Relating Martin Heidegger’s “On the Essence of Truth” to Art

 Sabine Trafimow

1. The Traditional Definition of Truth: “Accordance”

In his essay “On the Essence of Truth” (Heidegger, 1961), Martin Heidegger explores what “truth” is. He states that the traditional definition of “truth” comes down to an “accordance” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2). He then explains that there are two kinds of “truth” in this “common” way of conceptualizing it: First, “material truth”, and second, “propositional truth” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2).

“Material truth” can be summarized as follows:

A “matter”……..”in accordance”……with its widely accepted definition (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2).

 Heidegger gives the example of “true” versus “false gold” (ibid., p. 2). We have an agreed-upon concept that must be met before we accept a piece of gold that is shown to us as “true”. If this happens, we have “accordance”, that is, “truth” (ibid., p. 2). If, on the other hand, someone shows me a gold chocolate coin, it does not tick all the boxes regarding the features that the definition of “true” ”gold” includes. The key point is that in “material truth” it is the “object” (in this case, the physical object, the chocolate coin) that is assessed regarding “truth”.

“Propositional truth” can be summed up as:

A “statement”…..in “accordance”……with a “matter“ (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2).

This means that when I make a “statement”, the “statement” matches what I am talking about (ibid., p. 2). Here is an example. I hold up a yellow rose, and I say: “This is a yellow rose”. The “statement” is “in accordance” with the rose that is seen – the “statement” is hence “true”. In the case of “propositional truth”, what is assessed is not the rose but the “statement” (see Heidegger, 1961, p. 2).

1. “Accordance” Applied to Art

Let us take these traditional concepts of “truth” and apply them to art.

“Material truth” and Art

A “matter”……”in accordance” ………. with its widely accepted definition (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2).

In the case of artistic production, in the current discussion limited to the creation of drawings or paintings, it is the visual aspect of a “matter” or physical object that is most salient. What something looks like is the starting point for drawing or painting, at least in traditional, representational art. A pear has certain visual characteristics that we have learned. These, of course, enable us to say whether something is a pear or an apple.

“Propositional Truth” and Art

Now the “statement” is not a verbal one, but one but one that is visual in nature. What is judged with respect to its “truth” level is not a sentence that is said, but a drawing or a painting. Thus, we have:

The drawing or painting………..”in accordance”………………….with the “matter” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2)

I taught drawing for several years. In the process of teaching beginning drawing, my goal was to teach the accuracy, or the “accordance” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2) between the drawings the students were working on and the objects that they saw. The students were drawing still life arrangements that I had set up in the classroom. For me, it was about teaching students how to see “things” (see Heidegger, 1961, p. 4) in more detail. This mainly entailed two kinds of observation:

Observation of FINER NUANCES in shapes, colors, and degrees of light. As a result of learning and teaching how to draw, I have found that what we know about the visual appearance of something tends to be general. We know what the shape of a pear is…roughly, that is. There is a general mental concept of the shape of a pear that we have in our heads. This kind of concept though can hinder our close observation when it comes to drawing. It can make us draw what we know, and not so much what we really see when we engage in close, detailed observation. When we look closely, we see that there are shape differences between, let us say, three pears set up in a still life to be drawn.

Observation of RELATIONSHIPS. This relates to the first type of observation. How much darker is this blue compared to the one next to it? A crucial issue in art is that of proportion. Here we get into questions such as “How tall is the decanter relative to the wine glass?”, “How wide is the lampshade relative to its base?” Here again, we can be misled by what we think we know. When it came to figure drawing, a long time ago I would draw the hands too small relative to the rest of the body, and I would draw the eyes so that they were situated way too high up on the head. I learned later that the eyes should be at the middle line between the top line and the bottom line that delineates the head. That came as a surprise – I had THOUGHT that I knew, and I consequently ended up drawing what I had stored in my mind rather than what I could have drawn had I looked closely and analytically.

1. Heidegger’s Concept of the “Open Region”

In the essay “On the Essence of Truth” (Heidegger, 1961), Heidegger describes an idea that has multiple possibilities for applications: The concept of the “open region” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 4). How is it, Heidegger asks, that something can be in “accordance” with something else? (ibid., p. 4). The answer lies in the “open region” concept (ibid., pages 4-5). It can be summarized like this (we are returning to “propositional truth” for the moment):

 “Open Region”

A “statement” ……………….…….can adapt to…………………….. a “thing”/”being”

is is

“open”, “free” “opened up”

(Heidegger, 1961, pages 4-5, 6-7).

What does all this mean? Making a “statement” is a human behavior (Heidegger, 1961, p. 5), and human behavior is “open” and “free” (Heidegger, 1961, pages 4-5)– which means that it can adapt to any “beings” that may be seen (Heidegger, 1961, pages 5 -6, 8). The “beings” in turn are “opened up” (Heidegger, 1961, pages 4-6) – we see them, we identify them, and we can react to them in keeping with their respective identities (ibid. p. 5-6). The “open region” is the realm where it is possible for a human behavior to connect to a “thing” or a “being” in a way that is in keeping with, appropriate for, the “thing” or “being” that is perceived and responded to (ibid., pages 5-6). The capacity for human behavior to adapt to anything, and to have behavioral choices – that, Heidegger says, it what makes “correctness” of a “statement” and hence “truth” possible (Heidegger, 1961, p. 5).

This becomes clearer if we imagine a scenario in which we could react to any “being” in only one way, with one preset behavior or “statement”. How then could any behavior, or any “statement” be assessed as “correct” or “incorrect”/ “true” or “untrue?” Similarly, if “beings” could not be “opened up” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 5) to us, we could not respond to them.

Without the “open” human behavior that can adapt to anything, there would be no such thing as “correctness” or “truth”. Heidegger thus concludes:

“The essence of truth is freedom” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7).

1. Heidegger: “Truth” is More than “Correctness of Statements” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6).

Not happy with the conceptualizations of “truth” that we talked about earlier, Heidegger sides with the ancient Greeks who maintained that “truth” = “unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6). That is, “truth” is what is visible – the “beings” that are directly perceived (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6) and are noted as “there” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7).

It follows, Heidegger states, that the conceptualization of “truth” and “correctness” must be a much broader one than the one we normally use; it must go beyond the idea of a “correctness of statements” (Heidegger, 1961, pages 6-7).

1. The “Open Region” and Art

The blank canvas, the empty piece of paper – to me, these constitute an exciting “open region” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 4). Within this realm, I can make any “being” meet any other “being”, real or imagined. Art is seemingly endless possibility, the chance of a bringing-together. A bringing-together that may or not be possible in the real world. The piece of paper in front of me, ready to be drawn upon, is a meeting place where “beings”, my thoughts, emotions, and my imagination can come together.

 The work of art can be in “accordance” (Heidegger, 1961) with a seen object in the sense of the visual “correctness” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2) that I strove to teach. I have the “freedom” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7) to take this particular route – or an entirely different one.

However, just as for Heidegger “truth” goes beyond the “correctness of a statement” (Heidegger, 1961, pages 6-7), “truth” in art must be thought of in a broader way. One difference to the Greek conceptualization of “truth” is that which is ”there” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7) for the artist, and hence depicted in art, can include a purely inner vision, an inner “truth” that reflects emotions, hopes, and dreams of the artist.

 The difference to the narrower definition of “truth” as the “correctness of a statement” (Heidegger, 1961, pages 6-7) is that in artistic production, “truth” can include the artist’s personal way of seeing and depicting a “being” such as a person, a flower, or a landscape. It is not required that a painting be a mirror image of a “being”. In a painting, I can be as close or as far from a mirror image as I wish to be. If I want to, I can paint a “truth” that does not mesh with a “truth” that is broadly shared or expected in society. I can bring in my interpretation, my “truth”, if you will.

The artist decides what to paint and how to depict it. The artist chooses which materials to use, which colors shall appear in the work, which kinds of marks to put on the canvas, whether to blend be brushstrokes together or not, etc. This comes down to artistic styles.

In art, the artist’s way of seeing “beings” can be individualistic and highly uncommon. Art can push the boundaries of what may be deemed “correct” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 5) or “proper” during particular epochs and in specific societies. Artists on the one hand are “free” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6) to push boundaries. On the other hand, depending on the time and society they live in, they may face incomprehension, ridicule, condemnation, or even censorship. It is a well-known fact now that the works of the Impressionists were initially met with harsh criticism. This was not what the world looked like! It was not what people at the time were used to seeing, not in the world, not in art.

1. “Unconcealment” and Art

Art can be thought of a process of what Heidegger calls “unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6). “Unconcealment” relates to “truth” in the ancient Greek sense – making seen what is “there” (Heidegger 1961, pages 6-7). As we mentioned earlier, this artistic “there” can include the artist’s inner emotions and visions.

In Heidegger’s view, humans are by their very nature given to the pursuit of “the disclosure of beings” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7). Humans ask questions and want to learn (ibid, p. 7). Artists, like scientists, look at the world around them in order to reveal and share something about it. They make the “unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6) of the world a life focus. Both artists and scientists, both in their own ways, reveal something about the world to us.

Each artist decides what to bring into “unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6). In art, as we mentioned earlier, this includes the question of what to depict. With a painting, I can bring something into “unconcealment” for the person who looks at my painting. This can be something as simple as the beauty of clouds reflected in a puddle or the intricate details of a pine cone. As an artist, I look for such things – one of my favorites is the play of light, dark, and reflections in glass. There is beauty in so many places, in so many things – ready to be “unconcealed”!

 Georgia O’Keeffe ( 1887-1986) painted the beauty of the desert landscape, “unconcealing” it for a wide audience that may not have had the chance to see beauty in this seemingly harsh and barren environment.

 Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) brought ordinary people, not the just members of the upper class into “unconcealment” with his paintings, showing their hard work. In fact, Courbet dared to show “ (…)what was usually considered ugly or vulgar.” (Osborne, 1970, p. 286) in his time. Art then can become a form of social criticism, showing the wrongs that are in need of being addressed.

Artists have also, as Heidegger has done in philosophy (“Being and Time”, 1962), tried to “unconceal” and make us see “truths” that are not necessarily seen or in any way salient to us. Some artists have sought to find and visually express the “truth” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 2) of objects that goes deeper than their temporary, outer visual appearance (Jaffe, 1985, p. 15). Piet Mondrian (1872- 1944) was such an artist. He was “(…) striving for the essence and interrelationship of things” (ibid, p. 15). This led him to abstraction; he was paring his subjects down to the most basic shapes and colors (ibid., p. 9).

“Beings as a Whole” and Art

Another thought that Heidegger brings up in “On the Essence of Truth” ((1961) is “beings as a whole” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 8). What he means by this is all “beings”, who all stand in connection to each other. The idea is that ultimately, everything is interconnected, and there are no artificially imposed classifications seen as yet (Heidegger, 1961, p. 7). Heidegger believes that humans are, inherently and always, standing in a relationship to “beings as whole” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 8) but that, in our normal activities, “beings as whole” is “concealed” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 9). One reason for this is that man interacts with one or at most a few “beings” at a time ((ibid,. p. 9) at the expense, if you will, of the “whole”.

Art cannot show “beings as a whole” either in the sense of all “beings” that live and exist. But unlike the process of baking a chocolate cake, where I do not have to consider every item in the kitchen, the process of creating a drawing necessitates that I work on one element, but always relate one element to the other elements in the picture, this is known as composition. In other words, in this microcosm of the piece of paper, everything does get related to everything else. It is all about the relationships, the similarities and contrasts. Without keeping an eye on particular items and the work “as a whole”, I would end up with something that would look random, scattered, accidental.

Conclusion

Art can be thought of as an “open region” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 4) – the artist can have anything meet anything else on a canvas. The connection between “unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1961, p. 6) and “truth” (ibid., p. 6) is especially salient in art. The artist reveals the world but does so on his/her own terms. This not have to match a prevailing view of “correctness” (ibid., p. 6), the artist has the “freedom” to show the “essence of truth” (ibid., p. 6) as she or he sees it. This is a “freedom” that can be used to show “truth”, whether it be beautiful or not.

References

Heidegger, Martin (1961). “On the Essence of Truth”. On aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/201V02/Martin-Heidegger-On-the-Essence-of-Truth.pdf

Translation by John Sallis

Heidegger, Martin (1962). “Being and Time”. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. Translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

Jaffe, Hans L.C. (1985). “Mondrian”. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Osborne, Harold, ed. (1970). “The Oxford Companion to Art”. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.