

Analysis of the Concept of Reliability in The Origin of the Work of Art

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Abstract:

In Heidegger's article *The Origin of Works of Art*, "reliability" is an obscure but not easy to understand concept. By contrast with "usefulness", we can find that "reliability" is revealed because of the self-manifestation of the existence of the appliance. In this manifestation, the existence of the farmer woman is also revealed, so that the farmer woman has a grasp of her own world and hears the silent call of the earth. Heidegger chose works of art to reveal the existence of utensils because: First of all, although utensils can show their existence by themselves, such manifestation can only be realized at a specific moment; Secondly, the disclosure of the existence of the appliance itself depends on abnormal behaviors or phenomena, and it is no longer the appliance itself that is playing a role. At the same time, the artistic work reveals the existence of the appliance depends on the image reproduction of the appliance. In addition, although Heidegger's division of the boundary between instruments and works of art appeals to the mystery of art, it does not lead to the elitism of art, because Heidegger's division is not at the level of existence.

Keywords: Equipment, Reliability, The Origin of the Work of Art

This paper will start with Heidegger's discussion on the nature of equipment, trying to clarify the boundaries between equipment and work of art.

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger explained the essence of the work of art through the revelation of the nature of the peasant shoes in Van Gogh's paintings. But we should note that in the first subsection, Heidegger originally tried to get some clues about the nature of work of art by the discussion of the nature of equipment and the comparison of equipment, pure objects, and works of art. These two ways of thinking are different. Though the train of thought in the first subsection is forgotten, it is beneficial to our understanding of the work of art. Moreover, when Heidegger talks about the essence of equipment, he implies the occurrence of the world's worlding¹. But how does the essence of the equipment make the world world? And the occurrence of the world's worlding is also the occurrence of truth, so there is a possibility of making the truth happen in the essence of the equipment. So what is the difference between the relationship between the equipment and the truth and that between the work of art and the truth? This question may also provide an entry point for us to understand the boundary between works of art and equipment. Therefore, the discussion of the "reliability" of the equipment becomes the primary issue.

I

So what did Heidegger mean when he proposed that the essence of equipment is reliability? Usefulness seems to be closer to our daily understanding, but why does Heidegger say that reliability is the more primitive nature of equipment? The first thing we seem to be addressing is the question, what is something like "the essence of equipment is reliability" or "the essence of equipment is usefulness"? Is it the truth? Is it some concrete truth? Obviously, these two sentences are by no means truths in the sense of Heidegger, but

¹ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 14.

truths in the sense of traditional metaphysics that he tried to distinguish, truths in the sense of conformity of propositions, that is, truths as correctness¹.

Then, what state of unmasking of beings as beings do these two propositions respectively conform to? When we speak of usefulness, it is actually a grasp of a way of existing in which the equipment exists, that is, when the user has owned the equipment for a long time and has become very familiar with it. So it has become extremely unobtrusive, and is only used naturally when needed. And in this state, the grasp of the existence of the equipment, the grasp of its unconcealed state is the proposition that "the essence of the equipment is usefulness". But what Heidegger wants to emphasize, and what we need to pay attention to is such a question—is this the whole essence of the equipment? Is this the self-unveiling of equipment as equipment? Obviously not. A piece of equipment becomes equipment not only after we turn a blind eye to it, but when we first own it, the equipment is already a piece of equipment. At this moment we may be excited to obtain it for the first time. Perhaps when using it, we will be strongly aware of its existence, and always notice it from time to time, but at this time the equipment is already the equipment itself. We are excited and pay more attention to it unconsciously because it is such a piece of equipment, and it is already at hand². Our attention to it is not a contemplation of it as a ready-made thing, but a natural sight of it as a hands-on thing.

The initial striking and excitement is not just simple emotional arousal, but contains the arousal of the vitality of the owner, and a kind of power that makes a man perceive his world and plan his own life, although this force is not as strong and persistent as that the works of art will bring. We will discuss this difference later. This power of equipment can be illustrated by an example from literature. In *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, a former

¹ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 29.

² Martin H. (1996). *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. State University of New York Press. 65.

Soviet writer, the desk at Mikulichin's house is a piece of equipment with such power. When Zhivago took refuge in Valregino, he glanced at the Mikulichins' study. The large desk by the window, almost as wide as the wall, caught his eye. He said to the host, "What a wonderful place you have! What a splendid study, it must be a perfect place to work in, a real inspiration."¹ In later, when Zhivago came to this house again, the desk losing its master strongly attracted his attention and aroused his writing enthusiasm: "Once again, as so long before, Yurii Andreievich stood spellbound in the door of the study, so spacious and comfortable with its large, convenient table by the window. And once again he thought that such austere surroundings would be conducive to patient, fruitful work."² "From the moment they got up, Yurii Andreievich kept glancing at the table standing so temptingly by the window. His fingers itched for paper and pen."³ If we look back on our life, we will find our own desk of the Mikulichin, and the equipment that kindles our passion and bestows us the honey of being.

We can imagine that after a period of time we will no longer pay attention to that piece of equipment, and it becomes the same as other equipment we already have before, but this once striking is also the essential state of the equipment as equipment. Then the grasp of the whole essence of the equipment is what the proposition "the essence of the equipment is reliability" is intended to express.

II

So how do we make sense of equipment, which were initially striking but later unobtrusive? According to Heidegger's discussion of reliability, we can interpret reliability in this way, that is, reliability refers to the guarantee of a certain underlying causal connec-

¹ Boris P. (1997). *Doctor Zhivago*. The New American Library. 228.

² Boris P. (1997). *Doctor Zhivago*. The New American Library. 356.

³ Boris P. (1997). *Doctor Zhivago*. The New American Library. 357.

tion¹. Equipment, unlike non-equipment, must have been made for a certain purpose, and therefore must have had some connection with the world of causal connections. But the causal connection in the equipment is not always the causal connection of the world in Da-sein. Strictly speaking, the pre-set causal connection in the essence of equipment is only a potential causal connection. This kind of connection is not a causal connection that always tends to be embedded in the world of Da-sein silently and fittingly when the equipment appears at the very beginning. When the unfamiliar equipment hits the original causal connection, the original causal connection, this equipment, and Da-sein all become conspicuous at the same time. And just at that moment, the equipment begins to embed itself in the original causal connection and change it at the same time. This embedding-changing is not arbitrary, but dictated by the intended use of the equipment. However, this embedding-changing is not entirely mechanical, not merely an unfolding of something already known, but a kind of self-generation with certain free space. We can often find such situations in our daily life. There are two boys who get a pair of shoes respectively. But one of them already has a lot of shoes in a well-to-do life while the other from a poor family has never had sneakers. Then the meaning of the sneakers to them is completely different. Although they both wear it to play football, and the appearance of the new shoes brings excitement to their daily football training to some extent, there is no doubt that the change that the appearance of this pair of new shoes has brought about is completely different. But the embedding-changing of the equipment to the original causal connection will be completed. When this embedding-changing is completed, that is, when the equipment has completely become a piece of familiar equipment, the light by which the equipment, the causal connection, and Da-sein were opened is extinguished. This completion is pre-determined by the essence of the equipment. As equipment, it has always pre-determined the complete insertion into the

¹ Martin H. (1996). *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. State University of New York Press. 70.

causal connection it encounters. This is the promise and guarantee of the essential nature of the equipment as an equipment. This commitment and guarantee are the essence of the equipment.

We can find that in our interpretation of the nature of the equipment, there is actually a certain truth happening. When the equipment first meets the user, enlightening the causality of Da-sein and the mortal existence, there is truth happening. Therefore, in the essence of the equipment, there is actually the happening and operation of the truth. Although Heidegger did not directly mention the relationship between equipment and truth in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in fact, many of his statements in the article are about the occurrence of truth, for example, "World and earth exist for her and those who share her mode of being only here – in the equipment"¹, here the "exist... here", that is, "present", the reliability of the equipment makes the world and the earth appear in the presence, which can only be realized when the truth occurs; another example, "The equipmental being of the equipment, its reliability, keeps all things gathered within itself, each in its own manner and to its own extent"², this kind of gathering of beings can only happen when truth occurs. But in spite of the equipment's relation to truth, this occurrence of truth is short-lived. Because the causal connection in the essence of the equipment is ultimately determined by the purpose of the equipment, and such production purpose is born to be fit for the world, the embedding-changing of the equipment to the original causal connection must end. The occurrence of the truth in this equipment also comes to an end.

III

From this, the difference between equipment and works of art is obvious. The difference between equipment and works of art is not whether they are useful or not, or their uses are different, because if a work of art is defined in terms of use, it is not a work of art itself. In fact, we can see their difference in their different rela-

¹ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 14.

² Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 15.

tion to the truth. As discussed in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the essence of the work of art is to set the truth into the work, whereby the truth enters its eternal brilliance¹, and the dispute between world and earth in the work of art does not end, but perpetually keeps itself as a dispute², which is clearly different from the relationship of the equipment to the truth. Because of their different relationships with truth, their fates are also different: equipment is divided into old and new, they are consumables, they always have their service life, and there will always be a day when they will be used up, while the work of art is eternal; there will always be a day when the equipment becomes ordinary, while the momentum in the work of art makes the work of art manifest itself forever³.

However, here, obviously, we naturally have such questions, is the line between works of art and equipment really so clear? Are all works of art really timeless? Is it true that all equipment will soon become ordinary? In fact, we sometimes find some works boring and common, and sometimes we find certain equipment around us especially intriguing. Therefore, although the boundaries between works of art and equipment are clear, there are some pieces of equipment that seem to be somewhat artistic and equipment-like works of art.

What is a piece of artistic equipment? It is the kind of equipment that won't become commonplace in a short time. There is such extract cited by Heidegger in the essay named *What Is A Poet:* "Even for our grandparents a 'house', a 'spring', a familiar tower, yes even their clothes, their coat: infinitely more and infinitely more intimate; each thing, almost, a vessel in which they found the human, and preserved and added the human to it."⁴ These objects are equipment with seemingly artistic features. However, intriguing as they are, they will not be brilliant all the time like works of art. Their being will inevitably be ignored when being used.

¹ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 19.

² Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 27.

³ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 39-40.

⁴ Martin H. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press. 218.

What is a work of art like equipment? There are two cases. One is that there is a certain concept or idea that is so prominent or conspicuous in the work that we cannot help viewing it as its primary value, and then the work of art seems to be a carrier to express this idea or notion. But in fact, we see it as a work of art not because of the ideas or thoughts in it, but because of something else, the poetics in it, its creation of truth in the Heideggerian sense. But if we take the concept or idea in it as its artistic value, then when we are very familiar with the concept or idea which though had a great impact on us at first, the work will seldom touch us. But usually, it will ultimately not become completely untouchable, because after all, we always feel that there is something intriguing about it, and this intriguing part is its artistry. This is the equipmentalization of works of art due to our conception of art. But there are also some so-called works, which are literally equipmental works, that is, they have nothing intriguing except to convey ideas. The extreme example here is fables. Such equipmental works may initially be able to bring us a touch, just like the touch that equipment brings to us, but this touch will eventually disappear completely, so this so-called work is more appropriate to be called equipment than work.

Emphasizing the boundaries between equipment and work of art is not to imply that the value of work of art is higher than that of equipment, or that art is higher than philosophy. Due to its relationship with truth, equipment has certain similarities with works of art, which makes it easier for us, whose minds are easily influenced by equipment, to confuse the boundary between them, and to understand works of art by the existence of equipment. The point is that only when we accept a piece of work of art as work of art, not as equipment for carrying ideas, can we not miss its most essential value, which is unique to it.

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