ‘primal poesy’ of the pre-Socratics. What metaphysics always already forgets, Heidegger tells us, is the difference between Being and beings: ‘The oblivion of Being is oblivion of the distinction between Being and beings’ (GA 5: 364 / EGT 50). Heidegger’s claim is that insofar as metaphysical thinking approaches the question of ‘Being’, it always does so in terms of ‘beings’. Hence, ‘beings’ always have a certain priority in the thinking of metaphysics. Because of this presupposed priority, metaphysics always already forgets the real distinction between Being
and beings. By collapsing this distinction, metaphysics never approaches Being on its own terms. Because it is prevented from approaching Being on its own terms, metaphysics can never appropriately ask the question of the meaning (or truth) of Being. It is in this sense that metaphysics always already forgets Being: ‘The history of Being begins, and indeed necessarily, with the forgetting of Being. [. . .] This strange remaining-away of Being is due only to metaphysics as metaphysics’ (GA 5: 263 / QCT 109).

But what about the primal poesy of the pre-Socratics—what about the supposed ‘dawn’ of metaphysics in this connection? Although Heidegger sometimes describes a faint glimmer of the distinction in the sayings of the pre-Socratics, he makes it clear that the pre-Socratics never made a sufficient delineation.15, 16 He tells us that although ‘we may surmise that the distinction has been illuminated more in that early word about Being than in recent ones’, this would be a mistake—for, ‘at no time has the distinction been designated as such’ (GA 5: 365 / EGT 51).17 Because of this lack of a clear distinction between Being and beings in the primal poesy of the pre-Socratics, their primal poesy bestows on Western history—that is, on Western thinking, working, saying, interacting, etc.—a metaphysical history: an historical existence that always already forgets Being. That the pre-Socratics bestow this forgetfulness, Heidegger thinks, has the greatest consequences for the history of the West; the far-reaching effects of this oblivion, in Heidegger’s thinking, cannot be overstated.18

Now, at this point, we have clarified just what the historical endowment—referred to in ‘The Origin’—is: the historical endowment within which we currently exist is metaphysics. Our historical endowment is the history of metaphysics—which has been bestowed to us by the pre-Socratics. Assuming, then, that this much is right—assuming that we are currently existing and working within a delimitation (metaphysics) bestowed by an occurrence of art1 in Ancient Greece—we might ask: Is there any way for us, today, to step outside of this bestowal? Is Western humanity (and now, it would seem, global humanity) condemned to work always only within the historical landscape founded by an occurrence of art1 in Ancient Greece? More to the point: If this bestowal within which we exist and work is becoming dangerous, if Heidegger is right when he tells us that this bestowal, in the age of its end, is now bringing us to environmental and existential catastrophe, is there any way for us to step out of this bestowal so as to save ourselves? Or are we simply doomed to manifest, articulate, and reconfigure the end of this bestowal as it destroys us?

If my reading of Heidegger up to this point is correct, it would seem that, in order to step outside of our bestowal, there would have to be another occurrence of art1—the kind of art that occurred in ancient Greece, through the pre-Socratics and their poetic thinking, their ‘primal poesy’. For, as I have suggested, art2 can only work within the historical bestowal already granted to it. That is, art2 can only work within metaphysics, for ‘[m]etaphysics contains the basic Western position towards beings and thus also the ground of the previous essence of Western art [i.e., art1] and of its works’ (GA 65: 504 / CP 396). Art2 can only be metaphysical art (so long as there is not another occurrence of art1); only art1, it seems,
can genuinely ground a new (and thus, perhaps non-metaphysical) historical bestowal.

But can there be another occurrence of art₁? Can there be a genuinely new beginning? Again, are we doomed to have always only the ‘first’ beginning—in which case we are forever limited to art₂, i.e., metaphysical art? Or can there also be an ‘other’ beginning, another art₁? As Heidegger puts it in ‘The Origin’, the question is:

whether art can be an origin and then must be a head start [art₁], or whether it is to remain a mere appendix and then can only be carried along as a routine phenomenon [art₂].

Are we in our existence historically at the origin? Do we know, which means do we give heed to, the nature of the origin [art₁]? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past [via art₂]? (GA 5: 66 / PLT 75–76)

In ‘The Origin’, Heidegger leaves this question open. But the possibility of this ‘other’ beginning receives further attention in Heidegger’s Contributions. Here, he affirms the possibility of an ‘other’ beginning and speaks of the preparation for

another origin of ‘art’: the beginning of a [new] hidden history of the reticence of an abyssal encounter between gods and humans. (GA 65: 506 / CP 397–398)

It is through the establishment of ‘another origin of “art”’—that is, another occurrence of primal poesy; i.e., art₁—that a new history (and thus, a new art₂) can begin. When Heidegger writes, ‘[t]he overcoming of metaphysics is not a repudiation of philosophy hitherto, but is a leap into its first beginning, although without wanting to reinstate that beginning’ (GA 65: 504 / CP 396), he is suggesting that in order to overcome the historical endowment of metaphysics, we must learn from the first beginning—we must learn from that which has endowed us with metaphysics: an occurrence of art₁, the primal poesy of the pre-Socratics in ancient Greece. We leap back to it so as to learn from it. But of course we do not aim to ‘reinstate’ this first beginning—for this would be to repeat metaphysics. We leap back to this beginning so as to learn how beginnings (of a history) begin. In getting a sense for how beginnings begin (e.g., through the reflection on art that takes place in ‘The Origin’), Heidegger aims to prepare for a new, different, ‘other’, beginning. He aims to prepare for what he refers to as the ‘other beginning’ for Western thinking which is to endow us with a new—non-metaphysical, post-metaphysical—history in which to think, work, exist, etc. By founding and entering into this new historical endowment, Heidegger thinks, we might be able to save ourselves from the growing environmental and existential dangers that metaphysical thinking is culminating in today. The hope is that we may thus enact a new, ‘other’ occurrence of art₁, that sidesteps the forgetfulness that played into the primal poesy of the pre-Socratics, the ‘first’ occurrence of art₁. It is in this sense that Heidegger
hopes ‘art’ may offer us a saving power in our confrontation with, and overcoming of, the destiny of metaphysics.

This notion of a new occurrence of art$ _1$ is, of course, difficult to comprehend. And even if we succeed in comprehending it, Heidegger thinks, it will be even more difficult to successfully enact it. Yet, he emphasizes that it is (at least) not impossible. He writes,

\[ \text{[t]he relation to what is present that rules in the essence of presencing itself is a unique one, altogether incomparable to any other relation. It belongs to the uniqueness of Being itself. Therefore, in order to name the essential nature of Being, language would have to find a single word, the unique word. From this we can gather how daring every thoughtful word addressed to Being is. Nevertheless such daring is not impossible, since Being speaks always and everywhere throughout language. The difficulty lies not so much in finding in thought the word for Being as in retaining purely in genuine thinking the word found (GA 5: 366 / EGT 52, my emphasis).} \]

Of course, we do need to find in thought the word for Being—Being here demands of us the art of primal poesy, Heidegger thinks. For, although ‘[t]he riddle has long been propounded to us in the word “Being”’, Heidegger tells us that ‘[i]n this matter “Being” remains only the provisional word. Let us see to it that our thinking does not merely run after it blindly’ (GA 7: 234 / EGT 78). (And, of course, this is a difficult part of the task, although it may not be the most difficult part.) But the intended primal poesy cannot itself work—it cannot bestow a non-metaphysical history—unless we also ‘retain purely in thinking the word found’ (GA 5: 366 / EGT 52). Hence, the poetic thinker and speaker, as well as those towards whom her sayings are cast, must also work as preservers of the art that is worked. It is in this sense that, as Heidegger puts it in ‘The Origin’, ‘[f]ounding, however, is actual only in preserving’, that ‘in the work, truth is [thus] thrown toward the coming preservers’ (GA 5: 63 / PLT 72–73). If the work is not preserved by ‘retaining purely in thinking the word found’, the ‘found word’ can only fail in its attempt to bestow a post-metaphysical history.

4. Reconsidering the Predominant Reading

I say all of this to motivate a new understanding of Heidegger’s thinking on art. If Heidegger thinks that art can bring about the overcoming of metaphysics, he must conceive of a kind of art that can act as a genuinely new beginning—that can thus bestow a new non-metaphysical history for the West—as opposed to art that merely reconfigures that which has been bestowed by the first beginning (i.e., metaphysics). But as we saw in Part 2, it has become common to read Heidegger’s reflections on art as calling for just these reconfiguring works of art (art$_2$). But as I have suggested, it would not make sense for Heidegger to call for this kind of art, a kind of art that must remain metaphysical.
Why not? For one, as Heidegger himself tells us, we are living in the age of the end of metaphysics. For, ‘[w]ith Nietzsche’s metaphysics, philosophy is completed. That means it has gone through the sphere of prefigured possibilities’ (GA 7: 81 / EP 95). Hence, according to Heidegger’s thinking, there is an important sense in which we cannot further reconfigure our metaphysical endowment, we cannot create a new world out of this metaphysical endowment, for it ‘has [already] gone through the sphere of prefigured possibilities’ (ibid.). As I have shown, in Heidegger’s thinking, this sphere of possible metaphysical worlds was ‘prefigured’ by the first beginning, the poetic thinking (art1) of the pre-Socratics. And so the only way to get beyond our situation—the age of the end, the age of the collapse of metaphysics—is to somehow overcome the endowment of the pre-Socratics. And as Heidegger writes in the Contributions passage, this cannot take place through an attempted ‘repudiation of philosophy hitherto’, but must instead take place through ‘a leap into its first beginning, although without wanting to reinstate that beginning’ (GA 65: 504 / CP 396). We saw that in order to properly bring about and enter into this new beginning, we must learn from our study of the pre-Socratics (a) how the history of the West began as this primal poesy, and (b) where the pre-Socratics sent us astray (into oblivion) through their primal poesy. We may thus learn how to begin a new history that overcomes such oblivion.

Another reason we should reject the common reading is that even if we could generate a new world, a new metaphysics (and thus, even if art could once again serve this function of reconfiguring our history, of giving us a new understanding of the Being of beings), this would be contrary to Heidegger’s overt intention. As I have tried to show, Heidegger intends, through his reflection on the origin of the work of art, to uncover an art through which we may confront and overcome metaphysics as such. And clearly, we do not overcome metaphysics as such by generating a new metaphysics—a new occurrence in which the ‘truth of beings as a whole’ is revealed to humanity, but in which the oblivion of Being remains.19

It is for this reason that, in ‘The Will to Power as Art’ (1936–37), Heidegger only speaks of, but does not identify with, this more Hegelian interest qua art, according to which ‘[a]rt and its works are necessary only as an itinerary and sojourn for man in which the truth of beings as a whole, i.e., the unconditioned, the absolute, opens itself up to him’ (GA 6.1: 82 / N1 84). And as we saw above, it is also for this reason that, in ‘The Origin’, after discussing the way that truth has (in this manner) set itself to work through art in the history of the West (i.e., in the history of metaphysics), Heidegger more or less dismisses this part of his essay as ‘spadework for discovering art and the nature of art’ (GA 5: 58 / PLT 68). Heidegger does agree (with Hegel) that art has played this role in the history of the West. But to overemphasize this function of art, and to take it as the highest function of art, is a mistake, he thinks. For if we approach art only as that which gives humanity its basic sense of the Being of beings (i.e., the truth of beings as a whole), we overlook the most important possibility for art in the age of the end of metaphysics. This most important possibility is that art may once again enact a primal poesy that provides for (not merely a new sense of the Being of beings, but) a new non-metaphysical beginning, a new non-metaphysical historical bestowal, for humanity.
I have argued that it is only when Heidegger begins to speak of the essential relationship between all art and primal poesy that his more unique interest qua art comes forth in the essay. Heidegger is not drawn to a reflection on art because art can bestow new understandings of the Being of beings (although, again, it has done this throughout the history of the West, and although it is something that we must recognize if we are to understand the unfolding of the history of the West). He is primarily drawn to a reflection on art because of the role that a particular kind of art (primal poesy) has played in beginning, grounding, and bestowing the history of the West (that is, the history of metaphysics, in and through which all other art has thus far worked), and thus, too, because of the role that art of this kind may play in actualizing an ‘other’ (non-metaphysical) beginning, grounding, and bestowal of a history (i.e., in the actualization of the overcoming of metaphysics).

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ENDNOTES


2 See GA 6.1: 15-16, 64 / N1 18, 67.

3 The idea is that if we, for example, approach the Being of beings as a being-created-by-God (as was predominant in the medieval period), we may tend to relate to and thus interact with the beings of our world differently than if we characterize beings as energy resources to be represented, optimized, and efficiently controlled by a human subject (as in the contemporary period). Our manner of relating to the beings of our world and our answer to this basic question of metaphysics are, in an important sense, conjoined.

4 Cf. GA 5: 89-90 / QCT 129-130; GA 16: 523 / DT 50.

5 For Heidegger, ‘aesthetics is consideration of man’s state of feeling in its relation to the beautiful; it is consideration of the beautiful to the extent that it stands in relation to man’s state of feeling’ (GA 6.1: 75-76 / N1 78). ‘[S]ince in the aesthetic consideration of art the artwork is defined as the beautiful which has been brought forth in art, the work is represented as the bearer and provoker of the beautiful with relation to our state of feeling. The artwork is posited as the “object” for a “subject”; definitive for aesthetic consideration is the subject-object relation, indeed as a relation of feeling. The work becomes an object in terms of that surface which is accessible to “lived experience”’ (ibid.).
Aesthetics arises out of modern metaphysics in the following way, according to Heidegger: with modern metaphysics, ‘certitude of all Being and all truth is grounded in the self-consciousness of the individual ego: ego cogito ergo sum. Such finding ourselves before ourselves in our own state and condition, the cogito me cogitare, also provides the first “object” which is secured in its Being. I myself, and my states, are the primary and genuine beings. Everything else that may be said to be is measured against the standard of this quite certain being. My having various states—the ways I find myself to be with something—participates essentially in defining how I find the things themselves and everything I encounter to be’ (GA 6.1: 81-82 / N1 83). As a result of this development in modern metaphysics, ‘[m]editation on the beautiful in art now slips markedly, even exclusively, into the relationship of man’s state of felling, aisthēsis’ (GA 6.1: 82 / N1 83). ‘Aesthetics [thereby] takes the work of art as an object, the object of aisthesis, of sensuous apprehension in the wild sense. Today we call this apprehension experience. The way in which man experiences art is supposed to give information about its nature. Experience is [now] the source that is standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment, but also for artistic creation’ (GA 5: 67 / PLT 77). Art is thus infused with aesthetics in the modern period in that art is now created and received on the basis of the state of feeling (the experience) that it provokes in us. See also GA 6.1: 74-91 / N1 77-91.

And ‘only if reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are questioning’ (GA 7: 36 / QCT 35).

Heidegger delivers the essay in various forms throughout the 1930s, adds an afterword in the late 30s, and adds an addendum in 1957. For a detailed account of the historical development of ‘The Origin’, see Taminiaux (1993). Throughout my discussion, I draw primarily from Heidegger’s writings around the same period as ‘The Origin’. I draw from Heidegger’s later writings only when they help to further elaborate currents of his thought already present in the period of ‘The Origin’.

According to Young, ‘[n]ot the artwork, then, but rather “language” creates world. The artwork’s role is not to create but rather to thematize, to render explicit, to bring the “inconspicuous” into salience’ (2001: 36). He reads Heidegger as extending this (limited) role even to poetry: ‘The poet’s task is not to create the people’s voice but to “remind” them of it’ (2001: 35). The arrival of a people’s voice, of a people’s language, according to Young, does not happen through art. He argues that language is instead always “sent” or “destined” to us by Being and that ‘[t]here are, therefore, no Promethean artists involved in the creation of world by language’ (2001: 36). From this, he (erroneously, I think) concludes that the bestowal of language falls outside the purview of ‘art’ in Heidegger’s thinking.

This is not to say that Heidegger denies the importance of such artworks. (Such artworks have clearly played an important role throughout the history of the West, Heidegger thinks—and it is for this reason that he dedicates a large portion of ‘The Origin’ to a treatment of such works.) My claim is only that such art is not the most important kind of art in Heidegger’s thinking. The most important kind of art is that which may get us beyond the end of metaphysics.

For further elaboration on the poetry/poesy relation (in the ancient Greek context), see GA 6.1: 167 / N1 165.

We might see a problem here. For surely humans, beings, and history predate the pre-Socratics. This problem can be resolved, though, once we recognize that the ‘history’ Heidegger speaks of is the history of the West understood as the history of metaphysics. And the history of metaphysics takes its departure, Heidegger surmises, from the poetic thinking and saying, the ‘primal poesy’, of these pre-Socratics.

It is clear that, in Heidegger’s thinking, the oblivion of Being occurs as early as the sayings of the pre-Socratics. See GA 5: 263 / OBT 263, GA 5: 364-65 / EGT 50-51; c.f. GA 7: 232 / EGT 76-77.

As Dahlstrom describes it, Heidegger’s interpretation of the writings of Heraclitus (but also of the pre-Socratics in general) ‘aims at understanding them not simply as the dawn of metaphysical thinking but more importantly as a way of thinking that, by stopping short of the thought of what grounds its own thinking, cannot take leave of that history’ (2011: 138). And, ‘The fact that ἀλήθεια [. . .] remains unsaid [in Heraclitus] signals that it is the phenomenon “from which or on the basis of which the thinking at the beginning speaks”’ (2011: 150).

The poetic thinking and speaking of the pre-Socratics does not adequately put to word the truth of Being and the Being of truth. As such, the question of the meaning of Being and truth remains ‘unsaid’ in the primal poesy of the pre-Socratics, although (and, we might say, because) they (Being and truth) are the basis and the presupposition out of which the pre-Socratics think and speak.

Instead, Heidegger argues that ‘only when we experience historically what has not been thought—the oblivion of Being—as what is to be thought, and only when we have for the longest time pondered what we have long experienced in terms of the destiny of Being, may the early word speak in our contemporary recollection’ (GA 5: 365 / EGT 51).

As Krell puts it, according to Heidegger’s thinking, ‘[w]e cannot hide ourselves from the matter contained in these fragments, since what they say or do not say to Plato and Aristotle, and through them to the Schoolmen and to all modern science and philosophy, shapes our thoughts about Being and man. These in turn determine the character of our world’ (1984: 10).


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