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Creativity in Nietzsche and Heidegger: The Relation of Art and Artist

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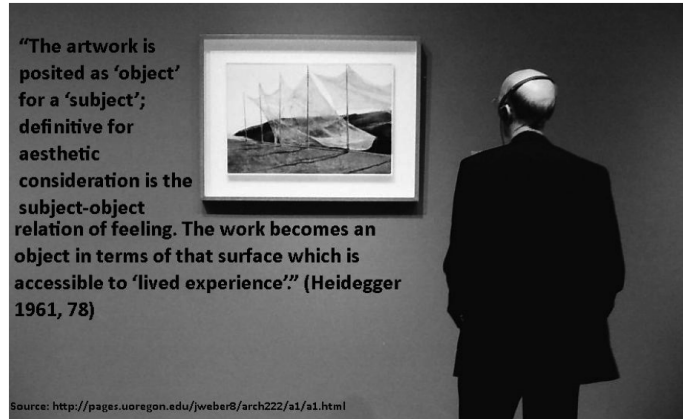
August 22, 2011

I began my research this summer with a simple goal in mind: I wanted to outline the ways in which the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger complement one another with respect to art. I had taken a few courses on each philosopher beforehand, so I had some inclination as to how their works might be brought into agreement. However, I almost immediately ran into difficulty. It turns out that Heidegger, who lived and thought two or three generations after Nietzsche, had actually lectured on the topic of Nietzsche's philosophy of art and had placed Nietzsche firmly in a long tradition characterized by its misunderstanding of art and of the work of art. This means that Heidegger himself did not agree with me—he did not see his thoughts on art as complementary with Nietzsche's. Rather, Heidegger saw his work as an improvement over the misguided aesthetic tradition.

Fortunately for me, Heidegger was simply mistaken. At least, that's my thesis. Heidegger did not see his affinity with Nietzsche because he was misled by his own misinterpretation. Nevertheless, his thoughts on art balance nicely with those of Nietzsche. To support this claim, I will make three moves today. First, I will set up Heidegger's critique, which is really a challenge to the entire tradition that begins with Plato and runs its course up to Nietzsche. Next, I will turn to Heidegger's views on art to see how he overcomes the tradition and answers his own criticism of aesthetics. Finally I will turn to Nietzsche to explain how I think he avoids Heidegger's critique and how his thoughts on art actually fit together nicely with Heidegger's.

Heidegger's Critique

According to Heidegger, knowledge of art in the western world began a long detour with the introduction of aesthetics in the works of Plato and Aristotle. While oftentimes the word "aesthetics" is taken as synonymous with "philosophy of art," Heidegger uses the word in a more precise manner. In aesthetics:



In other words, aesthetics essentially inquires into the experience that we have of art; it is a study of our relation to artworks. In contrast, philosophy of art inquires into art as art outside of the subject-object relation.

Take as an example Leo Tolstoy's aesthetic theory of art. In his essay "What is Art?" he writes,

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them. [8, p. 237]

This is an aesthetic theory of art because it defines art in terms of the feelings and experiences put into and invoked by the artwork. Aesthetic views of art like this have a strong appeal, as is evidenced by the philosophical tradition. Even so, against Tolstoy and against the tradition Heidegger maintains that fundamental knowledge of art comes from an inquiry into art itself, not from an aesthetic inquiry. But to be clear, the point here is not that Tolstoy is wrong to think that art in some way involves the communication of experiences and feelings—this is evident. Rather, the mistake of an aesthetic inquiry into the nature of art is the assumption that experience and feeling are the fundamental elements of art.

Accordingly, Heidegger's criticism of Nietzsche is essentially the claim that a genuine investigation of art has been neglected in favor of aesthetics. In particular, Heidegger claims that Nietzsche "sees [art] in its essential entirety in terms of the *artist*" [3, p. 70]. This focus on the artist leads Nietzsche to an analysis of the art in terms of the experience of the artist, i.e. aesthetics. In other words, "Nietzsche's meditation on art is 'aesthetics' because it examines the state of creation and enjoyment" of the artist [3, p. 129]. I will come back to these points to dispute Heidegger's dismissal of Nietzsche. Right now, it will be helpful to see how Heidegger himself pursues philosophy of art without recourse to aesthetics.

Heidegger's View of Art

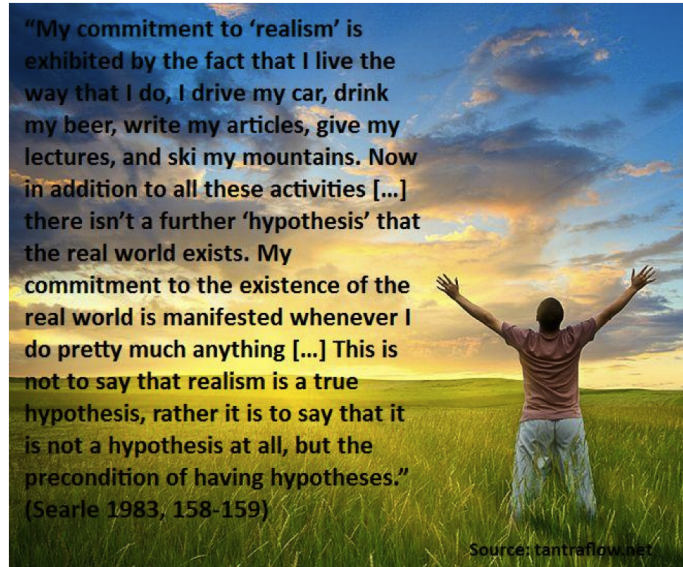
Heidegger opens his essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," with a question about the essential source from which the artwork emerges. Many people, if asked what the origin of an artwork is, would reply that it comes from the artist. Undoubtedly, Caravaggio for instance did paint *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*. For Heidegger, however, the answer is a bit more complicated. There is certainly a sense in which the artwork comes from the artist, from her hands or from his words. That is to say, the artist literally creates the artwork, brings it forth into existence. But there is also a way in which the artwork brings the artist, as an artist, into existence. If he had never painted or produced any other kind of artwork, then Caravaggio would not be an artist. Moreover, Caravaggio is not simply an artist that *then* goes on to create; instead Caravaggio emerges as an artist *through* the act of creating. In other words, artist and artwork emerge together, out of and on the basis of something else: namely, art.

At this point Heidegger makes a crucial move: to flesh out the abstract concept of art he turns to the artwork with the somewhat mysterious claim, "Art essentially unfolds in the artwork" [2, p. 144]. The artwork thus becomes the centerpiece of Heidegger's meditations on art. It attains this significance because it reveals what Hubert Dreyfus calls "the style of a culture" [1, p. 407]. What exactly is the "style of a culture" and how does it come out in the artwork? Dreyfus tells us that style "determines how anything shows up as anything and certain actions show u[p]]emphas worth doing" [1, p. 409]. In other words, it is the basic orientation that we have to the world which has been absorbed from our surrounding influences: friends, family, and our culture in general. Together these things form a way or style of seeing and dealing with things.

We need to be careful not reduce the style of a culture to a set of beliefs or theories that we have about life. Metaphorically speaking, the style of a culture or of an individual is more like the stance one takes in a field. From our stance or position in life we can look out and engage with our world. The stance is a necessary precondition to seeing or interacting with anything. John Searle forcefully describes realism, or taking the world as real, as such a stance when he writes:

Caravaggio: *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*.





Realism for Searle is included in the stance he takes within the world; it is a part of the style that allows him to interact in the world at all, but it is not reducible to a belief or hypothesis.

It is this type of precondition that is embodied in the style of a culture. And it is the job of the artwork to reveal our cultural style. On the Greek temple, Heidegger says:

Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, first brings to radiance the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night [...] The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. [2, p. 167–168]

The temple brings out the sun, the storm and the sky, allowing us to grasp them in a certain way. Within the atmosphere of the temple, the storm can make its violent appearance and the sun can shine forth in its grace. That we see the storm as violent, however, is secondary to the authentic work of art, which is the opening up of a way of understanding existence.

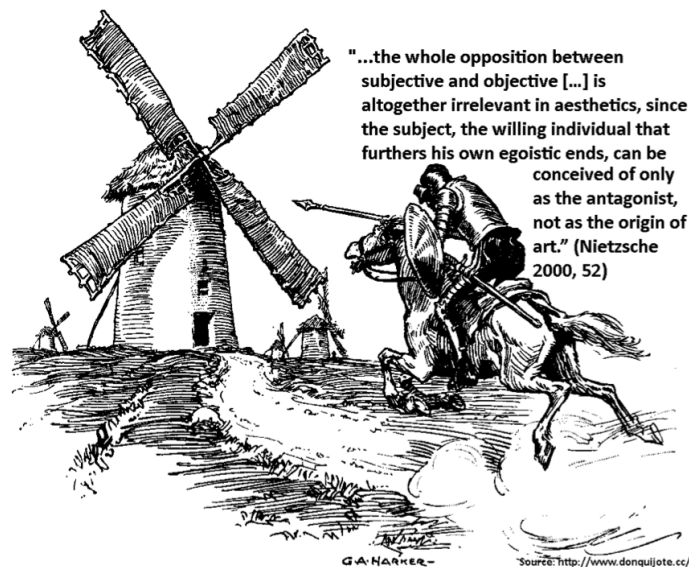
The artwork thus gives us a way to see the world—and, by extension, we see ourselves in the world. This disclosure is not reducible to feelings and experiences, nor can it be reduced to beliefs or hypotheses about the world. For Heidegger, the disclosure that happens in art is more fundamental than these things. Art opens up a way of understanding existence by first allowing us and other beings to emerge. Art is the illumination of us and our world which arises

out of existence itself. Art belongs neither to subject, nor to object—it is what first allows these to shine forth. Art is therefore a precondition to aesthetics, a precondition to a subject experiencing an object, and so it is not reducible to aesthetics. This is Heidegger’s basic conception of art as it unfolds in the artwork.

Nietzsche’s View of Art

It is my claim that Nietzsche conceives of art in a similar vein, though he arrives at his conception by a different route. As we have seen, Heidegger gives what we might call an “object-oriented ontology of art.” That is to say, Heidegger looks to the object, to the artwork, in order to unfold the nature of art. In contrast, Nietzsche presents what we might call a “subject-oriented ontology of art”—his focus is on the subject, on the artist and the viewer. These two positions complement one another in their parallel trajectories and common conclusions.

To see what I am getting at, let’s turn more fully to Nietzsche’s thoughts on art. First off, though Nietzsche uses the language of aesthetics, it is clear that he discards the subject-object relation:



This passage, taken from Nietzsche’s earliest book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, clearly anticipates Heidegger’s claim that aesthetics as a study of our experience of art does not penetrate the essential nature of art. Unlike Heidegger, however, Nietzsche takes the subject as the centerpiece of his philosophy of art. Yet the artist is assigned the role of antagonist and so he or she does not direct the

unfolding of art, but instead simply plays a role in it.

The real origin of art is found in the nature of existence. On Nietzsche's view, existence is constituted by artistic energies which drive the creation and destruction of all things, from the tiniest insects to the most awesome supernovae. We too owe our existence to these primal forces, which are embodied in gravity, evolution, and life itself. But while everything and everyone actually embodies art, the creative impulses of existence are most evident in the artist: "[t]he phenomenon 'artist' is still the most transparent" [5, p. 419]. For this reason, Nietzsche turns to the artist, mirroring Heidegger's turn to the artwork.

Through the artist, the influences of life and existence are channeled into the bringing forth of the artwork. As Nietzsche metaphorically states, "the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with th[e] primordial artist of the world" [4, p. 52]. This allows the artist to get a glimpse of the world she finds herself in - she becomes "like the weird image of the fairy tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself" [4, p. 52]. This view is articulated by the artist in the act of creating, thereby providing some illumination within the world. That is to say artists provide a way of seeing things; they shed light onto the world through their creations, "[to] everything that is dark they speak with their light" [6, p. 82]. Or in Dreyfus's terminology: in the act of creating, the artist reveals the style of her culture, a conclusion perfectly in line with Heidegger's views on art.

Summary

Following the account of Heidegger and Nietzsche I have laid out, we can conclude that their views on art fit together nicely. Both look beyond the subject-object distinction for the essence of art. Both see art as arising somewhat mysteriously out of existence, as perhaps something intrinsic to Being and to beings. Also, both agree that the job of art is to open up a way of seeing the world and ourselves. Yet, if this is the case, and if the matter is as simple as I make it out to be, then how is it that Heidegger so fundamentally misinterprets Nietzsche? Here I will only be able to point towards a few possibilities.

Heidegger accuses Nietzsche of doing aesthetics and he is, to some degree, correct. Nietzsche does engage in aesthetics when attempting to discern the value of art for the individual, and because of Nietzsche's preoccupation with nihilism, morality and value, this makes up a large part of his writings on art. Still, that small part of his writings concerned with the nature of art itself does go beyond aesthetics. In addition, in his lecture course on Nietzsche, Heidegger remains almost entirely occupied with Nietzsche's posthumously published notes, entitled *The Will to Power*. Relying on unpublished notes in this way can skew one's view of any author, but Nietzsche's work in particular are of a varied sort that should not be taken in isolation from one another. The most glaring omission is an analysis by Heidegger of Nietzsche's only work devoted exclusively to art, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Lastly, the state of affairs is hardly as simple as I have presented it. Given various restraints, I have left out at least two contentious and difficult areas between Heidegger and Nietzsche: the

metaphysics of art and art's relation to truth. Of course, these areas will receive a full treatment in my thesis.

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