

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80114-0 - Martin Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track

Edited and Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Origin of the Work of Art*^a

Origin^b means here that from where and through which a thing is what it is and how it is. That which something is, as it is, we call its nature [*Wesen*]. The origin of something is the source of its nature. The question of the origin of the artwork asks about the source of its nature. According to the usual view, the work arises out of and through the activity of the artist. But through and from what is the artist that^c which he is? Through the work; for the German proverb “the work praises the master” means that the work first lets the artist emerge as a master of art. The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nonetheless neither is the sole support of the other. Artist and work *are* each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relation, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account, that is, of that from which both artist and artwork take their names, on account of art.

As the artist is the origin of the work in a necessarily different way from the way the work is the origin of the artist, so it is in yet another way, quite certainly, that art is the origin of both artist and work. But can, then, art really be an origin? Where and how does art exist? Art – that is just a word

^a Reclam edition, 1960. The project [*Versuch*] (1935–37) inadequate on account of the inappropriate use of the name “truth” for the still-withheld clearing and the cleared. See “Hegel and the Greeks” in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 332ff.; “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” in *Time and Being*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 70 (footnote). – *Art* the use of the bringing-forth of the clearing of the self-concealing in the *Ereignis* – the hidden given form.

Bringing-forth and forming; see “*Sprache und Heimat*” in *Denkerfabungen 1910–1976* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983), pp. 87–112.

^b Reclam edition, 1960. Capable of being misunderstood this talk of “origin.”

^c Reclam edition, 1960: he who he is.

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to which nothing real any longer corresponds. It may serve as a collective notion under which we bring what alone of art is real: works and artists. Even if the word art is to signify more than a collective notion, what is meant by the word could only be based on the reality of works and artists. Or are matters the other way round? Do work and artist exist only insofar^a as art exists, exists, indeed, as their origin?

Whatever we decide, the question of the origin of the artwork turns into the question of the nature of art. But since it must remain open whether and how there is art at all, we will attempt to discover the nature of art where there is no doubt that art genuinely prevails. Art presences in the art-work [*Kunst-werk*]. But what and how is a work of art?

What art is we should be able to gather from the work. What the work is we can only find out from the nature of art. It is easy to see that we are moving in a circle. The usual understanding demands that this circle be avoided as an offense against logic. It is said that what art is may be gathered from a comparative study of available artworks. But how can we be certain that such a study is really based on artworks unless we know beforehand what art is? Yet the nature of art can as little be derived from higher concepts as from a collection of characteristics of existing artworks. For such a derivation, too, already has in view just those determinations which are sufficient to ensure that what we are offering as works of art are what we already take to be such. The collecting of characteristics from what exists, however, and the derivation from fundamental principles are impossible in exactly the same way and, where practiced, are a self-delusion.

So we must move in a circle. This is neither *ad hoc* nor deficient. To enter upon this path is the strength, and to remain on it the feast of thought – assuming that thinking is a craft. Not only is the main step from work to art, like the step from art to work, a circle, but every individual step that we attempt circles within this circle.

In order to discover the nature of art that really holds sway in the work let us approach the actual work and ask it what and how it is.

Everyone is familiar with artworks. One finds works of architecture and sculpture erected in public places, in churches, and in private homes. Artworks from the most diverse ages and peoples are housed in collections and exhibitions. If we regard works in their pristine reality and do not deceive ourselves, the following becomes evident: works are as naturally present as things. The picture hangs on the wall like a hunting weapon or

^a Reclam edition, 1960. *It gives art [Es die Kunst gibt].*

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a hat. A painting – for example van Gogh’s portrayal of a pair of peasant shoes – travels from one exhibition to another. Works are shipped like coal from the Ruhr or logs from the Black Forest. During the war Hölderlin’s hymns were packed in the soldier’s knapsack along with cleaning equipment. Beethoven’s quartets lie in the publisher’s storeroom like potatoes in a cellar.

Every work has this thingly character. What would they be without it? But perhaps we find this very crude and external approach to the work offensive. It may be the conception of the artwork with which the freight-handler or the museum charlady operates, but we are required to take the works as they are encountered by those who experience and enjoy them. Yet even this much-vaunted “aesthetic experience” cannot evade the thingliness of the artwork. The stony is in the work of architecture, the wooden in the woodcarving, the colored in the painting, the vocal in the linguistic work, the sounding in the work of music. The thingly is so salient in the artwork that we ought rather to say the opposite: the architectural work is in the stone, the woodcarving in the wood, the painting in the color, the linguistic work in the sound, the work of music in the note. “Obviously,” it will be replied. What, however, is this obvious thingliness in the artwork?

Given that the artwork is something over and above its thingliness, this inquiry will probably be found unnecessary and disconcerting. This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature. The artwork is indeed a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, ἄλλο ἄγορεύει. The work makes publicly known something other than itself, it manifests something other: it is an allegory. In the artwork something other is brought into conjunction with the thing that is made. The Greek for “to bring into conjunction with” is συμβάλλειν. The work is a symbol.

Allegory and symbol provide the conceptual framework from within whose perspective the artwork has long been characterized. Yet this one element that makes another manifest is the thingly element in the artwork. It seems almost as though the thingliness in the artwork is the substructure into and upon which the other, authentic, element is built. And is it not this thingly element which is actually produced by the artist’s craft?

We wish to hit upon the immediate and complete reality of the artwork, for only then will we discover the real art within it. So what we must do, first of all, is to bring the thingliness of the work into view. For this we need to know, with sufficient clarity, what a thing is. Only then will we be

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able to say whether or not an artwork is a thing – albeit a thing to which something else adheres. Only then will we be able to decide whether the work is something fundamentally different and not a thing at all.

THE THING AND THE WORK

What, in truth, is a thing insofar as it is a thing? When we ask this question we wish to know the thing-being (the thingliness) of the thing. The point is to learn the thingliness of the thing. To this end we must become acquainted with the sphere within which are to be found all those beings which we have long called things.

The stone on the path is a thing, as is the clod of earth in the field. The jug is a thing, and the well beside the path. But what should we say about the milk in the jug and the water in the well? These, too, are things, if the cloud in the sky and the thistle in the field, if the leaf on the autumn wind and the hawk over the wood are properly called things. All these must indeed be called things, even though we also apply the term to that which, unlike the above, fails to show itself, fails to appear. One such thing which does not, itself, appear – a “thing in itself” in other words – is, according to Kant, the world as a totality. Another such example is God himself. Things in themselves and things that appear, every being that in any way exists, count, in the language of philosophy, as “things.”

These days, airplanes and radios belong among the things that are closest to us. When, however, we refer to “last things,” we think of something quite different. Death and judgment, these are the last things. In general, “thing” applies to anything that is not simply nothing. In this signification, the artwork counts as a thing, assuming it to be some kind of a being. Yet this conception of the thing, in the first instance at least, does not help us in our project of distinguishing between beings which have the being of things and beings which have the being of works. And besides, we hesitate to repeat the designation of God as a “thing.” We are similarly reluctant to take the farmer in the field, the stoker before the boiler, the teacher in the school to be a “thing.” A human being is not a thing. True, we say of a young girl who has a task to perform that is beyond her that she is “too young a thing.” But this is only because, in a certain sense, we find human being to be missing here and think we have to do, rather, with what constitutes the thingliness of the thing. We are reluctant to call even the deer in the forest clearing, the beetle in the grass, or the blade of grass “things.” Rather, the hammer, the shoe, the ax, and the clock are things. Even they, however, are not mere

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things. Only the stone, the clod of earth, or a piece of wood count as that: what is lifeless in nature and in human usage. It is the things of nature and usage that are normally called things.

We thus see ourselves returned from the broadest domain in which everything is a thing (thing = *res* = *ens* = a being) – including even the “first and last things” – to the narrow region of the mere thing. “Mere,” here, means, first of all, the pure thing which is simply a thing and nothing more. But then it also means “nothing but a thing,” in an almost disparaging sense. It is the mere thing – a category which excludes even the things that we use – which counts as the actual thing. In what, now, does the thingliness of things such as this consist? It is in reference to these that it must be possible to determine the thingliness of the thing. Such a determination puts us in a position to characterize thingliness as such. Thus equipped, we will be able to indicate that almost tangible reality of the work in which something other inheres.

Now it is a well-known fact that, since antiquity, as soon as the question was raised as to what beings as such are, it was the thing in its thingness which thrust itself forward as the paradigmatic being. It follows that we are bound to encounter the delineation of the thingness of the thing already present in the traditional interpretation of the being. Thus all we need to do, in order to be relieved of the tedious effort of making our own inquiry into the thingliness of the thing, is to grasp explicitly this traditional knowledge of the thing. So commonplace, in a way, are the answers to the question of what a thing is that one can no longer sense anything worthy of questioning lying behind them.

The interpretations of the thingness of the thing which predominate in the history of Western thought have long been self-evident and are now in everyday use. They may be reduced to three.

A mere thing is, to take an example, this block of granite. It is hard, heavy, extended, massive, unformed, rough, colored, partly dull, partly shiny. We can notice all these features in the stone. We take note of its characteristics. Yet such characteristics represent something proper to the stone. They are its properties. The thing has them. The thing? What are we thinking of if we now call the thing to mind? Obviously the thing is not merely a collection of characteristics, and neither is it the aggregate of those properties through which the collection arises. The thing, as everyone thinks he knows, is that around which the properties have gathered. One speaks, then, of the core of the thing. The Greeks, we are told, called it τὸ ὑποκείμενον. This core of the thing was its ground and was always there. But the characteristics are

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called τὰ συμβεβηκότα: that which always appears and comes forth along with the core.

These designations are by no means arbitrary. Within them speaks something which lies beyond the scope of this essay: the Greeks' fundamental experience of the being of beings in the sense of presence. It is through these determinations, however, that the interpretation of the thingness of the thing is grounded that will henceforth become standard and the Western interpretation of the being of beings established. The process begins with the appropriation of the Greek words by Roman-Latin thought; ὑποκείμενον becomes *subiectum*, ὑπόστασις *substantia*, and συμβεβηκός *accidens*. This translation of Greek names into Latin is by no means without consequences – as, even now, it is still held to be. Rather, what is concealed within the apparently literal, and hence faithful, translation is a *translation* [*Übersetzen*] of Greek experience into a different mode of thinking. *Roman thinking takes over the Greek words without the corresponding and equiprimal experience of what they say, without the Greek word.* The rootlessness of Western thinking begins with this translation.

It is generally held that the definition of the thingness of the thing in terms of substance and accidents appears to capture our natural view of things. No wonder, then, that the way we comport ourselves to things – the way we address ourselves to, and talk about, them – has accommodated itself to this commonplace outlook on things. The simple declarative sentence consists of a subject – the Latin translation, and that means transformation, of ὑποκείμενον – and predicate, which expresses the thing's characteristics. Who would dare to threaten this simple and fundamental relationship between thing and sentence, between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the thing? Nonetheless, we must ask: is the structure of the simple declarative sentence (the nexus of subject and predicate) the mirror image of the structure of the thing (the union of substance and accidents)? Or is it merely that, so represented, the structure of the thing is a projection of the structure of the sentence?

What could be more obvious than that man transposes the way he comprehends things in statements into the structure of the thing itself? Yet this view, apparently critical but in reality overly hasty, has first to explain how the transposition of the sentence structure into the thing could be possible without the thing first becoming visible. The issue as to what comes first and provides the standard, the structure of the sentence or that of the thing, remains, to this day, undecided. It may even be doubted whether, in this form, it is capable of a decision.

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In fact, it is the case neither that sentential structure provides the standard for projecting the structure of the thing nor that the latter is simply mirrored in the former. The structure of both sentence and thing derive, in their natures and the possibility of their mutual relatedness, from a common and more primordial source. In any case, this first of our interpretations of the thingness of the thing – thing as bearer of characteristics – is, in spite of its currency, not as natural as it seems. What presents itself to us as natural, one may suspect, is merely the familiarity of a long-established habit which has forgotten the unfamiliarity from which it arose. And yet this unfamiliar source once struck man as strange and caused him to think and wonder.

The reliance on the customary interpretation of the thing is only apparently well founded. Moreover, this conception of the thing (the bearer of characteristics) is applied not only to the mere, the actual, thing but to any being whatever. It can never help us, therefore, to distinguish beings which are things from those which are not. But prior to all reflection, to be attentively present in the domain of things tells us that this concept of the thing is inadequate to its thingliness, its self-sustaining and self-containing nature. From time to time one has the feeling that violence has long been done to the thingliness of the thing and that thinking has had something to do with it. Instead of taking the trouble to make thinking more thoughtful, this has led to the rejection of thinking. But when it comes to a definition of the thing, what is the use of a feeling, no matter how certain, if the word belongs to thought alone? Yet perhaps what, here and in similar cases, we call feeling or mood is more rational – more perceptive, that is – than we think; more rational, because more open to being than that “reason” which, having meanwhile become *ratio*, is misdescribed as rational. The furtive craving for the ir-rational – that abortive offspring of a rationality that has not been thought through – renders a strange service. To be sure, the familiar concept of the thing fits every thing. But it does not comprehend the essence of the thing; rather, it attacks it.

Can such an assault be avoided? How? Only if we grant to the thing, so to speak, a free field in which to display its thingness quite directly. Everything that, by way of conception and statement, might interpose itself between us and the thing must, first of all, be set aside. Only then do we allow ourselves the undistorted presence of the thing. But this allowing ourselves an immediate encounter with the thing is something we do not need either to demand or to arrange. It happens slowly. In what the senses of sight, hearing, and touch bring to us, in the sensations of color, sound, roughness, and hardness, things move us bodily, in a quite literal sense. The thing is the

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αἰσθητόν, that which, in the senses belonging to sensibility, is perceptible by means of sensations. Hence, the concept later became commonplace according to which the thing is nothing but the unity of a sensory manifold. Whether this unity is conceived as sum, totality, or as form changes nothing with respect to the standard-setting character of this concept of the thing.

Now this interpretation of the thingness of the thing is every bit as correct and verifiable as its predecessor. This is already sufficient to cast doubt on its truth. If we think through that for which we are searching, the thingness of the thing, then this concept of the thing again leaves us at a loss. In immediate perception, we never really perceive a throng of sensations, e.g. tones and noises. Rather, we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, the three-motored plane, the Mercedes which is immediately different from the Adler.¹ Much closer to us than any sensation are the things themselves. In the house we hear the door slam – never acoustic sensations or mere noises. To hear a bare sound we must listen away from the things, direct our ears from them, listen abstractly.

The concept of the thing under consideration represents, not so much an assault on the thing as an extravagant attempt to bring the thing to us in the greatest possible immediacy. But this can never be achieved as long as we take what is received by the senses to constitute its thingness. Whereas the first interpretation of the thing holds it, as it were, too far away from the body, the second brings it too close. In both interpretations the thing disappears. We must, therefore, avoid the exaggerations of both. The thing must be allowed to remain unmolested in its resting-within-itself itself. It must be accepted in its own steadfastness. This seems to be what the third interpretation does, an interpretation which is just as old as the first two.

That which gives to things their constancy and pith but is also, at the same time, the source of their mode of sensory pressure – color, sound, hardness, massiveness – is the materiality of the thing. In this definition of the thing as matter (ύλη), form (μορφή) is posited at the same time. The permanence of a thing, its constancy, consists in matter remaining together with form. The thing is formed matter. This interpretation of the thing invokes the immediate sight with which the thing concerns us through its appearance (εἶδος). With this synthesis of matter and form we have finally found the concept of the thing which equally well fits the things of nature and the things of use.

This concept of the thing puts us in a position to answer the question of the thingly in the artwork. What is thingly in the work is obviously the matter of which it consists. The matter is the substructure and the field

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for artistic formation. But we could have proposed this plausible and well-known conclusion at the very beginning. Why did we make the detour through the other concepts of the thing? Because we also mistrust this concept of the thing, the representation of the thing as formed matter.

But is it not precisely this pair of concepts, matter and form, that are generally employed in the domain in which we are supposed to be moving? Of course. The distinction between matter and form is *the conceptual scheme deployed in the greatest variety of ways by all art theory and aesthetics*. This indisputable fact, however, proves neither that the matter–form distinction is adequately grounded, nor that it belongs, originally, to the sphere of art and the artwork. Moreover, the range of application of this conceptual pairing has long extended far beyond the field of aesthetics. Form and content are the commonplace concepts under which anything and everything can be subsumed. If one correlates form with the rational and matter with the ir-rational, if, moreover, one takes the rational to be the logical and the irrational the illogical, and if, finally, one couples the conceptual duality between form and matter into the subject–object relation, then one has at one's disposal a conceptual mechanism that nothing can resist.

If this is how it is, however, with the matter–form distinction, how can it help us comprehend the special region of the mere thing as distinct from other beings? But perhaps this characterization in terms of matter and form can regain its power of definition if we just reverse the process of the broadening and emptying of these concepts. Yet this, of course, presupposes that we know in which region of beings they exercise their real power of definition. That this might be the region of mere things is, so far, merely an assumption. Taking into account the extensive use of this conceptual framework in aesthetics might rather suggest that matter and form are determinations which have their origin in the nature of the artwork and have been transported from there back to the thing. Where does the origin of the matter–form schema have its origin; in the thingness of the thing or in the work-character of the artwork?

The granite block, resting in itself, is something material possessing a definite, if unstructured, form. “Form,” here, means the distribution and arrangement of material parts in a spatial location which results in a particular contour, that of a block. But the jug, the ax, the shoes are also matter occurring in a form. Here, form as contour is not the result of a distribution of matter. On the contrary, the form determines the arrangement of the matter. And not just that; the form prescribes, in each case, the kind and selection of the matter – impermeability for the jug, adequate hardness for

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the ax, toughness combined with flexibility for the shoes. Moreover, the intermingling of form and matter that is operative in these cases is controlled beforehand by the purposes jug, ax, and shoes are to serve. Such serviceability is never assigned and added on afterwards to beings of this kind. But neither is it something which, as an end, hovers above them.

Serviceability is the basic trait from out of which these kinds of beings look at us – that is, flash at us and thereby presence and so be the beings they are. Both the design and the choice of material predetermined by that design – and, therefore, the dominance of the matter–form structure – are grounded in such serviceability. A being that falls under serviceability is always the product of a process of making. It is made as a piece of equipment for something. Accordingly, matter and form are determinations of beings which find their true home in the essential nature of equipment. This name designates what is manufactured expressly for use and usage. Matter and form are in no way original determinations belonging to the thingness of the mere thing.

A piece of equipment, for example, the shoe-equipment, when finished, rests in itself like the mere thing. Unlike the granite block, however, it lacks the character of having taken shape by itself. On the other hand, it displays an affinity with the artwork in that it is something brought forth by the human hand. The artwork, however, through its self-sufficient presence, resembles, rather, the mere thing which has taken shape by itself and is never forced into being. Nonetheless, we do not count such works as mere things. The nearest and authentic things are always the things of use that are all around us. So the piece of equipment is half thing since it is characterized by thingliness. Yet it is more, since, at the same time, it is half artwork. On the other hand, it is less, since it lacks the self-sufficiency of the artwork. Equipment occupies a curious position intermediate between thing and work – if we may be permitted such a calculated ordering.

The matter–form structure, however, by which the being of a piece of equipment is first determined, readily presents itself as the immediately comprehensible constitution of every being because, here, productive humanity is itself involved in the way in which a piece of equipment comes into being.^a Because equipment occupies an intermediate position between mere thing and work, the suggestion arises of using equipment (the matter–form structure) as the key to understanding non-equipmental beings – things and works, and, ultimately, every kind of being.

^a Reclam edition, 1960. (To its) into its presence.