

Art and the Saving Power in Late Heidegger

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In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger allows the extreme danger of technology to come to light: "the coming to presence of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of standing-reserve" (1977, 315). Yet according to Hoelderlin, "where the danger is, grows the saving power also." The saving power can be fostered only in a realm which is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. For technology and art essentially belong to *techne* as ways of revealing, ways of bringing forth truth. Thus Heidegger concludes that art is the realm of being which is primally claimed to foster the saving power in its increase.

However, in "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'," art essences quite differently in relation to the danger of technology. In this essay Heidegger shows how modern technology, the struggle for dominion over the earth, is imbued with the metaphysics of subjectivity. Nietzsche becomes significant to this discussion because the metaphysics of subjectivity culminates in the "will to power"—Nietzsche's most important discovery. Heidegger announces that "the struggle for dominion over the earth is in its historical essence already the result of the fact that whatever is as such is appearing in the mode of the will to power without yet being recognized or without being understood at all as that will" (WN 1977, 101). Nietzsche's conception of the will to power is the historical culmination of the metaphysics of subjectivity in that, whereas previously the will to power operating throughout all metaphysics was not consciously brought before the subject—was not willed as such—with Nietzsche the will to power is willed as such.

What is significant to the present discussion is the way in which art functions as the highest value for the will to power. Heidegger outlines the value-function of art as follows:

Art is the condition posited in the essence of the will to power for the will's being able, as the will that it is, to ascend to power and to enhance that power. Because it conditions in this way, art is a value. As that condition which—in the hierarchy of the conditioning pertaining to the making secure of a constant reserve—takes the lead and in that way precedes all conditioning, it is the value that first opens all heights of ascent. Art is the highest value. In relation to the value truth, it is the higher value. (WN 1977, 86)

As the highest value, art not only sustains the will to power, but also fosters the will to power in its increase. Since the will to power manifests itself in the technological exploitation of the earth, to foster the will to power in its increase is also to foster the extreme danger of technology. But if art sustains and fosters the extreme danger of technology, how can it foster the saving power?

This paper is pursuing an answer to the question, "How can art foster the saving power?" The question is not, "How does art only or necessarily foster the saving power?," for the saving power and the extreme danger are found in the realm of art. This means that the extreme danger of technology does not disappear when we reflect on or participate in art. Because the extreme danger of technology ever-remains, Heidegger's call to foster the saving power remains a call. Hearing this call, we ask, "How can art foster the saving power?" But here the danger appears once again. In his book, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, Gerald Bruns says that the question itself is technological:

The question of how the work works is a question concerning technology. It belongs to what Heidegger will call Ge-stell or Enframing of our time. This is by no means a bad question in itself. We belong to our own time and cannot expatriate ourselves to other worlds. Not to be analytical or structurally-minded—not to understand the importance of how works of art are made and how their rules of operation are to be described—is not to have grasped the emergence of art in the age of technology. (1989, 37)

Because we wish to grasp the emergence of art in the age of technology, and we wish thereby to see the upsurge of the saving power, we cautiously embrace a technological question. But how should we approach an answer to this question?

Hoelderlin says:

where the danger is, grows
the saving power also.

Heidegger's thoughts on the saving power begin with a meditation on this poem-fragment. For Heidegger, the saving power must be thought in relation to the danger—indeed, according to Hölderlin, the danger and the saving power occur in the same location or whereabouts. Let us then prepare for an answer to our question by examining the extreme danger of technology.

Nietzsche tells us that “the time is coming when the struggle for dominion over the earth will be carried on. It will be carried on in the name of fundamental philosophical doctrines” (1967, XII:411). Heidegger interprets “fundamental philosophical doctrines” to mean “the language of the truth of what is as such, which truth metaphysics itself is in the form of unconditional subjectness of the will to power” (WN 1977, 101). If the struggle is carried on in the name of the will to power, then presumably the technological exploitation of the earth finds its source and justification in the will to power. The will to power manifests its dominion over technological activity in at least two ways. First, in the technological age “what is” appears to us as standing-reserve, as that which is useful for the maintenance and increase of man's power over what is. In language, for example, we reduce the earth, and even other human beings, to “resources,” to that which is ready-to-hand for human being. Effectively, we reduce Being to a value, and this reduction constitutes the essential activity of the value-positing will to power. Secondly, technology demands exactness, demands that what is revealed as a calculable coherence of forces that is at the same time manipulable by the subject. Exactness allows the subject to exact value from what is, and so be certain of its standing-reserve. In this way, then, the exactness of technological activity betrays its source in the will to power, which requires exactness to secure its standing-reserve.

These observations confirm Heidegger's thought that modern metaphysics thinks the Being of whatever is in the sense of will, for a thing is said to be only insofar as it is exposed as something of value for the will. But if a thing is said to be only in terms of its value for the will, then, in the technological age, Being appears as the product of the will to power, that is, as the object of unconditional subjectivity, or as the will to power itself. Heidegger demonstrates the reduction of Being as follows:

Everything that is, is therefore either the object of the subject or the subject of the subject. Everywhere the Being of whatever is lies in setting-itself before-itself and thus in setting-itself-up. Man, within the subjectness belonging to whatever is, rises up into the subjectivity of his essence. Man enters into insurrection. The world changes into object. In this revolutionary objectifying of everything that is, the earth, that which first of all must be put at the disposal of representing and setting-forth, moves into the midst of human positing and analyzing. The earth itself can show itself only as the object of assault, an assault that, in human willing, establishes itself as unconditional objectification. Nature appears everywhere—because willed from out of the essence of Being—as the object of technology. (WN 1977, 100)

Nevertheless, the technological assault on nature is “justified” because the very act of objectifying and positing value by the will to power is an act of justification:

The truth of anything that is in being, in the sense of the self-certainty of subjectness, is, as secureness (*certitudo*), fundamentally the making-right, the justifying, of representing and of what it represents before representing’s own clarity. Justification (*iustificatio*) is the accomplishing of *iustitia* [justness of rightness] and is thus justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] itself. Since the subject is forever subject, it makes itself certain of its own secureness. It justifies itself before the claim to justice that it itself has posited. (WN 89-90)

To flesh out the “justice” ruling in and justifying the age of technology, Heidegger turns to Nietzsche’s metaphysical concept of justice. For though it appears strange to us, it is really all too familiar because it “touches squarely the essence of the justice that at the beginning of the consummation of the modern age, amidst the struggle for mastery of the earth, is already historically true, and that therefore determines all human activity in this period, whether explicitly or not, whether secretly or openly ” (WN 1977, 92). The first note from Nietzsche, bearing the title, “The Ways of Freedom” (1884), reads: “Justice, as building, separating, annihilating mode of thinking, out of value judgments; highest representative of life itself” (1967, XIII; Aph. 98). The second (1885) reads: “Justice, as function of a power having a wide range of vision, which sees out beyond the narrow perspectives of

good and evil, thus has a wider horizon of interest—the aim, to preserve Something that is more than this or that particular person” (1967, XIV; Aph. 158). Nietzsche’s “insight,” that the justice holding sway in the will to power is a building, separating, annihilating mode of thinking wholly indifferent to this or that human being, harmonizes with Heidegger’s diagnosis. For if in the technological age everything appears as the object of technology, man too appears as an object of technology. And if, moreover, man is challenged-forth into an antithetical relation to everything that is, human be-ing becomes its own antithesis in the act of assaulting itself as an object of technology.

If man, too, is subjected to the unconditional subjectivity of the will to power, what is the Something that justice preserves? Nietzsche says, “Right=the will to eternalize a momentary power relation” (1967, XIII; Aph. 462). In the effort to secure an increasing standing-reserve, objectifying and justifying transform everything that is into objects for the subject’s use. In so doing, the subject delivers itself up to the objectifying will, subjects itself to assault as so much “resource,” and so finds itself measured against the unassailable standard of usefulness. But for the use of whom or what do we allow ourselves to be thus overpowered?

Because the process of justification turns assaultingly upon the subject itself, and so ultimately preserves Something that is neither human nor “just” in the human sense, the process of justification is essentially unjustifiable. Undoubtedly, the statement, “the process of justification is unjustifiable,” is primed for a philosophical/technological analysis, for philosophy thrives on the paradox—that is, thrives on justifying to itself the as-yet-unjustified. But here we enter into an endless circle because what is unjustified is the uncanny truth that justification itself is essentially unjustifiable. Nevertheless, we are called into the technological activity of challenging-forth, objectifying and justifying all that is, so we cannot simply give up the attempt to justify the as-yet-unjustified, even when it is essentially unjustifiable. Therefore, the process of justification can never be completed. The will to power must forever goad itself onward to greater power and thereby threaten revealing with the possibility that “all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of the standing reserve” (QCT 1977, 315).

But isn’t this possibility, with which technology threatens revealing, actually an impossibility? For Heidegger says that “If the essence

of technology, enframing, is the extreme danger, if there is truth in Hoelderlin's words, then the rule of enframing [technology] cannot exhaust itself solely in blocking all lighting-up of revealing, all appearance of truth" (QCT 1977, 310). Though the uncanny truth of the unjustifiability of justification indicates a nontechnological mode of revealing ("nontechnological" in the sense that it cannot be ironed-out by technological thinking), we cannot yet assert that we have grasped the upsurge of the saving power. For the appearing of a nontechnological truth, such as the unjustifiability of justification, may function precisely as art does in the domain of the will to power. Indeed, just like Nietzsche's conception of art, the appearance of the unjustifiability of justification insures the unending rule of technological thinking because it is and will always be as-yet unjustified. But though we have not yet solved the original problem, we may suspect that the real danger of technology does not lie in its completion—as if technology could ever ultimately suffocate all revealing except the revealing of mere standing-reserve. Perhaps the real danger of technology is that the very nature of the unending, self-devouring and regurgitating process of justification seduces man away from his attendance on the revealing/concealing.

Heidegger says: "When the Being of whatever is, is stamped as a value and its essence is thereby sealed off, then within this metaphysics—and that means continually within the truth of what is as such during this age—every way to the experiencing of Being itself is obliterated" (WN 1977, 103). That which essentially stamps as a value is the will to power, which is surfacing today as the metaphysics, the rationale, of technology. Hence, within the metaphysics of technology, which today is the metaphysics, every way to the experiencing of Being itself is obliterated. Yet the experience of Being is crucial to man's being, as Heidegger demonstrates when he says that the essence of man is his attendance on the revealing/concealing of Being. By obliterating the way to the experience of Being itself, the metaphysics of technology robs man of his essence. Therefore, the extreme danger of technology is that, by seducing man into the unending process of justification, technological thinking displaces (*ver-rueckt*) man from his attendance on the revealing/concealing and so robs him of his essence.

Because the extreme danger of technology is that man becomes displaced from his essence, the saving power must necessarily restore man to his essence. Furthermore, because the displacement of man from his essence is accomplished in the unending process of justification/

ordering into which man is gathered, the restoration of man to his essence comes about in man's confrontation with that which is unfamiliar, uncanny, and essentially unjustifiable. But unlike the as-yet-unjustified proposition, "Justification is essentially unjustifiable," that which is *decisively* unjustifiable must defy the will to power itself, which grounds the unending process of justification, and so make the will to justify collapse. If art can foster the saving power in its increase, art must be such that it can foster man's confrontation with the radical otherness to which man essentially relates. Now we must ask, "How can art foster this confrontation?"

For Heidegger, art is not to be understood as an object or "thing." Art is not the thing that art dealers and critics busy themselves with, nor is it primarily the created object of a creative subject. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger tells us that "Precisely where the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work remain unknown, this thrust, this 'that it is' of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work" (1977, 182). Therefore, art is not to be understood from the subject-object relation, in which subjectivity determines the work as its ground and thereby justifies the work of art to itself. Instead, art is essentially that openness of beings into which man allows himself to be transported:

the more purely the work is itself transported into the openness of beings—an openness opened by itself—the more simply does it transport us into this openness and thus at the same time transport us out of the realm of the ordinary. To submit to this displacement means to transform our accustomed ties to world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work. Only the restraint of this staying lets what is created be the work that it is. This letting the work be a work we call the preserving of the work. . . . Preserving the work means standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work. (183)

Thus, art is art only insofar as we submit to the displacement from the ordinary, technological world, and let the work be a work—preserve the work. Preserving the work, however, which means "standing within the openness of beings" and staying within the truth at work in the work, is an extraordinary event. For in his essence man is the one who stands ek-statically in the openness of beings, and who stays within the truth by attending on revealing/concealing. Therefore, by transporting us into

the openness of beings wherein we essentially attend on the revealing and concealing, art allows us to be restored to our essence.

Submitting to displacement from the technological world into the openness of beings implies a radical otherness. For submission implies acknowledging an Other who defies being justified, ordered, overpowered. In *Heidegger's Estrangements*, Gerald Bruns argues that this radical otherness we confront in the work of art is the otherness of the truth at work in the work. His insights concern the nature of truth as Heidegger speaks of it in the following passage:

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial. Yet this denial is not a defect or a fault, as though truth were an unalloyed unconcealedness that has rid itself of everything concealed. If truth could accomplish this, it would no longer be itself. This denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the nature of truth as unconcealedness. Truth, in its nature, is untruth. (OWA 1977, 176)

It is part of the work of the work of art not to allow the forgetfulness of concealment, of the untruth of the truth, to occur. In this way the work of art brings the otherness of truth to light. Heidegger hints at how radical this otherness is when he mentions how cleanly the work of art "seems to cut all ties to human beings" (183). For Bruns, the truth at work in the work is

so wholly other that we can see nothing in it; it mirrors nothing we can recognize. Its otherness means that we can make no place for it within any framework that makes the world an intelligible object for us. The work won't be an object for our subjective gaze, nor will it produce or reproduce any such object. (1989, 45)

Art disconnects beings from the hold that we have on them. If art emancipates anything, it is not consciousness or subjectivity, but rather the world. Art overturns the will-to-power: it takes the world out of our hands and allows it to come into its own. (46)

Therefore, from Brun's reading of Heidegger, we find that the truth at work in art is radically other: it strips us of our ordering-grasp of the

world, overturns the will to power, and so wakes us from the solipsistic slumber of subjectivity. The radical otherness of truth defies the very objectification/justification that displaces us from our essence, and thus makes restoration possible.

Hopefully, it is now clear, or at least less obscure, how art can foster the saving power in its increase. The extreme danger of technology is that, by seducing man into the unending process of justification, technological thinking displaces man from his attendance on the revealing/concealing and so robs him of his essence. Art, on the other hand, forces man to confront that which defies all justification—the radical otherness of truth. By submitting to displacement from the technological world, and by staying within the truth at work in the work of art, man is transported into the openness of beings wherein man can be restored to his essence.

This interpretation of how art can foster the saving power harmonizes with Heidegger's thinking. In speaking of the saving power, Heidegger says that "to save is to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing" (QCT 1977, 310). We have already shown how art can foster this fetching-man-home into his essence. And, following Heidegger, we can say that the genuine appearance of man's essence in the technological age can first occur only when man submits to displacement from the technological world into the openness of beings, where he realizes that revealing is not exhausted in the revealing of mere standing-reserve.

But just as we have completed the task of answering the question, "How can art foster the saving power?," a question that has remained concealed now presses itself upon us: What is the saving power, that it can be fostered by art in its increase?

By transporting us into the openness of beings wherein we essentially ek-sist, and by calling on us to stay within the revealing/concealing that is the truth at work in the work, art can foster our ek-static relation to the granting that sends into revealing. Heidegger says:

the granting that sends one way or another into revealing is as such the saving power. For the saving power lets man see and enter into the highest dignity of his essence. This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment—and with it, from the first, the concealment—of all coming to presence on this earth. It is precisely in enframing, which threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the supposed single way of revealing, and so thrusts man into the danger of the surrender of his

free essence—it is precisely in this extreme danger that the innermost indestructible belongingness of man within granting may come to light, provided that we, for our part, begin to pay heed to the essence of technology. (314)

It is clear from this passage that the essence of technology, in its relation to the saving power, is “in a lofty sense ambiguous” (314). On the one hand, the coming to presence of technology threatens revealing, and so “radically endangers the relation to the essence of truth” (314). On the other hand, technology comes to presence from and as a granting. Because the granting itself is the saving power, and because technology originates from the granting, technology harbors in its origins the upsurge of the saving power.

The upsurge of the saving power in the origins of technology comes to light in the truth of Van Gogh’s painting. The truth of the shoes in the painting—that is, their being as an object of technology—is not merely technological because they reveal their origin in the granting:

In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. (OWA 1977, 163)

The world of the peasant woman is grounded on the earth, not only in the sense that her world (ripening grain, children, equipment, etc.) emerges from the bare material of the earth, but primarily because her world emerges in relation to the earth’s otherness, unjustifiability. The peasant woman is granted a way of revealing that secures her world against the uncertainty of the earth. Therefore, the shoes are useful to the world of the peasant woman only because usefulness is first granted to her as a way of revealing the unconcealed in her relation to the radical otherness of the earth.

By staying within the truth at work in Van Gogh’s work of art, we find that technology essentially harbors the saving power in the way that technology comes to presence from and as a granting. Indeed, the tenacious and unrelenting nature of technological activity is intelligible

only when it is understood as a way of revealing that is granted to us. But if both technology and art share a belongingness to the granting that sends into ways of revealing, and if as *techne* they are both ways of bringing-forth truth, we must ask a further question: why is art, rather than technology, the “more primally granted revealing that could bring the saving power into its first shining-forth in the midst of the danger that in the technological age rather conceals than shows itself” (QCT 1977, 315)?

The answer to this question lies in the essential difference between art and technology, a difference we find in the different ways that they, as modes of revealing, relate to the radical otherness of truth. Because the saving power as such is the granting that sends into ways of revealing, the realm which primally fosters the saving power must be the realm in which truth is brought forth as a granting. But to grasp the truth that man is granted various destinies of revealing, one must grasp the truth that man essentially relates to a radical, non-human Other. As we have seen, art can foster the saving power precisely because it forces man to confront the radical otherness of truth. However, this confrontation does not imply an antithetical relation to truth—rather, the confrontation is the displacement from the technological world into the openness of beings. By staying within the truth at work in the work of art, one confronts the otherness of truth in at least two ways: one confronts the uncanny otherness of the material or earth that comes to bear in the work of art, and one confronts the uncanny truth that world and earth are in constant strife against one another. That art forces man to confront the radical otherness of truth is the startling “that it is” of createdness in the work of art.

In contrast, the createdness of the technological object essentially disappears into usefulness. The technological object serves technological activity to the degree that the material of the object does not “come to bear” but perishes into the usefulness of its function in the human world. Thus, technology requires not confrontation with the otherness of truth, which is a condition for the fostering of the saving power, but a forgetting or turning-away from the otherness of truth. This forgetting of the otherness is essential to technology as a way of revealing, which is why Heidegger says that the extreme danger is the revealing itself. Moreover, this forgetting makes possible the solipsistic illusion of subjectivity, holding sway in the technological age, that we everywhere and always confront only ourselves.

In conclusion, art can foster the saving power in its increase, and it distinguishes itself from technology as the revealing that is primally granted for this task, because of the way that it relates man to the radical otherness of truth. By displacing man from the technological world, which necessarily forgets the otherness of truth, into the openness of beings wherein man essentially ek-sists, art allows man to be restored to his essence as the one who attends on the revealing/concealing (truth). In reflecting upon art we must never forget its intimate relation to revealing and concealing, the constellation of truth. For Heidegger tells us that art can foster the saving power in its increase "only if reflection upon art for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth concerning which we are questioning" (QCT, 317).

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