WHAT IS TRUTH?: LESSING'S NUMISMATICS AND HEIDEGGER'S ALCHEMY MARC SHELL

A coin is both a proposition and a thing. It is an inscription (e.g., "minted at Sardis") and a thing (e.g., a golden ingot) on which the inscription is stamped, to which it refers, and together with which it becomes legal tender. A coin, then, is an epigram which, as Lessing notes in *Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm*, cannot be thought of apart from that into which it is properly inscribed.1 A coin is a numismatic epigram in which the inscription and the inscribed are one.

Truth, as Heidegger notes in *Sein und Zeit*, is traditionally associated with the adequation of a proposition and a thing.2 Many writings about truth, as it happens, rely on propositions about coins in order to exemplify the possibility or impossibility of such adequation. When the propositional character of coins themselves is ignored or misunderstood, however, such reliance leads to a systematic distortion of the concept of truth.

In this paper we shall study the internalization of a unique monetary form, the numismatic epigram, in literary and philosophical discourse. Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise*3 and Heidegger's essay *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*4 both posit (as an initial hypothesis) that truth concerns the relationship between proposition and thing, and offer as examples of this relationship.

---

1 G. E. Lessing, *Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm* (Berlin, 1771), Section 4. Cf. Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven, 1970), esp. pp. 208 ff. A numismatic epigram is not inscribed into something other than that which it explains (as Wordsworth's inscriptionsal poem "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree" was printed on paper rather than cut into a yew-tree), but is stamped into an ingot which it explains and together with which it becomes a coin.
2 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle, 1929), pp. 212ff.; hereafter abbreviated as *SZ*.
4 Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1954); hereafter abbreviated as *WW*. 
propositions about coins. As we shall see, the example of coinage is necessary to and symptomatic of the thought of these two radically different thinkers. The discourse about truth which began in Greece about the same time and in about the same place as the development of coinage, appears in their thought as a misleading numismatic "epigrammatology" or logic of the relationship between the inscription and the inscribed thing.

1. In the middle scene of the middle act of Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise*, Nathan, the Jewish descendant of Solomon the Wise, is asked by Saladin, the Muslim ruler, which of the three religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) is genuine. Nathan expected to be asked for money. He is asked instead a question like that of Pilate to Jesus: "What is truth?" Alone on stage, the puzzled Nathan considers how to answer Saladin's question. He compares truth, about which Saladin actually asked him, with coin, for which he believes Saladin would ask him and which, as the spectator knows, Saladin still hopes to receive from Nathan by tricking him into either abandoning Judaism or criticizing Islam.

- Ich bin
  Auf Geld gefaßt; und er will - Wahrheit. Wahrheit!
  Und will sie so, - so bar, so blank, - als ob
  Die Wahrheit Münze wäre! - Ja, wenn noch
  Uralte Münze, die gewogen ward!
  Das ginge noch! Allein so neue Münze,
  Die nur der Stempel macht, die man aufs Brett
  Nur zählen darf, das ist sic doch nun nicht!
  Wie Geld im Sack, so striche man in Kopf
  Auch Wahrheit ein?

In most of Lessing's writings, money is usually an example of something different from truth. In this monologue, however, the wisdom of Nathan the merchant and moneylender compares truth with *uralte Münze* and distinguishes it from *neue Münze*. *Uralte*

---


6 John 18.38.

Münze is exchanged by virtue of its material weight (and implicitly its purity), just as are all commodities in a barter economy; neue Münze acts as a medium of exchange (at least in part) by virtue of the stamped inscription (or type) impressed into the face of metal ingots in a money economy. Nathan suggests that the identification of truth with uralte Münze could “pass” because such “coin” is as creditable as “hard cash.” In eighteenth century Germany the phrase “Ich nehme es nicht für baare Münze” meant, as one contemporary dictionary tells, “Non habeo pro certo.” Sound common sense accepts as true only “hard cash.” Like small shopkeepers and philosophical empiricists, men with such sense refuse to take things at their face value. They seem to heed John Locke’s warning (in “Error”) that truth should never be accepted “in the lump” (i.e., “wholesale,” or without first testing it with a balance and a touchstone). Uralte Münze always must be so tested. Neue Münze, on the other hand, has a stamp or inscription by which the trader, no longer armed with a balance and a touchstone, can be misled by the habit of counting empty symbols.

Those who trust only uralte Münze do not merit the praise which Nathan seems to give them. We and he know that Münze is necessarily not only commodity (which can be tested with a balance and a touchstone) but also medium of exchange (which cannot be so tested since it is not material), and that its status as medium of

---

8 One other passage in which Lessing compares truth favorably with gold or with coin is his Briefe antiquarischen, Zweitundfünfzigster Brief (Gesammelte Werke [Berlin and Weimar, 1968], Vol. 5, pp. 604-5). “Um mich in einem Gleichnis auszudrücken: ich wickle das Gespinste der Seidenwürmer ab, nicht um die Seidenwürmer spinnen zu lehren, sondern aus der Seide, für mich und meinesgleichen, Beutel zu machen; Beutel, um das Gleichnis fortzusetzen, in welchen ich die kleine Münze einzelner Empfindungen so lange sammle, bis ich sie in gute wichtige Goldstücke allgemeiner Anmerkungen umsetzen, und diese zu dem Kapitale selbstgedachter Wahrheiten schlagen kann.” Compare the common phrase, “die Zinsen zum Kapital schlagen.” The purse in which Lessing would “collect” truth is a topos similar to the bag of which Nathan speaks in his monologue. The conceptual development from “coins” to “gold pieces” to “capital interest” informs Johann Peter Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe (Zurich, 1948), 6 December 1829.

9 Georg Thomas Serz, Deutsche Idealis men (Nurnb., 1797), 102b.

10 In “Error” (1672) Locke writes that “he that takes up the opinions of any church in the lump, without examining them, has truly neither searched after nor found the truth, but has only found those that he thinks have found the truth, and so receives what they say with an implicit faith, and so pays them the homage that is due only to God” (Quoted in Fox Bourne, Life of Locke, Vol. 1, p. 306). On the relationship between, for example, Berkeley’s idealism and credit economics, see Jean-Joseph Goux, Freud, Marx; Économie et symbolique (Paris, 1973).
exchange is equal or superior to its status as commodity. Those who with "sound common sense" pay no heed to the inscriptions on coins or who refuse to take things at their face value distrust the very things, such as banknotes and the credit economy, by which Nathan earns his livelihood. Many empiricists of the eighteenth century did dislike the concept of credit economy, of which banknotes (the extreme form of *neue Münze*) are typical. Lessing, however, who greatly influenced the idealists, suggests that the empiricists mistake the nature of money and truth. They mistake weight and purity for the authority of the state. They do not understand the principal of counterfeitness in a money economy, and so cannot distinguish the true from the merely counterfeit or the blatantly fake.

In a barter economy, one (large) metallic ingot is weighed in the balance against many (small) ingots, and the touchstone is applied to it. The development of metal ingots identical in weight and homogeneous in purity does away with the need for the balance and the touchstone only if the weight and purity of the ingots are guaranteed (however misleadingly) by the author of the coins and if that author is the political authority. A coin is an ingot on which are inscribed (among other things) propositions about purity, weight and issuing authority. The truth or counterfeittest of a coin as money (*neue Münze*), however, does not reside in the agreement or disagreement of the ingot with propositions about its purity and weight. For Archimedes, the determination of the relationship between the purity and the weight of a piece of metal, such as a crown or an *uralte Münze*, was important. His discovery (*heureka!*) of the subjection to numerical government of specific gravity supported the Platonic claim that the universe is governed by number. The importance of determining the relationship between purity and weight, however, attaches to coins only as pieces of metal and not as money. The relationship of propositions about the material properties of a coin to its actual material properties does not matter to its status as money. During the development of coinage in Greece, indeed, the actual weight and purity of individual coins did not matter for purposes of exchange (within the *polis*). A lack of correspondence between the actual and the stated material properties was both typical and immaterial.

---

11 As is now well established, however, many Greek cities had two kinds of coins: those for trade within, and those for trade without the *polis*. The latter were like *uralte Münze*, the former *neue Münze*. 
What does matter in considering the genuineness and counterfeitness of coin is the issuing authority. A coin as money is counterfeit when the stated place of origin does not correspond to the actual place of origin. A counterfeit coin may claim to have and may actually have the same weight and purity as the legitimate coin of which it is the counterfeit. It is, however, treason for a private citizen to mint coins. The political issue is crucial. Archimedes, after all, did not confuse his study of the relationship between the purity and weight of the metal of a crown with the study of the political authority of which the crown was the symbol.

The counterfeitness of coin, then, may be determined by discovering its issuing authority or its origin. In *Nathan der Weise*, however, the principal task seems to be to discover the authority not of a coin but of a religion. To this end the spectator of *Nathan der Weise* would interpret its plot, Saladin would interpret the tale of the rings which Nathan tells in order to answer or to avoid answering the question of which religion is genuine, and everyone (including Nathan himself) would determine by some sort of evaluation which of the three religions, if any, is genuine. In this play, truth is supposed to be attainable by evaluation. In his consideration of *Nathan der Weise* in *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, however, Hegel argues that "die Wahrheit nicht eine ausgeprägte Münze ist, die fertig gegeben und so eingestrichen werden kann." What, then, does literary and philosophical evaluation demand?

We are, I suppose, predisposed to look for truth in artful tales and philosophy. That art is "counterfeit" (stamped, imitative, etc.) does not mean that it is "untrue." As collectors and purchasers know, however, there are fake counterfeits or copies of works of art. The artful fable of the three rings which Nathan tells to Saladin describes and may itself be one of such fakes. Each of the three rings which the father bequeaths to his three sons "stands" for one of the religions of the book about which Saladin has asked. But which is the original or the genuine ring? Or are none—or

---

13 The "truth" of art may be discoverable in homogeneity and difference (e.g., between original and copy or between whole and part) rather than in disagreement and falsehood. Art may be supposed to be different from but homogeneous with the truth. Even by Plato the artful lies of the Socratic dialogues are explained as counterfeit in this sense of "truthful" disagreement or falsehood. (See Jakob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* [Cambridge, Mass., 1958], pp. 98ff.)
somehow all—genuine? Archimedes was able to determine the
genuineness of the metal of the crown which the king presented to
him. From the fable alone, however, we are unable to determine
which ring(s), if any, is (are) true.\textsuperscript{14} Nathan's fabulous answer to
Saladin is as prudent or "economic"\textsuperscript{15} as Jesus' answer to those who
ask Him to whom belongs a coin on which is stamped the likeness
of Caesar.\textsuperscript{16}

Nathan's fable of the rings can be compared with the beautiful
but fake Paduan coins which (as Lessing notes in \textit{Zerst"orete
Anmerkungen "uber das Epigramm}) mislead the observer, as do poor
epigrams, by disappointing his expectation (\textit{Erwartung}) with a
deceptive or unsatisfactory resolution (\textit{Aufschluß}).\textsuperscript{17} Nathan's
monologue comparing truth and coin, however, is concerned with
coins not merely as works of art (e.g., rings, fables and epigrams) but
also as money (e.g., \textit{neue Münze}, which we have identified as a
unique epigrammatic form). With what kind of money is truth
properly comparable? Or is truth itself counterfeit and all works of
art fake? Lessing's play recognizes but sidesteps deftly the problem
of what truth is, just as the fable sidesteps the problem of which
religion is true. In the end, as Hegel and \textit{Lukács} suggest, the

\textsuperscript{14} The tale of the three rings which Nathan tells does not settle the problem of
which religion is true. The audience will discover an adequate solution to this
problem or perhaps the inadequacy of the position of the problem by observing
what happens to the Christian child he has adopted and raised as his daughter.
Shakespeare's \textit{Merchant of Venice} is another play in which the relationship between
father and daughter is the dramatic vehicle. In this play about a Jew in the alien
world of Venice, however, the will of Portia's father is obeyed (as that of Jessica's
father, Shylock, is not) when Portia seems to choose a suitor according to the
method of the three caskets. At the end of the play, some tensions between the
Christian characters are settled by a complex exchange of rings. For another
interpretation of the relationship between \textit{Nathan der Weise} and the \textit{Merchant of
Venice}, see the essay by Peter Demetz in Lessing, \textit{Nathan der Weise}, ed. Peter Demetz
(Frankfurt-am-Main, Berlin, 1966).

\textsuperscript{15} On this meaning of "economy" see "Economy" III, in \textit{O.E.D.} Like Melchizedek,
who tells a similar tale in Boccaccio (\textit{The Decameron}, First Day, Third Story), Nathan
"escapes the snares set at his feet." At the end of Nathan's tale, as at the end of the tale
in Boccaccio, "the question [as to which of the three rings or religions is genuine] still
pendereth."

\textsuperscript{16} Jesus says "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's,
without stating openly whether the metal, from which the coin was minted, is owned
by Caesar or by God. Jesus does not ignore the political authority to which he, like
Nathan, would render what is its (\textit{Matthew 22, Luke 20, Mark 12}).

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Heller ("Paduan Coins. Concerning Lessing's Parable of the Three
Rings," \textit{Lessing Yearbook}, 1973) discusses this relationship between the Paduan coins
and the coin in Nathan's monologue.
brilliant play, *Nathan der Weise*, appears to be merely an “enlightened” work of pseudo-philosophy.

Lessing compares truth with coin (as commodity, as money and as art). Were Lessing's enlightening attempt to understand the relationship between truth and coin but a single instance in the history of philosophy, we might set it aside as an unnecessary metaphor. The metaphor, however, recurs throughout the history of literature, the metaphysics of number, and philosophy itself. Lessing’s particular interpretation of the economics of truth was a watershed of previous consideration of the problem, and a powerful influence on thinkers such as Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger.


In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger distinguishes between the traditional and the primordial or *uralte* conceptions of truth (SZ 212-230). The traditional conception of truth associates it with the Aristotelean and Thomistic agreement or adequation (*homoiosis*, *adequatio*, etc.) of *intellectus* and *res* (SZ 214); or, as Kant puts it, truth is “die Übereinstimmung der Erkenntnis mit ihrem Gegenstande.”

Heidegger, however, supports an untraditional and supposedly primordial conception of truth which he discovers in an etymology of the Greek word for truth, *alētheia*, as “the un-concealed.”

He argues that the phenomenon of truth in the sense of uncoveredness (unhiddenness) always shows through in matters of truth. Later in his philosophical development, Heidegger came to modify his position about at least the historical validity of the argument that the concept of truth as unconcealment (*alētheia*) is older than the traditional concept as agreement (*orthotēs*).

---

19 Plato etymologizes *alētheia* as “the unidirectional way of the gods” (*Crat.* 421b).
20 In *Sein und Zeit* and in *Platon Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Bern, 1947) this etymology and the conception of truth which it implies play important roles. In *Zur Sache des Denkens*, however, Heidegger doubts that the traditional conception of truth as
and primordial truth, however, informs all his works, including the crucial and carefully revised essay of his middle period, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*.21 In this essay, which marks the *Kehre* (turn) of his philosophical development, Heidegger restates or revises the realm of projection (*Entwurfsbereich*) or the manifest character (*Offenheit*) of Being of what-is.

*Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* begins with a critique of the traditional concept of truth, which Heidegger allies with that “wirtschaftlichen Berechnung” or “‘gesunde’ Menschenverstand” which “pocht auf die Forderung des handgreiflichen Nutzens und eifert gegen das Wissen vom Wesen des Seienden, welches wesentliche Wissen seit langem ‘Philosophie’ heisst’ (*WW* 5). Heidegger’s initial critique of “sound common sense” is like that of the German philosopher of absolute idealism, Schelling. In one of his essays on academic studies, Schelling seems at once both to admire and to condemn the attitude of those men who demand the coin of their truth in “hard cash.” Schelling writes:

Der Verstand, den die Unphilosophie den gesunden nennt, da er nur der gemeine ist, verlangt gleichsam die baaare und klingende Münze der Wahrheit und sucht sie sich ohne Rücksicht auf das Unzüreichende seiner Mittel zu verschaffen. In die Philosophie übergreifend, erzeugt er die Ungeheuer einer rohen dogmatischen Philosophie, die mit dem Bedingten das Unbedingte zu ermess, das Endliche zum Unendlichen auszudehnen sucht.22

Schelling suggests that common sense is not wisdom because wisdom requires the ability to hypothesize or to take something on credit. In this way he attacks the anti-philosophical empiricism of Locke and Bacon and perhaps even the dogmatism of Leibnitz and

---

propositional correctness or *orthotēs* is historically derivative from the conception of truth as *alētheia*. The use of the word in Homer to mean propositional correctness—at a time before the supposed beginning of the Western tradition of philosophy—causes Heidegger to seem to question his original position. He acknowledges that *alētheia*, unconcealment, in the sense of the opening of presence, was originally only experienced as *orthotēs*, as the correctness of representations and statements (Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* [Tubingen, 1969], p. 78). Heidegger manages to avoid any seeming contradiction by stressing that originally (which is an historical term) is not the same as *primordially* (which is an ontological term). Truth, he still insists, is unconcealment.

21 In the 1920’s Heidegger offered a series of seminars on truth; in the early 1930’s he delivered a lecture on truth; after many revisions, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* was published in the early 1940’s.

Wolff. Schelling maintains an important and subtle distinction between their anti-philosophical attitude and the un-philosophical attitude which is suitable for measuring the limited and making finite extensions, and from which philosophy can arise if it is properly nourished or "drawn out" by an adept teacher. Non-philosophy, then, can be either anti-philosophy or un-philosophy. Only from the latter can philosophy arise.

After the introductory section of *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, in which he seems to recall the Schellingian critique of sound common sense, Heidegger proceeds to try to "draw out" from common sense the essence of truth. Unlike Schelling, and certainly unlike the careful midwife of truth, Socrates, Heidegger finds that such "drawing out" (the primordial conception of truth from the traditional conception) is finally unfruitful.

In the first section of *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, entitled "Der geläufige Begriff der Wahrheit," Heidegger presents to us a persona of "Sound Common Sense." His "drawing out" the essence of truth from this persona depends in part on the many monetary examples which inform his hypothetical conversation with it. Whereas Lessing and Schelling begin their consideration of truth with the example of *baare Münze* (a kind of bare ingot), Heidegger's Common Sense is supposed to think of truth non-philosophically merely as gold:

> Das Wahre ist das Wirkliche. Demgemäß sprechen wir vom wahren Gold im Unterschied zum falschen. Das falsche Gold ist nicht wirklich das, als was es erscheint. Es ist nur ein "Schein" und deshalb unwirklich. Das Unwirkliche gilt als das Gegenteil des Wirklichen. (*WW* 7)

Heidegger suggests that Common Sense is mistaken to believe that the validity (*Geltung*, cf. *gilt*) of the unreal is the opposite of the validity of the real. He argues:

> Aber Scheingold ist doch auch etwas Wirkliches. Demgemäß sagen wir deutlicher: das wirkliche Gold ist das echte Gold. (*WW* 7)

Common Sense, however, is not allowed to rest easy with the association of reality with genuineness which Heidegger encourages it to make. The philosopher disassociates them by arguing that

> "Wirklich" ist aber doch beides, das echte Gold nicht minder als das
The discussions of verification (Bewährung) and validity (Geltung) seems to merge into a discussion of circulation (Umlauf) in general. That which is accepted or which circulates is sometimes assumed to be true. Heidegger argues, however, that mere circulation cannot confer truth.

At this point in the first section of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Heidegger might be expected to attend to the sovereign which grants to some entities (even words) their currency. As little here as elsewhere, however, does Heidegger consider this aspect of what he calls the inauthentic (uneigentlich) they-world of politics. Instead he merely supplies us with another version of the quandary with which Common Sense began, and which he believes to inform the entire Western tradition:

Die Frage kehrt wieder: was heißt hier und wahr? Echtes Gold ist jenes Wirkliche, dessen Wirklichkeit in der Übereinstimmung steht mit dem, was wir mit Gold “eigentlich” im voraus und stets meinen. Umgekehrt sagen wir dort, wo wir falsches Gold vermuten: “Hier stimmt etwas nicht.” Was dagegen so ist, “wie es sich gehört,” dazu bemerken wir: es stimmt. (WW 7)

We are told that Common Sense rests or tries to rest with the simple position that “das Wahre, sei es eine wahre oder ein wahrer Satz, ist das, was stimmt, das Stimmende” (WW 7).

The crucial word in the traditional definition of truth is “agreement (Übereinstimmung).” In Section II of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, entitled “Die innere Möglichkeit der Übereinstimmung,” Heidegger tries to convince Common Sense to abandon its position by demonstrating to it the logical problems of assuming two kinds of agreement: that between one thing and another, and that between a thing and a proposition about it.

In Section I of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Heidegger discussed the reality of Gold. His discussion led us to consider validity (Geltung) and circulation (Umlauf). (Our having been so led cannot justify the errors of the translators and interpreters of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit who treat this Gold as if it were “coin” or “monnaie.”) A coin is a

---

piece of gold stamped with the impression of the political authority. The error, however, is symptomatic of the general direction of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, which is from Gold to Geld.) In Section II of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Heidegger ceases to discuss Gold and begins to discuss coins. In his attempt to demonstrate the logical problems of assuming the possibility of correspondence between one thing and another, for example, he presents to us the opinion of Common Sense about two apparently similar coins:

Wir sagen z.B. angesichts zweier auf dem Tisch vorhandener Fünfmarkstücke: sie stimmen miteinander überein. (WW 10)

Heidegger seems to have made a transition from a barter economy (where Gold is traded as a material commodity like any other commodity) to a monetary economy (where Geltung alone is what matters). This transition, however, is not yet significant to the direction of the essay. Common Sense compares the five-mark pieces not in terms of their monetary validity, but only in terms of material qualities (such as weight, purity, shape and so on) which they share with other things. (Common Sense might as well have used the example of mere pieces of gold instead of that of coined money.) On the basis of an apparent correspondence of such material properties, Heidegger argues, no two things can be said to “agree” fully with each other. There can never be identity or equation between things. Differences, such as that of space (to which Hegel always looks), always remain. Heidegger thus finds to be lacking the definition of truth as correspondence between one thing and another.

The second kind of correspondence which Heidegger considers is that between a thing and propositions (Aussagen) about it. Heidegger returns again to the example of a coin, and discusses its relationship to three propositions about it:

Dieses Geldstück ist rund. (WW 10)
Das Geldstück ist aus Metall. (WW 10)
Mit dem Geldstück kann man etwas kaufen. (WW 11)

The first two propositions about the coin do not concern its Geltung but only its material properties: shape and composition. In his discussion of the impossibility of agreement between one thing and another, Heidegger had shown that they could never be identical to each other. Similarly, he shows that the first two propositions about the coin do not agree with the coin because, unlike the coin, they
are in no sense material (dinghaft WW 11; cf. stofflich). According to the current (geläufigen) idea of truth, this agreement is supposed to be a kind of adequation (Angleichung WW 11). But something completely unlike the coin—i.e., a proposition—can hardly approximate to the coin.

Wie kann das völlig Ungleiche, die Aussage, an das Geldstück sich angleichen? Sie müßte ja zum Geldstück werden und dergestalt ganz und gar sich selbst aufgeben. Das gelingt der Aussage nie. (WW 11)

On the basis of his discussion of the first two propositions about his principal example of a thing, a coin, Heidegger can find to be lacking the definition of truth as correspondence between a thing and a proposition about it."

The third proposition, however, is not about the material properties of the coin (which all kinds of Stücke have), but rather about its properties as money (which only Geldstücke have, and which confers on them legitimate Umlauf). Heidegger fails to note, and perhaps even to notice this difference between the third statement (which concerns our understanding of money) and the first two statements (which concern our understanding of all [other] things). (The only sign that he may have noticed this difference is the verbal transition from Fünfmarkstücke, which he used in his discussion of the correspondence of one thing with another, to Geldstück, which he uses in his discussion of the correspondence of a thing with a proposition about it.) As we shall see, this failure is symptomatic of Heidegger’s theory of truth and of his misunderstanding of the relationship between economic theory and ontology to which Greek and German idealists devoted much careful attention.

As he tried to show in his discussions of the correspondence between two things and of the correspondence between the first two propositions and the material properties of a thing, Heidegger now tries to show, in his discussion of the relationship between the third proposition and the thing, that agreement can never be one of complete homogeneity. Of the third proposition and of the coin to which it refers Heidegger points to the following supposed heterogeneity.

Mit dem Geldstück kann man etwas kaufen. Die Aussage darüber ist niemals ein Zahlungsmittel. (WW 11)²⁴

²⁴ Kant (Kritik, p. 680) makes similar statements in his attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of the Cartesian and Leibnizian proofs of the existence of God by
The *Geldstück* and the proposition, then, are supposed to be heterogeneous because only with the former can one purchase something.

We have seen that Heidegger believes that truth cannot be a material likeness between things. He seems not to notice that the third proposition about which he has written is not concerned with material properties; and simply concludes his discussion about the coin by suggesting to us that wherein he believes to reside the truth of a coin—round, metal and monetary—lying on a table:

Die Aussage über das Geldstück bezieht "sich" aber auf dieses Ding, indem sie es vor-stellt und vom Vor-gestellten sagt, wie es mit ihm nach der je leitenden Hinsicht bestellt sei. (WW 11)

Heidegger pretends that he would discover the relationship (*Beziehung*) between proposition (*Aussage*) and thing (*Ding*). He says simply that the proposition about (*über*) the coin relates itself to (*auf*) the coin, and looks straight away to some primordial or uralte notion of unconcealment.

There is, however, another way of considering the relationship between thing and proposition. The proposition that the coin is legal tender presents in a nutshell the various problems of currency (*Umlauf*), validity (*Geltung*) and verification (*Bewährung*) with which the essence of truth is concerned. Heidegger found this nut in the writings of Lessing and many others, but, like a toothless squirrel, he cannot crack it open.

Heidegger exemplifies his discussion with the legal tender that is coin, but his argument, that a proposition can never be legal tender, is uniquely problematical, and, as we shall show, inaccurate. There are many things which one can do with a *Geldstück*, such as play "heads-or-tails"; and there are many things other than *Geldstücke* which may be legal tender, such as paper money. Paper money (*Geldscheine*) is a proposition unattached by necessity to any thing (although, of course, it may happen to be printed on

comparing the actual to the potential worth of certain monies (*Taler*). He pretends that Descartes argued that because we "have" the idea of God he must "exist" in the same way that if we "have" the idea of money it can be "spent." Kant then argues that we can no more extend our stock of theoretical insight by mere ideas than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account. Hegel suggests that what made successful the Kantian critique of the ontological proof of the existence of God is the monetary example which Kant uses (G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. G. Lasson [Leipzig, 1923], First Part, pp. 70-75).
something, like paper). It is the politically authored propositional motto on paper money which alone confers its validity (\textit{Geltung}). False gold (\textit{Scheingold}), with the discussion of which Heidegger begins his argument about correspondence, may well be, as he suggests, invalid. Paper money, however, is both propositional and valid.

A coin, which Heidegger pretends to treat only as a material thing, is also a proposition. An ingot of gold, for example, is changed qualitatively into a coin (\textit{Münze}) when into it is inscribed a proposition (\textit{Aussage}) such as “five-mark piece” (“\textit{Fünfmarkstück}”) or the third proposition itself. The coin is composed of both the thing and such a statement of the crown. As participants in the same whole, the thing and the statement are homogeneous. Heidegger’s contention, that a thing and a statement are always heterogeneous, then, is erroneous when he ceases, as he does in Section II of \textit{Vom Wesen der Wahrheit}, to discuss the currency (\textit{Umlauf}) of \textit{Gold} and begins to discuss the validity (\textit{Geltung}) of the legal tender (\textit{Zahlungsmittel}) which is \textit{Geld}.

3. Die alte und berühmte Frage, womit man die Logiker in die Enge zu treiben vermeinte . . ., ist diese: Was ist Wahrheit?
- \textit{Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft}, p. 82

In his discussion of truth as adequation, Immanuel Kant distinguishes between analytic logic, which knows that the truth of objects can never be known absolutely, and dialectic, which believes that the formal laws of general logic can somehow apply to the objects of the world. The dialectician Hegel prefaces his \textit{Phänomenologie} with attacks on the formalism of the Kantian theory of truth and on Kant’s adoption of a supposedly premature limit to human knowledge and implicit argument that the Substance (to adopt Hegelian terminology) is not the Subject. The philosophically crucial relationship between known things and knower, or between objects and propositions about them, is the principal subject of epigraphy, or the study of the relationship of things to statements impressed (or supposed to be impressed) into them.

In his essay on epigraphy, Lessing notes that a single epigram has two inseparable parts: the \textit{Erwartung} or “anticipation,” such as a metal ingot; and the \textit{Aufschluß} or “conclusion,” such as an inscription impressed into the \textit{Erwartung} and explaining it or
making it what it is.\textsuperscript{25} The epigram should not be thought of apart from that whereon it is inscribed. In Lessing's \textit{Nathan der Weise} we encounter an example of a numismatic epigram: \textit{neue Münze. Neue Münze} is necessarily epigrammatic. It cannot be thought of apart from its inscription. The inscribed weight and purity (of which the \textit{Aussage} speaks) usually differs from the actual weight and purity, but even if it did not, the inscription alone is what makes the ingot (or mere commodity) into a legal coin. \textit{Neue Münze} is in this sense as much proposition as thing. (Even if \textit{uralte Münze} were impressed with accurate inscriptions about its purity and weight, it still would not constitute a numismatic epigram. It could be exchanged as a mere commodity without the political guarantee of the royal signet and thus is separable from its inscription.) Like paper money or \textit{Geldscheine}, coin derives its exchange value, which confers on it its status as money, from the inscribed proposition. As an epigram, \textit{neue Münze} is as much number or tale (\textit{Zahl}) as it is that which is tolled (\textit{Anzahl}).

The English word \textit{number} happens to refer both to a group or "number" (\textit{Anzahl}) of things and also to a numeral or "number" (\textit{Zahl}). \textit{Number} refers both to disposed things and to that which is supposed to dispose them. The etymology of \textit{number} happens to include the Latin \textit{nummus} and the Greek \textit{nomismos} which mean "coined money" or "coin."\textsuperscript{26} The etymology is explicable when we consider that a coin, like a number, concerns both things and symbols. As an ingot of metal, it has material properties (e.g., weight) like those of the members of a group or "number" of things; and as a monetary unit it has numerical or symbolic properties. The etymology of \textit{number} suggests how number theory may elucidate some of the problems which arise in monetary

\textsuperscript{25} Lessing, \textit{Anmerkungen}, Sect. 4.

theory, and also how monetary theory may elucidate the truth of things.

The analysis of a coin as both commodity or an inscribed thing and a symbol or an inscription, and of the relationship between coin and number, suggest why epigraphy and philosophy changed with the historical development of *neue Münze*, the first widely circulating "publications" in human history, in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Naive writers, for example, declared a unity of measurement and measured things. "You, O God, disposed all things by measure, number and weight. (Omnia in mensura et numero et pondere dispositisti.)" The author of this sentence from *The Wisdom of Solomon* (II. 24) adapts to Judaism the pseudo-Platonic argument that the economy (dispositio) of the universe is governed by number, or that there is a necessary correspondence between the truth of the things of the universe and that of numerality. In his influential discussion of the importance of the changing relationship between thing and proposition during the pre-Socratic period, Hegel attaches great importance to the epigram—the aesthetic "form" which marks the transition from Symbolic to Classical art—because in it the general relation of symbol to thing is explicit. In it the thing is allowed to "come forward" to us, as does the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx. In Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, the relation between thing and proposition, between subject and predicate, or between Subject and Substance, makes the epigram one of the few genres which is considered in the Symbolic, Romantic and Classical stages.

27 The sentence from the *Apocrypha* appears to be a naive adaption of Plato, *Republic* 602 c-d, etc.

28 Belief in such correspondence is crucial to much Western thinking. In literature, for example, this one sentence from the *Apocrypha* inspired a tradition of compositions in which number dominates both form and content. (See Hermann Kring, *DVīrt*, XVIII, 1940, p. 238; and other works referred to in the sections on numerical composition in E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [New York, 1953], p. 504, ft. 10, etc.). In science, the Platonic position gave rise to a tradition which includes Archimedes and other "marvellous assayers of nature" (Cavaliere, referring to the Platonic Galileo; quoted by Alexander Koyré, *Metaphysics and Measurement: Essays in the Scientific Revolution* [London, 1968], p. 14.).

29 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1970), esp. Vol. III, pp. 325-327. The tale of this development, which took place in Greece in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., must consider the interrelationships of changes in economic conditions, in the philosophical understanding of the relationship of proposition to thing, and in the production of literary genres. See Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (to be published by the Johns Hopkins University Press), Chapter II.
Heidegger, who also looks to the pre-Socratic period, does not take into account Hegel's and Lessing's study of the epigraphic relationship between thing and proposition. As we have seen, he fills out his essay *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* with examples such as *Gold*, *Fünfmarkstücke* and *Geldstücke*. He does not recognize, however, that numismatic epigrammatology or the theory of how *Gold* becomes *Geld* is crucial to the problem of the relationship between thing and proposition. Heidegger is tripped up by his own examples when he fails to understand their uniqueness and the way they inform his own argument. In this way, Heidegger prematurely if not erroneously trips out of the Western tradition.

What helps to explain Heidegger's method? As we have seen, Heidegger confuses verification (*Bewährung*) and validity (*Geltung*), and does not look well into the relationship between validity and currency (*Umlauf*). He looks to Lotze.\(^{30}\) Despite some criticism of Lotze in *Sein und Zeit*, the words *Geltung* and *gelten* play no less important a role in Lotze's *Logik* than in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*. Like Lotze, Heidegger was a kind of logical alchemist, interested only in the "genuineness" (*echtheit*) of gold and of those things

\(^{30}\) Hermann Lotze, *Logik* (Leipzig, 1880), esp. para. 820. Cf. the discussion of validity and reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in para. 318. In these paragraphs Lotze discusses the theory of ideas of Plato and Heraclitus in terms of the "currency" of "truth." See Felix Maria Gatz, *Die Begriffe der Geltung bei Lotze* (Stuttgart, 1928). The concepts of *Gelten* and *Geltung* in Germany during the period before the publication of *Sein und Zeit* is considered in the following works, all published before 1914: Ssallagoff, *Vom Begriff des Geltern in der modernen Logik*; Pflie, *Der Einfluss Lotzes auf die logische Bewegung der Gegenwart*; and Liebert, *Das Problem der Geltung*. In *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* Heidegger speaks disparagingly of statements in which truth itself is made to be worth (*gelten*) something else, and so disparages both Lotze and sophistry. See *WW* 9, 12, 14, 17, 18, 22, etc. Often Heidegger employs two kinds of metaphors from monetary discourse: "Die 'Wahrheit' ist kein Merkmal des richtigen Satzes, der durch ein menschliches 'Subjekt' von einem 'Objekt' ausgesagt wird und dann irgendwo, man weiß nicht in welchem Bereich, 'gilt,' sondern die Wahrheit ist die Entbergung des Seienden, durch die eine Offenheit west" (*WW* 18). The association of *Merkmal* or the classificatory mark of genuses and species (cf. *Prägung*, *character*, *tupos*, etc.) with *Geltung* is common in philosophy since Plato, and often gives rise to speculations such as this: "Der Blick in dieses Schwierige [i.e., that all Western languages are minted with an exclusive type of metaphysics], das aus der Sprache kommt, sollte uns davor behüten, die Sprache des jetzt versuchten Denkens vorschnell in eine Terminologie umzumünzen und morgen schon vom Austrag zu reden, statt alle Anstrengung dem Durchdenken des Gesagten zu widmen" (Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*; in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [New York, 1974], pp. 142-3).
which he compares with gold. Heidegger is an upholder of the “authentic” values of a barter economy.  

Heidegger also looks to Nietzsche. Truth, Nietzsche argued, is an unknown or dimly known etymon; it is an effaced and hence illegible monetary inscription.

Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dunken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass die welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen, in Betracht kommen.

Unlike Heidegger, Nietzsche takes into his account of truth, which he conflates with truths, the difference between coin (Münze), which acts as money only by virtue of the image (Bild) impressed into it, and mere golden ingots. Nietzsche of course, does not hanker after the effaced image which, he supposes, might explain the coin which is truth. For him the truth is, to use Lessing’s terminology, an Erwartung of which the Aufschluß is forever necessarily lost.

Nietzsche’s rhetorical consideration of truth occurs in an essay, entitled Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Aussermoralischen Sinn, which brings a more or less apolitical or even nihilist dimension to the

31 In Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Heidegger compares the currency of truth to that of money. In later works he compares words to coins or paper money, and considers the validity (Geltung) (which “common sense” allies with the Bewährung) of our words. Heidegger complains, for example, that words are usually thrown around on the cheap, and in the process are worn out (Martin Heidegger, Was Heisst Denken? [Tübingen, 1954], p. 87). He seems to be one of those who would return to or perhaps even resurrect “alten, ehrenwürdigen Worten” (Über “Die Linie” in The Question of Being, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluckhohn [New Haven, 1958], p. 108. Like Goethe, Heidegger would return to linguistic barter-exchange in which “paper money” would disappear. In Über “Die Linie” (p. 108) he approves this sentence of Goethe: “Wenn jemand Wort und Ausdruck als heilige Zeugnisse betrachtet und sie nicht etwa, wie Scheidemünze oder Papiergeld, nur zu schnellem, augenblicklichem Verkehr bringen, sondern im geistigen Handel und Wandel als wahres Äquivalent ausgetauscht wissen will, so kann man ihm nicht verübeln, daß er aufmerksam macht, wie herkömmliche Ausdrücke, woran niemand mehr Arges hat, doch einen schädlichen Einfluß verüben, Ansichten verdüsten, den Begriff erstellen und ganzen Fächern eine falsche Richtung geben.” Cf. Heidegger’s poem “Sprache” (dated March 1976) in which Heidegger asks “Wann werden Wörter / Wieder Wort?” and refers “an den Ort / uralter Eignis” (published in Philosophy Today, Vol. 20, No. 4/4 [Winter, 1976], p. 291).

study of being and verification. Nietzsche however, knew that his metaphor could explain not the essence of truth, but only the illusive truth of some things. The prejudice, implied in the metaphors of Heidegger’s Common Sense, that truth must somehow be comparable to the material properties of mere Metall (cf. Nietzsche) or baare Münze (cf. Schelling and Lessing) often informs the “high felutin” economics of German thought. Heidegger, who takes this metaphor as the false position from which to develop a true one, does not seem to understand or transcend its metaphoricity. He mistakes, indeed is trapped by, the implications of his own examples. He ignores not only the political authority of the state, with which monetary impressions are associated, but also politics itself. In Heidegger, the political world is that part of human existence which he associates in Sein und Zeit with the “inauthentic” they-world. We know, however, that it is this “inauthentic” they-world which makes coins authentic. Coinage, like language, is a political matter. Counterfeitness is determined only by discovering the issuing authority, the place of “origin” which (whether or not that origin be historical or material) alone confers on it its authenticity. The relation between genuineness and the political authority is always important. Heidegger ignores and is ignorant of the political authority recognized by Nathan the Jew and by Jesus, whose task it is “to bear witness” to that truth about which Pilate asks “what it is.” Heidegger’s notions of authentic (eigentlich) untruth derive from an alchemical and virtually apolitical theory of the counterfeit or of ungenuineness (Unechtheit). After all, it seems, we can not wisely expect more political acumen from Heidegger than from Lessing.


34 In their translation of Sein und Zeit and elsewhere, Macquarrie and Robinson refuse to associate the supposedly “casual” meanings of the word eigentlich (e.g., in Sein und Zeit and in Vom Wesen der Wahrheit) with its “loftier” meaning of “genuine authenticity” in Sein und Zeit. Their refusal is both unHeidegerrian and incorrect. Heidegger depends on the concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity as the authors of the medieval grail tales depend on the hypothesis of that free and infinitely large material and spiritual gift which is the grail. In Sein und Zeit, for example, Heidegger argues: “Un- und nichteigentlich bedeutet aber keineswegs ‘eigentlich nicht,’ als ginge das Dasein mit diesem Seinsmodus überhaupt seines Seins verlustig” (SZ 176). This statement is like (even informed by) the argument that even “false gold may be ‘real.’” In the section of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit entitled “Die Unwahrheit als die Verbergung,” Heidegger argues: “Das Da-sein verwahrt, sofern es ek-s sistiert, die erste und weiteste Un-entborgenheit, die eigentliche Un-wahrheit. Das eigentliche Un-wesen der Wahrheit ist das Geheimnis” (WW 21).
Heidegger’s reluctance to deal philosophically with economic problems is embedded in his anti-philosophical understanding of the historical and theoretical relationship between philosophy and economics. In *Sein und Zeit*, for example, Heidegger refers proudly to Heraclitus’ Fragment 1, which was written about the same time and in the same place that coinage was being introduced to the world, as the oldest fragment of philosophical doctrine and as a confirmation of his theory of truth as unconcealment (*alētheia*) (SZ 219). Heidegger, however, ignores other fragments of Heraclitus which tend to undermine Heidegger’s position, in the beginning of *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, that economic calculation and common sense have little to do with philosophy. Among these other fragments is one which allies the essential substance of the universe (fire) with golden money:

There is an exchange of fire (*puros*) for all things and all things for fire, as there is of gold (*chrusos*) for wares and wares for gold.

I have shown elsewhere that the linguistic form and the content of the fragment are both “monetary” and “barter-like.” Heidegger praises Heraclitus and claims that Heraclitus’ writings are the birth of philosophy; but, significantly, he says nothing about this fragment in the series of seminars he offered on Heraclitus during his “late period.” As Heidegger tries to avoid the problem of political authority in his discussion of currency in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, so he tries to sidestep in his seminars on Heraclitus that metaphysics of the market-place which allies the form and content of economics (*chrusos*) with that of ontology (*puros*).

In Heideggerian thought the counterfeit still exists as illusion. The essential negation of truth is its dis-essence, and truth’s dis-essence is part of its essence.”

35 Heraclitus, ed. Diels, Frag. 90. See my analysis of this fragment in *The Economy of Literature*, Chapter I.

36 Heidegger was absent from the seminar about Fragment 90 which he and Eugen Fink promised to their students. In Heidegger’s absence, Fink seems to have adopted Oswald Spengler’s interpretation (in *Der Metaphysische Grundgedanke der Heraklitischen Philosophie* [Halle, 1904]) that *chrusos* (gold) should be interpreted as the (golden colour of the) sun (Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraklit: Seminar Wintersemester 1966/1967* [Frankfurt-am-Main, 1970], esp. pp. 170ff.). It is interesting that Hegel, who promises to consider all of Heraclitus’ fragments in his lectures on the history of philosophy, also neglects to discuss Fragment 90; and that Heidegger, when he returns to the seminar, does not take up Fink’s discussion of Fragment 90, although in *Sein und Zeit* he had called the thought of Spengler “the mere expression of culture.”
Heidegger ignores the philosophy of the market-place despite his intuition that "in demselben Weltenblick jedoch, den der Anfang der Philosophie erfüllt, beginnt auch erst die ausgeprägte Herrschaft des gemeinen Verstandes (die Sophistik)" (WW 26), despite the suggestion that together with philosophy was born that "gesunden Menschenverstand" (WW 26) which Heidegger himself associates with economic calculation (WW 5).

Heidegger, then, shares with Husserl a prejudice that the trader's truth and the real scientist's truth are basically heterogeneous. Husserl wrote:

Der Händler am Markt hat seine Marktwahrheit; ist sie in ihrer Relation nicht eine gute Wahrheit und die beste, die ihm nützen kann? Ist sie darum Scheinwahrheit, weil der Wissenschaftler in einer anderen Relativität, mit anderen Zielen und Ideen urteilend andere Wahrheiten sucht, mit denen man sehr viel mehr machen kann, nur eben gerade nicht das, was man am Markte braucht?37

In the beginning of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Heidegger makes a distinction between sound common sense and philosophy similar to that of his teacher: "Was die Philosophie nach der Schätzung des gesunden und in seinem Bezirk wohlberechtigten Verstandes ist, trifft nicht in ihr Wesen, das sich nur aus dem Bezug zur ursprünglichen Wahrheit des Seienden also solchen im Ganzen bestimmen lässt" (WW 26). Unlike the philosophers whose theories of truth as adequation he inadequately understands, Heidegger seeks to avoid entirely economic calculation (WW 5). Unlike Plato, whose sense of truth as the uni-directional way of the gods (alētheia) he sometimes seems to parody, Heidegger seeks to transcend prematurely and altogether the tension between economics and ontology which has informed philosophy from its beginning. His refusal to work his way through the economics of truth is one of the telling political and metaphysical symptoms of his thought. Heidegger does not comprehend the epigrammatology of object and statement which informs his analysis of the errors of common sense. He cannot offer a final solution to "Die Wahrheitsfrage und die Philosophie" (WW 26-8) because he fails to account even for the conceptual transition from Gold to Geld which informs his critique of the traditional concept of truth.

Numismatic epigrammatology informs the discourse about truth

which began about the same time and in about the same place as the development of coined money. Philosophy explains this informing and is not reducible to alchemy or minting. Nowadays, however, there is an anxious tendency to dismiss truth or to italicize the word "truth" as an empty metaphor. Truths are supposed to be coins from which, as Neitzsche metaphorizes, the inscriptions have been effaced and which count not as money (or neue Münze) but only as metal (or uralte Münze). This challenge to the theory of truth as adequation goads us, as does Heidegger’s elenchus of Sound Common Sense, to question our hypotheses of logical and historical origins (including the origins of coinage and philosophy itself). The challenge, however, becomes a philosophical and political monster when it refuses, as do the final sections of Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, to account for the conceptual transition from Gold to Geld or for the epigraphic relationship between inscription and inscribed thing. As we have seen, the adequation of the traditional truthseeker, although transcendible, is no easier to escape than the equation of the moneychanger’s balance or the inscription of the minter’s stamp. Lessing’s sound considerations of Münze and of the relationship between things and propositions about things do not pretend to give access to the alkahestic revelation of which Heidegger chatters. At the same time, however, they do not bar us prematurely from the Platonic or the Hegelian ways to transcend the theory of truth as adequation. Heidegger wants to return to a barter economy of wares and words.³⁸ Lessing teaches us not to ignore the necessarily numismatic and political character of truth.

³⁸ See note 31 above.

State University of New York at Buffalo