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# Earth, World and Fourfold

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by David Weinberger

In *Die Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (*UK*)<sup>1</sup> in 1935 Martin Heidegger says that the things (*Dinge*) around us are to be understood in terms of the earth and world. In the 1950s, when he is writing about the fourfold (*das Geviert*), he says we are to understand the thing in terms of the earth and sky, gods and mortals. It is not the case that in later years Heidegger decided just to add some more members to his original “twofold” of earth and world. Much more is at stake, for the shift from the “twofold” to the fourfold is really a shift in Heidegger’s thought about what things are, what the earth and world are, and how an ontologist should go about ‘explaining’ the presence of entities. That is, it is a change not just in what Heidegger thinks does the accounting, but what the accounting itself is. Further, I suggest that this ‘shift’ is in fact a recovering of the basic truths of Heidegger’s pre-*UK* thought.

The issues we must explore in order to understand how and why the shift occurs are interrelated and cannot be fully understood as isolated points. We shall find ourselves led from one to another in our attempt to understand the path of Heidegger’s thought.

Let me first present a quick gloss of part of *UK* to help orient the discussion and to help make explicit any idiosyncracies in my interpretation of this difficult essay.

## I

*UK* is not essentially an attempt to make *Sein und Zeit* (*SZ*)<sup>2</sup> more complete by discussing a type of being – artworks – *SZ* had neglected. While it is true that the artwork does not easily fit into the two categories of non-Dasein Being discussed at length in *SZ* – the artwork is neither a practical item of use like *zuhanden* entities, nor is it an item deprived of usefulness by reflection or breakdown like *vorhanden* entities – the artwork is to be understood (according to *UK*) as giving access to the *truth* of the sorts of entities discussed in *SZ*. Heidegger takes a Van Gogh painting of a farmer’s shoes as an illustration: “Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the tool (*Zeug*), the pair of farmer shoes, in truth is.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the artwork is not simply one more type of phenomenon to be arrayed next to *zuhanden* and *vorhanden* entities; it is a phenomenologically crucial phenomenon which gives access to the truth of the entities characterized in *SZ* as *zuhanden* or *vorhanden*.

The painting presents the shoes in their earthiness and their worldliness: “This tool belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the farmer woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting within-itself.”<sup>4</sup> Real things *qua* real are (disclosed as being) “in exist-

ence” whether or not we disclose them; they present themselves as independent of our awareness of them. When we wonder how things can be independent, Heidegger points to the earth which is present to disclosure as being independent of disclosure, and as resisting every attempt to be forced into disclosure; the earth is “self-secluding”. But there can only be seclusion where there is also the possibility of non-seclusion: the last man on earth cannot be a hermit. The earth’s independence from disclosure is itself disclosed. Things can only announce themselves as entities not dependent on our disclosure of them because there is a *world* in which announcements can be made. The world, “that ‘*wherein*’ a factual Dasein as such ‘lives’”<sup>5</sup>, is a relational context of intelligibility within which entities find their meaning. The worldliness and earthiness of things are brought out by the artwork because the artwork, as a thing which is especially revelatory, is itself a bringing of earthy ‘materials’ into intelligibility. We marvel that Michelangelo could take a block of mere stone and make it speak; thus we marvel at the earth and world united in the artwork.

Heidegger turns from the example of Van Gogh’s painting in order to show that the artwork not only reveals truth, it also originates truth by establishing the world; the artwork opens up a world in particular, historical ways, and thus establishes that world for the first time. To show this, he looks at a Greek temple. In a passage too long to be quoted here in full, he writes:

The building encloses the figure of the god and lets it in this concealment stand out through the open portico into the holy region. . . . [It] . . . fits together and gathers around itself . . . the oneness of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, . . . achieve the form of the destiny of human nature . . . . The luster and gleam of the stone, itself seemingly only by grace of the sun, produces and reveals for the first time the light of day . . . . At the same time it lights up that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth* . . . .<sup>6</sup>

This passage *seems* to call for comparison with sections in two later essays—“*Bauen Wohnen Denken*” and “*Das Ding*”—in which the fourfold is presented and a bridge and a jug are described in terms of it.<sup>7</sup> After all, this passage *seems* to show the temple in light of the fourfold: the temple is understood in relation to the *god* who opens the surrounding landscape as a site of holiness. The *earth* is present as the dark and mysterious bearer which forever slips past full disclosure. The *sky* is opened as light and space. With the reference to birth and death *mortals* are brought into the picture. But this passage does not prefigure the fourfold. As we shall see, the earth changes its status, and with this change comes a deep shift in Heidegger’s thought.

## II

The problems which cluster around the relation of the earth-world pair and the fourfold can be distinguished but not separated.

1. *Ontological specificity*. At what level is the distinction between two phenomena an ontological distinction? For example, in *SZ* there is an ontological difference<sup>8</sup> between *zuhanden* and *vorhanden* entities. The difference

between a hammer and a saw is ontic; ontologically, in terms of their Being, they are both *zuhanden*. In *SZ*, then, ontology seems not to reach species of tools (if we call hammers and saws ‘species’). Much less does the ontology of *SZ* reach to the difference between this hammer and that hammer. Neither does the ontology of *UK*. The fourfold, on the other hand, enables us to give an ontological account not just of tools and artworks but also of species of tools and other things.

To see this, it will help to look at the different way Heidegger uses as examples the farmer’s shoes in *UK* and the jug in “*Das Ding*” (an essay we shall take as a good source of Heidegger’s thought about the fourfold)

Heidegger has long been wary of examples. In *Die Frage nach dem Ding* he writes that for a botanist a flower is always an example, never a just-this-one (*je dieses*).<sup>9</sup> In *Identität und Differenz* he says:

This we shall try to show by a for-instance, an illustration (*Beispiel*), bearing in mind from the start that nowhere in beings is there a for-instance, an illustration, of the essential nature of Being because the essential nature of Being is the instance, or luster (*Spiel*), itself.<sup>10</sup>

If we think about the farmer’s shoes, we see that they are not taken out (example = *ex + emere*) of the whole in order to exhibit what each member of the whole has in common. Rather, they bring to light (illustrate = *in + lustare*) that which enables each member to have something in common. It is because the farmer’s shoes are worn on the earth in an attempt to provide a shelter in the world that they are wrinkled, supple, and muddy. What lets all farmers’ shoes have this muddy, wrinkled suppleness in common is the shared ontological situation of mortals dwelling on the earth. The shoes in *UK* bring to light what every *thing* has in common, for in *UK* every thing is a thing insofar as it is of the earth and in the world.

In “*Das Ding*”, the jug lights up not what all *things* have in common, but rather what all *jugs* have in common, i.e. jugness. But this is not quite right: in fact, as the essay progresses, we hear less about the jug as jug and more about the jug as thing.<sup>11</sup> (i) As an example of a thing, we learn from the investigation of the jug that all things gather the fourfold in particular ways: in the jug the earth is gathered as the impenetrable which can contain fluids and as that which gives rise to the grapes which become wine; the sky is present as granting the room and light for the grapevine’s upward growth; mortals are present as cultivators of the vine, drinkers of the drinker, and those who can thank the gods; the gods become present in their absence as those to whom thanks are due. (ii) At the same time, every thing is a particular thing. The jug can be what it is (i.e., a jug) because it gathers the fourfold in way that a sieve or a stool does not. Thus, the ‘universal essence’ of things—that they gather the fourfold—contains an anti-generalization codicil: the fourfold must in every case be gathered in a particular way. With the fourfold, then, we can account for the jug not only as a thing but also as a particular sort of thing. The earth-world pair, on the other hand, gives us no way to distinguish ontologically among the many different species of things. The earth-world pair reaches to thinghood and no further.

2. *Means of access.* Heidegger begins *UK* by reviewing the traditional philosophic explanations of the thing and shows their failures. He writes, "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. Or can it be that this self-refusal of the mere thing, this self-contained resistance to being forced, belongs precisely to the essence of the thing?"<sup>12</sup> The answer is yes. Thus, to get at the thing, some extraordinary means of access is required: ". . . we never know thinghood directly and if at all only indeterminately, and thus require the work . . ."<sup>13</sup> Yet in "*Das Ding*" the thinghood of the thing is displayed to us without resort to an artwork. The thing in the fourfold speaks more directly than it can in the 'twofold' of earth and world.

3. *Transcendence of the principles, and struggle vs. gathering.* The specificity of ontology and the directness of the thing's address have a common source. In *UK*, earth and world function as forces of unintelligibility and intelligibility, concealment and unconcealment, dark and light, properties of the world which are not themselves found in the world. On the other hand, the members of the fourfold can be found in the world. We can point at each of the four (we can point at the gods' absence), but we cannot point at intelligibility and unintelligibility. This distinction becomes clearer if we look at the distinction between struggle and gathering.

The opposition of world and earth is a struggle . . . In essential struggle, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures. . . . The more the struggle overdoes itself on its own part, the more unyieldingly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another.<sup>14</sup>

Earth reveals itself as what it is—as the self-secluding—when the world struggles most forcefully to render the earth intelligible, and the world most clearly stands out as the intelligible when it struggles to bring the earth within its fold.

There are at least two reasons why *UK* talks of struggle whereas the unity of the fourfold he more gently characterizes as a gathering. First, there is an incommensurability in the artwork: it is made of mute earth and yet it has been brought to speak to us. If we use the artwork to give us an understanding of things, it is not surprising that we find that in the thing earth and world contend.

Second, and more important for our main point, Heidegger talks of struggle in *UK* because during this period Heidegger construed (or, I believe, misconstrued) the world in a way he did not before or afterwards. In *SZ* the world is that *wherein* we live and which we strive to render intelligible. In the fourfold the world is the open realm of intelligibility; it is the oneness of the fourfold.<sup>15</sup> In *UK*, although the world sometimes is that which is open, at other times it is not the *site* (or *wherein*) of intelligibility but is more like a *drive* toward intelligibility. He writes in *UK*, "The world endeavors (*trachtet*) in its resting on the earth to surmount it."<sup>16</sup> In so far as the world *tries* to make the earth intelligible, and the latter resists, it seems a struggle between these two 'opponents' must ensue. Later Heidegger seems to have recovered his pre-*UK* idea that it is Thought, and not the world, which strives to render all intelligible, for the world has no intentions and thus cannot *strive* to do anything.<sup>17</sup>

4. *The open and the world, or the open world.* That Heidegger in *UK* sometimes takes the world to be not the site of intelligibility but that which strives to render the universe intelligible, can be supported by looking at another difference between the earth-world pair and the fourfold. One of the key terms in *UK* drops by the time Heidegger writes about the fourfold: the open (*das Offene*). Although he warns us not to identify the world with the open and the earth with the closed,<sup>18</sup> the relationship is not made clear. Heidegger seems to think of the open as the field in which the “opponents”, i.e. “clearing and concealing”, joust.<sup>19</sup>

With the fourfold, the world is not something that enters into the open. It is the open. To be more precise, in *UK* Heidegger distinguishes the open and the openness of the open. With the fourfold, there is only the openness of the world. Heidegger thus has eliminated a puzzling metaphysical entity which he failed to present coherently in *UK*.

5. *Earth as principle vs. earth as this earth.* All of this has an effect on the meaning of the term “earth”. In the fourfold, the earth is paired with the sky; the formulation reads “earth and sky, gods and mortals.”<sup>20</sup> The sky is the horizon of the earth. For phenomenology, the horizon is that which is the border of the horizontal phenomenon, giving the latter its limit. It announces the presence of something beyond the horizon, giving the horizontal phenomenon its place in a beckoning but hidden context. In the case of earth and sky, the horizon is quite literal. In the “twofold” earth is given not an horizon but an opposite, an opponent.

The simplest way to understand the fourfold—and simplicity should carry weight—is the most literal way. The earth is this beneath my feet, on which I walk, which provides sustenance according to its own inner law, which preserves me and which ultimately will take my body back. The earth here is not a principle of unintelligibility or self-seclusion; it is instead just *this* earth beneath my feet.

There is no struggle between the earth beneath my feet and the sky over my head; there is only the gentle but decisive meeting in which each gathers the other into its form.

6. *The opening of things.* Things show themselves as being independent of their disclosure to us. But this independence from disclosure is in fact the way the *disclose* themselves to us. Having handled the category of *Vorhandenheit* unsatisfactorily in *SZ*, Heidegger in *UK* brings forth the idea of the earth to account for the independence of things from disclosure. Things are of the earth, and the earth is acknowledged by all to be independent of us; indeed, it so far surpasses us that when we die, not only do we not take the earth with us, we acknowledge that we are buried in it.<sup>22</sup> Truly to believe that the earth depends upon my awareness of it to exist would be a form of madness.

With the fourfold, Heidegger finds a different way of maintaining the independence of things more firmly than he did in *SZ*; the fourfold’s way is more in line with *SZ*’s basic understanding of the Being of the thing. In *SZ* we learn that “taken strictly, there never is *an* item of equipment”,<sup>21</sup> because an item of equipment only is what it is in reference to the context of tools and uses. There is a strong sense in which a thing according to *SZ* is its place in the world. That sense is recaptured with the fourfold. The four provide the fundamental and

abiding directions which give sense to the thing's place. And in describing a thing (the jug, for example), Heidegger also has reference to other things—the grapes, the path of the sun, etc.—which are also given place by the four. The thing becomes its place in the referential context of intelligibility, and this means that, as in *SZ*, its Being is firmly fixed to what it means, i.e., to what it is *as*. Further, *SZ*'s ec-static structure is recovered with the fourfold. In the fourfold, the thing is ec-static, standing out of itself; it only is what it is in its reference to what it is not. In this same sense, each of the four is ec-static: they are what they are insofar as they are mirrored in the round dance of the others.

The great danger of the earth-world pair is that it will sunder the thatness and the whatness of the thing, despite the labors of *SZ* to show that Being is always the Being of a particular being which has its own meaning *as* what it is. By discussing the earth Heidegger made it impossible to make the error of thinking that just because "to be" means "to be intelligible", Being is simply subjectively determined. But the introduction of the earth-world pair threatens to re-insert the traditional wedge between Being and thought, with the world playing the part usually assigned to thought: it struggles to wrest intelligibility out of a recalcitrant universe. With the fourfold Heidegger regains his unique stance; once again Being and thought are the Same, for the thing's Being is also its meaning, and its meaning is its place in the world.

<sup>1</sup> In *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1956), 2nd ed. Translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language and Thought* (NY: Harper and Row, 1971). References to the translation will follow a virgule after the German citation. All translations are my own, however.

<sup>2</sup> (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), 12th edition.

<sup>3</sup> "Van Goghs Gemälde ist die Eröffnung dessen, was das Zeug, das Paar Bauernschuhe, in Wahrheit ist." *ÜK*, p. 25/36.

<sup>4</sup> Zur Erde gehört diese Zeug und in der Welt der Bäuerin ist es behütet. Aus diesem behüten Zugehören erstet das Zeug selbst zu seinem Insichruhen." *ÜK*, p. 23/34.

<sup>5</sup> ". . . 'worin' ein faktisches Dasein als dieses 'lebt'." *SZ*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> "Das Bauwerk umschliesst die Gestalt des Gottes und lässt sie in dieser Verbergung durch die offene Säulenhalle hinausgehen in den heiligen Bezirk. . . . Das Tempelwerk fügt erst und sammelt zugleich die Einheit jener Bahnen und Bezügen um sich, in denen Geburt und Tod, Unheil und Segen . . . dem Menschenwesen die Gestalt seines Geschickes gewinnen . . . . Der Glanz und das Leuchten des Gesteins, anscheinend selbst nur von Gnaden der Sonne, bringt doch erst das Lichte des Tages . . . . Sie lichtet zugleich jenes, worauf und worin der Mensch sein Wohnen gründet. Wir nennen es die Erde. . . ." *ÜK*, pp. 30-3/41-3.

<sup>7</sup> Both essays are in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (*VA*) (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), and are translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language and Thought* (*op. cit.*). References to the English follow the virgule. Cf. *VA*, pp. 152-3/142-3; 170-2/172-3. It may be of interest to compare, in addition, *SZ* p. 71 where Heidegger shows how certain public buildings uncover the natural environment (*die Umweltnatur*).

<sup>8</sup> Not to be confused with the Ontological Difference discussed in later works.

<sup>9</sup> (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), pp. 11-2. Translated by W.B. Barton and Vera Deutsch as *What Is a Thing?* (Chicago: Regnery, 1967), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957). "Dies sei durch ein Beispiel versucht, wobei im voraus zu beachten ist, dass es für das Wesens des Seins nirgends im Seienden ein Beispiel gibt, vermutlich deshalb weil das Wesen des Seins das Spiel selber ist." p. 64. Translated by Joan Stambaugh as *Identity and Difference* (NY: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> We get both strands in the following sentence: "Der Krug ist Ding, insofern er dingt. Aus dem Dingen des Dinges ereignet sich und bestimmt sich auch erst das Anwesen des Anwesenden von der Art des Kruges." *VA*, p. 176/177. "The jug is a thing insofar as it things. The presence of something of the jug's kind which is present appropriatively occurs and determines itself only from the thinging of the thing."

<sup>12</sup> Das unscheinbare Ding entzieht sich dem Denken am harnäckigsten. Oder sollte dieses Sichzurückhalten des blossen Dinges, sollten diese in sich beruhende Zunichsgedrängtsein, sollte diese gerade zum Wesen des Dinges gehören?" *UK*, p. 21/31-2.

<sup>13</sup> "... wir vom Dinghaften nie geradezu und wenn, dann nur unbestimmt wissen, also des Werkes bedürfen . . ." *UK*, p. 57/70.

<sup>14</sup> "Das Gegeneinander von Welt und Erde ist ein Streit. . . . Im wesenhaften Streit jedoch heben die Streitenden, das eine je das andere, in die Selbstbehauptung ihres Wesen. . . . Je härter der Streit sich selbständig übertreibt, umso unnachgiebiger lassen sich die Streitenden in die Innigkeit das einfachen Sichgehörens los." *UK*, pp. 37-8/49.

<sup>15</sup> *VA*, pp. 178/179; 179/180-1.

<sup>16</sup> "Die Welt trachtet in ihrem Aufruhem auf der Erde, diese zu überhöhen." *UK*, p. 38/49.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the earth should not be taken as having a *drive* towards seclusion. The earth's seclusion is the character of its encounter with *thought*; it is thought which makes possible disclosure and thus makes withdrawal from disclosure possible for the first time.

<sup>18</sup> *UK*, p. 434/55

<sup>19</sup> *UK*, p. 19/60-1.

<sup>20</sup> *VA*, pp. 158/158; 178/170; 180/182.

<sup>21</sup> "Ein Zeug 'ist' strenggenommen nie." *SZ*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> This should not be taken to mean that *Dasein* is its body. Still, it would be phenomenologically inaccurate to deny that that which gets buried after death is (or was) in some sense *me*. Why Heidegger never explored in any depth the apparent existential fact that to be human is to be incarnate is an important question, but obviously beyond the scope of this essay.