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From Art to Ethics

Abstract: Heidegger’s understanding of the role of art is that it opens up a clearing where objects or structures fall away from their everyday meanings and uses, opening up a different world. The artwork thematizes the world explicitly for a people who already understand it implicitly. The artwork brings the implicit background of the world into the open, and makes it manifest. Heidegger sought to breathe new meaning into the philosophy of art by reorienting the work of art as one aspect of his analysis of a theory of truth, as a process of unconcealing meaning, and, I will argue, opening up a path for ethics.

Art, truth, and ethics

What makes Heidegger’s philosophy of art different from other German aesthetic theories? After all, the principal theme in German aesthetic theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the theme of unity and restoration. That is, the artwork, or the aesthetic experience, is seen as an opportunity for overcoming alienation (Kant), for healing the wounds of modern life (Schiller, Hölderlin, and Hegel), for escaping from vicious cycle of desire and dissatisfaction (Schopenhauer), or for revitalizing the culture (Nietzsche). Seen in this light, Heidegger’s philosophy of art is not much different. Heidegger sees art, in the most general sense, as a means of unifying the culture, creating a historical destiny for a people, and overcoming the nihilism of modern life. However, just as there are similarities between Heidegger and his nineteenth-century predecessors, there is a profound difference, a difference that has to do with Heidegger’s grounding in phenomenology.

Unlike Kant and his followers, who are indebted to Shaftsbury in this regard, Heidegger is not primarily interested in the subjective experience of pleasure or joy one gets from exposure to art. Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger is not primarily interested in the creative act, at least not insofar as it is understood as a subjective phenomenon, a product of genius or imagination, or an expression of will. What Heidegger is interested in is the very nature or essence of the artwork as artwork. He is interested in the origin, or essence of the work of art, by which he means the relation of the work of art to Being and truth. With this in mind, it is helpful to consider Heidegger’s critique of those nineteenth-century theorists mentioned above. He calls their approach to art “aesthetic,” which seems innocuous enough. However, Heidegger claims that the aesthetic approach to art, which began with Plato, but found its highest expression in Kant, is misguided.

What is the aesthetic conception of art? The key to the aesthetic conception of art is disinterestedness. To recall Kant, the experience of art is only an aesthetic experience, as opposed to a pleasurable experience, when the appreciation of the object is disinterested. When we abandon ourselves to the object of our perception and let go of any desire to possess or control, we experience the object aesthetically. The problem with this approach to art, claims Heidegger, is that we bracket all connections the object has to the world, severing it from the cultural life of the society in which it resides.