I am interested in presenting a genealogical reading of the Heideggerian interrogation of the origin of the work of art. This questioning dates from the mid-1930s, a period marked by the author’s compromise with Nazism. This compromise, which casts a shadow over Heidegger’s entire thought (a view I share with the late Dominique Janicaud), derives, not from an ideology, but from philosophy. One finds this to be the case from the text that is, its most evident symptom, namely, the famous rectoral address he gave at Freiburg in 1933.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the work that made her famous, Hannah Arendt analyzes totalitarian regimes and insists on the central role played in them by an ideology characterized by its transformation of classes into masses, its transformation of the party system into a mass movement mobilized by a sole leader, its sponsorship of the domination by the police of the army, and its explicit orientation towards world domination. She shows that the central objective of the totalitarian ideology-Bolshevik or Nazi-is to abolish, once and for all, the distinction, in the meaning of “law,” between legality and legitimacy, however, in the course of time, “law” might have been taken to mean: the transcendent Idea of Justice in Plato, the *Jus naturale* in Cicero, God’s Commandments in the Medieval philosophers, the general will in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or the Idea of practical reason in Kant. In other words, the totalitarian movements had sought to abolish the distinction (that both Plato and the entire tradition of the political assumed to be unsurpassable), between the legality of positive laws and the authority that justifies them. Because of the distinction, the existence of a number of gaps could be assumed, between the abstract and general
character of the norms of justice and injustice and the concrete variety of
unpredictable human events, between the universality of obligation and
the freedom of individual action; between duty and rights; between the
stabilizing power of codes and the volatility of human affairs. Ideology
causes these distinctions to vanish. It gets rid of them pretending to be
the definitive accomplishment of an ultimate law that, far from
emanating from an ideal sphere that is the object of a continuous struggle,
is conceived as the unquestionable expression of the "movement of a
superhuman force, Nature or History", a movement that has "its proper
beginning and its proper end", its absolute coherence or internal logic.
In this way, the ideology in every language through which it is expressed
is but the infallible deduction from an apodictic principle, from a
"premise that is considered to be evident," from the "pure race" in the
case of Nazism.

In addition to the repression of all forms of active life, ideology
involves, in Arendt's account, the destruction of all mental life. Only
labor is tolerated insofar as it is necessary for the survival of the race.
Repressed is production ("faire-œuvre"), that activity called poiesis by
the Greeks, whose condition is a common world, a human habitation
constructed beyond the cycle of needs, sufferings, and natural
satisfactions. This condition is eliminated in consequence of the fact
that the only work ("ouvrage") recognized as valuable by the ideology is
the production of a pure race. Similarly repressed is that activity called
praxis by the Greeks, whose condition, according to Arendt, is plurality,
i.e., the fact that human beings are both all similar and all different.
Constituting, as such, the link ("partage") between acts and words or, if
you will, the basis for interaction and dialogue, there can be no tolerance
for this activity when human beings are viewed as interchangeable
samples of one all-important racial type.

Ideology is equally destructive of mental life. It abhors the activity of
knowing as an unfinished experience of phenomena in face of verifiable
or falsifiable hypotheses, since it does not accept any knowledge other
than the deductive confirmation of the apodictic premise. For the same
reason, it destroys the activity of thinking as the always-repeated search
for a meaning that escapes the evident. Similarly, it does away with the
activity of willing: the monopoly of a force that transcends individuals
and whose spokesperson is the supreme leader means they can no longer
take initiatives; they can no longer engage in acts of the will.
If the above considerations reflect Nazi ideology in its broadest outlines, the rectoral address delivered by Heidegger in 1933 would have little affinity with it. Notwithstanding the fact that in his address Heidegger applauds the *Fuhrerprinzip*, makes an allusion to the *Blut und Boden* slogan, and expresses his high hopes in the ongoing "revolution," it is to the capital text of political thought, Plato's *Republic*, that he straightaway goes. Entitled "The Self Affirmation of the German University" ("L'auto-affirmation de l'université allemande"), this address celebrates the normative position of what Plato calls *theoria*, defined by Heidegger in ontological terms as "the passion to stay close to the being ("etant") as such and under its constraint." This passion, which transcends the ontic for the ontological (making of metaphysics truly the queen of the sciences), underpins *theoria*, not as a detached contemplation, but as an extreme possibility of *Dasein*. *Theoria*, as such, is an eminent way of existing, a mode of life, what Plato and later, Aristotle, called a *bios*, the *bios theoretikos*. It is by means of their language and in tracing the path of their teaching, that Heidegger defines it at the same time as "the supreme modality of the *energeia* proper to the being-at-work of the human"-understanding by the supreme modality of activity what the Greeks called *poiesis*-as "the highest achievement of praxis" as conduct of life.

*Theoria* as an eminent way of existing, *poiesis* as behavior, *praxis* as a conduct of existence-we have been made aware over the last fifteen years (owing to the publication of the courses taught by Heidegger in Marburg while he was working on *Being and Time*) that a specific reappropriation of these privileged themes of Plato and Aristotle was at the heart of the *magnum opus* and of the philosophical project involved in it, the elaboration of a fundamental ontology. This reappropriation focused on individual existence, on someone's *Dasein*. It was presented as something caught in the horns of *poiesis* and *praxis*, between the intention to produce this or that result in the everyday environment and the concern to be truly oneself, a concern culminating in a very characteristic ontological *theoria*, the intimate view, thanks to what Heidegger called *Gewissen*, of his own unavoidable mortality. What changes in 1933 is that this reappropriation is transformed into the *Dasein* of the German people, bringing about the appearance of a new theme: Prometheism. We find it remarkable that it was a Greek work of art, Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, that Heidegger evokes in introducing this
theme. He writes: "Among the Greeks circulated an old legend saying that Prometheus had been the first philosopher. It is through this Prometheus that Aeschylus formulates a statement that brings out the essence of knowledge: techne d’anankes asthenestera makro—‘Knowledge however is much weaker than necessity.’ This means that all knowledge about things is first subjected to the supreme power of destiny and gives in to this super power. That is why to truly fail, knowledge must unfold its highest challenge before which only all the strength of the concealment (‘celement’) of the being arises.”

The citation from Aeschylus aims then to stress that the ontological and existential theoria is not only the achievement of praxis but also the highest techne, i.e., the supreme modality of know-how, of an art adapted to a poiesis or specific production: the putting to work of truth, understood, of course, in continuity with Being and Time, as aletheia, unconcealment or disclosure. In thus transforming itself from individual Dasein to the Dasein of the German people, the ontologico-existential reappropriation of these Greek notions by Heidegger, if it shows that his rectorial address is, as stressed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and then by Dominique Janicaud, of a great coherence with his thought, is accompanied nevertheless by a major corrective with regard to the Analytic of Being and Time. The pair techne-poiesis is no longer relegated to the everyday, which is inauthentic by definition. It raises itself to the summit of the ontological disclosure, i.e., the disclosure of what Dasein, now of a people, possesses as unique to it. In other words, taking up by knowledge the challenge imposed by the supreme power of destiny is a creative gesture. According to the cryptic terms of Heidegger with regard to Prometheus, there is a “creative weakness of knowledge” understood as the ontological knowledge aimed at by the philosopher. In this way, the philosopher is raised to the level of creators.

The citation from Aeschylus is thus placed in the service of a celebration of the philosopher-king. It is this eminent incarnation of the Platonic theoria that inspires Heidegger when he evokes the "grandeur" of "the originally Greek science" and when he exhorts his university audience to convince itself that the grandeur of this "beginning" persists: "It is not found behind us as it was long ago; on the contrary, it is before us." It is still Plato who inspires him when he writes: "For the Greeks, science is not a 'cultural good' but the milieu that determines most intimately all of Dasein as a people and as a State." It is
under the same inspiration and as an echo to The Republic that he describes the political body as a kind of workplace where each one has a definite function, and sets up a chart of the corporatist State in which each one of the hierarchical levels (Stande, a privileged term in Hegel’s political philosophy, itself inspired by Plato) accomplishes a distinct service: service of work, service of defense, and at the top, a service of knowledge that before everything else is a service of metaphysics, to obviate the dispersion of the sciences into disciplines turned in on themselves. And finally, it is with a citation from The Republic that his peroration ends. Significantly, the citation is drawn from a discussion of the political regime that is the most conducive for philosophy. It is of this that Plato writes in passing, asking how a State that takes philosophy into its hands could avoid spoiling itself: ta megala panta episphale, a phrase that Robin translates well as “All great things carry risks.” Heidegger, on the other hand, does not hesitate to translate into a language in which it is difficult not to hear an echo, be it astutely indirect, of the usage by the Nazis of the word Sturm: “all that is great holds itself in tempest.”

However equivocal the address, equivocal on account of its repeated usage of the term, Kampf, itself also astutely turned around from its Hilterian usage insofar as it denotes “the combat of knowledge of those who question,” one searches in vain for any trace of a naturalist dogmatism, or of an alignment with the apodictic premise of the Nazi ideology—the pure race—because in the end, the only principle the text claims is strictly ontological and of an interrogative character is the being of the human being is worthy of questioning. Just as one does not find an alignment with the specific traits of the totalitarian regime in the process of setting itself in place, there is no allusion to the transformation of the classes into masses. The movement taken into consideration is not the mobilization of the masses but the taking hold of being. The world is not the universal Lebensraum of the race of masters but the existential site of the Dasein of the people. Neither could one say of this address that it promulgates the repression of the vita activa because in fact it subordinates the vita activa to theoria without destroying it; or that it sponsors the destruction of the mental life because, quite the reverse, it announces that “whoever leads must acknowledge to those who follow their own strength” and even their capacity for “resistance.”
It is not the Nazi ideology that this text concerns itself with but with what Dominique Janicaud called fittingly an “exacerbated Platonism”. With Hannah Arendt, we think it is to this Platonism that one must return in search for the roots of the inclination of philosophers towards tyranny. More precisely, an inquiry into Heidegger’s blindness to the tyranny that was in the process of imposing itself, and that would soon transform itself into totalitarianism, would require that one ask (insofar as it is qua philosopher that he delivered his address) what accounts for it, in both its ontogenesis and its phylogensis, that is, in Being and Time, and in the expansive but very selective memory he had of the history of philosophy, beginning with the Greeks.

We embark upon this twofold quest for his artistic views by focusing on the texts that flow from his interrogation of the origin of the work of art. As this interrogation remained unpublished in its first versions until recently, one moment claiming implicitly, the next moment explicitly, to follow from the views developed in the rectoral address, and rejoining them at many points, what we have just said of this address offers a first sketch of our investigation. A sketch about which two points must be very precisely made.

With respect to its precursors in the history of philosophy, the rectoral address is not limited to Plato who orients in every part and is explicitly cited in the conclusion. When Heidegger proclaims the necessity of regaining, to the measure of the German destiny, “the grandeur of the beginning,” and “to rely with decision on the distant injunction” arising from the astonishment of the Greeks before being, Heidegger does not hesitate to cite Nietzsche, “the last German philosopher” as he calls him, and to present him as a precursor who even as “he passionately searched for god,” had said, “God is dead,” acknowledging thereby “the abandonment of man today in the midst of being.” In this regard, one will notice that the Heideggerian questioning of the figure of Prometheus in terms of a creative challenge and affirmation of power (Macht) before a super power is not without affinity to the Nietzschean analysis of Aeschylus’s Prometheus in The Birth of Tragedy. One could even ask, taking into consideration astute counter-echos that we have evoked, whether this analysis has not played a decisive role in Heidegger’s circumstantial choice of the figure of Prometheus, insofar as Nietzsche, who admired the Nazis without being able to read them, holds in his first book that the myth of Prometheus “had for the Aryan soul the same
characteristic meaning as the myth of the fall, and original sin for the Semitic soul.” Be that as it may, Nietzsche is not the only modern precursor to be evoked by the rectoral address. As Jacques Derrida has fittingly brought out in a brilliant book, it is in the language of Hegel that Heidegger expresses himself when he proclaims: “A spiritual (geistig) world alone guarantees grandeur to a people.” The phylogenesis of the rectoral address rests, then, on Plato’s memory of the Ancients, on Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s memory of the Moderns. We shall have occasion to see that the interrogation on the origin of the work of art also claims as sources these three figures.

As for the ontogenesis of this interrogation, we think that we must look for its elements in the anterior itinerary of Heidegger, and thus take the measure, as done by Dominique Janicaud with respect to the rectoral address, of its continuity with the fundamental ontology and with the works in which it is articulated. This ontogenesis concerns, when transposed to art, many themes evoked by the rectoral address with regard to knowledge, like the unconcealment of the being in its being, the repetition of Greece, the grandeur of the beginning, the injunction that it apprises a people of its unique being. To these themes, it is necessary to add, to make more precise the ontogenesis in question, two themes also present in the rectoral address: the return of the divine in the age of the death of God, and the theme of historicity. When the rectoral address proclaims in Hegel’s footsteps that the Dasein of the German people is “spiritually historical,” it presents the will as an event—a Nietzschean theme par excellence—of which it shows to be its proper being and to know what it is authentically.

We have chosen this theme of the event as a guideline because it is in it that the phylogenesis and the ontogenesis that we intend to scrutinize come together in a privileged way.

This theme likewise provides us with an occasion to contrast the two philosophers to whom the rectoral address renders homage, namely, Plato (the first philosopher of politics and art) and Hegel (great admirer of Plato and eminent metaphysician of politics and art), with two thinkers who were their contemporaries but who approached politics and art from a very different perspective, namely, Aristotle and Kant. The rectoral address makes no allusion to Aristotle for the simple reason that when Heidegger speaks of the Greeks, it is Plato who guides him. Neither does he mention Kant, and with reason, for the primacy of practical reason is
not a theme of fundamental ontology. We will see that the successive versions of the interrogation on the origin of the work of art leave them both in darkness. We think that in opting for Plato among the Ancients to the exclusion of Aristotle, and for Hegel among the Moderns, to the exclusion of Kant, Heidegger shows, with regard to politics and art, a preference for speculation to the disadvantage of judgment. Such a preference is not without historical antecedents. That is why we would like to show how among the Ancients and later among the Moderns, the artistic event and likewise the political event have drawn from philosophers two antinomic approaches. A first approach accords to the philosopher the privilege of being the only one to determine, in the name of an ontological view of the last instance, what is finally art and politics. It is the speculative approach of which Plato is the paradigmatic example among the Ancients and Hegel among the Moderns. In opposition to this is an approach in which the philosopher refuses to give to himself such a privilege for the reason that he immediately acknowledges the right of each one to express himself in artistic as well as political matters. This is the judicative approach of which Aristotle is the example among the Ancients and Kant among the Moderns. 

*Translated from the French by Leovino Ma. Garcia*