Introduction

Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was probably the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century; certainly he remains the most controversial. This enduring controversy stems not only from Heidegger's undeniably horrendous politics, legendarily difficult prose, and profoundly challenging views, but also from the fact that a list of the major thinkers inspired by the works he wrote after *Being and Time* (1927) reads like the required table of contents for any good anthology of "contemporary continental philosophy": Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, Maurice Blanchot, Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Hubert Dreyfus, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Rancière, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, and Slavoj Žižek. For all these "postmodernists" (the heading under which this diverse group is often lumped together), Heidegger's later philosophy served as a formative influence as well as a primary point of departure. Yet, despite his immense influence, Heidegger's own philosophical attempt to articulate a postmodern understanding of being – and so help usher in a postmodern age – remains shrouded in darkness and confusion along with the other views at the heart of his later thought.[1] That is a situation this book hopes to help remedy.

   Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity serves as a happy shorthand for what I think of as this book's full title: *Heidegger Beyond Ontotheology: Art and the Possibilities of a Meaningful Postmodernity*. As that more unwieldy title more clearly suggests, this book constitutes something of a sequel to my *Heidegger*

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[1] Pioneering investigations of this topic include Fred Dallmayr, "Democracy and Postmodernism"; Leslie Paul Thiele, *Timely Meditations: Martin Heidegger and Postmodern Politics*; and Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity*. These praiseworthy works approach their topic from a more political than philosophical perspective and, despite their insightfulness, they do not uncover the ontotheological roots of Heidegger's critique of modernity and so cannot convey the full specificity of his philosophical vision of postmodernity.

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on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education. There I showed how understanding the details of the later Heidegger's philosophical critique of metaphysics as "ontotheology" allows us to greatly improve our grasp of his controversial critique of technology, his appalling misadventure with Nazism, his prescient critique of the university, and his important suggestions for the future of higher education. *Heidegger on Ontotheology* showed, in other words, that *ontotheology* works like a skeleton key to Heidegger's notoriously difficult later thinking, a conceptual key that unlocks the door to the underlying structure of his later work and so allows us to understand it as much more philosophically coherent, unified, and defensible than is usually supposed. The underlying unity of Heidegger's later thinking can be seen clearly, I argued, in the fact that his diverse philosophical efforts all serve the same philosophical goal of trying to help us recognize, undermine, and transcend the nihilistic, "technological" ontotheology that continues to shape our late-modern age. Yet, if Heidegger's mature thinking is dedicated entirely to helping us uproot and transcend the ontotheological core of the late-modern age, then this immediately raises a number of pressing questions: How does Heidegger motivate the philosophical transition beyond modernity for which he calls? What specifically does he think such a genuine "postmodernity" would entail? Why does he think we late-moderns should seek such a postmodernity, and how does he think we might actually get there from here? Finally, how does Heidegger's own philosophical conception of postmodernity relate to and differ from what more typically passes under the cover of that much used and abused label?

Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity provides answers to these important questions – and several others besides. Here I explain Heidegger's philosophical critique of our "technological" late-modernity, clarify his view that art can help lead us beyond the nihilism of the modern age, think through several "postmodern" works from a post-Heideggerian vantage point, and conclude by examining the continuing danger and promise of Heidegger's thinking in a sympathetic yet critical way. It is my hope that this book will appeal not only to those concerned to understand the profound philosophical vision at the heart of Heidegger's later work, but also to those who are more broadly interested in contemporary theorizing about art and popular culture, about which this book contains several detailed discussions. Although these discussions often focus on works rather different from the ones Heidegger himself discussed, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* continues to pursue the Heideggerian conviction that thinking through art can help guide us into the future. This book is not another vague and starry-eyed celebration of the postmodern, however, but a philosophical exploration of what exactly "postmodernity" means *for Heidegger* (undoubtedly the greatest philosophical critic of modernity), as well as a partial attempt to elaborate and defend a set of post-Heideggerian views about what a genuinely meaningful postmodernity could still be for us.

Building on the perspective developed in my earlier book, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* begins by showing that when we understand what Heidegger really means by ontotheology, then we can also see that his critical broadsides against modernity – and his complementary calls for a genuinely *postmodern* understanding of being – are not nearly as philosophically indiscriminate, empty, or unmotivated as they otherwise appear to be. The first two chapters thus show how Heidegger's philosophical critiques of the modern age follow from – and so can only really be understood in terms of – his conception of the history of Western metaphysics as a series of ontotheologically structured ways of understanding the being of entities, that is, different ways of understanding what and how entities *are*. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Heidegger's still too often misunderstood view of Western metaphysics as ontotheology, clarifying the crucial details and exploring the larger significance of this key concept of his later thought. Building on this ontotheological background, Chapter 2 turns to focus on Heidegger's critique of the modern tradition of philosophical aesthetics in particular, because it is this tradition, Heidegger suggests, that obstructs our view of the clearest path leading beyond modernity. Together, the first two chapters show how the two epochs of modernity relate to and differ from one another as crucial permutations in "the history of being," Heidegger's name for Western humanity's changing sense of what it means for something to *be* at all. Chapter 3 then develops the positive philosophical vision at the core of Heidegger's later thought by presenting a new interpretation of his minor masterpiece, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Here I show that recognizing Heidegger's ambiguous use of the "nothing" in his phenomenological interpretation of Vincent van Gogh's painting *A Paiv of Shoes* (1886) allows us to reconstruct, for the first time, the specific phenomenological insights responsible for Heidegger's conviction that thinking through art can help show us the way to a genuinely postmodern understanding of being. This central chapter of my book thus shows concretely just what postmodernity really meant for Heidegger – and what it might still mean for us today.

To explore this question of the meaning of postmodernity today, Chapters 4 and 5 take Heidegger's thinking as the point of departure for two attempts to think through distinctive works of "postmodern" art. These works are drawn from our contemporary popular culture and reflect the implicitly contested understanding of being within it. The goal of these two post-Heideggerian discussions of postmodern art, then, is to help raise, clarify, and begin to come to terms with a few of the important questions already pressing in on our late-modern age from some of its possible "postmodern" futures. Chapter 4 opens the discussion by exploring the dominant meanings the term "postmodernity" currently possesses, seeking to clarify both their relationship to and their differences from Heidegger's philosophical vision of a postmodern understanding of being. Chapter 5

then discusses one of these differences in particular, casting a critical eye over the postmodern deconstruction of the hero. By critically exploring some of the serious philosophical issues that these popular "postmodern" works raise about the nature of our contemporary age, these two chapters of (what is sometimes called) "applied Heidegger" seek to address a few of those questions every generation must face concerning what we should preserve from the past to carry with us into the future, and what we should try to leave behind.

It will be obvious, however, that I make no attempt to apply Heidegger's understanding of art to the many different aesthetic genres in any comprehensive or systematic way.[2] If my own philosophical attempts to draw out the central lessons from Heidegger's understanding of art remain relatively modest, this is perhaps in keeping with the artistic subject matter this book ranges over: Works such as Jonathan Swift's popular satire, *Gulliver's Travels*; Vincent van Gogh's much beloved painting of *A Pair of Shoes* (1886); a single hit song by the rock band U2 ("Even Better than the Real Thing"); and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's comic book miniseries, *Watchmen* (a genre-transforming work currently taught in universities around the world as a "masterpiece of postmodern literature"). One could say that my hermeneutic analyses focus on "low" more often than "high" art, were that not to invoke a problematic distinction that most postmodern movements begin by rejecting, preferring instead to follow in Heidegger's footsteps by bringing the most advanced theoretical tools to bear on the popular works that quietly yet pervasively shape our historical self-understanding.[3] Heidegger famously thought that we need to learn to read Nietzsche's seemingly most "literary" work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "in the same rigorous way we read one of Aristotle's treatises" (WCT 70/ GA8 75). I go one step further here by extending Heidegger's dictum even

[2] At best, that would mean repeating the work already carried out by Julian Young in his important book on *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*. At worst, it would mean committing the kind of category mistake Robert Bernasconi diagnoses in "Heidegger's Displacement of the Concept of Art," in which one tries to assimilate or apply Heidegger's thinking about art to the very categories of the aesthetic tradition that, as we will see, he was in fact seeking to transcend from within.

[3] On the postmodern rejection of the distinction between fine and commercial art (most obvious in Andy Warhol's work), see Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 2. The present book, however, can be understood as a sustained rebuttal of Jameson's Marxian assertion that "Heidegger's 'field path' is, after all, irredeemably and irrevocably destroyed by late capital" (34–5), a claim Jameson can maintain so confidently only by *literalizing* Heidegger's philosophical metaphor. Indeed, the remarkable contrast between Jameson's insightful interpretations of multifarious cultural phenomena, on the one hand, and his superficial understanding of the philosophers he invokes, on the other, makes his book the inverted image of another influential work from the same period (albeit from the other side of "the culture wars"), viz., Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which combines an impressive grasp of modern philosophy with an incredibly shallow understanding of contemporary culture.

to that "lowliest" of the low genres, the comic book, and, in so doing, I suggest that we only ever truly *read* insofar as we practice the kind of slow and rigorous hermeneutics that Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein all taught. (This remains true, I think, even if the philosophical imperative to "Take your Time!" is lost on those oxymoronic "speed-readers" who set the daily values of the cultural marketplace.)[4] As we will see, Heidegger's view of art suggests that no one can predict ahead of time where the great works of art will emerge, those artworks capable of pervasively reshaping an historical age's self-understanding. Today's high art is often yesterday's low art (much "classical" music and Shakespeare, for instance, began as the popular works of their day), so it is only reasonable to suppose that some of today's low art will become tomorrow's high art – perhaps even some of the works discussed here.[5] Rather than worry too much about the inevitable controversies concerning canonization, however, I shall simply try to suggest that the important insights and lessons these seemingly humble works can still teach us about the possibilities of postmodernity make their philosophical study well worth our while.

My final chapters conclude by returning the focus to Heidegger's own thinking of postmodernity, seeking to dispel some more of the darkness and confusion surrounding the views at the core of his later thought. Chapter 6 helps explain Heidegger's postmodern call for an "other beginning" to Western history by clarifying the structure and goal of his notoriously difficult work, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. My thesis is that this esoteric work in fact records Heidegger's experimental attempt to develop a philosophical version of the musical art of the fugue, an innovative (but not entirely successful) experiment he devised in order to help articulate his postmodern ambitions. Chapter 7 brings the book to a close by exploring the danger and promise of Heidegger's thinking. Recognizing the complexity of that thinking, I continue to reject the superficial demand to either condemn or exonerate Heidegger's work whole-cloth, preferring to remain critical of what deserves our criticism and sympathetic about what merits our sympathy. (It is strange that something so obvious could still be so controversial.) At the same time, however, I also suggest that what remains dangerous and promising in Heidegger cannot be entirely separated but, instead, need to be thought in relation to one another. In this spirit of critical sympathy (the approach Heidegger himself called for as "hearing with thoughtful reticence" [FCM v/GA29–30 v]), I once again seek to clarify and so advance Heidegger's pivotal hope for

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[4] "The greeting of philosophers to one another should be: 'Take your time!'" Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 80.

[5] That U2 has become too "popular" to remain "hip" thus works in their favor here. Personally, however, I would be much more inclined to bet on *Watchmen* to make it into the canon, especially given the central role comics have come to play in the ongoing cultural shift, as one generation takes over the reigns from another.

an "other beginning" to Western history, this time by elucidating his deeply mysterious vision of a phenomenological gestalt switch capable of instantly transforming the greatest danger of late-modern technologization into the promise of a new, postmodern understanding of being. Finally, a brief concluding section makes a case "Against Conclusions" by gathering together and reflecting on some of the book's central insights into Heidegger, art, and the possibilities of a genuine postmodernity that remain open to us today.

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Understanding Ontotheology, or "The History that We Are"

> The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of think-ing that created them.
>
> Albert Einstein (popular bumper sticker)

> It is one of life's ironies in our times that so many of us require more knowl-edge, even to find our way home, than we really care to have.
>
> J. Glenn Gray, *The Promise of Wisdom*

What does Heidegger mean by *ontotheology*, and why should we care? We will see that Heidegger understands ontotheology as the two-chambered heart of Western metaphysics, "the history that we are" (N3 20/GA47 28). As I showed in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, Heidegger's deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition leads him to the view that metaphysics does not just concern philosophers isolated in their ivory towers; on the contrary, "Metaphysics grounds an age." As he explains: "Metaphysics grounds an age in that, through a specific inter-pretation of what is …, it gives the age the ground of its essential form" (QCT 115/GA5 75). Here Heidegger advances the thesis I call *ontological holism*. Put simply: Everything *is*, so by changing our understanding of what "is-ness" itself is, metaphysics can change our understanding of every-thing. In other words, metaphysics molds our very sense of what it means for something – anything – to *be*. Because everything intelligible "is" in some sense, Heidegger holds that: "Western humanity, in all its comport-ment toward entities, and that means also toward itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics" (N4 205/GA6.2 309). By shaping and reshaping our understanding of what "is-ness" is, metaphysics plays a foundational role in establishing and maintaining our very sense of the intelligibility of all things, ourselves included.[1]

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[1] See *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, Ch. 1; 20 note 16.

Heidegger's view that "metaphysics grounds an age" ("*ein Zeitalter,*" literally "an age of time," in the singular) presupposes two further theses, which I call *ontological historicity* and *epochality.* Ontological historicity, in a nutshell, is the thesis that our basic sense of reality *changes* with time. As Heidegger put it, "what one takes to be 'the real' is something that comes to be only on the basis of the essential history of being itself" (N4 232/NII 376). *Ontological epochality* just further specifies that Western humanity's changing sense of reality congeals into a series of relatively distinct and unified historical "epochs." Ontological holism teaches that metaphysics can change our sense of everything simply by changing our understanding of what "is-ness" is, but "light dawns gradually over the whole" (as Wittgenstein observed near the end of his life), and Western humanity's sense of what-is changes slowly and infrequently enough that individual human beings tend not to notice the change.[2] Many of us even experience a troubling sense of vertigo when first faced with the contention that humanity's basic experience of reality is historically variable, the kind of vertigo we might feel when first noticing that the ground we live and build our homes on is slowly shifting. Nonetheless, Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics makes a convincing case for ontological holism, historicity, and epochality by uncovering a succession of different ways in which Western humanity has understood what entities are. In the "history of being," these different "understandings of being" each "ground" and "guide" their respective ages.

Heidegger's deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition suggests that ontological historicity – our changing sense of what-is – congeals into five distinct but overlapping ontohistorical "epochs" in the "history of being," which we could call the *pre-Socratic, Platonic, medieval, modern,* and *late-modern epochs.* Foucault adopts Heidegger's epochs in his investigation of the different occidental *epistemes* or "regimes of truth," as does Levinas when he writes more poetically of different "mutations in the light of the world."[3]

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[2] See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 21. We tend not to notice this fundamental change, not only because of our "blindness to the immediate" (this paradoxical "distance of the near" is the first law of phenomenology, as we will see), but also because, in Heidegger's influential view (a kind of "punctuated equilibrium" theory), history – in the deepest "ontohistorical" (*seinsgeschichtlich*) sense – does not "happen" within epochs so much as between them, when a new ontotheological "truth event" or understanding of what and how entities *are* takes hold and spreads, consolidating past insights and catalyzing an historical transformation of our very sense of intelligibility. I shall suggest that these new understandings of being do not fall from the heavens (*à la* Badiou) but instead happen when a new way of understanding being that has been taking shape at the margins of an historical age (e.g., in works of art) suddenly becomes all encompassing, giving rise to a new understanding of being that pulls everything into its gravitational field. (See Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* and, for a telling critique of Badiou's view, see Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change.*)

[3] See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, and Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 59.

I find it illuminating to think of these epochs as historical *constellations of intelligibility*. Heidegger himself calls them "epochs" because, as readers of Husserl know, *epochê* is the Greek word for "holding back," "bracketing off," or as Derrida liked to say, "putting in parentheses," and Heidegger saw that each of the epochal understandings of the being of entities "holds back" the floodwaters of ontological historicity for a time – the "time" of an *epoch*.[4] Each of the five different historical epochs is unified by its shared sense of what is and what matters, but each of these epochs is grounded in a *different* way of understanding what and how entities *are*.

How, then, is it possible for each epoch to *share* a sense of what is and what matters, and yet for this shared sense of the intelligibility of things to be *different* for each epoch? By what "mechanism," as it were, is Western humanity's shared sense of the being of entities transformed and maintained? This question brings us directly to the two-chambered heart of Heidegger's view of metaphysics. For, an *ontotheology* is what puts the parentheses around an epoch, temporarily shielding a particular sense of what is and what matters from the corrosive sands of time. In Heidegger's terms, ontotheologies "sustain" and "guide" their epochs by establishing an historical understanding of the being of entities; ontotheologies supply the aforementioned "ground" from which an age takes its "essential form" (QCT 115/GA5 75). In other words, an ontotheology provides a temporarily unshakable understanding of *what* and *how* entities *are*, and thereby doubly anchors an epochal constellation of intelligibility. To say that "Metaphysics grounds an age" is thus to say that the shared sense of intelligibility unifying an epoch derives, in the last analysis, from an *ontotheology*.[5]

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[4] In the metaphysical tradition, Heidegger maintains, the question of the being *of entities* stands in for (and so eclipses) the deeper question of "being as such." Being as such "conceals itself in any given phase of metaphysics, [and] such keeping to itself determines each epoch of the history of being as the *epochê* of being itself" (N4 239/NII 383). (See also the explanation of T&B 9/GA14 8–9 in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 19–20.) This is why Heidegger often maintains that our next, "postmodern" understanding of being will not usher in another *epoch*; it will not lead to another metaphysical (i.e., ontotheologically-grounded) age. For, by understanding the being of entities in terms of being as such (i.e., as conceptually inexhaustible), the postmodern (and post-metaphysical) understanding of being will not "hold back" the floodwaters of ontological historicity; it will not temporarily dam time with another ontotheology and so ground another historical constellation of intelligibility. Instead, Heidegger believes that the radically pluralistic, postmodern age will be the "last" age (hence his talk of "the last God," which we will examine in Chapter 6), in so far as it constitutes a permanent openness to other possible interpretations, and so to the future.

[5] This suggests that the philosopher who understands how exactly metaphysics "grounds" and "guides" an age should also be able to discern the general direction in which it is moving historically. At first blush, the claim of any connection between philosophy and prophecy sounds dangerously hubristic (especially in light of Heidegger's own history). Nonetheless, we can see how metaphysics facilitates a kind of general historical prognostication once we grasp the relation between our own late-modern ontotheology and

I realize that, at first, "ontotheology" can sound like a dauntingly unfamiliar word. As an index of this unfamiliarity, "ontotheology" and its cognates have yet to make it into the official *Oxford English Dictionary*.[6] Shortly after *Heidegger on Ontotheology* was published, my intrepid teenage cousins pressed me on what "that big word" in my title meant. We happened to be at a public pool so, inspired by the moment, I suggested that if they thought of all reality as a beach ball, then they could think of ontotheology as the attempt to grasp the beach ball from the inside and the outside at the same time. (As a first approximation of Heidegger's views, I am still not too unhappy with this analogy, but I shall present more precise and suggestive images later.) What is crucial is that ontotheologies allow the metaphysical tradition to temporarily establish what it means for an entity to *be*, and that they do so by answering the question of what it means for something to be *in two different ways at the same time*.[7] We could say that metaphysics' ways of understanding what it means to be resemble what advertisers call "two-for-ones"; the "great metaphysicians" implicitly answer the question of reality's ultimate foundation twice-over by understanding the being of entities ontologically *and* theologically.

Indeed, for an ontotheology to work, it must "doubly ground" its age's sense of reality by comprehending the intelligible order in terms of both its innermost core and its outermost form or ultimate expression. Because these dual ontotheological foundations are what allow metaphysics to provide a temporarily stable basis for the intelligible order, Heidegger's notorious antipathy to "metaphysics" obscures the fact that, in his view, it is the two-chambered, ontotheological heart of metaphysics that unifies and secures our successive historical epochs. A series of metaphysical ontotheologies doubly anchor our successive constellations of historical intelligibility, securing the intelligible order (for the time of an "epoch") by grasping reality from both ends of the conceptual scale simultaneously: Both *ontologically* (from the inside-out) and *theologically* (from the outside-in). In this way, metaphysics secures our understanding of reality

the current global movement toward increasing technologization. Understanding this connection will help us to appreciate why Heidegger continues to inspire philosophical resistance to the *Zeitgeist* of global technologization.

[6] "Ontotheology" is listed in the "draft revision" of the on-line version of the OED (dated June 2004), but it is defined there only in (1) Kant's sense (explained below) and (2) as: "A branch or system of theology in which God is regarded as a being, esp. the supreme being." We will see that this latter construal of ontotheology, although common, mistakenly reduces the genus to one of its species.

[7] In order to secure its understanding of the being of entities, metaphysics seeks to establish "the truth concerning the totality of entities as such." This phrase is meant by Heidegger to be "positively ambiguous" between the ontological and theological ways of understanding the being of entities, connoting not ontology *or* theological but *both*. (I explain this point in detail in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 11–23.)