# Heidegger and Schopenhauer on Being's Conceptual Inexhaustibility

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In this paper, I will address the resonances, hitherto largely neglected, between the philosophies of Heidegger and Schopenhauer. Despite some groundbreaking work by Julian Young as well as Dale Jacquette (244-9), little Anglophone scholarship has been devoted to this topic. I will continue the task of exploring the "*affinities*" (Young 162) between these two philosophers by examining their views on how reality manifests itself to human intelligibility. In the first section, I summarize some of Heidegger's later views on the conceptual inexhaustibility of "being as such" and the role that art plays in revealing it. Then, I sketch Schopenhauer's epistemology to show how he likewise argues that there is a dimension of human experience that cannot be fully articulated in concepts. Finally, I show how both philosophers draw similar conclusions concerning the epistemological status of "feelings," the pitfalls of using words without grasping the experiences that anchor their sense, and the role of argumentation in philosophical discourse.

## 1. Being as Such, Poetic Insight, and Nothing More

As Heidegger's thought evolves beyond the form it took in *Being and Time*, his concern shifts from the being of Dasein in particular to a consideration of what he comes to call "being as such." As Iain Thomson explains, "'Being as such' is one of the later Heidegger's names for that conceptually inexhaustible dimension of intelligibility that all metaphysics' different ontotheological ways of understanding the being of entities *partly capture* but never *exhaust*" (20). In other words, in his later work, Heidegger endeavors to comprehend the common source from which

different metaphysical conceptions of reality spring. He concludes that metaphysics has always been mistaken in assuming that there is some *single* right answer to the question of what reality is—of "what is and what matters" (Thomson 9). Instead, the lesson to draw from the repeated failure of metaphysical thinking to finally capture the "perfect" understanding of what and how entities are is that our thinking about reality will always be "imperfect"—hearing "perfect" and "imperfect" in their etymological senses of "complete" and "incomplete," respectively. That is, *no* conceptual account of the nature of being will ever fully exhaust all that being is and can manifest itself as. "Being as such" thus designates the always incompletely graspable source of everything that we do and can understand to exist, or "what is inexhaustibly given to the human to think" (Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations* 156).

For the phenomenologist Heidegger, being as such is something we can encounter in our own experience. In fact, it can be considered as that dimension or aspect of our experience which we have not yet captured in concepts, and yet which is unknowingly staring us in the face all the time. Because of this invisible or inconspicuous quality, Heidegger sometimes refers to being as such—only seemingly paradoxically—as "nothing." This terminology first emerges only two years after *Being and Time* in the lecture titled "What Is Metaphysics?" The infamous line reads: "the nothing itself noths [*das Nichts selbst nichtet*]" (90). In his subsequent writings, "the" nothing recurs as this active, though initially unnoticed, plentiful presence, which Thomson describes as "the phenomenological manifestation of that which both elicits and eludes complete conceptualization, an initially inchoate phenomenon we encounter when we go beyond our guiding conception of what-is" (85). Being as such, in the guise of the nothing, is thus the excess that remains over after we have seemingly pinned down the true nature of reality.

In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger shows us how we can arrive at a phenomenological encounter with the nothing through his meditation on the "thingliness of the thing" (4) and his consideration of a painting by Van Gogh. Starting from the notion that an artwork, whatever else it may be, is a "thing" with a physical presence in the world, he decides to first inquire into the essence of a "thing" in order to discover, on that basis, the essence of an artwork. His investigation unearths three traditional conceptions of the thing, each of which fails to adequately capture our actual experience of things. He concludes that it is precisely this uncapturability that truly characterizes thingliness. As he formulates this insight, "The inconspicuous thing withdraws itself from thought in the most stubborn of ways. Or is it rather that this self-refusal of the mere thing, this self-contained refusal to be pushed around, belongs precisely to the essential nature of the thing?" (12). Thus, in our very phenomenological encounter with things, we run up against their ineradicable inaccessibility. They simultaneously and inseparably reveal themselves to us while escaping our full grasp, and it is

precisely this elusive aspect of the thing that we can recognize as the "no thing" in which they are grounded. Hence, as Thomson points out, the very fact that not everything about a thing shows up to us "does show up to us" in our experience of the inadequacy of our concepts to fully name the thing's essence (79n19). In this way, the nothing of being as such makes its way into our experience.

Shortly afterward in this same text, Heidegger turns his attention to "a well-known painting by Van Gogh" depicting what Heidegger calls "[a] pair of farmer's shoes and nothing more" (13, 14). It is easy to hear this phrase as saying that the painting depicts *only* farmer's shoes, but Thomson argues that we should hear the "nothing more" as the plentiful, dynamic nothing described above. For in the same paragraph, as Thomson points out (85), Heidegger literally writes, "Surrounding this pair of farmer's shoes there is nothing, in which and to which they can belong" (14). Such a wording suggests that the nothing is the background out of which the shoes emerge and in which they are situated, as it is for every entity in general. Van Gogh captures a sense of this bountiful, all-containing nothing in the detail and texture of this background, which is not a featureless monochromatic abyss but a teeming sea of colors, brushstrokes, and half-glimpsed shapes. In this way, the shoes appear continuous with the background, as if they were simply slightly more recognizable constellations of the figures and colors composing it, and yet they stand out from it and acquire their distinctive character in contrast to it. Heidegger thus sees Van Gogh's painting as a dramatic, palpable revelation of the vibrant, conceptually untamable source and medium of the intelligible structures that populate our experience of reality.

Heidegger's account of the historical vicissitudes of our understanding(s) of thingliness, juxtaposed with his interpretation of Van Gogh's visionary painting, reveals both the forces that conceal the richness of being from us and those that promise to disclose it once more. He claims that the ancient Greek understanding of thingliness, born from an original insight the nature of reality, became lost to history when the original Greek terms were translated into Latin "*without the corresponding and equiprimordial experience of what they say, without the Greek word"* ("Origin" 6). Uprooted from the experiential soil in which they first grew, the Latinized fruits of Greek thought withered from lack of proper nourishment. This nourishment can come only from a continual renewal of the same poetic insights that gave rise to those words in the first place. Without it, men and women merely mouth the words without hearing their meaning. Worse yet, they remain unaware of their own semantic deafness because they imagine that their attenuated understanding of these terms is complete and adequate. But in so imagining, they fall victim to what Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls "leveling down," whereby "everything primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known" (165). The monotonous, habitual repetition of these words without our struggling to recapture their original sense numbs us to the striking, "unfamiliar source" from which they arose, doing "violence" to the things they name ("Origin"

7). Before long, our understanding of being becomes so impoverished that we become susceptible to a nihilistic outlook that is blind to being's rich and inexhaustible meanings.

However, if the original impetus to our understanding of being consisted in a creative insight into the nature of reality, then a sense of the plenitude and wonder of being can be restored through new insights of our own. Such insights, Heidegger suggests, will be hard to come by, at least in part owing to the obfuscating power of the customary, leveled-down interpretations of things. Attaining a fresh vision of the awesome dynamism of being as such requires struggling against these customary interpretations in order to twist free from them and be released into the apparent nothing that lies beyond them. However, certain people seem better equipped for this task than others. These are creative artists, who are able to see beyond the ordinary and communicate their vision through their artwork. We have already seen how Heidegger takes Van Gogh to be just such an individual, who was able to glimpse the dynamic presencing of the nothing and convey his insight not through words, but through paintings. Those who are receptive to these paintings may also catch a glimpse of being as such and thereby overcome the stultifying force of custom and habit. This is why Heidegger sees in art the possibility of overcoming our "rootlessness" through a reconnection with the inexhaustible source from which and in which our lives and meanings flow ("Origin" 6).

## 2. Schopenhauer on Concepts and Feelings

In this section, I will outline aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy that resonate strikingly with the aspects of Heidegger's thought discussed above. In particular, I hope to show that Heidegger's views on the conceptual inexhaustibility of our experience of being find salient parallels in Schopenhauer's epistemological doctrine of the discrete nature of concepts versus the continuous nature of perceptions.

According to Schopenhauer, concepts are nothing more than abstractions from non-conceptual experience. As such, they necessarily contain less information than the unique, individual experiences from which they are drawn. They are thus "partial representations" that "have arisen merely through our thinking something away" (2: 378). Schopenhauer refers to the non-conceptual experiences from which they are abstracted as "feelings." He defines "feeling" [*Gefühl*] negatively, in the broadest possible sense, as "every modification of consciousness…which is *not abstract concept*" (1: 53). Under this broad heading, Schopenhauer includes not merely states of pleasure and pain but also spatiotemporally, causally structured representations of empirical objects. According to him, all the information we can ever abstract into concepts is already present in our felt perceptions. Conceptual articulation cannot *add* to our knowledge, but can only

*convert* it into a different form (1:54).

While concepts are indispensable for human life, the fact remains that they are paltry, low-resolution copies of the "inexhaustible" richness of felt perception (2: 76). They can only ever asymptotically approximate that richness, but never fully capture it, since concepts are discrete, while perceptions are continuous. Schopenhauer's favorite image to illustrate the relation between concepts and perceptions is the relation between a mosaic and the painting on which it is modeled. He writes, "However fine the mosaic may be, the edges of the stones always remain, so that no continuous transition from one tint to another is possible. In the same way, concepts, with their rigidity and sharp delineation, however finely they may be split by closer definition, are always incapable of reaching the fine modifications of perception" (1: 57). I am tempted to modernize this analogy and add that concepts relate to perceptions as a digital reproduction of a Van Gogh painting relates to the painting itself: the former is pixelated, stubbornly two-dimensional, likely smaller than the original, whereas the latter stands starkly before us, jumping out at us with three-dimensional globs of paint, in its full life-sized glory.

Via this distinction between concepts and non-conceptual experience, Schopenhauer effectively maintains that there is a "conceptually inexhaustible dimension of our reality [which shows up in] a kind of preconceptual givenness and extra-conceptual excess that precedes and exceeds" all conceptualization, as Thomson expresses this point *apropos* Heidegger (35). Adding Schopenhauer to the conversation introduces a different perspective on *why* non-conceptual experience is conceptually inexhaustible. His answer concerns the incongruity between the discrete nature of concepts and the continuous nature of the non-conceptual experiences from which they are drawn. Just as no tessellation using polygons, however many of them you have or however small you make them, can perfectly match the area of a circle, so no discursive description can ever do complete justice to the way reality concretely shows up to us. There will always be an excess that may be (partly) captured through another description, but no description or set of descriptions will ever capture it all.

## 3. Heidegger and Schopenhauer on Feelings, Words, and Arguments

Using the terminology of feeling, Schopenhauer's epistemology sounds a striking note. Keeping in mind that concepts can never give us new knowledge, but only translate the knowledge we already have into a different form, Schopenhauer's position amounts to the claim that all knowledge and insight is primarily *felt*, and only secondarily articulated (though never wholly adequately) into conceptual, discursive form. We acquire new knowledge only through our intuitions, perceptions, practical engagements, emotions, desires, and whatever else we

experience concretely. As striking as this view may be, it accords with many colloquial uses of the word "feeling." Thus, we may say that a skilled pool player *feels* the laws of mechanics and geometry while immersed in a game, usually without knowing (discursively, in the abstract) a single equation or theorem (Schopenhauer 1: 56), or a decent skateboarder *feels* how to glide down a hill without falling over or smashing into pedestrians, or a professional carpenter *feels* that a certain hammer is too heavy for the job.

Heidegger likewise suggests that our feelings are wiser than we give them credit for. During the course of his inquiry into the nature of the thing, he remarks that one often "feels" (7) that violence has been done to the concept of the thing through the kind of leveled-down pseudo-thinking that complacently abjures genuine insight in favor of unexamined secondhand words and phrases. He defends the validity of this feeling by suggesting that "perhaps what, here and in similar cases, we call feeling or mood is more rational—more perceptive, that is—than we think; more rational, because more open to being than that 'reason' which, having meanwhile become *ratio*, is misdescribed as rational" (7). Schopenhauer's epistemology concurs with and explains Heidegger's suspicion: according to the former, the seat of all wisdom and insight is our intuitively felt perception, which is our primary access to reality. Reason's access to being, by contrast, is only second-hand, and at best can do no more than clarify and draw out the implications of what we have already, in the broadest possible sense, felt. While he would not maintain that all "feelings" are on the same level or warrant the same degree of assent (since this concept of feeling is so broad and heterogeneous), still our basic perception of the world is something felt rather than thought.

Moreover, Schopenhauer, like Heidegger, is sensitive to the detrimental philosophical consequences of a slavish attachment to words whose meanings we have failed to experience for ourselves. Such words are ultimately dead ends, *Holzwege* in a purely negative (and non-Heideggerian) sense: "Concepts and abstractions that do not ultimately lead to perceptions are like paths in a wood [*Wegen im Walde*] that end without any way out" (2: 82). Thus, any philosophy that starts not from original insight but from these mummified hand-me-downs (words like "the absolute, absolute substance, God, infinite, finite, absolute identity, being, essence," or, one might add, like subject, substance, thing) ultimately goes nowhere and fails to enrich our understanding of reality (2: 82). This might not be a problem but for the fact that philosophers "at all times" have attempted to philosophize on the basis of such concepts (2: 83). When they do so, and thus when the words and concepts they use to philosophize are not backed by the relevant experience and insight, their minds are "like a bank whose liabilities are ten times in excess of its cash reserve, so that it ultimately becomes bankrupt" (2: 78). While the idea that philosophy originated in some primordial experience of being that has since been lost in translation, and hence that our estrangement from being follows a historical trajectory, is peculiar to Heidegger, Schopenhauer

would agree that philosophy suffers to the extent that it is guided by words whose meanings we have not managed to perceive for ourselves. Likewise, while he does not draw the implication himself, his philosophy provides the resources to conclude that, insofar as a civilization is shaped by such words, it will ultimately suffer cultural and ontological bankruptcy (such as by struggling with pervasive nihilism).

Schopenhauer also concludes on the basis of his epistemology that rational arguments do no more than make explicit what was already implicitly contained in the premises. For Schopenhauer, if we want to extend our philosophical insight at all, we have "to perceive, to allow the things themselves to speak to us, to apprehend and grasp new relations between them, and then to precipitate and deposit all this into concepts, in order to possess it with certainty; this is what gives us new knowledge" (2: 72). In all these ways, Schopenhauer's approach sounds proto-phenomenological. Despite his subordination of argument to insight, "Schopenhauer argues nearly everything he can to the hilt," as Bryan Magee memorably puts it (41), although he nearly always clinches every point he makes with a vivid analogy or comparison to leave his readers with an intuitive image to illustrate this point. This emphasis on direct insight, on showing rather than telling, certainly resonated with Schopenhauer's most influential reader, Nietzsche, who seems to have taken Schopenhauer's suggestion and run with it, breaking through at times to a register of writing that is equally philosophical and poetic. Heidegger continues this tradition with his "poetic" turn after *Being and Time* in which "he is no longer content simply to construct arguments in relatively straightforward philosophical prose, but also begins to try to lead his audience performatively to see the phenomenon ultimately at issue for themselves" (Thomson 81). Likewise for Schopenhauer, "writing and speaking, whether didactic or poetical, have as their ultimate aim the guidance of the reader to that knowledge of perception from which the author started" (2: 72). The underlying point on which they agree is sound: the only way to enrich our knowledge is through our own observations and insights, not through aping the technical terms and argument structures of others. We can test the validity of others' words only by comparing them with our own experience, by struggling to see the same thing they purportedly saw, and by articulating the fruits of this struggle for others to test on their own.

In this paper, I have sketched a few convergences between Schopenhauer and Heidegger concerning the conceptual inexhaustibility of non-conceptual experience and the philosophical implications they draw from this premise. I hope thereby to have shown that more fruitful work remains to be done concerning the relation between these two philosophers' bodies of work.

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