

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

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Martin Heidegger (Meßkirch 1889 – Freiburg i.B. 1976) was a German philosopher, widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in 20th-century philosophy and aesthetics. Heidegger studied theology and philosophy at the University of Freiburg, where he became an assistant to Edmund Husserl. Between 1923 and 1928, he taught at the University of Marburg, before returning to Freiburg. In 1927, he published *Being and Time*, his unfinished philosophical masterpiece. Appointed Rector in 1933, Heidegger resigned after six months but remained a member of the NSDAP until 1945. His political involvement with Nazism, particularly during his rectorship, remains the subject of intense debate. After the war, Heidegger underwent a denazification process and was banned from teaching until 1951. He then returned to Freiburg as professor emeritus, where he remained until his death in 1976.

While traces can be identified before 1927, Heidegger's engagement with aesthetic themes becomes more pronounced after the turn (*Kehre*) in his thought around 1929–1930. Recognizing the limits of *Being and Time*, Heidegger reorients his inquiry along two lines: toward the theme of history, developing the idea of a history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*), and toward art and language as privileged sites for the disclosure of Being.

In his writings on art, Heidegger critiques traditional aesthetics on three main grounds: (1) it reduces the artwork to a mere object; (2) it diminishes the experience of art to subjective enjoyment and lived experience (*Erlebnis*); (3) it treats materiality as a passive substratum for spiritual content.

Against this view, Heidegger develops the idea of art as the setting-itself-to-work of truth and as a shared experience (*Erfahrung*) through which a historical community faces its destiny. The artwork, for Heidegger, is not an object but an event that discloses the truth of Being, establishing a shared horizon of meaning and grounding a people's dwelling in the world. Art enacts this truth by instigating the strife between world – the drive to illuminate and give meaning – and earth – the resistant materiality that holds inexhaustible possibilities of meaning.

For Heidegger, the essential possibilities of art are best exemplified by Hölderlin, whose work thematizes the poet's task: to prepare the ground for the event of the truth of Being and to establish human dwelling.

Finally, Heidegger sees language not as a vehicle for transmitting information but as a creative force that reveals the originary power of words for the event of truth. In the poetic word, language is not conceived as a tool but is experienced as the very site where truth happens, shaping a people's experience of Being.

MAIN WORKS

Among Heidegger's many works, four key texts stand out in the present context:

- (1) *Nietzsche*, a series of lecture courses in which Heidegger develops both his critique of metaphysical aesthetics and his interpretation of Nietzsche;
- (2) *The Origin of the Work of Art*, an essay on the relation between art, truth, and Being;
- (3) *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, a collection of essays reflecting his dialogue with Hölderlin;
- (4) *On the Way to Language*, a collection of essays exploring his analysis of language and poetry.

(1) *Nietzsche* is a two-volume work comprising a series of lecture courses delivered by Heidegger between 1936 and 1946. Among these, the first course, *The Will to Power as Art* (1936–1937), is particularly significant.

In this course, Heidegger examines Nietzsche's supposed magnum opus, *The Will to Power*, erroneously interpreting Nietzsche's late notebooks as the blueprint for a single, unfinished book.

Throughout the course, Heidegger offers a rich analysis of various figures central to Nietzsche's thought – such as Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Wagner – and suggests understanding the aesthetic tradition as a coherent historical development.

This approach is particularly evident in the section titled "Six Basic Developments in the History of Aesthetics", where Heidegger identifies six pivotal moments in the history of aesthetics:

1. Greek great art, which had no need for aesthetics as a separate, philosophical discipline.
2. The emergence of aesthetics with Plato and Aristotle, marked by the introduction of the matter-form dichotomy and the transformation of the *physis-techné* dynamic.
3. The rise of modernity, which grounds knowledge in the subject's self-certainty, leading to the diminishment of artistic experience as *Erlebnis*.
4. Hegel's thesis on the end of art, where the idea is made explicit that art no longer what fulfils the highest need of a historical people.
5. Wagner, as a failed attempt to restore art's supreme value while remaining trapped within the metaphysical framework of *Erlebnis*.
6. Nietzsche's idea of art as a counter-movement against nihilism.

Nietzsche's position is further explored by Heidegger by referring to "Five Statements on Art"

1. Art is the most perspicuous and familiar configuration of the will to power
2. Art must be grasped in terms of the artist
3. Art is the occurrence of all beings to the extent that they are created
4. Art is the distinctive countermovement to nihilism
5. Art is worth more than "truth"

These five statements indicate that, for Nietzsche, art – created and rooted in the "true world" of the senses – stands in opposition to the metaphysical illusion of a transcendent truth. The new philosopher-artist, through their will to creation, enacts the countermovement against the depletion of values, rejects metaphysical stagnation, and creatively gives form to the being of beings.

(2) *The Origin of the Work of Art*, now included in *Off the Beaten Track*, was originally a lecture that Heidegger delivered in 1935-1936 and later supplemented with an *Afterword* and an *Appendix*.

Heidegger begins with the question of what a *thing* is, using this inquiry as a gateway into the problem of the artwork. He critiques traditional views, arguing that they fail to grasp both the *thingness* of a thing and the essence of the artwork. Instead, they remain tied to the ontology of tools, reinforcing the framework of metaphysical aesthetics.

To capture the *thingness* of a thing, Heidegger famously turns to Van Gogh's painting of a peasant's shoes. Through this artwork, he argues, we do not simply perceive the shoes as objects; rather, the painting reveals the peasant's lived world – that is, the web of practical references within which things gain their *meaning* and *reliability*. Heidegger thus concludes that it is through art that the truth of beings is set to work.

To better articulate this last point, Heidegger introduces the key notions of *earth* and *world*. The world is not a collection of beings but an evental unfolding. It is an opening that grants measure and meaning to beings, allowing them to come to be within a broader constellation of significance. The artwork enacts this opening, setting up the world and activating its sense-giving operation.

Conversely, earth is not inert matter but "the self-secluding that shelters while concealing". The artwork, Heidegger argues, is truly itself only insofar as it "lets the earth be an earth". Earth manifests and operates in the artwork as an irreducible opacity, resisting full disclosure by the world but at the same time preserving inexhaustible further possibilities for meaning.

Heidegger describes the relationship between earth and world as *strife*. The world seeks to illuminate and give definitive meaning to everything, while the earth resists this drive, remaining incoercible to the world's revealing force. At its core, this struggle reflects the originary conflict between truth and untruth, the tension in which the clearing (*Lichtung*) of Being emerges. Art, Heidegger concludes, is thus "one essential way in which truth establishes itself".

In the final part of the essay, Heidegger further elaborates his position. He reinterprets the createdness of the artwork as the "fixing in place" of truth in a being, granting it an enduring yet never definitive form.

This endurance is intimately linked to the artwork's *historicity*, which, for Heidegger, is inseparable from the role of the *preservers* – a community that feels existentially bound by the event of truth occurring in the artwork. The work continues to “work” as long as it has preservers who uphold its meaning, thus keeping it operative and historically alive. Finally, Heidegger presents the provocative thesis that “*all art [...] is, in essence, poetry*”. This does not mean that all art is reducible to poesy (*Poesie*), but that art is poetry (*Dichtung*) in the sense that it dic-tates the truth of Being for a historical community. Art thus serves as the ground of history, projecting a people's destiny as they stand in the truth of Being.

(3) *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* is the only book exclusively dedicated to Hölderlin that Heidegger published during his lifetime. It consists of eight essays based on lectures and talks delivered between 1936 and 1963. In the “Preface”, Heidegger makes clear that these elucidations are not meant as historiographical reconstructions but as attempts to think in dialogue with Hölderlin.

The essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” holds special significance within the book. Here, Heidegger draws on five of Hölderlin's verses to explain why he considers him the “poet of the poet” and how he poetizes the very *essence* of poetry. For Heidegger, this essence is not an abstract generality but is rooted in Hölderlin's poetry as it belongs to the event of the truth of Being. Hölderlin himself calls language as “the most dangerous of goods” because it is within language, at its highest potential, that the founding of the truth of Being for a historical people occurs.

This poetic founding of truth represents humanity's highest and most distinctive role. Human beings can “bear witness” to themselves – that is, truly *be* themselves – only insofar as they enter into a “conversation” with Being, responding to its call and poetically projecting its truth. This conversation, unfolding through poetry, weaves the very fabric of history, insofar as humans “name the gods” – that is, they repeatedly and poetically found the principles that give meaning to their historical existence.

This understanding also shapes Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin's famous line: “But what remains is founded by the poets”. What remains is not simply another being, but the historical principle from which beings emerge into their existence, meaning, and purpose. It is Being itself, whose founding is the poetic task that Hölderlin enacts through his poetry.

For Hölderlin (as read by Heidegger) the poet's task is then to dwell in the “realm of the between”, acting as an intermediary between the gods and the people. The poet receives the ever-new, unsettling “hints” from the gods – the signs of emerging epochal principles – names them, grounds them poetically, and offers them to the people. In receiving them, a people awakes to their destiny and come to inhabit the historical dwelling shaped by the horizon of meaning the poet has opened.

(4) *On the Way to Language* is a collection of six essays written by Heidegger between 1950 and 1959. The guiding thread of these essays is not to develop a “philosophy of language” that treats language as an “object” of study, but rather the attempt to engage in an authentic experience (*Erfahrung*) of it. This means approaching language not as a tool for transmitting pre-established information, but as a site for the manifestation of Being. This view aligns with Heidegger's famous formulation from the *Letter on*

"*Humanism*", where he describes language as the "house of Being" and the "home" in which humans dwell. The "guardians" of this dwelling, each in their own way, are the philosophers and the poets.

Heidegger thus seeks to cultivate an experience of dialogue between thought and poetry, most notably through his interpretation of George's poem "*Das Wort*".

The poem recounts an unexpected experience of the poet. He would bring "wonders or dreams" to the Norn, goddess of fate, who in turn would draw from her depths the words to name them and make them "bloom and shine" in poetry for the homeland. But on one occasion, the poet brings the Norn a "prize so rich and frail" that she finds no word to match it. As a result, the prize "vanished" from the poet's hand without bearing fruit. In the final two lines, he reflects: "So I renounced and sadly see: / Where word breaks off no thing may be".

Heidegger reads the poem as recounting a transformation in the experience of language. At first, the poet approached language instrumentally – one in which he mastered words. Confronted with something rare and precious, however, this view collapses. The poet's renunciation marks an opening to a new experience of language, one that reveals a transformed relationship between word and thing. What appears to be a simple copula – the "be" – is, for Heidegger, the origin from which both word and thing emerge. Where instrumental language "breaks off", there lies "*no thing*", but that from which both things and words come to be – Being itself. Being resounds as the silence within instrumental language – a silence in which a call can be heard. To *experience* language, then, is not to master it, but to recognize that it is language itself that makes experience possible, allowing things and words to emerge and shaping the very way we dwell in the world.

HEIDEGGER'S AESTHETIC LEGACY

Despite his own rejection of the term – seeing it as inseparably bound to traditional metaphysics – Heidegger's influence in the field of aesthetics is both deep and far-reaching.

Heidegger's aesthetic legacy is most clearly felt within hermeneutics. Hans-Georg Gadamer identifies in Heidegger a decisive break from the modern, subjectivist conception of art as *Erlebnis*. He reinterprets Heidegger's view of art as a disclosure of Being, emphasizing the emergence of meaning within historical, linguistic, and interpretive contexts. Later, Gianni Vattimo reconnects Heidegger with Nietzsche, extending his analysis of nihilism and developing Heidegger's aesthetics within the framework of "weak thought". In this view, art – through its post-metaphysical nature and capacity for continuous reinterpretation – serves as a paradigmatic model for postmodern thought.

Heidegger's influence has also been profound in phenomenological aesthetics. John Sallis (2008) draws on Heidegger's reading of Hegel's thesis on the end of art to highlight the autonomy of the sensible dimension of art as key for a genuinely post-metaphysical aesthetics. Sallis praises Heidegger's notion of *earth* but critiques his lack of a theory of medium-specificity in the arts. Günter Figal (2010) grounds his phenomenological/hermeneutical aesthetics in the notion of objectivity, proposing a radically realist

perspective in which artworks are perceptual “appearing things”, irreducible to intentional data or subjective interpretation. This emphasis on the autonomy of aesthetic appearance underpins his critique of Heidegger, whom he faults for subordinating art to the question of Being.

French philosophy and aesthetics have also been deeply influenced by Heidegger. In various ways, both dedicated Heidegger scholars, such as Michel Haar, and Jacques Taminiaux, as well as major figures like Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Marion, have engaged with Heidegger’s philosophy of art. Among them, Miguel de Beistegui plays a synthesizing role, especially in de Beistegui (2004), where he daringly seeks to reconcile Heideggerian and Deleuzian perspectives.

Among the currents engaging with Heidegger’s aesthetics is also Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Building on the distinction between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*, OOO emphasizes the irreducibility of objects – not just to scientific consideration but also to perception and use. Graham Harman thus elevates aesthetics to the status of “first philosophy”, arguing that it grants privileged access to objects in their self-withdrawal and self-sufficiency.

Among those not aligned with a specific school, Julian Young, Karsten Harries, and Iain Thomson stand out. Young (2001) explores Heidegger’s main aesthetic texts and seeks to connect his thought with various 20th-century art movements. Harries, in *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”* (2009), provides a detailed reading of Heidegger’s essay. Thomson (2011) presents a compelling postmodern interpretation of Heidegger’s aesthetics, engaging also with contemporary popular art forms.

CRITICAL DEBATE

An aesthetic framework as influential and radical as Heidegger’s inevitably sparked extensive and controversial critical debate. Below are four key lines of discussion.

(1) *The interpretation of Hölderlin.*

Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin was often seen as instrumental, serving more to advance his own philosophical agenda than to faithfully represent the poet. Benedetto Croce, for instance, criticized his interpretation as “fantastical and arbitrary”. A stronger critique, motivated by both philosophical and political concerns, comes from Péter Szondi in his *Hölderlin-Studien* and from Theodore Adorno in his essay “Parataxis”, where Heidegger is accused of “sequestering” Hölderlin’s poetry for his own ontological ends.

(2) *The Controversy Over Van Gogh’s Painting*

Art historian Meyer Schapiro (1968) accuses Heidegger of imposing a fictional narrative onto Van Gogh’s painting, arguing that there is no historical basis for claiming the shoes depicted belonged to a peasant; rather, they were Van Gogh’s own. This misreading, Schapiro contends, fundamentally undermines

Heidegger's interpretive approach, reducing it to an arbitrary philosophical projection rather than a genuine engagement with the artwork.

Jacques Derrida (1978) revisited the debate, critically examining both Heidegger's and Schapiro's positions and deconstructing the assumptions underlying both phenomenological and art-historical approaches to the painting.

(3) *Heidegger's Aesthetics and Nazism*

The extent to which Heidegger's philosophy and aesthetics were influenced by or aligned with National Socialism remains a subject of intense and ongoing debate.

Interpretations vary widely. Adorno and Victor Farias argue for an intrinsic connection between Heidegger's philosophy and Nazi ideology. Tom Rockmore and Charles Bambach contend that Heidegger's anti-humanist and anti-subjectivist views on agency and justice raise political concerns. Harries interprets *The Origin of the Work of Art* as a problematic transformation of Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede*. Taminiaux, adopting a contextualist stance, attributes aesthetic affinities with Nazism to broader cultural currents of the time. In contrast, Derrida, Nancy, de Beisteigui, and Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei, each in their own way, argue that Heidegger's aesthetic insights can be disentangled from his political commitments, allowing for a reading independent of his ideological affiliations.

(4) *Heidegger and Modern Art*

Another of Heidegger's aesthetics is that it is overly conservative and classical, insufficiently engaging with modern and contemporary art. This view stems from Heidegger's own criticisms of avant-garde art as overly subjective and virtuosic, though he makes notable exceptions for Cézanne and Klee.

Recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the continuing relevance of Heidegger's aesthetics for contemporary artistic practices. For instance, Robert Pippin has explored Heideggerian readings of modernist painting, while Young has examined the applicability of Heidegger's approach to a range of artistic phenomena, including Rilke's poetry, Cubism, abstract art, and East Asian traditions. Thomson has extended Heidegger's framework to rock music and comics, while Amanda Boetzkes and Aron Vinegar – drawing on OOO – have explored its potential for interpreting contemporary and hypermodern art. De Beistegui has similarly employed Heidegger's aesthetics to analyze figures such as Proust, De Kooning, and Chillida.

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