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The End of Life Is Not the Worst: On Heidegger's Notion of the World

Beyond the End of the World

For Heidegger, the eradication of all life on planet earth is not the most horrible thing that could happen. It is the impossibility of thinking the world that exposes us to something worse: the loss of our link with being. If human beings want to avoid the eradication of life, it is imperative to not simply stop the most dangerous technologies from unfolding their explosive threats, but to think the world. Today, we see that we cannot think the world as something we have at our disposal, something we can handle, something we can master. We see that a world which we can master is only the futile image of a will to mastery which has directed itself into an impasse. What was once thought to be mastered, reigned over, has come to unfold its own powers, and returns as the threat of the uncontrollable. This threat, and the potential consequence of the eradication of life, is increasingly discussed under the keyword “the Anthropocene”: the un-circumventable traces of the human species inscribed into the geological body of the earth threaten to make life gradually impossible. But the Anthropocene not only raises the image of a possibly uncontrollable planet, it also opens up a rift in thought. Thinking as such is challenged by the Anthropocene, for it brings about the increasing dissipation of the formal distinction between thought and thing – human and earth. Within the Anthropocene, the thought of the human as well as its actions reflect back from the former object “earth” or “nature”. The former objects of thought turn into acting objects themselves, and the human turns out to be an objective geological factor.

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Once we see that the world is not at our disposal (although we knew that perhaps already before), the way we think the world has to change. The relation of the human and the world is infected by the imponderabilities of the meta-language, and the Anthropocene is not only the result of our reckless behaviour; it is also a symptom of the impossibility of thinking of ourselves as a part of the planet. How can we think of ourselves not as distant from but as moments of

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that which we think? This rift, the rift of modern rationality, threatens us with the uncontrollable. Thus, if it is still possible to think the world at all, then this thought has to take the uncontrollable, the unaccountable into account. This is a loss, a crack. We cannot think the world as the totality of all beings on earth, neither can we attempt to think the world as a completed form. Consequently, to think the world may have become impossible today.¹ This impossibility, however, is not a plain technical impossibility. It implies that the thought of the world has been a pillar, a linchpin of the fatal mastery over the earth that led to the critical age of the Anthropocene. To think the world as a rational entity was nothing more than an imaginary delusion that has been working until now: now (a “now” which is itself expanded in time) we can no longer ignore the consequences of this blindness.

From this, two questions arise: First, is it possible to think the world in such a way that it does not fall prey to the will to mastery? And second, if the world can be thought such that the impossible is a moment of this thought, how is this thought to be related to the earth or the planet, which it seeks to think?

In the following, we will attempt to follow one single consideration: we will propose to reconsider the late Heidegger’s examination of the concept of the world, and we will argue, in line with Heidegger, that to think the world is not only necessary to prevent the extinction of life on earth, but that the loss of thinking the world lies at the beginning of the crisis we are living through. Or, in other words, what we discuss under the heading of the Anthropocene is a symptom of our lost world. A concept of the world is not simply a sign of human hypocrisy; a true concept of the world is rather an essential moment of being on earth.

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And indeed, this is the late Heidegger’s concern: the loss of the world must abandon the earth to the crisis. And he presents the thought of the world precisely as an answer, an acceptance of the impossibility of thinking the world as a totality. But instead of resigning, we are called upon to think the world in a different manner. For Heidegger, the need to think the world is not an attempt to master it, but rather to accept it as something uncontrollable and to act upon this ac-

¹ This is considered a consequence of the Anthropocene by Timothy Morton, among others. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, especially pp. 99–133.

ceptance. We have to think the world, because otherwise we are not capable of confronting what Heidegger calls “the horrible”. And here we have to begin: with the horrible. The late Heidegger, critical of the unfolding of (especially modern) technology, was very clear in his stance regarding the dangers resulting from the – back then – most dangerous technologies. Technological developments such as the atomic bomb or the hydrogen bomb, with all their destructive power, are for Heidegger nothing but superficial markers of a far greater and further-reaching danger. In his *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* from 1949 he emphasizes this conviction very strongly. In his introduction, Heidegger writes:

The human is transfixed by what could come about with the explosion of the atomic bomb. The human does not see what for a long time now *has* already arrived and even *is* occurring, and for which the atomic bomb and its explosion are merely the latest emission, not to speak of the hydrogen bomb, whose detonation, thought in its broadest possibility, could be enough to wipe out all life on earth. What is this clueless anxiety waiting for, if the horrible [*das Entsetzliche*] *has* already occurred?²

Not only is the potential destruction of the earth a rather superficial occurrence – even more importantly, it conceals that the “horrible *has* already occurred.” The entire unfolding of his thought around the question of technology – with the seminal text “On the Question Concerning Technology” from 1954 – thus situates the human in the presence of what Heidegger calls the horrible. The horrible appears to be a moment of the uncanny, as Freud had defined it: strange in the midst of the familiar, it has occurred, it is there, it is here. It is what is, this seems to say, distinct from what it seems to be. We humans have already been living in the presence of the horrible, and we are living in its presence without realising it. And this horrible, we have to conclude, must be deemed more horrible than the end of all life. For if the eradication of all life is only the “latest emission,” and the “horrible *has* already occurred,” then the eradication is an end, the end of the horrible. The horrible must be worse, because it is the ground from which that end and its many, diverse possibilities come forth. Thus, the destruction of all life on earth – that is: of the entire earth – is only a consequence of something

² Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, trans. A. J. Mitchell, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2012, p. 4.

worse. But is it some-*thing* worse? It is not clear at all whether this “something worse” is really some-*thing*, and not perhaps a pure loss, a no-thing. That much we can say: the end of the earth is not the worst. And we can further say: what is worse than the extinction of all life is that it has already begun. These claims, in all their radicality, cannot but leave us with astonishment and irritation; they are a challenge to thought. Is there something that is worse than the end of all life on earth? What is it, how can it be? Heidegger leads us beyond death, beyond the end of the earth, maybe beyond being. The horrible has to be found somewhere beyond life and death in the midst of all the beings on earth.

It is very well known that Heidegger, in his 1966 interview with the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, stated “Only a God can save us.”³ Recalling this slogan, one might be tempted to associate apocalyptic undertones with the notion of the horrible, and subsequently to take the slogan too literally as a call for a God. But if we do not assume this God to be the Christian God, a God whose existence could be – or would have to be – proven, then “God” remains as an old name for something that we are unable to determine and which is irretrievably lost. If only a God can save us from the horrible, it cannot be an old God, as if a God had been missing for some time and we would have to hope for His return. To hope for the return of a God would imply thinking the world as the world of a God, even in the absence of a God. But a God, as Jean-Luc Nancy remarked, is not simply missing, we do not live in a world with a missing God:

[T]here is no God because there is world, and because the world is neither the work nor an operation but the space of the “there is”, its configuration without a face. There is no God because God does not belong to the “there is”: his name names precisely the category of that which would be subtracted from the “there is”. [...] The “world” is henceforth the name of that which neither operates nor is operated: the sense of the “there is”.⁴

If there is world, and if the “there is” of a world marks the inexistence of a God, then a God cannot return to the world. Rather, the world presents the challenge

³ Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us: The *Spiegel* Interview (1966)”, in T. Sheehan (ed.), *Heidegger, The Man and the Thinker*, Chicago, Precedent Publishing, 1981, pp. 45–72.

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 156.

of living without a God on earth. In the *Spiegel* interview, Heidegger explains: "Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in [our] decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline."⁵ And a little later, on the absence of a God: "Even the experience of this absence is not nothing, but a liberation of man from what in *Being and Time* I call "fallenness" upon beings. Making [ourselves] ready for the aforementioned readiness involves reflecting on what in our own day ... is."⁶

That only a God might save us should rather be read inversely: only a God can save us, but once a God saves us, we have lost the world, and we have lost all "there is". Instead, we should rather take on the task of thinking the world, so that no God will have to save us by taking away everything "there is". The answer to the horrible cannot be "a God". We will have to look somewhere else, and it is the horrible that will lead us there. In the final paragraph of the already quoted introduction, Heidegger specifies the horrible: "The horrifying is what transposes [*heraussetzt*] all that is out of its previous essence. What is so horrifying? It reveals and conceals itself in the way that everything presences, namely that despite all overcoming of distance, the nearness of that which is remains outstanding."⁷

The nearness of everything dissolves, and the horrible grows in, and as, the loss of nearness. The "beyond" is then the sphere that arises in the distance of the thing; "beyond" death and "beyond" the end of the earth – this is a sphere right within the earth, for it is within the thing. It is this dissolution of nearness that must be understood as worse than the eradication of the earth. We do not know, though, what Heidegger points us to when linking the horrible to the loss of nearness. At this point, "the horrible" is given to us in the state of the uncanny: something is wrong in the sphere of our intimate surroundings, in the sphere of the thing. What seems physically near to us is not near any longer.

But still, Heidegger's rigorousness remains surprising, and this moment of surprise needs to be read as well. The harshness with which he dismisses the erad-

⁵ Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us", p. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷ Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, p. 4.

ication of life as a secondary phenomenon remains noticeable in comparison to the rest of the lectures, which unfold the question of technology, the outstanding nearness of the *thing*, the reign of the *Ge-Stell*, as well as the *turn* of thought as a turn within the *danger* of technology. While the general tone is severe and serious – Heideggerian so to speak – at certain moments the disdain for a given ontic technological phenomenality breaks through, and it rises to remarks that seem to dissolve all differences under the heading of a destructive industry, or rather an industry of destruction: “Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs.”⁸

Although “in essence the same” does not say “literally the same” – the simplicity of this statement is not very Heideggerian. It has to be taken as a symptom, as the conflictual expression of a different conflict that remains unsolved. The contempt uttered here refers back to the essentially horrible – namely the loss of nearness within the thing. The loss of nearness is essentially the loss of the thing itself: “The exclusion of nearness despite all abolition of distances has brought the distanceless to dominance. In the exclusion of nearness, the thing as thing in the stated sense remains annihilated.”⁹ What is horrible, then, is that every thing withdraws (or has already withdrawn). The destruction of life is a reality, a technological reality, but as such it disguises the essential withdrawal of every thing in itself. Later, in the lecture on *the turn*, Heidegger opposes catastrophic scenarios: “All attempts to reckon up the presiding actuality, whether morphologically, psychologically in terms of decay and loss, in terms of disaster and catastrophe, of downfall, are all only instances of a technological behavior.”¹⁰ No calculation of the horrible is possible; every calculating, comparing, weighing terminology remains as a moment within the calculated catastrophe.

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The withdrawal cannot be calculated. But, and this is the crux of the matter, calculation, technology in the broadest sense, is an expression of the essence of being itself: “Positionality [*das Gestell*] is the essence of modern technology. The essence of positionality is the being of beings itself, not in general and not

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

from time immemorial, but rather now, here where the forgetting of the essence of being completes itself.”¹¹ Within being, we find the withdrawal of being, and this is the horrible. The horrible forgetting of being cannot be calculated, it cannot be accounted for in technical terms, and it is not a technological difficulty or challenge. But, at the same time, the horrible finds its expression in the reign of technology, which is a mode of being in the state of its withdrawal. The horrible is expressed within technology, but it conceals the loss of nearness, the loss of the thing, and finally the withdrawal of being within itself.

“Technology” as such a symptom cannot be understood as a specified technology – it is neither this nor that technology, and it cannot be a certain technology here, in some country, continent or region, nor a certain technology there, in another country, continent, or region. Thus, we are dealing with a technology that has a planetary dimension, as Heidegger emphasizes in his *Spiegel* interview.¹² Technology, as Heidegger conceives it, endangers the earth as a planet, and is therefore understood in a planetary dimension. And within this dimension, calculation regarding the aspect of energy is the common denominator of modern technology, which allows Heidegger at certain points to wipe out all differences: loss of nearness, on the one hand, calculating energy by means of technology, on the other. Modern technology is that which erases its own differences.

This is not to say that technology reigns at every place in the same manner; rather, technology unfolds itself in a planetary dimension – everywhere where it evolves it unfolds a planetary relevance.¹³ The planetary dimension is an

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49, translation modified by J. V.

¹² Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”, p. 60 ff.

¹³ This becomes clear when Heidegger criticizes the development of thought alongside the development of technology. “Thinking ‘as such’ – this is our Western thinking, defined from the λόγος and calibrated to this. On no account does this mean that the world of ancient India, China, and Japan would remain thought-less. Much more, the reference to the λόγος-character of Western thinking contains for us the behest that before touching upon these foreign worlds, should we risk it, we first ask ourselves whether we at all have the ear to hear what is thought there. This question becomes all the more burning as European thinking also threatens to become planetary, in that the contemporary Indians, Chinese, and Japanese in many cases report their experiences to us only in our European way of thinking.” Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, pp. 136–137. Thus the planetary dimension does not imply an omnipresence, but a will to and a tendency towards omnipresence.

overarching dimension of a specific Western technology, and thus it is a very specific technology, which stems from the West, and is not in itself universal, but unfolds a universal approach. And it is here that the political dimension of this discussion is left untouched by Heidegger, and the outbreaks of contempt that align all different technologies under the theme of destruction mirror this unresolved political problem. By ignoring the different forms of technology's presence in different areas of the earth, Heidegger ignores the political aspect inscribed into any notion of "the planetary". However, this planetary dimension brings us back to the possible wiping out of "all life on earth" – technology, in its destructive appearance, concerns the earth as a planet.

The World and its Earth

What then is the meaning of the world, and how can it be related to the notion of the earth and to the notion of the planet? How can the notion of the world be related to the threat of the end of all life? How is the notion of the world related to the loss of nearness, the withdrawal of being within being? To understand the weight that Heidegger puts on the notion of the world, we have to go back to "The Origin of the Work of Art", written in 1935-1936 and published in 1950. As the title indicates, the question in this article is the essence of the work of art and its origin. Heidegger understands this origin as a work in which a thing unfolds its truth. But in order to examine this origin as embodying the ground from which it stems, Heidegger, as he mostly does, starts from the plain appearance of a thing: a thing can be defined as something that has properties or as something that appears to the senses, but a thing also needs to be distinguished from pure utility. In his attempt to define a thing, Heidegger then famously turns to a painting of Van Gogh in which a pair of shoes is shown. A pair of shoes is a typical thing that is utile: that is to say, Heidegger turns to a work of art in which a typical utile thing is displayed to further investigate the specificity of a thing. And it is here, in the description of the painting, where he first mentions the distinction between earth and world:

The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs *to the earth* and finds pro-

tection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.¹⁴

What Heidegger calls the equipment (*das Zeug*) reveals its truth in the work of art, and this truth is its “reliability.”¹⁵ But all this can only be seen within the work of art, it cannot be registered within the everyday use of the equipment. What, then, is the truth?

In the work of art, the truth of the being has set itself to work. “Set” means here: to bring to stand. In the work, a being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the constancy of its shining.

The essential nature of art would then be this: the setting-itself-to-work of the truth of beings.¹⁶

The truth is what the thing, as equipment, is in its being. And Heidegger then goes on to unfold the question of truth as one between the notion of earth and world. Already in the quoted passage we saw that the world is understood to protect the equipment, and that the equipment belongs to the world. In German, Heidegger uses the word “*behütet*” (translated as “finds protection”),¹⁷ which might also be translated as “taken care of” or “looked after”: in the context of the rural scenery of the painting, *behütet* points to the “taking care” / “looking after” of animals (as in *shepherding*). This *behüten* determines the “belonging”, insofar as the equipment belongs to the world precisely to the degree that it is looked after. In reverse, something that is not taken care of cannot belong to the world. And we might even ask whether there is a world if there is nothing that is looked after. The construction of the world is much more interesting than the delineation of the earth, which here seems to refer to the circular up and down, give and take, in a more or less classical understanding of nature as the circulation of powers. But this impression has to be revised: something that is not taken care of is left to decay. So it is not only the world that is opened by taking

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks”, in *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1950, p. 19.

care of equipment, but also equipment in its belonging to the earth is taken care of, which means: within the world, the earth is taken care of; without a world, the earth will disintegrate.

We find this same constellation, in which the earth appears as something to be taken care of, in Heidegger's later essay on "The Question Concerning Technology". Here, he opens up a distinction between modern technology as a "challenging" (*Herausfordern*) of nature, on the one hand, and a different form of "revealing" that was characteristic of technology before modernity, on the other:

The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order [*bestellte*] appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase.¹⁸

In German, Heidegger uses "*hegen und pflegen*" ("take care of and maintain") and then again "*hütet*" ("watches over").¹⁹ *Hüten* ("taking care") leads us directly to the figure of the human being, as it is the peasant who is said to be watching over the earth. And it is the figure of the human being on which Heidegger focuses his argument in the following: after unfolding the essence of technology as "*Gestell*" ("enframing"), in which the real is understood in its specific way to reveal its being as a matter of "*Bestand*" ("standing-reserve"),²⁰ and in which the human being finds itself also posited, Heidegger contrasts "*Gestell*" with "*Geschick*" ("destining"):²¹ destining marks the potential freedom for the human being, for it is not simply posited within the *Gestell*, but the human being is also enabled to become "one who listens and hears."²² Enframing, *Gestell*, is the essence of technology: everything is calculated, aligned, and economized. Stand-

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¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt, New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1977, pp. 14–15.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik", in *Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910-1976, Bd. 7, Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 2000, pp. 15–16.

²⁰ Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik", p. 22.

²¹ Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", p. 24; Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik", p. 25.

²² Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", p. 25.

ing-reserve or *Bestand* means that modern technology is geared to the storage of energy and to the allocation of everything for further use. The human being is a moment of the *Bestand*, but the human being is also marked by the *Geschick*, which is the point at which history becomes possible. Within the *Bestand*, the human being is the open positioning of the *Geschick*.

The essence of modern technology starts man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve. "To start upon a way" means "to send" in our ordinary language. We shall call that sending-that-gathers [*versammelndes Schicken*] which first starts man upon a way of revealing, *destining* [*Geschick*]. It is from out of this destining that the essence of all history [*Geschichte*] is determined. History is neither simply the object of written chronicle nor simply the fulfillment of human activity.²³

Geschick is the reverse of *Gestell*: for the *Gestell* of modern technology enforces the revealing and challenging of nature, and the *Geschick* is the human being enacting this revealing and challenging. Thus, history is neither simply human activity – as it is sent on its way – nor is it simply a matter of what is happening, for what is happening expresses in essence something else. Technology is happening, but history is a case of listening to the *Gestell* expressed within it. By listening, the human being can set itself "truly free."²⁴ So we see, revealing is entangled with concealing; the human being is able to listen to the revealing within the concealing. In his famous reference to Hölderlin, Heidegger then characterizes destining as the "extreme danger" in which at the same time "the saving power is said to grow":

Every destining of revealing comes to pass from out of a granting and as such a granting. For it is granting that first conveys to man that share in revealing which the coming-to-pass of revealing needs. As the one so needed and used, man is given to belong to the coming-to-pass of truth. The granting that sends in 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

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

watch over the unconcealment – and with it, from the first, the concealment – of all coming to presence on earth.²⁵

As the translator remarks in a footnote, “coming-to-pass” is the translation of “Ereignis”, event.²⁶ The human being is “given to belong” to the event of truth – in German, Heidegger writes “*vereignet*”,²⁷ which refers back to *Ereignis*, and is also linked to the verb *eignen*, which then again refers to one’s own, one’s belongings or property. The event of truth does not simply happen as something distant from the human being, something to be watched, to be recognized, and to be accepted. The event is something to which the human being is given to belong; we might also say that the human being is assigned to the event of truth. Destining sends the human being on the way by which it is assigned or even ascribed to the event of truth. On the one hand, the human being is a moment of the *Gestell*, of the enframing or positioning of every thing, while on the other hand, the human being is capable of listening, and thus of realising the revealing within the concealed. And if destining, *Geschick*, entails an opening in which history dwells, then we get a more detailed understanding of what the event might be: the understanding, the acceptance, of being a part of the *Gestell*. Heidegger emphasizes that this does not imply some sort of fatalism, but neither is it the position of the master in which the human being will find itself. It is important to see that the dignity ascribed to the human being is situated, in classical terms, on the threshold between passivity and activity: the human being is not the one to master the event or to initiate it, the human being only has the capacity to “keep watch” – and here it is again “*hüten*”.²⁸ And what is it that the human being is able to watch over? “The unconcealment – and within it, from the first, the concealment – of all coming to presence on earth.” This last sentence of the quote gives a further hint as to how to understand the “keeping watch”, in which Heidegger finds the highest dignity of the human being. We may notice in passing that the “highest” dignity contrasts with the lower ground of the earth, such that in this link we already find an anticipation of the later quadruple of heaven and earth and mortals and immortals, as that by means of which Heidegger will unfold the notion of the world. We will return to this in a moment.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik”, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

What needs to be taken care of is not so much the unconcealment – for technology is a brute force of unconcealment itself – but more the concealment. We have to refer to the German again: concealment as well as unconcealment concern the “coming to presence on earth”, which in German is “*alles Wesens auf dieser Erde*”.²⁹ *Wesen* is often translated as essence, although Heidegger is careful to distinguish *Wesen* from *essence*, and he uses the noun – as he often does – as a verb, too. The earth is the site from which and to which everything moves in its essence, as unconcealment and concealment. This we can learn from another passage from “On the Origin of the Work of Art”:

Early on, the Greeks called this coming forth and rising up in itself and in all things φῶς. At the same time φῶς lights up that on which man bases his dwelling. We call this the *earth*. What this word means here is far removed from the idea of a mass of matter and from the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back – as, indeed, the very thing that it is – and sheltered. In the things that arise the earth presences as the protecting one.³⁰

And once more, we have to turn to the German. The German of the last sentence of our quote reads: “*Im Aufgehenden west die Erde als das Bergende.*”³¹ The earth unfolds its essence in that which arises, and it does so by salvaging that which rises up. The earth, as we saw Heidegger clearly stating, is neither a mass of matter nor the name of a planet; it is rather a lighting up, an opening that assembles.

Let us recall where we started this discussion: it is Heidegger’s aim to distinguish the thing in what makes it a thing from descriptions that reduce it to some properties (Where to start? Where to end?) or to its sensual appearance. This brings us to the question as to the essence of the thing, and Heidegger turns to the shoes displayed on a painting by Van Gogh. The thing, as a useful thing, as equipment, belongs to the earth, and is taken care of in the world. In the work of art it unfolds its truth. If we can see the truth in the work of art, then this is not to be understood as if we could see something that essentially belongs to the shoes

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, p. 21.

³¹ Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks”, p. 28.

as they are outside of the painting. The truth of the equipment essentially is within the painting, it unfolds its essence here. Truth is not the correspondence of a thought with a thing; truth is a thing being in its essence.

This tells us something about the earth to which these shoes, as Heidegger said, belong. We can see now that the earth is not simply the fertile ground from which things – first the living and then the non-living – would stem. The earth is not “mother earth”, in which things are sheltered and from which things originate. The earth is not the origin. Rather it is the work (understood as a work of art, as something that is brought about) in which the essence of the useful thing, the equipment, can unfold its truth. And the earth can only unfold as the opening up once it is watched over by the human being – watched over not as that which is revealed, but on the contrary, watched over as revealing and concealing.

The Truth of the World

It is from the point of truth that Heidegger conceives of the world.

The work, then again, in which the equipment reveals its truth, is linked to the world.

World is not a mere collection of the things – countable and uncountable, known and unknown – that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. World worlds, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being.³²

World, as we have seen before, is the sphere of taking care of the things of the earth.

By the opening of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits. In worlding there gathers

³² Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, p. 23.

that spaciousness from out of which the protective grace of the gods is gifted or is refused. Even the doom of the absence of the god is a way in which world worlds.³³

There are different worlds, worlds in which a God prevails, and worlds in which a God does not exist. As we said before: “world” in the sense of the “there is” cannot be a world without a God, but it is a world in which there is no God. Heidegger seems hesitant to accept that the modern world, the world of modern technology, is a world in which no God exists. But does he not precisely describe this world in which there is no God? It is the interplay of distance and proximity (as well as that of lingering and hastening, breadth and limits) that allows the essence of things to be. By opening a world, things are enabled to unfold their essence: and this does not simply mean that they are allowed to present themselves, they shine forth and exist essentially. World and work are closely related: “To be a work means: to set up a world.”³⁴ And it is the ambiguity – the form of a threshold – which justifies this link. In his article “Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger emphasizes the aspect of the shining that marks the work of art and is traditionally addressed as beautiful. “The shining”, he writes, “that is set into the work is the beautiful. *Beauty is one way in which truth as unconcealment comes to presence.*”³⁵ Just like the character of the work of art is ambivalent – as it comes to be essentially once it is not what it is – so is the relation between the earth and the world not an instance of harmonious salvation:

The opposition of world and earth is strife. We would, to be sure, all too easily falsify the essence of the strife were we to conflate that essence with discord and dispute, and to know it, therefore, only as disruption and destruction. In essential strife, however, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion [*Selbstbehauptung*] of their essences.³⁶

In this world, there is no God, for there is no harmonious *one*. Strife is the sense of the world, strife as the setting of a world to work, of setting up a world as a work. The strife is what essentially the work is: it is essentially there where it is not simply what it is. Opening up a world does not simply mean to bring something to its essence, as if the thing would find its fulfilment within a work.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

It is not as we often claim: “This is what a thing truly is!”, as if we would have stripped off the thing to its essence. It is the other way round: the essence dwells where the thing is brought to its ambivalence. The work brings forth the essence, but it does so by allowing for concealing and unconcealing to take place at the same time. Thus, against the unconcealing force of technology, the opening up of a world reinforces the ambiguity of the thing.

In terms of the relation between earth and world, we have to turn things over. Heidegger does not design a relation in which things that essentially belong to the earth are watched over within a world: in such a relation, earth might be taken as mother earth and the world as paternalistic care. The situation is more complex:

That into which the work sets itself back, and thereby allows to come forth, is what we called “the earth.” Earth is the coming-forth-concealing [*Hevorkom-mend-Bergende*]. Earth is that which cannot be forced, that which is effortless and untiring. On and in the earth, historical man finds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. “Setting forth [*Herstellen*]” is to be thought, here, in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth into the open of a world and holds it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*³⁷

To “let be” is the essential indication here. Within a world, the earth is allowed to be an earth. The world neither forms nor orients, neither guides nor brings about the earth, but the world lets the earth be an earth. Without a world, that is to say, the earth cannot be an earth.

But the world brings us back to the question of the thing and its nearness. In his talk on *The Thing*, Heidegger unfolds the thingness of the thing: What is it that makes a thing a thing? He rejects the position of knowledge, of science: it is unable to grasp the thing in its essence. But why? Because for Heidegger the essential moment of the thing is a void. The famous example in this talk is a jug, and Heidegger meticulously describes the void of the jug and the pouring out of a beverage, from this jug, which embraces a void. He relates “the gift of the pour”³⁸ to the mortals drinking it and to the immortals, for whom it is

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁸ Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, p. 11.

an oblation. Mortals and immortals, earth and heaven – these four form what Heidegger calls the “*Geviert*” (“fourfold”).³⁹ The fourfold “gathers”,⁴⁰ and this is the difficult and substantial relevance of the thought of the fourfold: it forms a gathering without referring to a preceding form. Rather, the gathering gathers in the form of the jug that is formed by this very gathering. Neither gathering nor form precede. They are of equal precedence, together in strife. This fourfold finally gives a definition of a world: “We name the appropriating mirror-play of the single fold of the earth and sky, divinities and mortals, the world. The world essences in that it worlds.”⁴¹

And directly afterwards, Heidegger further explains the “worlding” of the world:

This says: The worlding of world is neither explicable by nor grounded upon anything other than itself. This impossibility is not a matter of our human thinking being incapable of such explaining and grounding. The inexplicability and ungroundability of the worlding of the world lies much more in the fact that things like causes and grounds remain unsuitable for the worlding of the world.⁴²

We might be dissatisfied with the impossibility of explaining the worlding of world in explanatory terms. But Heidegger argues against any calculating or causal understanding of worlding. Worlding, for Heidegger, refers rather to thought. We have to think the thing to grasp its essence:

When we let the thing in its thinging essence from out of the worlding world, then we commemorate the thing as thing. Thoughtfully remembering in this way, we allow the worlding essence of the thing to concernfully approach us. Thinking in this way we are met by the thing as thing. We are, in the strict sense of the word, conditioned [*Be-Dingen*]. We have left the arrogance of everything unconditional behind us.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen, Bd. 79, Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, p. 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The process of accepting to be conditioned is what Heidegger understands as thinking: conditioned, that is, by the thing which is more than that what it plainly and simply appears to be. Can we really argue that a thing is more than what it appears to be? Heidegger's argument is exemplified by Van Gogh's shoes. We cannot say that a thing is not what it seems to be, we have difficulty telling what it is. To say what it is, we have to follow the thing throughout different spheres of its appearances, and in the painting we find the truth of its being. It is only within a world that a thing can unfold its truth, that it can be in its essence. And it is, as in the fourfold, neither a thing nor its truth that comes first; a thing unfolds its truth in its "thinging essence", its being within a world. But a world is strife – it is not a rational, scientific entity, it is neither some purity of the earth, nor some higher order of the world; it is the strife, not only between different essences, but of the essence within itself. A world is a work for it lets the thing be what it is, and the human being is only capable of being conditioned by the thing once it lets the thing be within a world. Thinking, then, does not mean to understand or to describe, it rather means to let oneself be approached: "When and how do the things come as things? They do not come through the machinations of humans. But they also do not come without the vigilance of mortals. The first step to such vigilance is the step back from merely representational, i.e., explanatory, thinking into commemorative thinking."⁴⁴

A world is work in which the thing can be what it essentially is, and it is the task of the human being to build this work, but this world is built not by accounting or counting, but by letting the thing be. Thinking is worlding, and it is the human being that thinks. But thinking is not an attempt at mastery; it is precisely the contrary. The human being is not the master of the world, but rather the rift of thought within the world, which allows the thing to be in its character as essentially unfolding its truth. Unfolding its truth, the thing is not only what it is, but also what it seems to be. It is what it is, but also what it is not. But the point of thought, thinking the thing, which the human being inscribes into the earth, is not only the possibility of letting the thing be, it is also a moment of the being of the thing: the thing is a thing when it is thought; it is a thing within and by the human being. To think the thing is not only to let it be, but also to let the thought be a thing.

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

“The horrible” was Heidegger’s title of a non-world in which the thing has lost its nearness. The loss of nearness appears amidst every thing, a moment of the uncanny within the thing. But the horrible is not uncanny because the thing has lost its clear outline; the horrible marks the loss of being within the thing. The true thing then is not the thing clearly outlined, but the thing that is let be in its being, as well as in its shining. The world is the space in which truth is thus: “The world is the truth of the essence of being.”⁴⁵

Our current attempts to think the crisis of the Anthropocene come along with the problem of understanding human beings as part of a changing geological structure. Maybe the danger implied in this endeavour is to lose the capacity to think a world and thus to lose the point of weakness at which a thing can be a thing, and at which the thought that allows a thing to be is a thing, too. If this is the case, the thought of the Anthropocene would have to remain an “instance [...] of technological behaviour.”⁴⁶

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