



Gadamer on Being

Beauty, Globalism and the Modern Sublime

Jessica Frazier



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For Joan L. Young

‘The return to ourselves is always ... a return to the whole in which we
are and who we ourselves are.’
—Gadamer (1992a, 90)

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Introduction: Gadamer's Grand Narrative

Abstract Grand narratives about modernity have often predicted a dystopian descent towards a 'clash of civilisations', or 'decline of the West'. But Hans-Georg Gadamer, student of Heidegger and one of the last philosophers in the German phenomenological lineage, spent his career describing a hopeful grand narrative of dialogue and growth that was grounded in a robust metaphysical picture drawing on Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and others. Gadamer is frequently depicted merely as a philosopher of language and understanding, but this book examines the coherence of his core ontology with his larger philosophical vision of truth, reality, ethics, values and human life. It unpacks a promise implicit in his thought that a more creative, dialogical and sublime form of modernity is possible. This chapter also positions the present study amid common approaches to Gadamer and critiques of him: our goal is to see what his thought looks like as a systematic ontology for contemporary metaphysics, and a grand narrative for modern society.

Keywords Modernity • Phenomenology • Postmodernism • Plato

In the post-postmodern era in which we live, it can feel as if something is lost—some spirit of confidence in what is true and important, some

passion about what matters, some commitment to life lived as a meaningful quest undertaken in the forward-flow of history. One flashpoint in the development of this attitude was Jean-François Lyotard's prophetic proclamation of the end of metanarratives in 1979's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*,¹ written at the time that Hans-Georg Gadamer was achieving international fame for attempting to redefine truth in *Truth and Method*—translated into English in 1975. Ironically, this was itself an era in which postmodern grand narratives proliferated; Jacques Derrida inculcated a sense of freefall through relative truths, Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault encouraged the playful remaking of our identity as a kind of 'second naïveté' liberated from external authority, and Richard Rorty instilled a calm, unexcitable pragmatism in his readers. These and other 'postmodern Platos' writing 'on the basis of a conviction that modern rationalism has exhausted its promise and its possibilities', as Catherine Zuckert (1996, 1) put it, helped to build the narrative of modernity as a time of decline, revolution and uncertainty. In 1961, Leo Strauss had echoed the rhetoric of Nietzsche's twilight and Oswald Spengler's decline of the 'evening-land', when he wrote to Gadamer that his new book *Wahrheit und Methode* would surely precipitate an unprecedented 'approach of the world night'.²

1 GADAMERIAN OPTIMISM

But Gadamer aimed at something quite different. His thought is irrepressibly constructive in building a large-scale systematic philosophy, and optimistic about our role in history as makers of the future (and not merely inheritors of the past)—or so this book argues. These claims will be controversial to those who feel that Gadamer's work was limited primarily to his continuation of the tradition of hermeneutics flowing from Humanistic interpretation through to German exemplars like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, or those who feel that Gadamer's thought remained almost exhaustively within the overarching framework of Heidegger's thought. Indeed, for many, compared to Heidegger he effected 'a certain narrowing of the philosophical perspective' of phenomenology, for he was

¹ See both Lyotard's 1979 account and Habermas' (1981) response in 'Modernity Versus Postmodernity'.

² See Leo Strauss' 1961 letter to Gadamer in their correspondence (Gadamer and Strauss 1978).

‘not concerned to make a contribution to the philosophical or theoretical discussion of the concept of truth in the great work’ (Zaborowski 2006, 357–358).³ Here we do not focus on Gadamer’s treatment of understanding or his relation to Heidegger, although we discuss these issues in the chapters on “Truth: The Fabric of Meaning” and “Metaphysics: Structure, Vitality, and Pantheism”. There are already excellent studies on these topics (e.g. Palmer 1969; Warnke 1987; Coltman 1998; Scheibler 2000; Eberhard 2004; Hammermeister 2006; Barthold 2010; Davey 2013; Nielsen 2023).

Instead the present book re-reads his work on a range of themes from truth to spirituality and ethics, because it takes a substantive ontological insight to lie at the heart of Gadamer’s thought, yielding a consistent philosophical position spanning the areas on which he wrote. After years of having been seen primarily as a scholar of traditional textual hermeneutics despite important outlying voices, recently there has been a collective move to affirm a more thoroughgoing *ontological* position embedded in his work, resulting in more substantively objectivist (Figal 2010), realist (George 2024) or metaphysical (Grondin 2024) readings of Gadamer. Grondin has emphasised that the meaning that hermeneutics recovers is not only a sense of the text, but ‘a sense that is already lurking in the things themselves... that is already there and that is binding for the interpreter’. It presents a universal aspect of life because ‘we all seek to uncover or anticipate the sense of things in our constant quest for orientation and understanding’ (Grondin 2024, 24).

In the following chapters we build on Gadamer’s phenomenologically inflected account of reality, rooted in his central ontological analysis of ‘play’-like structures (Frazier 2008, 2022). We agree that the truths of hermeneutics lie in the phenomenological ‘things themselves’ and that this results in a kind of objectivity—thus answering the old question of whether hermeneutics is ultimately merely relativistic or pragmatic. But unless one revises the whole ontological concept to which Gadamer’s realism applies, one is liable to fall back into the old question of whether truth lies in the subject or object, the real or ideal. As Culbertson (2024, 91) puts it, we should seek to avoid reinstating ‘a Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal that Gadamer seeks to avoid’ and so ‘the

³ ‘eine gewisse Verengung der philosophischen Perspektive... Gadamer ging es in seinem Hauptwerk nicht darum, einen Beitrag zur philosophischen oder wissenschaftstheoretischen Diskussion um den Wahrheitsbegriff zu leisten’; see Zaborowski (2006, 357–358).

very dualism that Gadamer's account of truth and understanding seeks to unsettle'. For Gadamer, we argue that at the ultimate level this dualism is misplaced, because his ontology is fundamentally different from the Cartesian theatre of distanced viewers watching an external realm of things. As we will see, he draws not only on Heidegger but also on Plato, Hegel and others to explain Being itself as something that encompasses both subject and object into an interdependent structure. Reality is not something we look at and study, but something we are part of, and help to make.

The following chapters treat Gadamer as a systematic thinker who applies this ontological insight widely beyond the familiar concerns with text, understanding, truth and method, to the more ambitious areas of Being, self, art, society and ethics. In Part I we contextualise his thought in relation to the discourses of the time and his own life, and in Part II we set out his views on the nature of meaning and truth and his often-ignored views on ontology—claiming that they constitute an account of reality calculated to stand outside of substance metaphysics and materialist realism, and beyond the artificial divide between self and world. Finally, in Part III we unpack some implications of Gadamer's thought for philosophies of value and ethics, self and spirituality, and society and global life.

This may seem contrary to Gadamer's modest self-presentation and the apparently unassuming remit of his thought. There is certainly some risk in trying to articulate more clearly for a philosopher things that he himself was reluctant to say. It is true that Gadamer doubted philosophers should take on the mantle of prophets (as we will see), yet he himself narrated the past failures and lost possibilities of Western history and spent his later years suggesting a better way forward in modernity. It is true, too, that he saw Being as a dynamic, infinite medium that always slips beyond any totalising grasp, and so suggests a 'postmetaphysical' approach; yet as we discuss in the chapter on metaphysics, he also asserted strong, universal truths about existence and 'discretely underlined the metaphysical bend' of his thinking away from Heidegger (Grondin 2017, 29). True, also, that Gadamer saw the narrow outlook of humanity as inescapably constrained within finite boundaries of knowledge and action shaped partly by tradition and community, but in the chapter on truth and globalism, we see how these very constraints function as 'enabling' conditions, platforms for an innovative, dynamic, collaborative future.

In a sense, this book is an attempt to give a clearer narrative to Gadamer's overall vision, showing that philosophical hermeneutics contains an

ontological insight which illuminates larger philosophical questions about truth and the world as we know it, and about value, human flourishing and social ethics. We try to place his view in historical context as a twentieth-century culmination of older trajectories in German thought to do with *Geist* or consciousness, *Bildung* or development, and *Sein* or being. But we also try to show how Gadamer does something new with his sources, treating finitude, uncertainty, change, interdependence as something positive and beneficial—something *sublime*—but in a distinctively modern way, as we will see.

A secular thinker from an urban setting, Gadamer never expressed the sentiment that a God is needed to save us—as Heidegger seemed to do in his later years when ‘the danger hanging over the present age’ included ‘such threats as nuclear war and environmental degradation’ and more broadly ‘the human ambition of achieving domination over nature’ (Pattison 2000, 1–2).⁴ Rather, he believed that if we understand the nature of Being, it will lead us to see existence as an invitation to participate creatively in the world. Instead of being paralysed by relativism and finitude, we should revel in the infinite range of meaning’s possible expressions, and work creatively to add our own unique and never-wholly-finished contribution to the whole that forever exceeds us. Hopeful about the possibilities of dialogue, about the benefits of a multi-cultural world, about the value of poetry and the arts, and the hope that we can achieve the balances needed for harmony in health and relationships, Gadamer’s work harbours ‘a certain optimism toward life’. This ethos perhaps reflects the way that ‘on a personal level, Gadamer was himself a natural optimist’ (Grondin 2024, 128–129).

Gadamer’s view is sublime, we argue—not as the term has sometimes been limited chiefly to ‘the beautiful in nature and in art’ (as by Kant), but rather as a realisation also applicable to ‘the whole ocean of the beautiful spread throughout the moral reality of mankind’ (2004, 34). As Gadamer universalises the ontology of art, so too he universalises our experience of beauty as an immersive, self-opening event of growth into a comportment we may adopt towards all experience. Unlike the ambivalent account of the sublime we find in Longinus, Burke, or Kant or implicitly in Pascal, Gadamer’s is a sublime perspective on our place in the groundless ocean

⁴ See Wrathall and Lambeth (2011) for an interesting reading of Heidegger as offering a ‘third way’ of post-metaphysical comportment that lies between secularism, and waiting for God.

of being. But groundlessness need not be negative. His account is charged with optimism about the value of individual contributions to the whole (as we will see in his views of playing games, interpreting art, creating conversations and new identities, and building community). Despite his reluctance to adopt the prophetic style of some peers and predecessors, his later works in particular contain a driving energy stemming from his exhortation to engage in dialogue—with history, art, others and ourselves.

This approach to philosophy can be traced back to Gadamer's guides, among whom (although he had many during his long life and Martin Heidegger was surely the most famous) Plato was arguably the most important and the closest to his own approach. Heidegger, following Nietzsche, was somewhat dismissive of Plato as a wrong-turn in Western thought. But as Walter Lammi notes, Gadamer interpreters face a puzzle in the fact that however deferential a student the young Hans-Georg was towards his mentor, he nevertheless refused to abandon his Platonism: 'Gadamer has also been known to say, quite flatly, "I am a Platonist." How could this be possible? How could Gadamer consider himself a "Heideggerian" and a "Platonist" at the same time?' (Lammi 1991, 487). Gadamer, who had begun life as a classical scholar, thought he saw in Greek thought generally,⁵ and in the later works of Plato particularly, something of perennial importance that Heidegger had missed.

For Gadamer the ancient perspective of the late Plato was surprisingly *postmodern* in its acknowledgement of inescapable complexity, dynamism, relativism and an altered conception of Being beyond mere concrete substance.⁶ Plato depicted individual minds as being like windows—finite forms of existence that, despite their limits, can be opened towards a vision of the whole of things. In texts like the *Parmenides* he acknowledged the infinity and instability of meaning, offering a corrective to the apparent determinacy of the forms in earlier sources like *The Republic*. In Gadamer's own work on science, technology and the failure of dialogue, he had tried to warn his readers against the pathology of overly deterministic,

⁵ See DaVia (2022) on Gadamer's sense of the 'distinctness' of his interest in Greek thought relative to his peers, and the place of Aristotle in his work.

⁶ As we will see, Gadamer's readings of Plato remained much more positively re-appropriative than those of Heidegger; see, for instance, Coltman (1998, ch.2) on their differing interpretations and Wachterhauser (1999) on the centrality of Plato's thought to his ontology, as well as Lammi (2008) on the general significance of Greek classical worldviews in Gadamer's thought.

technological thought, sounding a warning bell about the lure of a mis-conceived Platonism that promises simple answers.⁷

Yet as we will see, this did not mean abandoning Plato's love of truth, his confidence that humans can access it, and the belief that it represents a place of equal access, rights and action. Plato's *Meno* had tried to demonstrate the human significance of the forms by showing slaves to be as innately adept at geometry as any master. Plato's ideal person was unafraid to analyse ideas, to ascend the ladder of eros towards the Good or to evolve from the world of the particulars to that of the forms... or to die. His optimistic confidence in our human potential to understand the essence of Being sharply contrasts with the sense of foreboding expressed towards the end of Heidegger's life and the 'malaises of modernity' that Charles Taylor diagnosed in 'themes of decline' that have marked the modern West.⁸

In this sense, Gadamer was an heir of Plato's *rationalistic* optimism about the potential of human reason to understand its world. This may seem odd, given that hermeneutics emphasises the limits of knowledge, and the way Gadamer's abandonment of apparently 'objective' or determinate truths, and critique of Enlightenment rationalism has been a topic of debate (e.g. Gjesdal 2008). The infinity of the world, the instability of language, the finitude of our own limited perspective are all present in his thought as they are in that of Derrida, Deleuze and others. Yet these can also be the platforms for a substantive insight into what 'world' consists of universally and necessarily for us. For Gadamer, Plato's picture retained 'continued validity under the subtly altered conditions of modern thought', resounding in the confidence of rationalist philosophers, metaphysical mystics and phenomenological revisionists (see Sprung 1978, 45). Something sacred remained available, but in a different form: 'the question of the being of Beings was posed in terms of the highest and most eminent of beings, namely the divine.' Indeed, we argue in this book that, as with Plato, Gadamer's goal was as much spiritual as epistemological, for one of the things that humans could hope to see in their

⁷ See, for instance, Marino (2011) for an interesting analysis of the way that Gadamer's work fitted within a broader historical trajectory of discourse on the problems of scientific, instrumental thinking and the way that it now resonates with our concerns about the technologically adapted life-world that we inhabit.

⁸ See Taylor (1991), based on his Massey Lectures examining problems with the modern ethic of self-fulfilment; later reprinted by Harvard University Press as *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

eudaimonian vision of the whole was not only the world around them, but also their own nature and fate.

In an address that he gave in 1994, at the age of ninety-four, Hans-Georg Gadamer, wrote that it was precisely the desire to know oneself in relation to the whole that had brought him to his love of the Greeks. Discussing ‘the task of hermeneutics as philosophy’ he spoke of ‘conceptual thinking’ as ‘the enduring intellectual creation whose bright rays have streamed out over the globe’ and through which ‘we inherited our thinking and reflection about the possibility of knowledge as such’:

Plato has shown us what this wisdom consists of, namely, knowing about our not knowing. It is the uncompromising and incorruptible way by which we humans seek, during the short span of life that ends in death, to understand the other person, the unknown, the *ignoramus* and *ignorabimus*—in other words, our not knowing our true place in the world.... (2007, 110)

It was perhaps on account of this timeless classical problem that Plato’s positive vision caught his imagination in Paul Natorp’s Plato classes at Marburg University in the 1920s. At that time Hans-Georg was a bright, liberal, middle-class child of the new century. He was the son of an atheist scientist on the one hand and a Christian pietist on the other, gifted at history and classics but also attracted to philosophy, and these combinations made him into a natural synthesiser of outlooks. Over the ensuing eight decades, Gadamer was able to give new life to the contours of Plato’s rationalist vision by weaving together insights from diverse periods and traditions of Western thought. Edmund Husserl suggested a route out of the impasse of Kantian epistemology by learning to ‘elucidate... connections between veritable being and knowing’ and so bypass the problem of a world beyond experience (Husserl 2008, 434).

We will see how language, under Heidegger’s conception, would eventually serve as a medium for pursuing ontology which was newly understood as a kind of second-order structural analysis of what defines all meaning, all experience, all appearance. Certainly, meaning was subjective to the individual, relative to the culture, diachronically evolving at every moment and never the same between the speaker and the understander. Yet it was just this kind of phenomenon—dialogical and dynamic—that best illuminated the structure of our world in Gadamer’s view. He had found a medium in which ‘every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to

appear' (2004, 454). His theories of hermeneutics would later gain him international acclaim, but language could not contain his interests, for, as we will see, Gadamer had meant hermeneutic philosophy to open a window onto Being itself. Much later, as an octogenarian concerned with the way in which doctors, psychologists and scientists had taken up the torch of self-understanding that philosophers and theologians had once carried, Gadamer would seek 'wholeness' in human life, in terms of 'that process which, by virtue of its self-contained and self-producing living power, finds its place within the totality of nature' (1996, 88).

This idea that humanity has a 'visionary' capacity to understand reality and itself, and progress towards a better way of life, has an important role to play at this juncture in modern history. As cultures and societies blend into a global sphere, media and information multiply beyond our capacities, environmentalism intensifies our actions onto a planetary scale, and politics debates our increasing entanglement, the place of human life has become a question for social, spiritual and scientific theory. The 'global' outlook wrought by information and geo-political connections, and new media and technology, has thrown our small shadows against a vast canvas of possibility. We now face the choice between fragmentation of this uncontrollable and vast reality, and wonder at the possibilities of our creative co-operation. In this sense, the scale of modern concerns calls us to a transcend the old fear of vastness that Burke, Pascal and arguably Kant evinced in their ideas of 'the sublime'. We need a newly positive attitude—a 'modern sublime'—that embraces the uncertain future of global society, humanity and nature in a constructive way.

2 ONTOLOGY, MODERNITY, POWER AND CONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY

While there are many existing introductions and critical assessments of Gadamer's thought, this book aims to add to them a study that does three things. First, it treats his thinking as rooted in a core ontological insight that systematically lies behind the different sides of his hermeneutics. In this sense it takes him as a systematic thinker of not only hermeneutics, but also questions in ontology and flowing from that, epistemology and even ethics. Second, it interprets his different interests in text, history, aesthetics, fundamental ontology, pedagogy, flourishing etc., as united in a coherent philosophical vision. For that reason it will read his various areas of

writing as consistently culminating in an overall worldview—or at least as *aiming* to do so. Third, it treats him as constructing his philosophy from a distinctively ‘modern’ stance. By this is meant that he takes into account the critiques that motivated Husserl and Heidegger, and even Hegel and Kant, but also tries to ‘correct’ even Heidegger as Lammi (1991) puts it, going beyond his predecessors in a way that made him part of postmodernism and post-foundationalism, as much as he was an heir of twentieth-century phenomenology. We also suggest that his own upbringing and outlook were distinctly more ‘modern’ than that of Heidegger, in that he grew up in an urban and multi-religious context, surrounded by educated women like his first wife and her family, scientists like his father and his colleagues, imbibing a rather secular outlook that we will explore more in the chapters on his life, and on his approach to spirituality. It is also important to acknowledge that this book is more constructive than critical in its approach: its main goal is to deploy a principle of generosity in leaning in to Gadamer’s ideas and offering their most consistent interpretations, rather than focusing on what he misses or may distort in pursuit of his overarching goal. These different approaches will become evident in the following chapters, but it is helpful to indicate their rationale here.

Hermeneutics as Fundamental Ontology

Along with a small but growing minority of other interpreters of his thought, this book takes Gadamer’s claim to a universal and ontologically grounded insight as central to his thought, and—judging the claim to be correct—it takes this as core to his value for philosophers across disciplines. We will discuss this issue in much greater detail in the chapter on metaphysics, considering particularly his relations to Plato, Hegel and Heidegger. But it is extraordinary that with Vattimo (2002, 300) writing on the ‘*ontologische Wendung*’ towards a ‘*hermeneutische Ontologie*’ in Gadamer, Grondin (2017, 2022, 2024) on his ‘somewhat ontological conclusion’, his ‘metaphysical bend’ and more recently his ‘metaphysical hermeneutics’, Wachterhauser (1999) on his ‘post-Platonic ontology’, Bernstein (1983, 34) on hermeneutics as a ‘primordial mode of being in the world’, and scholars like Mackinlay (2016, 119–121), Tsai (2011) and others all pointing towards his innovation of an ontologically substantive aspect to hermeneutics that goes beyond Heidegger, nevertheless there is still such reluctance to see him as speaking about anything more than language, truth and interpretation. By contrast, this book builds on an

analysis of his central structural analogy of play which he claimed to have a 'special speculative appeal' (*einen besonderen spekulativen Reiz*; Gadamer 1958, 141), making it a 'clue to ontological explanation' not only of art but of all experience (Frazier 2008, 2022). We take him to offer an ontological insight onto the core prerequisite structure of all existence as we could ever know it, and with this in mind, the following chapters emphasise his continuity with Plato, Hegel and more explicitly metaphysical traditions.

In doing this we are bringing out what was often implicit in his thought. He was curiously cautious about asserting this position, and often disavowed 'metaphysics' (for instance, he insisted that his statement 'being that can be understood is language' is 'certainly not a metaphysical statement'),⁹ and his interpreters have sometimes sought to reframe the universality of his insight as a matter of linguisticity (e.g. Di Cesare 2013). His own reticence on ontological matters came perhaps from the fact that questions about the basic and universal fabric of things were enormously fraught in the philosophies of the time. 'Metaphysics' had been condemned by Nietzsche and Heidegger both, whereas Gadamer's contribution lay more in the direction of 'fundamental ontology' in the sense of 'what any understanding of entities necessarily presupposes' (Carman 2003, 8) and 'transcendental' analysis in the sense of 'necessary universal structures that shape our perspective on the world' (Berendzen 2023, 202). Even claims to universality had become complicatedly tied up with the notion of objectivity, whereas Gadamer asserted a truth that was essentially universal precisely insofar as it described the necessary conditions of experience that constitutes 'the world' for us.¹⁰ Ironically, to make his substantive turn towards a philosophy with a 'strong, somewhat metaphysical conclusion' (Grondin 2022), he had to distance himself from Heidegger's rhetoric of metaphysics—which largely referred to ways of thinking about reality and our formulation of truth that were flawed, something to be overcome. In this connection 'metaphysics' was used almost as an adjective for all the old wrong ways of thinking. We see this in a 'weakening in Gadamer's thought of notions that are absolutely

⁹ See his account of his thought in 'Aesthetics and Hermeneutics' collected in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 103.

¹⁰ His ontology is not necessarily unique in its key features; he saw it as continuous with insights in the late Plato, and there are hints of it in Deleuze and Badiou, and also perhaps precursors in other cultures—in Bhartṛhari's classical Indian ontology of language, or Huayan Buddhism's conception of Being as a web of interconnected essences, for instance.

central to Heidegger's—such as metaphysics, the forgetting of Being, and the ontological difference' (Warnke 2016, 3).

This meant that his account of existence would be of a kind that was not a substance ontology and not an objective description of the world beyond thought. Yet the ontological stake remained in his work, arguably differentiating him from Heidegger's work, to which his own was so often reduced. Numerous scholars have examined the way that he seems to break away from Heidegger at a certain point. Careful analysis may show how he completes the ontological turn initiated by Heidegger in showing that 'being, language and understanding are not identical but ontologically together form a unity' (Tsai 2011).¹¹ For Mackinlay he stands with Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher who tries to fulfil the ontological project of phenomenology, resulting in:

an ontology that is dynamic, temporal, and much better characterised by interplay and interrelatedness than by an adversarial juxtaposition of subject and object. Neither subject nor object impose themselves on the other; rather, they are mutually and reciprocally constituted by the way that they stand in relation with one another, and indeed with the broader whole of which they form part. (Mackinlay 2016, 121)

Gianni Vattimo noted that:

...the *Philosophische Hermeneutik* alluded to in the subtitle of the book appears increasingly, and perhaps beyond the intentions of the author, as an *Ontologische Hermeneutik*, or even, and more so, a *Hermeneutische Ontologie*. It is along these lines that I think we should read Richard Bernstein's statement: "if we take Gadamer seriously, and we press his claims, they will bring us beyond philosophical hermeneutics." (Vattimo 2002, 300)

Vattimo concludes that the narrow interpretation of Gadamer as concerned only with understanding is flawed, a point also raised in his discussion of the commas in the phrase 'Sein, verstehen werden kann, is Sprache':

Today, both positive receptions and critical rejections of Gadamer's hermeneutics seem to be marked by a basic misunderstanding: the assumption that it may be reduced to a theory of the intrinsically finite and historically bound

¹¹ 'Sein, Sprache und Verstehen zwar nicht miteinander identisch sind, aber ontologisch zusammen eine Einheit bilden.'

character of understanding... the misunderstanding can only be cleared by pressing Gadamer's thought in the direction of that ontological *Wendung* (shift) announced in the third division of *Wahrheit und Methode*. (Vattimo 2002, 300)

Gadamer himself tried to express that he was not returning to the metaphysics Heidegger had rejected, but instead trying to build on that which is pre-required for everything we think of as the object of metaphysical thought, writing to Leo Strauss in the year after *Truth and Method's* publication that 'Against Heidegger I have for decades advocated that his leap or spring back behind metaphysics ("Satz" oder "Sprung" zurück *hinter* die Metaphysik) is itself made possible through this... I really believe I have understood the later Heidegger. But I must "prove" it—with the experience which is my own, and that is what I have named "hermeneutic experience"' (Gadamer and Strauss 1978). Having realised that existence could not be defined as something apart from experience and its essential defining structures, Gadamer's ontology dug into the immediacy of experience itself, excavating 'beneath' it for the universal truths that experience itself affords. It is these, and their implications, that we explore in this book.

The Systematic Coherence of the Hermeneutic Insight

One may seem to be *imposing* coherence on a philosopher like Gadamer when one tries to construct a systematic total philosophy from his ideas: for many he was only a philosopher of interpretive principles, or perhaps of language, or even of the kinds of truth that we deal with in the Humanities—but barely a phenomenologist and certainly not someone concerned with the modern forms of metaphysics and ontology. Yet even as his book was published, Gadamer was told by Leo Strauss that 'you possess and present a comprehensive doctrine,' and Gadamer replied that he was attempting 'to develop from the diversity of interpretive practice and experience the unity of a theory (*Aus der Viefachheit interpretatorischer Übung und Erfahrung die Einheit eine "theorie" zu entwickeln*)'. This was evidently a difficult task for him; as Warnke notes, Gadamer developed his ideas in something of a vacuum—notwithstanding the precedents he drew on and the debates of the day which formed a springboard for his new account of truth. Hence 'when Gadamer sets about outlining his hermeneutics of language, he has neither important forerunners, nor actual points of reference—other than the tradition he will reassess in a careful

confrontation... he ventures out alone into what is still uncharted territory for philosophy' (Warnke 2016, 2). He was perhaps understandably cautious in advancing his more innovative views and remained deferential to his more famous teacher Heidegger. Further, reception of his worldview was 'not helped here by the fact that Gadamer is not a thinker who likes to present his theses in an axiomatic or ostentatious manner' (Grondin 2022, 25). Thus a certain amount of work is needed to draw out his total philosophy. *Truth and Method's* organising structure, which we will discuss in the next two chapters, clearly flags his desire to show shared insights in the areas of textual hermeneutics, aesthetics, history and phenomenology. But he also speaks in a more primordial mode about the way we experience ourselves, others, our world, value, and the nature of flourishing in self and society, or so we claim in the following chapters.

Given this assumption about the systematic coherence of Gadamer's thought, this book seeks to lean into his hints and fill out their sometimes unstated implications, applying them more widely. In some ways, it has a similar systematising goal to other books on this prolific thinker. Warnke, for instance, writes that she aims 'to reconstruct the thread of argument that ties together Gadamer's disparate discussions of art, history, and philosophy, and second to identify both its virtues and its difficulties' via a strategy of 'reconstructing a set of debates in which his work has participated' (Warnke 1987, 9–10). While one does not want to impose one's own views on a thinker and ventriloquise foreign notions into his mouth, nevertheless unpacking a philosophical position requires a certain amount of speculative reconstruction. Much of the discipline of the history of philosophy is engaged in precisely such reconstructive activity—filling the gaps in Leibniz, seeking the most coherent interpretations of Spinoza (as well as those he may have advocated for other reasons than coherence), building on Heidegger's insights, and so on. While many scholars in intellectual history may see this coherentist approach as a defect of overinterpretation, the present discussion errs on the side of philosophical analysis, trying to piece together the most complete and consistent version of Gadamer's view in order to put it to work philosophically.

Beyond Critique to Construction

One result of this commitment to coherence is that the book is primarily constructive rather than critical in tone. Much has been written criticising Gadamer, and as Warnke (1987) notes, this often takes the direction of

key debates on authorial intention (as with Leo Strauss, Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch), on subjectivism, relativism and pragmatism (as with thinkers like Richard Rorty), and ideology and power (as highlighted by Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida and others). Some common critiques arose in the course of clarifying his view, as when early critics worried that there would be no basis for arbitrating between truth and untruth, intention and distortion, in a hermeneutic account. It may be that many of the early concerns about his hermeneutics were in fact a result of this lack of clarification—what Ambrosio (1986, 124) called ‘in a certain sense beside the point—a sort of extended category mistake’. Others disagree on relatively minor matters of historical interpretation, as when he is taken to read Kant or Dilthey wrong, for instance; these criticisms may be right but do not always have significant implications for the philosophical issues at hand.

But some criticisms raise more penetrating questions about whether inadequacies in Gadamer’s philosophical account result in untruths or injustices. Perhaps the most important of these is the worry that Gadamer has failed to account for the way that power intersects with meaning and influences the dynamics of dialogue. This is tied up in Habermasian concerns that hermeneutics sees all dialogue-partners as *de facto* equal in their ability to shape dialogue. As Warnke puts it: ‘hermeneutics is unable to distinguish between those orienting prejudices that enable understanding and those that distort it...’ missing out ‘exclusions, marginalizations, coercions and the like that are also part of its legacy’ (Warnke 2016, 7).

In a sense, this criticism brings out the danger of confusing the universal prejudice involved in our necessary starting-context for any dialogue, with the prejudice of views and actions that dominate others, distorting dialogue, because they are weighted with political, cultural, economic or physical power. This is a crucial insight into the very nature of dialogues and encounters, and it was addressed occasionally by Gadamer (as we will discuss in the last chapter on globalism), but the issue was subsequently unpacked more fully by critical theorists and those interested in the hermeneutics of power, such as Michel Foucault. It is also an area where many subsequent scholars have sought to improve on Gadamer’s hermeneutics by thinking in their own right about the issues of identity, social inequality, silencing and open discussion, and more—as we will see in the final chapter.

Indeed, the nature of power and prejudice are not the only areas where we see a need to contribute to the project; another example is the need for an account of implicit, subconscious, pre-linguistic experience (an issue

raised by Paul Ricoeur in his 1965 book *Freud and Philosophy*), and a further need to account for the modes of experience in which the body is central and seems to undercut the primacy of language, or in which mere meaning is inflected with the intensities of emotion. This book will touch on these and other issues along the way. But its main approach is to see them not as flaws so much as desiderata for a fuller, better hermeneutics. Consequently, it seeks resources for thinking about them more effectively—either from within Gadamer’s thought or from the contribution of other thinkers. This emphasis on constructive rather than critical points is partly due to the limited scope of a single book, but it is also a recognition that such debates have already been deftly discussed by other scholars, and a belief that progress lies in constructive suggestions rather than critical rejections.

As a whole, this book aims to expand the range of options for modern thinking about reality and life’s place within it, by showing that Gadamer was a rare ‘other’ to today’s dominant traditions. He was an heir of ancient thought who nevertheless explicitly addressed modern questions of globalism and technology. He was a post-Nietzschean phenomenologist, but also a metaphysician who tried to reground universal truths. He was a ‘secular’ yet also ‘spiritual’ liberal in a century of extremes. His cautious ethical philosophy grew out of the experiences of a man persistently wary of political, religious and philosophical affiliations, but inspired by experiences of small-scale community in classrooms and reading groups. Although a deferential student, he was an independent-minded explorer of unfashionable views. He watched the philosophical world around him for almost a century, and sought to chart a path beyond the dead-ends at which so many of his colleagues seemed to have arrived in a disillusioned and disaffected state.

Careful reading and juxtaposition of Gadamer’s wide range of works reveals a philosophy of immanence grounded in the infinite, dynamic whole of Being. He invites both recognition of history’s vast scope and momentum, and creative participation in the world that we are always-still-creating. In a sense he combines the instinct for wonder that we find in Greek religion with the focus on individual access to the universality of ideas that we see in Plato, the wide-ranging embrace of Renaissance thinkers who stood at the beginning of the Human Sciences, the sense of divine immanence that inspired Germany’s ‘pantheism controversy’ and mystical movements, the pro-active, pro-arts self-development ethos of the *Bildung* tradition, modern phenomenology’s hunger for the ‘real’ and

also the postmodern impulse towards finitude, epistemic humility and fertile ambiguities. Mindful of these different influences, this book explores the broader vision for a global future that emerged from Gadamer's system over more than four decades. And it begins with the idea that the West felt—and stills feels—that it needs to be 'saved'.

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BACKGROUND



Prophecy: Seeking a Sublime Modernity

Abstract The twentieth century began in times of great hope and deep doubt about the future. Nietzsche's call for renewal echoed alongside Spengler's prophecy of the decline and fall of the West. Yet Phenomenology seemed to carry the insights of past thinkers forward, establishing a modern movement with solutions to the oldest problems of philosophy. This chapter situates Gadamer as a child of that time, galvanised by competing senses of crisis and possibility. He gradually took up the task handed down to him by thinkers like Natorp, Husserl and Heidegger. But he also tried to chart a path forward towards a society lived in accordance with new conceptions of truth, Being, ethics and selfhood. Bringing a new appreciation of finitude and infinity, uncertainty and ceaseless-becoming as positive values, Gadamer suggests a 'sublime' ethos that resonates with the older ideas of Burke and Kant in the way it positions us in a limitless reality on which we depend and which calls us to awe. Yet it tried to replace fear and paralysis in the face of vast visions, with a distinctively modern form of sublimity: Gadamer encourages us to relish our place in the world's ever-expanding fabric of ideas, arts and experience, cultivating our own unique contribution to it.

Keywords Modernity • Spengler • Nietzsche • Sublime

Every possible means of salvation was offered for the sickness and crisis of the time. One person spoke out for a socialist society; another saw the poet Stefan George as the founder of a new human community; a third wanted to build anew on the basis of antiquity and humanism... [and then a] student came forward and said fervently that the only salvation from our difficulties was phenomenology. (Gadamer 1976, 133)

The turn of the twentieth century was a time for prophets of apocalypse and architects of a new future. During the cold February of 1900, Friedrich Nietzsche lay paralysed only six months from death in Weimar. But in Marburg a boy was being born who would try to meet some of Nietzsche's most provocative challenges to the modern world. Hans-Georg Gadamer would take the idea of truth as the mainstream of Western thought had revered it for centuries and seek to transform it into something new and strange.

He gained many insights from his influential teacher Martin Heidegger, as has been well documented¹ and as he himself acknowledged in innumerable essays.² But the essays and book that he developed were strikingly different from anything Heidegger had done: his approach charted its way by the lights and shadow afforded by the whole history of Western thought, using linguistic conceptuality itself as the basis for a substantive analysis of form—echoing the approaches of Plato and Hegel. His own phenomenology with its 'hermeneutic' account of truth would seem so odd and challenging to the modern Western 'scientific' way of thinking that it took his contemporaries more than a decade to see its implications, and fifteen years for the first English translation to be published. What is more, his ideas on ontology, well-being, growth and flourishing never attracted much attention, obscured as they were behind the vast impact of his textual hermeneutics. His self-appointed mission to 'win back the thick, experiential richness that he associates with a truthful historical

¹ Many of the comparisons of Gadamer and Heidegger focus particularly on their views on language and hermeneutics. See, for instance, Coltman (1998) and Fuyarchuk (2010) who chart their respective interpretations of Plato and Aristotle, Ambrosio (1986), Kusch (1989), Risser (1997), Dostal (2002) and Warfield (2014).

² See, for instance, the three essays from the 1960s evaluating Heidegger's sources and intentions (collected in English in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*) and the diverse essays collected in *Heidegger's Ways* many of which situate him in relation to the wider philosophical tradition with which Gadamer felt himself to be forging new, independent links through his own close readings.

existence', as Gjesdal (2009, 2) puts it, failed at the first post partly due to the success of his hermeneutic theories. However Gadamer's philosophy was a response not only to Nietzschean problems of epistemology, or the hopes and fears of early twentieth-century philosophy. It also spoke to the wide trajectory of Western thought as he understood it.

Twentieth-century phenomenology had prioritised a notion of truth as that which is most directly and intimately known by us and does not require any extra metaphysical apparatus in order to function as an account of reality. This idea that fundamental data about our perceived reality can be directly intuited is what had made phenomenology appealing to many, especially after the scepticism that flowed from Kant's work. Gadamer spoke about the way that, in his youth, Max Scheler was as influential a phenomenologist as Edmund Husserl, and Scheler was more explicitly concerned with ethical and spiritual questions than with epistemological ones. His vision of the new science moved beyond what he called a point-less question of 'how the subject, filled with his own representations, knows the external world' (1976, 131), to engage with the 'movement of the inmost personal self of a finite being toward participation in the essential reality of all possibles' (Scheler 1960).

1 THE GREAT JOURNEY OF PHILOSOPHY

Most studies align Gadamer with the hermeneutic tradition from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* to figures such as Luther (1483–1546), Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1788–1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). They see him as part of the gradual methodological critique of fixed, ahistorical, objective truths and as one of the main philosophers to *reposition* truth in a way that finally allayed fears of rampant relativism by urging philosophers to recognise the interpersonal nature of all meaning, and the context-bound nature of truth-claims. In this light he seems a part of a trajectory that conducted modernity towards a 'post-truth' culture opposed to political, theological or any other form of claim to absolute knowledge. Thus scholars who focus on his continuity with the hermeneutic tradition include Palmer (1969) and Warnke (1987) who relate him to the interpretative theory of Schleiermacher, Hirsch, Dilthey, Habermas, Apel and Rorty; Risser (1997b) emphasising Dilthey's historicism (with a nod to the influence of Heidegger and Kierkegaard); and Di Cesare (2013) and Vilhauer (2010) who apply him to themes of

dialogue and engagement with the Other that are more widely associated with Ricoeur and Levinas. He is compared with Wittgenstein (Lawn 2007), Ricoeur (Mootz and Taylor 2011; Helenius 2022), Derrida (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989; Evink 2022), Foucault (Kogler 1999), Vattimo (Benso 2022) and Heidegger on language (Coltman 1998) and only more rarely situated with regard to German Idealism (Gjesdal 2009), Plato's dialectic (Barthold 2009; Wachterhauser 1999) or the Classical Greek cosmology of Aristotle (Lammi 2008; Da Via 2022). Yet such older traditions, many of them religious despite his own secular views, remained close to his heart and omnipresent as signposts in his work.

Thus, as we will see in the chapters to come, although his ideas seemed challenging to many thinkers in 1960s Europe and America—appearing as they did to legitimise relativism, key aspects of his thought would have been familiar to older thinkers. The range of sources on which he drew includes ancient cosmologists, Renaissance Humanist writers, Lutheran theologians, German radical mystics and pietists, many Romantics and philosophical Idealists, scriptural interpreters and historiographers, poets and physicians. While Gadamer followed the lead of his own contemporary teachers Paul Natorp, Martin Heidegger and others, he had always maintained his own eclectic pantheon of intellectual guides from across the wide swathe of Western history. We will see that his role models included Socrates the calm and conversation-minded spiritual teacher, Jakob Böhme and Friedrich Oetinger the mystical free-thinkers, Leibniz and Hegel the vigorous synthesising enthusiasts, Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler the committed seekers of truth (one secular and the other religious), and Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan and Stefan George, poetic exponents of both doubt and beauty. From such sources he developed an independent genealogy of philosophers interested in immanence, spirit and mystical or poetic experience, and it was with the help of this 'alternative history' that Gadamer navigated his own way towards a solution to the problems of modernity.

To be sure, he was not the only one who would try to meet Nietzsche's challenges by rethinking older epistemological or semantic insights. 'Postmodern Platos', as Catherine Zuckert (1996) has called them, were thick on the ground in the twentieth century, all proposing visionary insights meant to 'fix' (or finally destroy) our understanding of the true, the real and the good. But arguably Gadamer's direction was shaped more by the crisis that followed the First World War than the Second. George Steiner has argued that where the devastation that followed the Third

Reich ‘numbed the imagination’, the more profound ‘crisis of spirit’ suffered by Germans in 1918 ‘pressed upon reflection and sensibility’ in a fashion that inspired innovative creativity and bold new hopes (Steiner 1989, vii). For Steiner, Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* is a product of that time, and while *Truth and Method* was not published until 1960, his own thought was also formed in that early twentieth-century Germany of brave new ideas.

Unlike many of his peers, Gadamer assimilated past and current ideas without feeling he had to judge them. In his own thought, he tried to make a minimal concession to the factionalism that was as rife in philosophy as in politics. Instead of speaking, he listened (for decades, much to Heidegger’s frustration with his reticence as a young scholar). He was the quiet philosopher, and his main work—which even in *Truth and Method* is meticulous to the point of occasional tedium—is rarely read in its entirety. His journey towards the formulation of a distinct message was a very slow, even reluctant, one; much of his early work was concerned with giving earlier thinkers their due, rather than proposing his own system. A modest and self-effacing middle-class boy who had been discouraged from entering the Humanities by his father who was a successful academic in the field of pharmaceutical chemistry, the young Hans-Georg Gadamer was like Plato in that he tried to think current doctrines through from their foundations. His approach, facilitated by a home that was run by his Prussian father but balanced in its circumspect approach to dogma, was to put traditional religion at a distance and speak ‘dialogically’, letting one’s opinions emerge through conversation with others. For more than fifty years of his long life he had little desire to stamp his own name on a single philosophical doctrine.

He also saw no great villain in history against whom to pit his philosophy: each thinker could be seen to possess both insights and flaws (even Kant whose categorisation had introduced many covert mistakes or Schiller who had compounded them). Each was given his due as an architect of both the insights and mistakes of modern thought. Perhaps this was because Gadamer’s classical training had taught him to read history as something ‘not complete but fluid’, binding both the past and present to the principle of ‘movement’, as Jerome Veith (2015, 162) has put it. With no easy straw man, Gadamer would never quite develop the firm identity and grand confidence in his own vision that Nietzsche or the later Heidegger possessed. Yet arguably it made his philosophy more balanced and holistic and less rhetorical. As we will see, he did become a visionary

with a project that he hoped would heal the key sicknesses of the West by initiating a new platform for human experience, cultural creativity and ethical interaction.

Perhaps the seeds of this visionary project were sown in his sickbed in 1922 when he was recovering from the polio that would leave him with a limp for the rest of his life and prevent him from serving in Germany's wars. Throughout the first two decades of his life, he had assimilated aspirations from two very different directions. On his mother's side, the Gewiese family were committed Pietists concerned with the cultivation of the soul, while on his father's side the elder Gadamer was a celebrated chemist renowned for his contribution to the medical sciences. But his mother had died early, and science as a career left him cold—so amid ambiguous expectations young Hans-Georg was left to his own devices. When in 1922 he found himself convalescing for a long period, he read bold, imaginative works that made a powerful impression on him. Among them were the work of the Romantic author Johann Richter, representatives of the 'new school' of phenomenology such as Husserl, and an essay on Aristotle by an up-and-coming young scholar named Martin Heidegger.

He described the experience as 'electrifying'; soon he would move to Freiburg and then Marburg to attend Heidegger's inspiring lectures. For young students before and after the First World War, these were the 'prophetic texts' of the time, as Steiner (1989, vii) puts it. Later, as Germany was offered a new source of inspiration by the rising National Socialists, he would share liberal Germany's admiration when Stefan George, the enigmatic poet who Gadamer esteemed highly throughout his life, coolly refused to join the National Socialist party, dying in Switzerland in 1933. In *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, his unconventional autobiography (in which he wrote about the figures who had shaped him rather than about himself), Gadamer described his youthful world of earnest, witty, sometimes dry, but often impassioned thinkers as one that showed him what it means to *live* as a philosopher, not merely to 'do philosophy'.

Despite the way in which those times led him to 'deep doubt about [his] intellectual gifts' (Gadamer 1986, 37), nevertheless this ambitious milieu of path-breakers imparted the idea that what was required of philosophers was that they become visionaries diagnosing and healing the illnesses of their time. This role, so far from the conscientious 'concept-tidying' that characterises much of the Analytic tradition of philosophy today, was at the heart of the phenomenological tradition as he had been taught it. With the confidence leant him after riding the storm of National

Socialism, he finally put his hard-won views into a grand philosophy of his own, so that by the 1970s he was being invited to universities throughout Europe and the Americas, at last taking his turn to play the role of the great philosopher.

In one context, Gadamer had rejected the idea that the philosopher should also be a prophet, for ‘the role of prophet, of Cassandra, of preacher, or of know-it-all does not suit him’. At the end of his foreword to the edition of 1965 (printed as ‘foreword to the second edition’ in English translations), he acknowledged that figures like Heidegger and Nietzsche would be dissatisfied with his philosophy’s ‘lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions’ about the world night to come at the end of metaphysics as a science. He explicitly positioned these thinkers as philosopher-prophets in their predictions about the future of philosophy and of the modern worldview (e.g. 2004, xxxiv), much as he had seen great German poets such as George and Hölderlin prophets ‘of a new god’ (1992, 95). It is important that he did not aim to play the same prophetic role—but he does speak about the ‘corrective’ truth of hermeneutics, and his texts about the future serve as warnings and suggestions about the mistakes and possibilities revealed by the past. He says:

What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now. The philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he finds himself. (2004, xxxiv)

He thus sought both to avoid the kind of prophetic authority that his predecessors had assumed and to correct our path into the future by offering insights and resources. And he did not abandon the grand narrative style of philosophical history that was so prevalent in German thought, from Hegel to Heidegger. As we will see, he told a historical tale that began with diagnosis of how we have erred, continued with an exhortation to redeem that mistake and remake the future, and hinted at the presence of keys and correctives that are hidden in the soil of past thought. *Truth and Method* had taken more than twenty years to be translated and disseminated globally, and to win recognition. But his philosophy would

eventually form a cornerstone for paradigmatic shifts in our understandings of truth, meaning, world, self, ethics and the goals of life.³

2 FUTURISM VERSUS THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

Yet despite his earlier sources, the reception and development of Gadamer's work was arguably part of distinctively modern late-twentieth-century concerns in a way that was not true of previous phenomenologists like Heidegger. In a 1962 essay, 'The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century', Gadamer described the feeling in his youth that 'a bourgeois age, which had united faith in technological progress with the confident expectation of a secured freedom and a civilizing perfectionism, had come to an end'.⁴ The twentieth century seemed ripe for apocalyptic prophets and saviours, nowhere more than in Germany where successive utopian hopes had been built and destroyed in the form of spiritual movements, philosophical revolutions and new political orders.

A long period of historical optimism in European thought was gradually coming to an end; the notion of progress in the German Enlightenment was tied to a widespread idea that the natural development of matter into conscious mind, and of mind into reason, culture, art and utopian societies, could all be taken as an extension of that fundamental *Bildung* that characterises life. Spinoza and Hegel had depicted the progress of history itself as lying on a continuum with nature and thought, and Ernst Haeckel, who was Germany's foremost naturalist and supporter of Darwinian evolution as Gadamer was growing up, combined the Darwinian assurance of biological life's progressive improvement with a religious desire to affirm the value of the self-cultivating subject. Even Nietzsche's critical tone, so disparaging of his forerunners in many respects, expressed a striking optimism that echoed American thinkers such as Emerson.⁵

³ See the evaluations of Gadamer's impact by thinkers such as Charles Taylor (2002, 126) who saw him as responding to 'the great challenge of the coming century' which is 'understanding the other', Jürgen Habermas, even Alasdair MacIntyre (who wrote of *Truth and Method* and *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* as texts 'with which it is necessary to come to terms, that failure to reckon with... will seriously harm our enquiries' (Malpas, Arnsperg and Kertscher 2002)).

⁴ See 'The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century' [1962] in Gadamer (1976), 108.

⁵ Walter Kaufmann (1950) gives a strikingly Emersonian interpretation of Nietzsche.

Science was an important, if controversial, element of that early optimism. Darwin's own bold illumination in 1859 of what he called the 'mystery of mysteries' (the origin of the human species) seemed to confirm the necessity of progress as direct result of the biological principle of adaptation to the environment. One of the most eloquent advocates of hope for a future elevated by science was J.G. Frazer, the Scottish anthropologist. In *The Golden Bough*, his famed 1890 survey of global rituals, he told a story of the progress of world-historical cultures towards an infinite horizon of new ability and wisdom:

Here at last, after groping about in the dark for countless ages, man has hit upon a clue to the labyrinth, a golden key that opens many locks in the treasury of nature. It is probably not too much to say that the hope of progress—moral and intellectual as well as material—in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle placed in the way of scientific discovery is a wrong to humanity.⁶

Frazer turned Rousseau's nostalgia for the era of the 'noble savage' on its head, positioning the future as a field of unknown discoveries vastly exceeding those that seem to him so revolutionary in his own time:

The advance of knowledge is an infinite progression towards a goal that for ever recedes... Great things will come of that pursuit, though we may not enjoy them. Brighter stars will rise on some voyager of the future—some great Ulysses of the realms of thought—than shine on us. (Frazer 1963, 825–826)

Such predictions rang true for the middle class of many Western European nations, and in the cosmopolitan, well-appointed town of Breslau, predictions of this kind were already looking increasingly correct. There, in Gadamer's youth, transportation, communications, industry and of course warfare were all being radically transformed by new technology during the 1930s. By the end of his life he would see the arc of that development into the silicon revolution that accompanied the dawn of the twenty-first century. Thus Gadamer was, in many respects, uniquely placed to witness the fulfilment of nineteenth-century optimism, and it is no surprise that the tone of optimism rings strongly through much of his work.

⁶ See J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1963), 825–826.

But that optimistic modernism was questioned, then as now, by a swathe of texts that challenged that story. Certain voices countered the earlier Darwinian cultural model of civilisation as an ever-upward progression, into a powerful new myth of Western downfall that resonated with emerging concerns about environment, the implications of capitalism and the dangers of large-scale culture clash. Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* sketched out a compelling 'romance' of 'world-historical fantasy' (as Gadamer later put it),⁷ prophesying that history is doomed to an inescapable series of rises and falls determined by the fundamental logic of their worldview. The oncoming Fall of the West was to be the most cataclysmic yet seen. Spengler's theory was an extraordinary piece of imaginative hermeneutics in its own right: arts, religion, concepts of number, space and history all fed into the world-picture that drove each culture forward, yet also propelled them towards inevitable decline as their apparent strengths became limitations.⁸ This theory, capturing the imagination of many in its time, fairly dashed the hope of global history's rise through science towards greater and greater possibilities, and after the Second World War, it warned twentieth-century Germany away from the triumphalism of American modernism. Spengler's grand narrative (to some extent emulated in that of *Truth and Method*) accomplished 'a genuine putting in question of the modern faith in progress and its proud ideal of proficiency and "accomplishing things"' (2007, 6). This questioning was continued in other contemporary texts such as Paul Ernst's *The Collapse of German Idealism* and Theodor Lessing's *Europe and Asia* which suggested that other, possibly preferable, cultural traditions existed beyond the West. Thus during Gadamer's twenties, the West appeared as Spengler's 'evening-land' destined to imminent decline. The difficult German history that reached from 1914 to 1989 seemed to confirm the Spenglerian world-historical narrative (1976).

For many thinkers, it was its 'Faustian' fascination with technology that damned the modern West. Amongst them was Gadamer's own great aunt by marriage, Ricarda Huch, who had written a book titled 'De-personalisation' describing what she saw as attitudinal side-effects of

⁷ See Gadamer's characterisation of the zeitgeist that predominated in his youth in 'Autobiographical Reflections' (2007, 6).

⁸ Incidentally, Spengler (1926, 154) also introduced a distinction between the 'truths' of history and the 'facts' of natural science that prefigured Gadamer's most basic distinction in *Truth and Method*, writing that by this distinction 'is justified the paradox that the less a historical researcher has to do with real science, the better it is for his history'.

the technological development that had sprung from the Enlightenment. Thus scepticism about the juggernaut of science, and the very nature of the knowledge that underpinned it, was already a matter for dinner table conversation by the time Gadamer reached adulthood. The First World War confirmed technology's potential for damaging uses at the same time that the outcome of the war confirmed that the apparently natural momentum of Germany's cultural greatness could come to naught. For Gadamer 'belief in progress and... cultural optimism' among the pre-war generation faced eventual disappointment that only confirmed Kierkegaard's prior critique of all those who had forgotten to *live* (a forgetting exemplified by Hegel in Kierkegaard's view).⁹

Jean Grondin describes the world into which Gadamer grew as 'years dominated by a sense of impending catastrophe... one could not just go on with the old, but the new had not yet taken shape' (Grondin 2003). The spirit of Europe already seemed to have died, an image illustrated by the inner despondency of literary protagonists such as Harry Haller, Hermann Hesse's existentially honest yet suicidal thinker in 1927's *Steppenwolf*, Ulrich the bored and wealthy mathematician in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1945), the nostalgic and repeatedly disappointed narrator of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1871–1922), or the desperate self-destruction of Thomas Mann's artist-hero Adrian Leverkühn in his 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus*. Such depictions suggested that at the psychological or spiritual level, individuals were grinding to a halt, while only the machine of society still moved onward.¹⁰ The impact on philosophy was direct: technology figures in the writings of both Gadamer and his teacher Heidegger as something threatening to become a lifeless body carrying the public, Frankenstein-like, blindly forward without reason or goal. Spengler's 'disease' of the West was a natural consequence of the lifespan of civilisations (which he had reckoned at approximately a millennium of good cultural 'health'): like an ageing organism, culture was losing its vitality, momentum and capacity for creative self-renewal. It would not be easy for the young Gadamer, a secular humanist who

⁹ See Gadamer's reflection on the existentialist side of his philosophical heritage in the 1981 essay 'Existentialism and the Philosophy of Existence' (1994, 3–4).

¹⁰ Gadamer attests his appreciation for Hesse, Mann and Musil despite reservations about their style, but his whole post-war generations was, he said, 'deeply moved' by books like *The Glass Bead Game* (1992, 111) and 'enchanted by the melancholy tone of Hermann Hesse's early novels' (2007, 7).

prefigured modern ‘non-religion’, of to choose an ideology in which to put his faith.

Like the work of Heidegger, Gadamer’s writings from around the time of the publication of *Truth and Method* take up the theme of distrust towards the increasing hegemony of technological science. For him Husserlian phenomenology’s value was that its analysis of experience affirmed the ‘life-world’ as a whole, with all its values, impressions, directions and uncertainties intact. Phenomenology did not try to obscure the complex web of real human experience beneath theoretical systems and reductions, as positivism—both logical and scientific—seemed to do. In this respect, Gadamer seemed to regret Husserl’s rhetorical decision to emphasise the way his philosophy could function as a ‘science’; on the contrary, one of the most compelling features of his methodology was that it could ‘go back beyond the whole of scientific experience to the simple phenomenological data, like sense-perception or practical experience’, themes that represent:

...a mode of givenness, or better, a realm of modes of givenness, and it is clearly unjustified to ignore these modes of givenness by directing our attention to a structure of scientific knowledge of the world that lies ‘behind’ them—to an ontology of the genuinely objective world—and to do it because the objective science of nature encompasses everything that is knowable.¹¹

Technology’s extraordinary successes in the twentieth century showed its value. But the problem of technology lay in the imagined ‘objective’ world and its elision of the real, wonderfully complex, shifting-and-growing, mysterious and feeling-filled realm of actual experience. Gadamer was wary of what Owen Chadwick (2002, 3) called the ‘historiographical sin’ of ‘decline and fall history’. One of Gadamer’s main goals would be to point out the path back towards the vibrant, organic holism of the world as we receive it—the ‘life-world’, and to provide helpful suggestions for living in it.

¹¹ See Gadamer’s attempt to recapture what was essential to the idea of the ‘life-world’ as a new area of empirical science in his essay ‘The Science of the Life-World’ (1976, 183–184).

3 SPENGLER, HEIDEGGER AND THE MODERN PROPHETS

With hope of change came belief in *agents* of change. *The Decline of the West* had dramatised the fear of cultural apocalypse, but it also set up the image of the prophet ‘whose life was one great symbol... whose existence has profound significance apart from and in addition to their works... [and whose] existence has become a treasure for our nation and an integral part of its spiritual history’.¹² Spengler envisioned individual thinkers as figures uniquely positioned in the historical narrative, and philosophers and poets were the only figures in society possessed of the special training required to rise above the context and see the larger picture, acting as a mirror for their times. Thus ‘Spenglerism’ fuelled new moves in philosophy, politics and the arts by individuals seeking to take on the mantle of history’s renewal.

Publishing *Truth and Method* around forty years after the publication of *The Decline of the West*, Gadamer witnessed what he believed to be the maturation of new hope in the 1950s and 1960s; he particularly appreciated the growth of new art-forms in cubist painting, modern architecture, modernist literature’s deconstruction of traditional narrative and the exploration of new musical forms, as well as the first hints of a cultural turn towards spirituality and the environment. He wrote of the 1950s aesthetic in architecture as ‘an entirely new life-feeling’ that favours ‘the transparency and openness of every space’. This development accorded with Karl Jasper’s 1930 description of the ‘spiritual situation of the time’ as one in which ‘the illusionless recognition of the actual is united... with the passion of existential decision’ (1976). In contrast to the ‘foundations of the nineteenth century’ as analysed by thinkers like Houston Stewart Chamberlain (the son-in-law of Wagner, whose well-known book had helped to spur National Socialism towards a ‘new solution’), Gadamer observed that the sensibilities of the post-war generation:

...no longer appeared dominated to such an extent to such an extent by the anxious expectation that catastrophe will inevitably result from the historical complexities of the present day. Today the predominant expectation is that men may learn to adjust even to the great forces that threaten them with mutual destruction, that a sober assessment of realities and a readiness for rational compromises will open the way into the future. (1976, 107)

¹²See Spengler’s speech delivered in 1924 on the occasion of Nietzsche’s eightieth birthday.

What remained was to identify a prophet who could help to usher in this future. In Spengler's story Goethe had the good fortune to be born at the 'high noon of Western culture', but Nietzsche was his prime model of a modern prophet. For early twentieth-century readers, this depiction seemed to be borne out by the widely read writings of Nietzsche himself, for alongside his indictments of modern moral, philosophical and religious thinking, Nietzsche had left a compelling vision of a modern 'saviour' standing at the fall of civilisation's night. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* began with a celebration of the attitude of prophecy itself:

Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if that hadst not those for whom thou shinest!... we waited for thee every morning, took from thee thine overflow, and blessed thee for it. Lo! I am weary of my wisdom, like the bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to take it. I would fain bestow and distribute... Therefore must I descend into the deep... bless the cup that is about to overflow....

Thus Spake Zarathustra, like *Decline of the West*, was well known, as was the critique of metaphysics in the *Twilight of the Idols*. It established an expectation of revolutionary thinking that guided the philosophical agenda. In German theology, arguably the prophetic mode of discourse had already long been cultivated by mystics and reformers, thriving in a range of non-conformist thinkers. Hegel had placed this sense of a German destiny in a world-historical frame by situating European thought at the summit of world religions and philosophies, but Zarathustra's decision to 'descend into the deep' to share his wisdom helped to establish a self-identity for modern German thinking as a *critical* voice. In the phenomenological tradition this was combined with aspirations to 'ground' truth, furnishing the new generation of prophets with truth as their saving relic, a holy grail that they hoped would heal all maladies and restore the health of the West. Nietzsche remained the 'great, fateful thinker who fundamentally altered the task' of philosophy through 'the excessive, self-destructive and disillusioning way in which Nietzsche himself tears one mask after another from the I, until finally no more masks remain' (1976, 116).

It is at this point in Gadamer's prophetic history that the phenomenologists emerge—primarily Husserl, Scheler and Heidegger, with help from Brentano and Jaspers. In his writing they appear as saving figures who tear away the old 'mythology' of the real and replace it with a new immediacy.

Phenomenology was to be ‘the new foundation of our human relation to the world’, for despite the successes of science, ‘human thought is nonetheless continually dominated by questions for which science promises no answer’; it was ‘in this state of affairs’, Gadamer wrote, that ‘philosophy takes up its task’ in the modern age (1976, 109). But the successful prosecution of this task involved two halves: one critical and one constructive. The first half of the necessary modern prophecy was to articulate ‘scepticism over against all dogmatism, including the dogmatism of science’ (1976, 129) while the second half should point the way forward towards a new worldview landscaped with usable concepts. Thus a new constructive phase in phenomenology’s message would be required.

If Nietzsche had been the John the Baptist of the story, denouncing false paths and foretelling a new beginning, Husserl was the Christ figure who introduced a genuinely new set of possibilities, aiming to lay the ground for a genuine change in philosophical outlook. A 1963 essay on ‘The Phenomenological Movement’ provides a helpful sketch of the significance that Gadamer accorded to key phenomenologists, and he describes Husserl as a ‘missionary’ who sought to become a ‘worthy philosopher’ by executing each step of his thinking in such a way that ‘each further step can have a secure ground’—a project that ultimately ‘was to renew the morality of philosophising’ (1976, 134). In his account Gadamer explicitly notes the preacherly and evangelical features of the grand project to which the phenomenologists of the twentieth century devoted themselves:

...Husserl was in fact filled with a genuine missionary consciousness. He regarded himself as a master and teacher of patient, descriptive, detailed work... In his teaching, whenever he encountered the grand assertions and arguments that are typical of beginning philosophers, he used to say, ‘Not always the big bills, gentlemen; small change, small change!’ This kind of work produced a peculiar fascination. It had the effect of a purgation, a return to honesty, a liberation from the opaqueness of the opinions, slogans and battle cries that circulated. (1976, 132–133)

Max Scheler helped to overturn tables in the temple of positivist philosophy by bringing a passionate and powerful temperament, and a ‘penetrating intuitive power’ to his ‘intellectual adventure’, championing ‘the actuality of impulse’ as a philosophy that ‘carried all the way into the doctrine of God’ (1976, 135–136). In phenomenology’s prophetic narrative,

Heidegger was the Saint Paul, widening the insights of the movement to encompass ontology as a whole and the full span of human life and illuminating the movement's practical implications in a compelling and poetic style. In Gadamer's eyes Heidegger was a truly epochal figure with an 'intensely revolutionary temperament' who 'changed the philosophical consciousness of the time with one stroke', introducing a 'swirl of radical questions' into the culture of the time. Gadamer positions Heidegger among the 'great moralists in the style of Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche', but notes that he was 'at the same time a well-established and highly successful teacher'. The result was explosive: 'the academic boundaries were boundaries no longer' (1976, 138).

His 'existential passion, an emanation of intellectual concentration... made everything that preceded it seem feeble', and this disposition had been shaped by his own early reading of prior world-changing figures such as Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and even Van Gogh:

One could actually recall the romantic furioso of Van Gogh, whose letters appeared at that time and made a deep impression on the young Heidegger.... Just as might have been the case in fifth-century Athens when the young, under the banners of the new sophistic and Socratic dialectic, vanquished all conventional forms of authority, law, and custom with radical new questions, so too the radicalism of Heidegger's inquiry produced in the German universities an intoxicating effect that left all moderation behind. (1976, 139)

One of his key acts had been to redefine Being through the thesis 'that being itself was time', a constantly unfolding phenomenon always arising anew and projecting itself forward towards the future. Gadamer writes of the revolutionary significance of this account: 'this burst asunder the whole subjectivism of modern philosophy—and, in fact, as was soon to appear, the whole horizon of questions asked by metaphysics' (2004, 248). Heidegger brought philosophy back to the world: 'The chasm that finally opened in the nineteenth century between the academic and worldly forms of philosophy seemed to close up', banishing the rote analysis that Schopenhauer had rejected as purely 'rostrum philosophy' (1976, 138). And Heidegger was not merely a critic, but also a creative force. Into the breach he introduced radical new styles of analysis. *Being and Time* resulted in a 'total transformation of the intellectual climate'.

Thus in the 1960s, while Gadamer recognised that Heidegger's influence was no longer felt with the same force, it had nevertheless penetrated

everywhere—and certainly Gadamer still felt himself to be the heir of a tradition of philosophical ‘furiosos’. He was inspired by it—hoping to complete the project by drawing the map of the new world and its mode of life, yet simultaneously he felt the urge to avoid its occasional excesses, and the potential over-personalisation of such philosophies in such a way that they become biased and inapplicable as solutions for the wider populace. As we will see, this danger had been all too clearly demonstrated by Heidegger’s ‘fall’ into the assumption that National Socialism would serve as a national and even a global solution.

Hence like many of those shaped by the lecture halls of pre-war Germany, Gadamer valued philosophical passion as the foundation for all serious thinking in the discipline to which he devoted his life. Yet he himself was wary of it. He wanted to be a dialogical Socrates or a resonant Paul Celan—someone who offers solutions, rather than forcing the future to follow the paths that he himself found most inspiring. In that sense, the spiritual individualism seen in Luther’s direct relation with God, German pietism’s focus on private spiritual growth or Kierkegaard’s private call to the hidden Knight of Faith remained a central feature of his own understanding of the prophet’s task; each development and flourishing must naturally follow its own autonomous pattern. Any other approach commits the sins of technological objectivism anew.

4 READING *TRUTH AND METHOD* AS A PROPHETIC TEXT

So, after the radical re-grounding achieved by Heidegger, why was *Truth and Method* necessary? What was it Gadamer saw that had still to be done? The reason was that Gadamer felt that the broader project of bringing the West ‘back to life’ had not been completed, despite the fresh starting point established by phenomenology, despite even the potent style of Scheler and the galvanising impact of Heidegger. The sense of truth, world and future possibilities had not been fully restored—Heidegger’s indications towards a way of living were powerful but from the perspective of many of his peers his turns towards political utopianism and later towards a ‘saving god’ were a symptom of his failure to ‘urbanise the Heideggerian province’, as Habermas (1983, 189–198) put it—to discern its practical outlines and make it liveable. Thus the line of prophecy remained incomplete.

These were some of the tasks left undone that Gadamer would take up as his own quest. ‘There are still open questions’, he wrote in 1960, regarding the need to ‘come to grips afresh with the problem of *life*’ and

to formulate ‘a positive account of the mode of being of life’ (2004, 253). Thus where Heidegger had taken up the ‘Forgetfulness of Being’, and its transfigurative restoration as his cause, Gadamer faced a different task. He wanted to restore our old orientation to the pole star of ‘truth’ but in a new form that privileged the positive principles of interaction, creativity, mutual transformation and growth.

Truth and Method told a new narrative of the history of the West. In contrast to Spengler’s tale of inevitable tragic decline, Gadamer’s ‘plot’ was a classic tale of loss and return. Part one of *Truth and Method* works to identify the ‘Fall’, the moment of misunderstanding in which the problem of truth had arisen. Part two then seeks to ‘extend’ this insight—to show us how many doors the key of a clearer understanding of meaning can open, from history, to exegesis, to epistemology.¹³ Part three finally aims to make good the promise by applying these insights to the issue that Gadamer sees as being central to all of the others—language.

But the ‘Fall’ in part one was meant to apply not only to the contingent paths taken by the West. It was a potential danger for all thinking beings. The problem of hermeneutics, and of ‘the universal claim of scientific method’, we are told in the first pages of the introduction, ‘belongs to human experience of the world in general’, to ‘experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself’ (2004, xxi). Science, used as a way of seeing, threatens to deaden our receptivity to life, and hermeneutics was intended as a tool to recover it. The promise held out by earlier philosophies that Western thought has failed to make good is that we will be able to correctly experience—to be ‘opened’ to, as he puts it—the ‘truly hermeneutic universe’ in which ‘the natural givenness of our existence and our world’ is evident.¹⁴ Note here that hermeneutics meant not simply interpretation, but a broader shift in our sensitivity to the world and our own existence.

In the ‘fall’ of truth, our conception of the real has been brought low by the gradual transition from appropriately dialogical, complex and organic conceptions of the world, to new ideas of scientific ‘facts’ about an ‘objective reality’. Scientific method imposed a dichotomy between the ‘subjectivised’ areas of ethical, emotional and aesthetic meaning and the idealised sphere of scientific knowledge. In so doing it replaces an

¹³ See Frazier (2022) for a condensed summary of the significance of Gadamer’s central account of being as play.

¹⁴ See Gadamer (2004, xxiii) and Frazier (2023) on the way that study of other cultures fit within Gadamer’s larger account of hermeneutics.

intrinsically poetic reality—that is one filled with complex meanings and with intrinsic meaningfulness to the observer—with a merely practical scheme. Viewed in terms of this prophetic structure, the discussion of humanism in the first chapter is a recalling of a pre-lapsarian state of holistic knowledge and value, and his account of Kantian ‘subjectivisation’ is a tale of a fall from epistemological grace. We now risk losing sight not only of truth but also of our own nature as part of the natural world.

But Gadamer’s vision is essentially an optimistic, pro-active one with much in common with the essays of the later Heidegger: he plots the path for a gradual return of truth and the renewed possibility of leading humanity back to its own distinctive form of flourishing. The second section of the part one of *Truth and Method* (which focuses on art), in which he deals with the ontology of the work of art, begins with the discovery of a ‘clue’ that promises to solve the problem. With his ‘ontological explanation’ he begins to rebuild the notion of truth in the space cleared by his previous critique of the scientific model of objectivity, and the subjectivist model of purely private experience. Part two, which focuses on the Human Sciences, discusses what Gadamer calls ‘extension’ and ‘historical preparation’ of the original insight, charting the chronological development of these fundamental problems into modern notions of history, text and philosophy. The subplots include points of ‘entanglement’; the correct insights of thinkers such as Dilthey and Schleiermacher become obscured by the philosophies of their time, and figures such as Kant and Hegel appear repeatedly to both illuminate and mislead.

It is essential to the return of hope in this story that the past contains hidden treasures—not to be revered indiscriminately, but rather philosophies that need to be put to new use with renewed analytical caution and creative energy. Gadamer was particularly passionate about the humble heroes of the past whose value had become obscured by insensitivity to their insights and subsequent misuse of their ideas. He worked hard to restore our faith in them, combatting the instinct that what is newer is necessarily ‘cutting edge’:

The naive self-esteem of the present moment may rebel against the idea that philosophical consciousness admits the possibility that one’s own philosophical insight may be inferior to that of Plato or Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant, or Hegel. One might think it a weakness that contemporary philosophy tries to interpret and assimilate its classical heritage with this acknowledgement of its own weakness. But it is undoubtedly a far-greater weakness for

philosophical thinking not to face such self-examination but to play at being Faust. (2004, xxi)

Many of the heroes in *Truth and Method* and in his essays on Plato, Aristotle, Hegel or Heidegger espoused a holistic perspective in some regard or other. Change, complexity, interdependence and the patient cultivation of organic growth were variously championed by philosophers from Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle to Humanist and Romantic thinkers, long before the phenomenologists of the twentieth century gave attention to these themes. With brilliant but—to Gadamer—flawed figures such as Kant, and heroic thinkers such as Dilthey carrying the fate of truth through the story, *Truth and Method* is as much a tale of truth's redemption as of its loss.

At last, late modernity and the phenomenologists appear as heroes in Chapter "Truth: The Fabric of Meaning". Their arrival permits a restatement of the solution in terms of language in Chapter "Metaphysics: Structure, Vitality, and Pantheism". Here both the universal scope and the necessary limitations of the book's insights are sketched out. Although Gadamer refers us once again in his final pages to his structural explanation of reality through the ontological metaphor of play, it is language that appears as the key protagonist—volatile in its vulnerability to misuse, but heroic in fundamentally apt to define reality in its most basic structural constitution. These entail specificity and limit, plurality and growth, temporality and dynamic creativity, and the enabling of all value. No final eschaton is promised, but if we will let ourselves be guided by it, recognising the continuing influence of ancient truths passed on to us by past prophets such as Plato, then Gadamer felt we can be 'saved' from what Charles Taylor would later call the 'malaises of modernity'.

Thus the marks of a 'promise, fall, and return' narrative, that is, a *prophetic* structure to *Truth and Method*, are everywhere in evidence. However, three years after first publication, in the foreword to the second German edition, Gadamer augmented that prophetic presentation slightly; the word 'commitment' becomes important in the account he gives of himself. He wished neither to express nor to recommend any particular commitment himself. Instead, he wrote, he wished to point out 'what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing' (2004, xxvi), leading to an exhortation grounded in a revelation of necessary possibilities. In the afterword he also expressed more clearly the risk and danger involved in his prophetic quest. 'When I had finished the present book at the end

of 1959,' he wrote, 'I wondered whether it had not come "too late"' for already 'the pressure toward scientific planning and the technical organisation of research was unmistakable. A new "positivistic" self-conception was emerging' (2004, 555). As he finished his work and could see more clearly its intervention into contemporary discourse, so he could explain more clearly the critical 'saving' function of a:

...philosophical approach that... does not consider scientific research as an end in itself but, rather, thematises the conditions and limits of science within the whole of human life... science can fulfil its social function only when it acknowledges its own limits and the conditions placed on its freedom to manoeuvre. Philosophy must make this clear to an age credulous about science to the point of superstition. (2004, 577)

Thus the 'inescapable currency' of this critique was explicit in Gadamer's mind; indeed, by the time of *Truth and Method's* eventual publication in 1960, and its eventual recognition as a significant text some fifteen to twenty years later, time seemed to be slipping away.

The book was received by Humanities that were, at that time, much concerned with truth as a linguistic phenomenon rather than as a meta-physical picture or experiential quality. Accordingly, it was the part of his story that concerned communications, propositions and verbal texts that dominated the scholarly imagination. Once the slow, meticulous, exegetic style of his writing had been peeled back and the underlying message had been revealed, the book was acclaimed as a thorough re-grounding of the mechanisms that underpin our habitual notion of truth. With translation into Italian, English and other languages, the 'fusion of horizons' became a common catchphrase that associated him with notions of linguistic usage, community, interaction, text and relativism. The book had a seismic impact in fields such as linguistics and literary studies, philosophy of language (more, perhaps, than phenomenology), history, law and aesthetics. If Gadamer was not considered a visionary—lacking in exhortations and new ideas as he seemed to be—he was nevertheless praised as a clarifier and re-grounder of concepts. The attention and invitations that he received in the 1980s reflected the perception that—finally—a thinker had come forward to 'save' truth and give it a new grounding in the modern world.

But to some extent, Gadamer's caution had worked against him. Readers largely ignored the ontological stake in Gadamer's work, and his essays on ethics, aesthetics and global concerns only emerged gradually in

subsequent years. Few saw his phenomenological project as one directed not only at language but at the life-world itself. Indeed, Gadamer's prophetic tone sounded either arrogant or naïve to many of his contemporaries: Habermas accused him of being a traditionalist—running to the cover of the past when critical theory sought to denounce the bad old refuges of thinking and to clear the ground for the new. His well-known debate with Derrida painted him as the old-fashioned, out-dated optimist in the face of Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, and to some in the younger generation he seemed too close to what Slavoj Žižek (2008, 1) has described as 'all-explaining systems and global emancipatory projects; the violent imposition of grand solutions' and 'strong thought'.

But gradually new discourses emerged that encourage a 'Leap of Faith, faith in lost Causes' and a return to the 'true ideas' that 'are indestructible... [that] always return every time they are proclaimed dead' (Žižek 2008, 2). Žižek learned from Gadamer that 'fear and pessimism are as a rule fake'—they are a dramatic gesture that is only made because of our underlying hope for a better future (Žižek 2008, 439). Deeply un-Nietzschean in that he was not willing to wholly denigrate or destroy anything, Gadamer was aware that he would be compared unfavourably with the powerful critical tone of Heidegger, and of Nietzsche who seemed inevitably to stand behind him:

I shall not deny, however, that—among all the elements of understanding—I have emphasised the assimilation of what is past and of tradition. Like many of my critics, Heidegger too would probably feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw... [faced with] the nihilism that Nietzsche prophesied, then may one not gaze at the last fading light of the sun setting in the evening sky, instead of turning around to look for the first shimmer of its return? (2004, xxxiv)

But his response was to defend his own 'dawn-facing' approach as something that is suitable to the modern spirit:

It seems to me, however, that the one-sidedness of hermeneutic universalism has the truth of a corrective. It enlightens the modern viewpoint based on making, producing and constructing... What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now. (2004, xxxiv)

Gadamer saw the need for prophets, but also saw that—while he wanted to pull back the veil over fundamental mistakes like those in the critical tradition—he nevertheless did not want to become a ‘preacher’, ‘know-it-all’ or doom-mongering ‘Cassandra’ (2004, xxxiv). He does not primarily offer a declamatory prophecy, like the veil-rending critiques of the Marxist tradition. Nor was it a promisory prophecy—Gadamer’s philosophy does not pretend to know what the future holds and tell us what god or messiah must come.

The message of hermeneutics attempts to be ‘revelatory’ specifically in the sense of making clear ‘what is still and ever again real’, laying close to hand as the tools for continuing what we already do in life, but with greater awareness, pleasure and vision (2004, xxxiv). There is no need, then, in Gadamer’s view, to use the rhetorics of fear and command or to invoke a falsely ‘Utopian or eschatological conscious’ of the kind that has repeatedly served to arrogate power to authorities and political parties. The path forward must be charted in open dialogue, trusting to truth as a living practice of discovering the true proportion of factors in experience, the golden mean that governs reality as we must face it, and the line of action that creates a platform for the fullest flourishing of all parties. ‘Truth’ is shown by philosophical hermeneutics to be different from what we thought it was. But as we will see in the next chapters, it nevertheless exists as something more than our own isolated subjectivity, and it is always already guiding us—even in the very act of asking what truth is and what its value might be.

5 GADAMER’S VISION: A MODERN SUBLIME

One of the most distinctive features of Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of truth is that it took up older projects of forming a clear picture of the whole of things—albeit by ingenious means that also incorporated a sense of the infinity and ultimate inconceivability of that whole. This was one of the hopes of ontological reflection on the basic constitutive nature of things: as Van Inwagen and Bernstein have expressed the traditional metaphysical impulse, it sought ‘the first causes of things’, the ‘unchanging things’ and ‘being as such’ (van Inwagen and Bernstein 2023). The whole project of a comprehensive philosophy, from Plato through to Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, had sought a total understanding that included the nature of the fabric of things. As we will see, Gadamer’s own interest in the ‘natural inclination of human beings toward philosophy’

(1981, 141) linked this inclination to philosophy's attempts to picture of that which is 'displayed in everything as the true, the *logos* common to all things, the cosmic law, universal ground, and universal meaning, the union of being and thinking' (1981, 141). The discovery of such existence-defining principles could offer a form of ontological comprehension of something infinite in extent. In this it resembled what Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer, Schleiermacher, the British Romantics and others called 'the sublime'.

In the German intellectual tradition there was a long-standing trope of the human who seeks a vision of the whole of things whilst braving the concurrent sense of one's own relative insignificance and dependence. This 'sublime' vision took various forms through the tradition on which Gadamer would later come to draw. One major source text for this idea was Longinus' *On the Sublime*, which aimed at aiding the creation of rhetorical and aesthetic effects. But the impressions it described furnished a kind of psychology of grand feeling, pointing to the way that vast ideas may lead us to powerful emotions and a rethinking of the self even when concurrently they may lead us to us feel rationally lost or disempowered. One can see how this might apply to Gadamer's conception of Being; Longinus exhorts his readers that they should 'train up our souls to sublimity, and make them as it were ever big with noble thoughts', and Pierre Hadot (1995) takes up this idea along with Marcus Aurelius' conception of philosophy as a wider Greek attempt 'to relocate human existence within the infinity of time and space, and the perspective of the great laws of nature', so that the philosopher becomes one who 'thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective' and 'has the feeling of a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality'. Again and again, as we will see, Gadamer sought ways of thinking that let the wider nature and scope of Being resonate in our words and thoughts. Yet his distinctively modern reform lay precisely in trying to do this in a way that sustains the essential finitude of our own knowledge.

In his early treatise *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant had argued that the sublime experience occasioned by 'snowy summits', 'roaring tempests' and 'infernal regions' was a form of unsatiable and contemplative finer feeling that encouraged 'high sentiments... contempt of the world, of eternity', and therefore helped to cultivate epistemic and moral virtues (Kant 1960, 5). Here the sublime is depicted as a 'humour' of reason with a tendency to make one's thoughts more abstract. But in Kant's later *Critique of Judgment* the sublime takes

a more concise epistemic form, referring to the feeling we have when an object is too vast to be easily subsumed within our concepts. We are then thrown back on our apprehension of the infinite and abstract principles of reason itself, which bring home to us our own ‘supersensible vocation’ as reasoning beings (Kant 2000, 141). Kant’s sublime, with which Gadamer was thoroughly familiar, points to the mind’s intriguing capacity to have its power of comprehension surpassed, and nevertheless to develop from this experience still-higher forms of thought—as when we try to use our capacity for abstract thought to think the totality of something that is limitless.

Where Kant’s model hinted at the way in which this rational sublime revealed the very nature of the thinking self, Schopenhauer also asserted a unique form of *pleasure* found in the sublime. He suggested that experience of our place in things produced a pleasure rooted in the experience of freedom that we have when the individual is able to overcome and escape its isolation, submerging itself in the universal through ‘a free and conscious exaltation above the will’ (Schopenhauer 1969, 208). Spinoza had argued that the understanding of the divine by any individual mind was necessarily a pleasure, implying not only that apprehensions of the infinite reality are a source of happiness and virtue.¹⁵ Schleiermacher, who provided a template for so many aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutic thought, added to this the idea that through such experiences ‘individual spirits look upon the sublime act of the universe’, producing an experience that is central to spirituality but all too rarely sought given the ‘frivolous indifference’ of the ‘millions’ (Schleiermacher 1988, 9). For Schleiermacher there is no doubt that the adjective ‘sublime’ is properly due to anything that presents a comprehensive vision of greatness to the individual, revealing human life as part of a ‘sublime unity’, a ‘relationship which reflects greatness’ and which ‘cannot be completely understood in terms of the individual’ (Schleiermacher 1988, 35). Here Schleiermacher linked hermeneutics to a pleasure in acquiring just such a ‘relationship which reflects greatness’ by pointing the individual’s understanding beyond itself to a larger sublime unity.

The publication of Longinus’ classical text on the sacred during his lifetime had also led Leibniz to write a short essay ‘on the secrets of the sublime’ arguing that human reason must naturally be able to infer from

¹⁵ See section 5:15–18 of Spinoza’s *Ethics* for his argument that human understanding of itself proportionately leads to an understanding and love of God.

its own finite thoughts the existence of something infinite on which we depend.¹⁶ Here our ability to relate awareness of our own finitude to the comparatively infinitely ‘great’ idea of God is the basis of a positive rather than a ‘dreadful’ sense of the sublime. Gadamer wrote that existentialism took its original German impetus from Karl Jaspers’ philosophy of the ‘encompassing’ and before that from Schelling’s notion of existence in God (1994, 3). But he had his own reference points for experiences of reality as something vast and resistant to easy comprehension. He described the First World War as a negative sublime experience that ‘outstripped... powers of comprehension’ and lay at existentialism’s origin (1994, 4). But Gadamer felt that there was a way to overcome the ‘horror’ of the sublime and, indeed, all horror in general. He wrote:

Being overcome by distress and horror involves a painful division. There is a disjunction with what is happening, a refusal to accept, that rebels against the agonizing events. But it is precisely the effect of the tragic catastrophe that the disjunction with what exists is removed... We are freed not only from the spell in which the painful and horrifying nature of the tragic destiny had held us, but at the same time we are freed from everything that divides us from what is.... (2004, 101)

Heidegger’s subsequent radicalisation of Jaspers showed that what really displays to us our own nature is those moments in which boundary situations such as death, which convey finitude and radical specificity, bring existence as a whole into focus (1994, 5). Here at the heart of existentialism we encounter the juxtaposition of our awareness of our own personal finitude with the vast scale of existence. Gadamer saw Heidegger as sharing this goal by seeking a way in which a ‘finite, frail human Dasein—one whose death is certain... could experience Being, not as a privation, as a defect, or as a merely fleeting pilgrimage of earthlings journeying through this life towards a participation in the eternity of the divine’ but as something in which the finite human individual is nevertheless ‘at home’.¹⁷ What Gadamer took from these was a grand narrative of

¹⁶ See section 30 of Leibniz’s *Monadology* for the argument that it is reflective thoughts that allow us to generate a conception of God, and sections 36–41 for the idea that God can be arrived at as a necessary feature of our own reasoning about causes.

¹⁷ Thus Gadamer notes that Heidegger’s path was different from that of Sartre and the French existentialists: he rejected the ‘irrationalism’ associated with the ‘pathos of existence’; see Gadamer (1994, 10).

modernity in which we harvest from history's resources a new capacity of sublime wonder at Being, viewed from within in a way that reconciles us to our tiny place in the vast world. In this he stood close to Bertrand Russell's idea of philosophy as something that gives us 'some share in infinity', making us 'capable of that union with the universe that constitutes [our] highest good' (Russell 2001, 94).

Kant's 'sublime' experience is one in which nature becomes a window onto its 'supersensible substrate', its 'transcendental freedom' (1986, 167) bringing the broader structures of reason into comprehension:

... since we must look upon the whole of nature as we do the sublime in nature—that is, as the occasion for the elevation of the mind to its supersensible vocation—and since we thus experience a satisfaction that elevates us beyond the unpleasant experience of our insignificance and powerlessness, we are then fulfilled by an intellectual interest. (1986, 169)

Kristin Gjesdal has argued that this, Gadamer's late interpretation of the Kantian sublime, only incorporates the sublimity of nature into human understanding insofar as it is dependent on an 'intellectual interest'—that is, insofar as formless infinity is 'tamed' by its constriction within rational concepts. But rather than aesthetic experiences evoking the world in such a way that they 'hide' the aspects which escape human reason, each experience of the aesthetic sublime reveals the whole expanse of the world—including the aspects that outstrip our understanding through discrete concepts. Thus 'intellectual interest' here does not signify the 'merely' intellectual, but rather the coming to understanding of the fundamental form of consciousness that defines all human awareness.

In what follows we treat the 'sublime' experience not as a classic romantic theory, but as a new form of apprehension of the world in which we exist. It answers the 'inner desire of the human soul for a meaningful inter-relatedness of the whole, which should also ground the meaning of one's own life and desires in agreement with "nature,"' so that we can finally achieve an 'experience of the whole and ourselves in the whole' (1992, 228). His concern was foremost with those phenomena that, in his words, 'evoke in us the "you are that"', a phrase referring to the Hindu Upanishadic saying 'tat tvam asi' and so signalling sympathy with classical views beyond as well as within Europe (ibid., 90). Indeed, as Walter Lammi has noted and as we will see in the chapter "Spirituality: The Self in the Whole", Gadamer expresses sympathy with the Greek tendency to

see the experience of the whole as a religious or spiritual experience (Lammi 2008), and it is perhaps here, in contrast to the Christian and Jewish outlooks of most of his colleagues, that his own touchstone for ‘spiritual’ values lay.

But this was not meant to be primarily backward-looking. Gadamer saw genuinely new possibilities for appreciation of the global culture and nature in the modern world. New forms of overview were becoming possible, facilitated by the expansion of communications and media, advances in scientific theory and method, and the broader remit of global culture that was opening up in the international community. But it was also important that the modern outlook of the twentieth century sustains a new attitude to finitude itself, persuading humans to accept their inevitable limitations, and even to affirm them as the basis of ethics and creativity. There was something positive in this condition, something that enables all that we experience and value, much as his notion of tradition and prejudice *enabled* all understanding rather than preventing it. What beckons is a fresh sense of our place as part of something larger than ourselves. In this book, using *Truth and Method* and both the lucid earlier essays in which Gadamer explained his position, and the later essays in which he expanded its implications, we will unpack the ‘modern sublime’ vision of reality implicit in Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy. We will find it to open up a way of life that cultivates self-recognition, creative participation and wonder at that which stretches beyond the borders of our understanding.

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Life: The Spiritual Humanist

Abstract Gadamer's life wove together many different inspirations as he lived through the decades of the twentieth century, passing from German Pietist readings and symbolist poetry, through the powerful intellectual forces of Marburg and post-war Germany's demands for a new ethos, to times in which *Truth and Method's* growing fame helped him engage with modernism, globalism, and the dangers of nuclear and ecological disaster. This chapter tells a story of Gadamer's life that focuses on those experiences and influences which gave shape to his widest philosophical aims.

Keywords Biography • Modernity • Phenomenology • National Socialism • Heidegger

Being eighty-five, I am an oldest child of the century ... I have lived through this stormy epoch from my childhood until today and may therefore qualify as a witness. (1992a, 224)

Born into a middle-class, educated, urban cultural world that combined science with spirituality, and modern technologies with traditional literatures, Gadamer's life challenges the oppositions that have tended to dominate twentieth-century philosophy. Where Martin Heidegger had come from a traditional and Christian background, Gadamer was from quite a

different urban, liberal, secular and scientifically inclined milieu. As his main biographer, Jean Grondin, puts it:

Heidegger came from a peasant setting, the backwater city of Messkirch, and from a modest family in which no one had ever received a university education. Gadamer, on the other hand, came from a major city, Breslau, and was the son of an acclaimed professor... Heidegger was in his youth a devout Catholic, destined for the priesthood, whereas Gadamer was, at best, a nominal Protestant, for whom faith issues were less existential ... Worlds thus separated Gadamer and Heidegger. (Grondin 2003, 2)

But in addition to all this, in many ways Gadamer was more of a *romantic* and a *modernist* than his teacher. He saw himself as part of a phase of history that was just blossoming into an utterly fresh space, contrary to all the firm truths and distinct identities of the past. The First World War left him, at eighteen, 'in a situation for which our social structures gave us no preparation': there were 'serious doubts about the ethos of the older Germany focused on struggle and achievement' (1992b, 135–137), and 'the inner-worldly asceticism of a value-free philosophy' seemed majestic yet impossible' (ibid., 140). Instead, the organic, vital, realities of *Lebensphilosophie* called forth some new 'liberal' direction. He felt, by his own description, like a Romantic after the Enlightenment, and part of the appeal of the Marburg philosophers was that they seemed to be 'following their star, unswayed by the events of the great world' (ibid., 144).

His own situation was distinguished by its blending of extremes that had galvanised and divided many of his contemporaries. While his earliest work carefully interpreted Plato in a Marburg that he described as a 'village' (1994, 135), some of his latest work commented on nuclear armament, the ecological crisis and the increasing cultural diversity of Europe. He was physically disadvantaged throughout his life by a limp caused by polio, yet as time wore on, he turned out to be one of the hardest and longest-lived of all the era's thinkers. He featured in prominent debates where he was considered too radical by some (as, for instance, by Emilio Betti) and too conventional by others (such as Jacques Derrida in their well-known meeting). He began his career as the unpaid assistant of Heidegger, little-valued intellectually by his teacher to whom he appeared to hide behind philosophers now considered passé, such as Plato, Aristotle and Hegel. Yet after the end of the war, he found himself a revered Rector and a kind of chaperone to the disgraced Heidegger whose death in 1976,

just as *Truth and Method* was finding its way into English and other languages, would eventually open the field for Gadamer's own growing fame. He had no real religious upbringing and was under no pressure to believe anything, yet he thought of himself as having a disposition towards religious questions which he investigated in his own way, free—he felt—from the theological constraints that had so influenced Heidegger's work. Thus he never seemed to embody any extreme identity or radical message, and he never lost his own sense of being a liberal amid Germany's left and right, theologians and atheists, traditionalists and rebels. In many respects he was at once both the most *traditional* and the most characteristically *modern* of the phenomenologists.

In this respect Gadamer's life does not just offer up an intellectual biography; it also sheds light on a certain way of being philosophically modern, epistemically humble and yet hopeful about philosophy and the future thinking of humanity itself. If his upbringing was shaped by a sense that the old ways were no longer available to modern thinkers, his personal mindset was always touched with a hopefulness, an essential and almost Leibnizian 'optimism' (Grondin 2024, 71, 129), that cut him off from the Nietzscheans and doom-mongers around him. Asked about his vision of the future, he said that—while Heidegger had no utopian vision, he himself agreed with Ernst Bloch: 'the principle of hope simply holds true'. We need to anticipate what will make human life 'worthwhile' (1992a, 151).

One biographer has written that 'the content and influence of Gadamer's philosophy are clearly more interesting than his biography. Gadamer himself always downplayed the importance of his personal life' (Zimmerman 2022, 9). But this approach to telling his story risks missing the rich moral and cultural background that frames his thought and amplifies Gadamer's often seemingly dry ideas. There were poets, musicians and wildly dramatic authors who inspired him, a ghostly legacy of spiritual concerns left him by his mother, a rebellion to enact by either rejecting or recovering the past, the expectations of first his teachers and then the National Socialist government to negotiate with his personal integrity intact, the slow crafting of a major work that fought him every step of the way, and the late fairytale-ending in which he found success—and, with it, a fresh quest. Jean Grondin's immensely detailed biography gives the complex texture of Gadamer's lived life, but as with *Truth and Method* itself, a life can be so full of chapters, and so modest in its style, that we miss its overarching insights. In this chapter we explore the conditions of his upbringing, the growth of his philosophical interest and his journey through the

war years into professorship and teaching. We also consider the slow success of *Truth and Method* and his struggle—for the rest of his life—to unpack the implications of his own difficult book for a world that was changing—perhaps faster than ever in history.

I INSPIRATIONS: PIETISM AND POETRY

In 1900 the young Hans-Georg's birth brought a poetic nature into a practical lineage of successful technically minded Gadamer. They were part of the 'emerging Silesian Bourgeoisie': the Gadamer family had been devoted to factory-ownership (his paternal grandfather owned a match factory) and natural science (his father was an influential chemistry professor), and the resulting home life was 'scientifically oriented' by his own account (Grondin 2003, 19–23). Yet this description excluded his mother who—despite her early death when he was barely four—had left him an impression of great spiritual sincerity. She also left a collection of books that proved food for deeper thought, including the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelsohn's 1767 *Phaedon* which intervened in the sceptical climate of Enlightenment Germany to reclaim Platonic arguments for the immortal soul, and the Austrian philosopher-physician Baron von Feuchtersleben's 1854 popular manual for well-being, *On the Diatetics of the Soul*. Gadamer's 'scientifically oriented' upbringing also excluded his brother who—older but affected by severe epilepsy—sustained a strong faith that the younger brother seemed gently to envy.¹ Yet Gadamer aligned himself with a wider trend among German Protestants of his time towards taking from religion what one found helpful (often the arts and the resources for personal development or metaphysical reflection) and leaving what one did not (usually Church authority, ritual, and supernatural doctrine). Yet he observed that this kind of liberal autonomy was not particularly modern. It stretched through history to thinkers like Plotinus who stood 'on the dividing line' like himself: outside of clear religious traditions, while concerning themselves with matters of spiritual, existential and metaphysical significance (Grondin 2003, 19, 23–24).

His father's scientific outlook was a less liberal force in his life, for he was expected to carry the paternal baton by studying the natural sciences

¹ Reflecting his own difference with both his brother and Heidegger, Gadamer (quoted in Grondin 2003, 25) told his biographer that 'I have no religious faith at all. I always say that with a certain amount of regret.'

as Johannes Gadamer had done. We might think of Breslau's industrial setting and Marburg's scholarly centre as ideal settings in which to welcome scientific modernity. It is true that his youth contained traces of that sense of magic and wonder that accompanied the 'completely fantastic novelty' of many things during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He remembered the novelty of seeing a Zeppelin in the sky for the first time—'this cigar floating in the sky', or having pastries baked in coconut oil (1992a, 221).

But the First World War interrupted all this and brought in a note of doubt about all that which resonated with earlier thinkers like Spengler, Lessing and Nietzsche. It helped to induce a certain nascent Romanticism in post-war youths who had, at first, little reason to celebrate technology's achievements:

Gadamer and other youths saw the war and its consequences as an indictment of the establishmentarian belief in progress through modern science and technology that made too many Germans proud of their nation's science and industry and that first made such modern warfare possible. (George and Van der Heiden 2022, 2)

The teenage Gadamer achieved a subtle rebellion by entering the *Geisteswissenschaften* or 'sciences of the spirit' and turning his attention towards the Greek philosophers and the German poets—two communities in which he found solace and solidarity throughout his life. In charting his spiritual outlook and message, in Chap. 7, we will look more closely at his personal sources of inspiration. While he did not carry his mother's pietist tracts around with him, he did revere Pindar and Shakespeare, Stefan George and Hölderlin who seemed 'a kind of harbinger for the prophecy of a new god' (1992a, 95). We may remember that the modernity of his youth had more in common with the rebellious, life-affirming, uncertain vitality of the Romantics, than with the hard-edged modernism of either post-war period.

2 LIBERALISM: DIVERSITY AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

The promise that he could explore new directions, freshly derived from diverse sources and pursued with the rigour of one's own intellect, and at the bidding of one's own dispositions, was part of the liberal German culture into which he was born. In contrast to the pastoral world revered by

Heidegger, Gadamer was described by Habermas as the ‘urbaniser’ of the phenomenological heritage. Indeed, his childhood city of Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) was at that time an industrial centre of culture with a university in which previously Catholic and Protestant institutions had united to form a secular centre of the sciences, with the first rabbinical seminary in the region serving its thriving Jewish community. By birth and subsequent university education Gadamer’s Marburg culture was academic and relatively liberal in its outlook, and his own father was a representative of this outlook—a secular scientist who nevertheless did not despise religion, nor could he prevent his son from following a Humanistic course of study despite his own professional disinterest in such subjects.

Thus, although his translator Frederick Lawrence spoke of Gadamer as having been ‘bred, educated, and trained as a typical middle-class youth of the age of Victoria and Wilhelm’,² this was not the middle class of conservative Christianity, but the middle class of secular progressive Europe, already proud to feel ‘free’ of the constrictions of religious and political dogma. Gadamer’s youthful studies were encapsulated within this formative cultural openness. Prevented from serving in the First World War by his weak physical disposition, his experience of transition from a teenager to a twenty-something student was framed within an intellectual milieu including earnest young female and Jewish scholars, as well as open-minded thinkers such as himself. The Stefan George circle included Jewish members, who sought a ‘new realm’ based on poetic, inner sympathies rather than national, ethnic and political ones, and some of his closest intellectual associates in the reading groups that he joined while many men were away at war were young women. He reminisced about protests in which his female peers celebrated that corsets had finally been discarded, and it was one such woman who became his first wife, Frida Kratz, an older woman who occasionally worked as a vocalist, was a fan of literature and the Spanish language and came from a family of intellectuals that included the female historian of ideas and novelist Ricarda Huch, a defender of Lutheran individualism (Grondin 2003, 60).

Grondin implies that the George circle and the other reading groups, in which he participated throughout his formative intellectual life, set up an ethos that would serve Gadamer as an ideal of conscience-guided communities for the rest of his life; it trained its members to ‘refuse everything

² See Frederick Lawrence in the introduction to *Reason in the Age of Science; Gadamer* (1981, xiii).

that reeked of concession to the noisy public world' (Grondin 2003, 49). This template would serve him well as an ideal during the years in which the academic world was being courted by National Socialist forces. A certain global inclination became a quiet fixture of his identity, in contrast to colleagues for whom German-ness became a key category of reflection and affiliation. In school Gadamer had been able to study both French and English, developing a life-long love for the French language and for Shakespeare, and his first journey by air was an academic visit to Spain during the Second World War, an experience that he described as inspirational. As we will see, his sympathy for Hellenic outlooks was rooted in this sense of a natural ability to 'see from the perspective of' another culture. But it was not merely Greece to which he turned: this study of the European classical heritage was framed within a broader world-historical outlook that included his own brief study of the Quran and of Sanskrit.

Gadamer's milieu was more full of cultural 'others'—in terms of gender, outlook and intellectual study—than that of many of his teachers; indeed, one can see his educational alternation between reading circles and lecture courses as a training in the activity of modest debate, relatively free of traditional hierarchies. One gets the impression in the reminiscences found in *Philosophical Apprenticeships* that it was many decades before he felt himself to stand centre-stage in a position of equal leadership and authority. But the world in which he lived allowed him a certain cosmopolitan leeway to collaborate in the kind of broader culture of understanding that his later colleague Jürgen Habermas would call the 'public sphere'. That ethos eventually became central to his whole approach to intellectual activity.

3 PATH-MAKERS: PHENOMENOLOGISTS, CLASSICISTS AND 'FURIOSOS'

However, Gadamer's movement deeper into professional academic life in his twenties was accompanied at one and the same time by a draining of his self-confidence (he was not adept at the kinds of phenomenological reduction taught by his teachers) and a refinement of his own instincts for meaningful scholarship (his generation of students vigorously discussed the virtues and flaws of those same teachers). Where did truth lie in the post-Kantian, post-Nietzschean age? Where lay the well-spring of inspiration? What knowledge of the self was to be found through

phenomenology, and where did it place consciousness on the spectrum between the ‘soul’ and the psychology’s rapidly developing conception of the biologically rooted mind? Could ethics be reconfigured within a philosophical perspective that is unable to affirm any objective, certain knowledge of the Other?

Around Gadamer the discipline of philosophy, into which he had gradually been drawn by Richard Höningwald and Paul Natorp, was a hive of theories and debates and conceptual interventions designed to provoke and revolutionise the establishment. His opinion of his peers was not always high: he remembered the academic establishment of the twenties as pervaded by ‘the academic style of affected behaviour’ (1994, 5). But his student years also brought him into contact with a cast of luminaries to whom tribute is paid, each in his own manner, in Gadamer’s writings about them, largely in his uniquely impersonal autobiography *Philosophical Apprenticeships*. He met phenomenologists among whom he discerned two abiding virtues—on the one hand, the virtue of meticulous analysis and commitment to truth and on the other the more vague but compelling quality of ‘demonic’ philosophical passion, a personal engagement that fulfilled the desire of Gadamer’s generation to find a Zarathustra, a prophet. This was apparent in a number of thinkers—in Nicolai Hartmann whose almost ascetic seriousness was familiar to Gadamer. Hans-Georg became more and more a sort of ‘son’ to this scholar known for his extreme lifestyle and midnight conversation (Grondin 2003, 75–6). Academic passion was also found in Max Scheler about whom about Gadamer spoke with considerable warmth and in Martin Heidegger who was the powerful antidote to Husserl’s dry approach, as Kierkegaard had once seemed the fire to Hegel’s placid ice.

Hartmann had encouraged his young student to pursue instruction with Paul Natorp, a teacher notorious for his powerful advocacy of Platonism as a solution that was at once scientific (he likened the Platonic forms to scientific laws), philosophical in its proposal of absolute values and mystical in its guidance towards a realm of higher, yet pervasive, truths. Through his own Platonic temperament, Natorp encouraged Gadamer to see his teachers as doors onto a much longer lineage of philosophical luminaries, reaching back through history and offering insights that were at once philosophical and spiritual.

Yet he was seduced away from Hartmann and Natorp, like so many other young philosophers, by the rising star of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger had gained great influence not through his publications, but

precisely through his own personal qualities as a lecturer and seminar-leader—he thus exemplified personality-based, authentic philosophising. Indeed, for both Heidegger and Gadamer, they had already become well-established on the German intellectual scene through their teaching well before the publications for which they are now known. Inspired by the passion evident in the writing of Van Gogh and Dostoevsky, Heidegger brought a fierce earnestness to his approach (1994, 8). Later, Heidegger's reliance on the power of his personality could sometimes make him appear pompous—after the war when trying to reclaim his reputation after the scandal of his National Socialist years, he was known to begin his talks at Gadamer's discussion groups by theatrically drawing back a curtain. More broadly, Gadamer had plenty of opportunity to observe the professional problems that others incurred through an over-emphasis on rhetoric.

Yet it was partly Heidegger's urgent, 'prophetic' character that drew the young Hans-Georg to him. If his interest in Stefan George's circle had taught him to seek someone who could gather and inspire young people, then Heidegger fit the bill. He wrote of him that the 'chasm ... between the academic and worldly forms of philosophy seemed to close up in Heidegger's work'—this was an essential part of the power that he held for his students, the way he brought their studies deep into the centre of their daily experience and real-life concerns. For Gadamer as a typical earnest young intellectual of the time we can see how much this would have been welcomed as the healing of a problematic personal division (he seemed to hold a similar appreciation for Plato and Leibniz as holistic thinkers who refused to observe such disciplinary boundaries; Gadamer 1976a, 138). Above all, Heidegger was a 'furioso' of thought, inspiring others to serious thinking through the demonstrable intensity of his own philosophical commitment. He too blended science and art (Gadamer reminded post-war readers that Heidegger had voluntarily taken mathematics and physics as minor subjects for his doctorate; Gadamer 1994, 6). Best of all, all he urged his students to awaken to the call of the times, and did not mind criticism as long as it signified a preparation to 'direct all passion increasingly into the sure channel of a challenging life task'.³ There was no doubt that philosophising under Heidegger would be embracing a life-long quest of central personal importance. Indeed, even after Heidegger's disgrace, and Gadamer's own ascent, this is perhaps what remained of Heidegger's significance for him. In his response to the exposé of

³ From a letter to Karl Lowith, cited in Grondin (2003, 131).

Heidegger as an unabated supporter of National Socialism, he marvelled that anyone could still be surprised that Heidegger had wholeheartedly supported Nazi ideology. But he also supported him in a fashion: ‘Even those who were disturbed at the time by Heidegger’s political adventure and distanced themselves from him for many years would never have dared to deny the philosophical impetus with which he had not ceased to inspire them from the beginning.’ The teacher had not attempted to create blind followers, and rather than making oneself ridiculous by looking down with an air of superiority, one should, by implication, move forward to refute and improve on what had gone before (1992a, 81–2).

It is interesting to note that Gadamer remembered his early encounters with Heidegger as dominated by an overarching theological character. Indeed, he once observed:

My life mission was very different from Heidegger’s, for example, who was searching for a more appropriate language than that of Catholicism—that is, he was searching for a religious language ... finally it was Hölderlin who did so—though to my mind in a very bizarre way.⁴

Heidegger’s post-Catholic mission seemed quite clear to this pupil, at least—and in the early years it lay at the heart of his powerful drive as a philosopher. For the students, it was immediately apparent that Heidegger was not merely a logician or ethicist or poet, but someone who was seeking answers to all the most urgent theological concerns, but through the medium of philosophy. For Heidegger, as for Paul Natorp in his mystical period of approach to Plato, for Scheler and Bultmann in their own attempts to reground religious ideas, and for the whole of the George Circle which sustained a current of spiritual discourse throughout Gadamer’s life, mere academic study was connected with the nature and fate of the ‘soul’.

A few thinkers provided a necessary balance to the powerful influence of Heidegger, however, directing Gadamer towards religious literatures, classical works, and the broader cultural scene. Max Scheler and Rudolf Bultmann were key among such thinkers, adding a theological tone to Gadamer’s phenomenological setting. Max Scheler was an exemplar of the passionate challenge of ‘life-philosophy’ to the dominant sciences (recommended as such by Heidegger; Grondin 2003, 130). Scheler had also

⁴Quoted from a conversation with his biographer in Grondin (2003, 24).

come from a divided family—in his case with a Catholic Father and an Orthodox Jewish mother—and after an early orientation towards Catholicism, he had gradually detached himself from any traditional affiliation and set himself to develop his own philosophically grounded spiritual perspective. For Scheler it was his ‘philosophical anthropology’ that provided the materials for his own creative spiritual analysis of mind, and its mechanisms for making itself anew.

The ‘non-conformist’ goal of such thinkers took a new form, inspired by biblical hermeneutics, in the work of the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann. His explicit reinterpretation of Christianity focused on religion’s existential goals rather than its propositional content, and after the war, his work would have a concrete impact on thinkers across Christian traditions—including his friend Ute Ranke-Heinemann, a Catholic theologian and a woman who applied his thought to traditional doctrines concerning women and sex. Meanwhile Gadamer’s own dissertation supervisor, Natorp, was a friend of Rabindranath Tagore and a colleague of the reviver of ‘mystical’ approaches to religiosity, Rudolf Otto; this too seemed to opened up Christian sources to ‘renewal’ through dialogue with other traditions. Thinkers such as these formed a community always seeking more than merely an account of fact and truth; each sought to frame a world-picture in which humans could find themselves as meaningful member of the cosmos and clearly develop their sense of value and their higher goals in life.

Yet Gadamer’s allegiance to phenomenology, the exciting new movement that promised to take European thought in a new direction, was inflected by his turn *backward* towards a field that offered refuge from Heidegger’s criticisms, and exemplified detailed, devoted scholarship: Classics. Gadamer’s early poetry-reading had trained him into a high sensitivity to the subtleties of texts, and this served him well in his work on Plato, Aristotle and the pre-Socratics. Marburg had been the centre of a flourishing of German Romanticism that looked nostalgically back to the past, but also drew inspiration from the discovery of foreign or hidden cultures—the Brothers Grimm had gathered their folktales there, revealing beliefs far from the mainstream doctrine of the church. More broadly, the Orientophilia, which had animated German Romanticism through the work of Friedrich and August Schlegel, Johann Herder, Goethe and others, was still alive in the university.

Through his collaboration with Paul Natorp on a thesis examining pleasure in Plato, Gadamer was the heir of an important tradition of

classical philology. Natorp had studied in Bonn under scholars such as Hermann Usener who took a comparative approach to the study of Greek culture, and was also the teacher of Friedrich Nietzsche. In Marburg, and later Leipzig, Gadamer would also be influenced by the Jewish Plato scholar Jacob Klein and by Karl Reinhardt who approached Plato and pre-Socratic studies with an enthusiasm suggesting that he—another fan of Stefan George—was searching for alternative insights from those that populated the Western spiritual and philosophical mainstream. Serious philologists could feel themselves to be part of a broader cultural project of discovering the world’s intellectual heritage and bringing back the treasure of different perspectives.

Thus non-religion, liberal ‘existential’ interpretations of tradition, and alternative spiritualities of the age were common then. They were very different in tone and implications from the confrontational approach of contemporary popular atheism, where wrangles over ‘supernatural’ propositions, evolutionary claims and socio-political conflicts between religions dominate much of atheism’s critical discourse. Gadamer’s own lack of faith was framed by a culture where liberal forms of religiosity could flourish without theism, literalism or the church. Instead, one might maintain a humble internal spirituality or draw on philosophies that redefined the divine, from Parmenides and Pythagoras to Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Bultmann.

Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, as his concerns about the hegemony of scientific conceptions of truth increased, he was able to refer to the example of earlier philosophers such as Leibniz who had:

...appropriated the new scientific thought with his entire genius, and yet he considered the ancient and scholastic doctrine of substantial forms to be indispensable. Thus he became the first thinker to attempt to mediate between traditional metaphysics and modern science. (1976b, 110)

Gadamer’s appreciation for Leibniz was considerable and he was perhaps more in agreement with him than has been fully appreciated (see Grondin 2024, 119–129). But in many ways, it was above all Socrates that Gadamer took as his model, retaining a confidence that the truth will emerge of its own natural power, without undue force or fanfare. At the core of his work he affirmed the importance of personal development—not as a mere reductive individual psychologism, but in a way that kept intact its concern for the fulfilment of humanity’s greatest

potential—collectively, dynamically, creatively—in its global march through the ages (2000).⁵

4 INTEGRITY: CAUTION, HUMILITY AND THE WAR YEARS

It was in part due to Gadamer's disinclination to follow the crowd and take up anyone's standard that the Second World War came as a surprise. He had not served in the First World War—he was young and the Gadammers were not blessed with particularly good health. By the time romantic and nationalist rhetorics took the stage in the run-up to the Second World War (during his late twenties and thirties), he knew that the limp with which polio had left him would prevent any active service in the military. He seemed fairly immune to the heated hopes and debates around him, seeing himself as one of the young intellectuals who, initially, could not take nationalist scapegoating seriously, doubting that the public would follow Hitler's crowd-rousing jingoism. He wrote:

In the spring of 1934, those in academic circles, including even my Jewish friends, still maintained a hope that anti-Semitism, for example, had been no more than a tactic of electoral politics—albeit a terrible one—that 'the drummer' (as Hitler was called at the time) had used quite crudely.⁶

He had already been wooed by neo-Kantianism, neo-Platonism, the defenders and critics of German idealism, the Stefan George Circle's dismissal of purely academic theory, phenomenology and different forms of the hermeneutics of facticity, by Protestant and Catholic thinkers, and various other Nationalist ideologies. The years from 1935 onward would see him also negotiating the claims of National Socialism, then Marxist movements, each in their own time seeking to win the hearts and minds of young thinkers. But precisely the quality that made Gadamer seem inadequate during the early years of his career—his cautious intellectual reticence—made him a trusted Professor during and after the war. It is perhaps significant that an early report of Heidegger's, assessing his young student, describes him as prone to parrot the ideas of various other thinkers critically rather than advancing his own. He neither staked out his own

⁵ For Gadamer's genealogy of the move from individualistic to intersubjective conceptions of self, see the essay 'Subjectivity, Intersubjectivity, Subject, Person' (2000).

⁶ See Gadamer's reflection on Heidegger's Nazi sympathies in 'Like Plato in Syracuse', printed in Gadamer (1992b).

position nor threw in his lot with one or other of the bright but brief stars of the academic scene. Only Heidegger governed his thinking, and here, as his teacher courted ever-more extreme ideologies, a parting of the ways began to grow.

Thus in the pre-war years he listened and discussed with a range of colleagues, witnessing both the increasing enthusiasm of Heidegger for National Socialism and the concerns of his many Jewish colleagues and friends. He insisted later that, initially, Nazi polemic seemed mere rhetoric with little danger of being put into action to him and many others at the time. Like many, he saw Hitler and his followers as zealots engaged in the complicated politics of proclamation and provocation, and he found the party-political development of their influence distasteful and personally disadvantageous. But it did not strike him as likely to result in military action.

His heroes, from Socrates to Stefan George, to his close personal friend Max Kommerell who had suffered great difficulties in eventually abandoning George's circle of followers, had taught him that good thinkers should be wary of over-zealous allegiances. He himself had no reason to support Hitler and his ideas—he wrote that a few invitations to join the party and its young speech-making firebrands seemed to him distant from the careful, measured, humble dialogues of his own social world. He and his associates 'just simply felt more at home with the *Three Penny Opera* than we did, let us say, with a figure of the romantic and nationalist right wing such as Hans Freyer' (1992a, 143). Nationalist and ethnicity-centred ideas meant little to him; many of his teachers and friends such as Karl Lowith were Jewish, and in the later years of the war his wife to be, Käte Lekebusch, was detained and eventually imprisoned for casually referring to Hitler as a swine when among friends at a bus-stop. Gadamer identified as a liberal and had, in any case, always preferred the allusive, question-asking poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke to the heroic nostalgia of Hölderlin. On top of all that, he became rather proud of his abilities in the Greek and French languages (and later the moderate grasp of English that allowed him to become a regular visitor to the USA): all in all, excessive Germanophilia had little to recommend it.

Thus while watching other thinkers, with Heidegger at their forefront, join the National Socialist parade, Gadamer tried to weather the storm. Through 'the reality of that time: the conformism, the pressure, the indoctrination, the sanctions' he aimed to maintain both his career and his independence of thought (2016, 79). This independence took on a precise

form once he became an employee of German universities that were now under the power of the state. His topics for teaching and any speeches he made or papers he gave all became subject to close scrutiny by the National Socialists. He dealt with this by carefully choosing to teach neutral topics and to maintain as aloof a position as possible—and this was aided by his own careful, philologically grounded approach to philosophy. Heidegger's rhetoric seemed made for the broad, suggestive statements of nationalist polemic, but what could the Nazis do with Gadamer's meticulous readings of the *Philebus* or *Phaedo*? This assured him the job he needed to support his family, with a minimum of pacification required for the authorities. He hoped for little more than this, taking refuge in his own implacable love for the material that he studied, and viewing it ultimately as a refuge from the turbulent waters of popular opinion. In a letter of 1938 he wrote 'I don't have any ambition any more—I think people today shouldn't go with the flow' (Grondin 2003, 192).

Ultimately, when the war ended, it was this attitude that led to his success within German Universities such as Leipzig and Heidelberg, where his independence of thought and failure to align strongly with any particular movement was valued. Academics were now assessed for their level of complicity in the National Socialist agenda. Heidegger was discredited, but Gadamer's work was seen as preserving a neutral tone, and taking up a laudable defence of the intellectual world as a realm that cultivated caution, objectivity and balance in the face of the sophistry of politics. Already in 1938 his recommendation for a professorship at Marburg noted this objectivity and the quietly effective diligence of his teaching. It describes him as follows:

He began his career as a student of Heidegger, but soon struck out on completely independent paths and today can no longer be viewed as a representative of any school whatsoever. His success as a teacher is extraordinary ... from a rhetorical standpoint his lecturing is only average, but he captures his listeners through the construction and content of his lectures. (Grondin 2003, 193)

When the war ended he was made Dean of the Philosophy Faculty partly on account of his teaching method of 'imbuing his listeners with the habit of precise, independent thought', and the Rectorship to which he was appointed there, with all of its political strategizing and speech-making, left him desiring only to return to simple, private philosophical

work in a smaller university (Grondin 2003, 235). The Rector's speech he did make, however, now in the newly formed East Germany, advocated that the university must be the centre of a society made fair, free and independent through sincere scholarship. The universities must, he urged, open up to those classes of 'worker students' who had previously stood outside of them. At their best, universities could become small utopias in which individuals, groups and generations learned openness to their peers, thinking together in such a way as to 'create with one another new solidarities' (1992a, 59). His own meticulous, balanced but appreciative mode of reading other authors was at the centre of this ideal, and it would form the basis for the magnum opus that he was now being pressured to write.

5 BUILDING A SYSTEM: *TRUTH AND METHOD*

Like Heidegger's popularity, Gadamer's early success had been built almost wholly on his teaching. But to a much greater degree, his own seminars advanced no particular position, striving instead to teach students to form their own assessments with integrity and clarity. Now, preparing to enter his fifties, he had to produce a publication on which he could stake his name. His second wife, Käte Lekebusch who he had met when she was a student, encouraged this and helped to shepherd his ideas in the direction of a coherent philosophy. But he found writing acutely difficult, even painful. He wrote later that he yearned for interlocutors, immediate faces and minds to whom to direct his thoughts. Furthermore, his years of cautious historical research had cultivated a habit of digression into the hermeneutic background of each idea—something for which he had a reputation (there had been a rumour among some students that he dissolved philosophy into mere intellectual history; Grondin 2003, 275). In writing, this manifested as a tendency to get lost in what his friends jokingly called 'Gads'—elaborate and unending diversions of thought. He himself complained that it was difficult to systematise and unify his thought because the Gads kept creeping in.⁷ In many ways the whole of *Truth and Method* is a carefully shaped series of historical and hermeneutical 'Gads': through numerous historical hermeneutic analyses it gradually approached the right idea by building a cumulative picture of past insights and

⁷ See Di Cesare's (2013) account of Gadamer's struggles with his own styles, goals and self-confidence during these years, in the essay 'Living Through a Century'.

mistakes. But the book would become an important defence of tracing the roots of our philosophical ideas in this way. It offered a hermeneutic recuperation of past insights and argued that they are crucial to understanding any contemporary philosophical idea in its full potential for inspiration, refutation, association and further development.

One powerful creative influence on Gadamer's writing was the influential style of his teacher Heidegger who he said he felt was always looking over his shoulder when he wrote. For him, Heidegger had chosen the easier but flawed stylistic path of crafting poetically evocative expressions that cultivate 'mythological thinking'. Heidegger's wordplay—referring to many possible understandings of 'Being' (*Sein*), coining the neologism 'there-being' (*Dasein*), seeking evocative yet imprecise terms like 'the Nothing' (*das Nicht*) and building curious abstract nouns like 'unconcealedness' (*Unverborgenheit*)—impressed some and dismayed others. Gadamer was wary of this approach, writing that 'I am opposed to creating a special language' and preferring instead to make 'the language which we normally use say what Heidegger speaks about' (1992a, 128). Thus he wanted to speak on his own; and yet the grand goals of Heidegger, and before him Scheler, Schleiermacher or Nietzsche, were still the ones that he himself cherished. Like Leibniz after the Thirty Years War, he sought to renew philosophy with a detailed, all-encompassing and holistic account of the way thought itself unfolds.

The resulting work finally emerged, after a decade of work, and surprised his colleagues with the fact that he had managed to finish it at all. His title was not particularly illuminating; he and his wife had 'pondered a little, like a cook who lets his imagination roam when he draws up a menu...' and they followed the principle that 'ambiguity is the secret to a good title' (1992a, 65). Consequently, the resulting title 'Truth and Method' was characteristically ambiguous about the point it sought to make. At first sight, the work of other phenomenologists seemed far more exciting and important, and nothing in Gadamer's manner or previous publications had promised an incendiary opus. In certain respects, these impressions were justified—many found it difficult even to read enough of the book to get the gist of its claims. No one expected a second edition to be printed, least of all Gadamer himself.

But just as his own slow, earnest, truth-seeking manner had brought him eventual success, so the ground-breaking character of the book gradually came to be recognised. Further, Gadamer was astute enough to immediately publish a series of essays explaining his position more

succinctly (published in English under the title *Philosophical Hermeneutics*). In his collected works he eventually extended the title ‘Truth and Method’ to cover both the original large book and these essays, explaining that ‘the third part of *Truth and Method* was only a sketch and I had not said everything I really had in mind ... In truth, I did want to show that in texts experiences open up that belong much closer to art, religion, and philosophy than they do to science’ (2007, 413). By itself, *Truth and Method* had made few if any clear claims and lacked compelling mottos and quotable lines—although the phrases ‘fusion of horizons’, ‘hermeneutic circle’ and ‘historically effected consciousness’ slowly entered the wider consciousness. Yet for those with the patience and the intellectual background needed to follow its references, and journey through its historical narrative of ideas of truth, it *showed* the real meanings of these ideas to its readers in a way that, once comprehended, seemed irrefutable. He had succeeded in becoming an apt successor to the Plato of the *Meno*: rather than *telling* the truth, Gadamer’s great work tried to teach others to discover it for themselves.

6 ARGUMENT: BETWEEN THE MARXISTS AND THE CONSERVATIVES

It became clear to readers that Gadamer’s new philosophical hermeneutics denied that a purely correct reproduction of someone else’s ideas in one’s own mind is possible; we must instead understand their background and our own and see how—in the process of making sense of new data—we all construct something that fuses both into new meaning. This is truth—indeed, it is the structure of the ‘lifeworld’ which constitutes all humanly felt existence. The way to check for its success as a way of engaging someone else’s ‘truth’ is to sustain a thoroughgoing dialogue in which we constantly adjust to the other person. Truth, then, is never single or static, and the process of finding the truth is never finished. Bit by bit, this picture—and its radical challenge to much of the Enlightenment project and modernity’s hunger for certainty—came to light.

The slowly growing recognition of *Truth and Method*’s value took various forms, each applying its methodological insights to a different field. One of the first responses—from the Italian jurist and philosopher of legal interpretation, Emilio Betti—expressed the realisation that Gadamer had thrown the belief in fixed truths, the project of achieving perfect

agreements, and the possibility of fully objective arbitration, all to the wind. Betti had been involved in drafting the Italian civil code in 1942, and in his 1955 exposition of a general hermeneutics he emphasised the importance of trying to see what the original author of a text had meant. By contrast, Gadamer's book seemed like a defence of one's own prejudices. American theorist E.D Hirsch (1967) would also follow this line, and Gadamer was led to respond to these concerns; on the one hand he had to persuade his attackers that his analysis must of necessity be true—there can be no way of digging up the 'real intention' of the original author for, as it was later expressed, there can be no objective 'view from nowhere', no construction that does not bear the imprint of the builder. On the other hand, he had to persuade them that he did believe in conscientious methodological efforts to do full justice to the person or text we are trying to understand. In a 1967 essay, 'The Limitations of the Expert', he strove to explain this idea by clarifying the place of the expert or legal witness: such a person is one 'who is listened to', but who cannot take the place of the decision-maker, the person who must mediate between diverse contexts and concerns, to reach a solution that is itself something new—a best fit to present needs. He used his own father as an example of the ideal expert:

I am the son of a chemist who became an authority due to his research on alkaloids. Because of this, he was occasionally called for as an expert in complicated poisoning trials. I am convinced the courts were never very pleased with his expert testimony [for] he was a true researcher and always emphasised all that we do not know. (1992a, 183)

The modern desire to call on experts to present decisive answers signifies 'the increasing ignorance of the decision-makers'; that is, all arbiters of meaning must be courageous and indefatigable in moulding old meanings to new circumstances in authentic and appropriate ways—they cannot expect a past locus of truth to step in and give us easy answers for the present. Yet the distinction between right(ish) and wrong(ish) answers remained, and as we will see in the next chapter, the analogy of play in *Truth and Method* was meant to reshape our understanding of the very nature of this process, whilst relocating (and retaining) the idea of right, shared, agreed truth. Indeed, the historical, cultural situation of the original speaker is not less but *more* important in Gadamer's understanding of dialogue, for it shapes the horizon with which we must be fused.

Gadamer's self-defence against these charges of irresponsible relativism was repeated in various forms. But by the 1970s, as his book was translated into global languages, the tables had turned and he found himself being celebrated for his apparent context-relativism and criticised for being too conservative in formulating it. Jürgen Habermas, for whom Gadamer had helped to secure a post at Heidelberg, had developed similar insights into the ever-newness of meanings and interpretations, drawing them from the Marxist heritage of critical theory. For Habermas the relativist, or even constructivist, implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics were welcome, and this would later contribute to the positive reception of Gadamer among later 'postmodern' thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur. For some, he began to appear as the German bridge between Heidegger and postmodern thinkers such as the younger Jacques Derrida; he was gentler and more traditional in tone, but similar in the sources and implications of his thought.

But the new line of criticism was concerned that Gadamer had prioritised the influence of tradition and past prejudice, over the autonomy and free-rein of contemporary agents. Could the creative plenitude of meaning not draw free of the past? And was the denial that it could, not merely a discouragement to try? Habermas (1980) expressed this concern in a thoughtful way, while Derrida later repeated a similar criticism, pushing it further in his encounter with Gadamer in 1981 to suggest that on Gadamer's view, the effort to 'understand' was really an appropriation of the other's view into one's own perspective and past. It could, he argued, be seen merely as a new imperialism embedded at the very level of speaking itself.⁸ The implication was that Gadamer, a member of a German generation that had bowed to the aggressive conservatism of National Socialism, was himself peddling a political silencing of the Other in philosophical form.

Gadamer's response to Habermas came almost immediately, and their exchange was perhaps influential on his acknowledgement of the ways in which historical events manifest at a personal level in 'reality, resistance, the absurd, and the unintelligible' and are often characterised by 'absurdity and contingency' capable of being diverted into unfamiliar paths, as well as by a determining continuity with tradition (2004, xxxi). He had once more to clarify the universalism and philosophical necessity of his insights: hermeneutics wasn't a 'spin' on truth; it was the structure of what

⁸ See Derrida and Caputo's expansion of his critique in Michelfelder and Palmer (1989).

we call truth itself. He had then to show that this did not imply what it was being taken to imply. It was fundamentally right, he agreed, that truths were ‘constantly developed through the fecundity of the individual case’ as he had originally written (2004, 34). Rebellion and revolution were always still possible. But he reminded his detractors that this always consisted of ‘the furthering of an event that goes far back’ (2004, xxiii); even total reversals were part of a longer trajectory that provided the very terms of their protest. This did not mean that the content and messages were doomed to be repeated; one can change a message, and, indeed, a revolutionary message is an exemplary case of a meaning that takes its cue from the past whilst shaping something radically, often diametrically different.

Gadamer’s style remained oblique, however, and he often failed to bring out these implications directly. In many respects, he repeated what he had already said again and again: all of his insights were expressions of the foundational principles of all communication, regardless of its position in the mainstream or on the margins, in agreement with past tradition or in rejection of it. In later work he tried to use examples to get his idea across, such as the ways that healthcare, art and educational cultivation of critically aware pupils all involve complex dialogues and open truths. Yet he was wary of engaging directly in matters of morality, justice and *realpolitik* social situations, and that very distancing of himself from social realities worked against him.

Criticism of this kind continued over the decades, forcefully advanced by feminists and others who saw him as failing to fully defend the voice of minorities or dissenters from the mainstream. Paul Ricoeur (1981) and Gianni Vattimo (1997) both intervened to some extent, helping to place Gadamer’s hermeneutics in a more universal light and distancing it from the language of ‘tradition’ which had such a conservative connotation in other languages than German. Richard Rorty (2000) also helped to defuse the critical viewpoint when he tried to appropriate Gadamer to a pragmatist position, although perhaps this muddled the public understanding of hermeneutic philosophy by likening it to pragmatism (the implications were the same, but as we will see in the next two chapters, the underlying ontology of meaning was somewhat different). In any case, each voice, *pro* or *contra*, rose and fell against a backdrop of rapidly changing philosophical orientations over the decades from 1960 to 2000. As each view brought his ideas further into the limelight, his growing international audience afforded him the chance to express himself in new, more expansive ways—on the fate of Europe, the nature of inter-religious relations, the possibility

of cultural co-existence, the nature of human flourishing, the importance of universities and good pedagogy, and the value of the arts. With fame, the humble, self-doubting Professor Gadamer finally learned to accept the role of an advisor to the modern world and so to tacitly accept the mantle of prophethood that he had so long avoided.

7 LATE PASSIONS: POETRY, MODERNITY AND FUTURE PROMISE

While its waves of critiques came and went, the insights of *Truth and Method* were meanwhile being assimilated into the methodological self-reflection of all the relevant humanities, social sciences and even some natural sciences. By the age of seventy-six he had outlived Heidegger and still had much of his most successful period—the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s—to come. He began to find himself a minor philosophical celebrity across the academic world, particularly as his work resonated with post-modern thinkers in the French tradition, and philosophers of language in the Anglo-Analytic world. He soon found himself being sought out by young scholars from around the world and invited to speak on a range of timely topics. In this new fertile intellectual milieu, a new crop of publications were born.

The later work of Gadamer never diverges from the insights of *Truth and Method*, but it elaborates on them in two ways; on the one hand he produced a series of close studies expanding understanding of the way in which older thinkers anticipated modern insights. These studies included essays on Hegel (1971), Plato and Aristotle (1978), and Heidegger (1983). In them he was able to hone his coherent, systematic understanding of those philosophers and show how they complemented his own views, as well as tracing what he saw as wrong turns. These works were a fulfilment of long-standing conversation with detractors of those thinkers, and thus they sought to re-appropriate the positive insights they offered. His foreword to the collection of essays on Hegel, *Hegel's Dialectic*, for instance, acknowledged the 'irritation' of Hegel's dialectical method but wrote that:

...it was my concern that the wealth of insight which can be derived from and mediated by this puzzling art might be more fully exhausted. For ... Philosophy must incorporate within itself that anticipation of the whole which makes our desire to know go round. (1976a, 3)

Methodologically, these indicated a kind of holism in Gadamer's thought that was quite different from the approach taken by other more decisively critical thinkers. Every thought that past philosophy contained, could show us something about the structures that shape the whole. Even the wrong turns revealed the possible thought-space of all ideas and often helped to show what options the genuine insights had needed to consider and negotiate. His books and essays on other thinkers tried to show this—hermeneutics meant never condemning any thought wholesale, but rather seeking to retain the idea, or even simply the *question* that it revealed. In these years Gadamer worked to 'save' many such insights that reached back to Plato's Parmenidean reflection on the interconnectedness of all beings, and forward to existentialism, the meaning of which was naively 'taken for granted' in the philosophical circles of 1981, but which needed to reclaim its roots in influences like the freedom-in-God of Schelling, Kierkegaard's 'either/or' of human decision and Heidegger's struggle with the philosophy of Jaspers. His desire to help Heidegger's philosophy continue 'into the world conversation of the future' (1981, 13) was typical of his attitude to past thinkers in work of this kind; in this sense he sought throughout this period to serve the history of philosophy by filling in gaps, often caused by philosophy's tendencies to demonise and idolise in equal measure.

A further body of short works made his ideas more accessible, and spoke much more broadly of issues raised by modernity, the development of scientific discourse and the areas that concern human well-being, from healthcare, to educational philosophy, to spirituality and the arts. The translated collections *Philosophical Hermeneutics*; *The Relevance of the Beautiful*; *Reason in the Age of Science*; *Praise of Theory*; *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*; *The Beginning of Philosophy*; *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*; and other volumes that emphasised the themes submerging in his wide-ranging collected works, all help to demonstrate the range of these broader writings. Here Gadamer let himself finally embrace the wider remit of moral philosophy and intellectual history, developing a literary style of exhortation all his own.

Gadamer was sceptical of treating philosophers as prophets, but it was in these works that the rationale behind his own 'prophecy' was worked out, and the implications of hermeneutics' account of life made more explicit. Here he expounded ideas about self-knowledge, the flourishing of the individual and the community, the nature of creativity and of beauty,

and that form of awareness that provides a ‘higher’ attitude—that is, more far-seeing and satisfying—of human experience. Many of his later works were developed from addresses to international audiences and to specialist areas outside of philosophy. Aside from his university addresses after the war, and later regarding German higher education, he spoke at various congresses and as part of visiting positions at Universities across and beyond Europe. In 1983 he was invited by Pope Jean-Paul II to take part in the papacy’s Castel Gandolfo meetings, where he visited a theme previously important to Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger: the distinguishing characteristic of Western thought. Throughout, he recommended a global outlook that we will explore further in the final chapter, and greater recognition of ‘the primary belongingness of all who live together’.⁹ What, perhaps, made this period a positive experience for him was that he found that he did indeed have something distinctive to offer, a kind of dialogical, poetically minded affirmation that had not seemed possible previously.

Part of the reason for his continued engagement was perhaps that he was being afforded the opportunity to see how his prophecies, and those of his now-dead colleagues, were faring against the realities of the modern world. He was both appalled and pleased with modernity. Many fresh problems had emerged, including ‘the immense increase in weapons technology... the arms trade, which is as difficult to control as the drugs trade; and... the deluge of information which threatens to engulf our human faculty of judgement’ (1996, viii). Yet he also noted striking sources of optimism, not least of which was the new, ready access to other cultures and cultural resources.

In due course he was awarded honorary fellowships including at Boston College, the University of Ottawa, Hamilton College in New York, St Petersburg State University and Catholic University in Washington, DC. Generations of young students from different continents helped to sustain his engagement in the fast-unfolding debates of contemporary philosophy, and even in his nineties he maintained academic office hours so that all and sundry could come to talk. Some of his engagements were more successful than others: his now-famous ‘encounter’ with Jacques Derrida was an unforeseen disaster, with the younger man rejecting Philosophical Hermeneutics’ notions of dialogues and understanding as simply an attempt to subject another person’s meanings to one’s own interpretation. Gadamer merely replied, with understated exasperation,

⁹ See the essay ‘Citizens of Two Worlds’ in 1992a, 217.

that Derrida's own comment was an attempt to communicate and thus an expression of faith in the possibility of understanding. He found that he had already been cast by Derrida's supporters in the role of a conservative seeking to advocate 'a strengthening of tradition and an emphasising of the authority and truth of texts' (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989, 33). This was far from the way in which Gadamer saw his own position. More positive relations with Derrida came later, and the Italian postmodern thinker Gianni Vattimo had some success at building bridges between Gadamer's path of post-Heideggerian thought and that of the French philosophers and critical theorists who had become so influential by the end of the twentieth century.

While his wider audience spurred him to new interests, nevertheless one of the most valued effects of his success was that it allowed him to pursue personal passions; thus in writing on poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Gottfried Benn, Stefan George and Paul Celan, he allowed himself to indulge in lovingly detailed exegesis of the literature that had inspired him personally, but had previously been invisible in his philosophical publications. One of the notable features of his poetics in these works is the latitude of personal response that he allowed himself. He ruminates on past memories and draws on the reminiscences of others to craft what, in many cases, is essentially his own prose-poetical response. His language is almost theological in many cases, as, for instance, in his reading of a passage in Celan's poem *In die Rillen* which seems to allude to the never-attainable nature of the divine:

Between the corrosive bite of heaven's acid, from which we are apparently separated by a never-to-be-opened door and which we would not be able to endure anyway, and the coppered beggar's pan 'up there', spans the arch of a single sentence. Yet the door is pervious. The heaven's acid, from which we are blocked by the door, has eaten away grooves in the crack of the door, allowing something to come through. What comes through is the world. (1997, 79)

Such readings created new ideas out of the interpretative resource of the source texts and often hinted at his own personal 'theology' of the word and the world, a view that gives new significance to his idea that 'Being that can be understood is language'. One reading is of Paul Celan's famous poem for Heidegger, *Todtnauberg*, a poem written after a visit to the older philosopher's forest hut where Celan, as a Jew, hoped for some

apology or explanation for his ideological involvement with National Socialism. None had been forthcoming, and the poem is widely seen as an expression of profound disappointment. Gadamer had, of course, been to Heidegger's hut a number of times, and at eighty-eight was happy to let the poem revive his own memory of the swards, the shingle-covered paths, the plants in the wood there and the guest book in which his own mark lay. Such writings, both private in their content and public in their address, allowed him to develop his own sensibility to beauty and meaningfulness; in a sense they were his own late form of artistic creation.

The deepening of this more personal side of his work coincided with greater engagement in ethics and existential questions. This meant honing one's own sensitivity to the 'inner world' of our encounters, but also increasingly acknowledging that which we can't know or cannot quantify. Beyond questions that are easy to answer, he called for a return to the diffuse, unquantifiable concerns that 'have called forth the grand answers of the religions, the mythologies, artistic creations like the tragedies, and intellectual works like the Platonic dialogues' (1981, 149). Indeed, the practical problem of delineating the conditions of knowledge and understanding led him, gradually, to themes that he himself likened to religious ones. In 1985 he wrote 'of the truly tremendous task which faces every human every moment' that life calls us to respect otherness and admit when we are wrong, a realisation that forms 'a basic constant that shapes our whole experience' and that we encounter in a religious form in Kierkegaard's essay *The Edification Implied in the Thought that as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong* (1992a, 233). Gadamer the secular individualist, child of a chemist and a pietist, had, in a sense, finally given shape to his own total philosophy.

For Gadamer's hundredth birthday a celebration was held, with his wife, colleagues and students in attendance at the University of Heidelberg; Richard Rorty and others attended, Habermas published an essay in his honour (entitled *Is Metaphysics Still Possible?*), and Heidegger's son Hermann dedicated a volume of Heidegger's collected works to him. More than a year later an airplane hit and destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York. Gadamer was less than a year from death, yet had witnessed the beginning of what would be seen as a new era in global identities, tensions and challenges. His response was that such a world had become *unheimlich*—strange, uncanny and unhomely to him. He had already recognised the possibility of global tensions resulting from lack of dialogue and recommended solutions for them. He was a philosophical

celebrity, but when he died those later writings were still read by relatively few.

Gadamer Among the (Post)moderns

In many ways, while Gadamer was born in the early twentieth century, it was during his second youth in his eighties (indeed, Grondin (2003, 312–29) speaks of his four successive youths) that his work came to fruition among other thinkers grappling in a similar framework with similar issues. Where Heidegger's work had been deeply affected by his inner struggles to reconcile a philosophical culture that rejected the old ways but had not yet formulated the way forward, Gadamer, by contrast, was in the generation that Heidegger, Husserl, Scheler and others had created. The anti-metaphysical turn was almost complete in both continental and analytic philosophy, and instead there were a slew of unsolved problems left to him by his teachers. But there were also, by that time, examples of how one might or might not proceed, and he debated the future of philosophy in fellowship with Jürgen Habermas, Gianni Vattimo, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida and the succeeding generation. Although he was elder to Charles Taylor, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and similar thinkers who built on phenomenology and the postmodern heritage, it may be that in the end he would have felt closer to them than to Heidegger and his teachers' generation.

Furthermore, he was not tortured by worries about what to do with any residual sense of responsibility to a religious legacy. There was, in his picture of the world, no God's judgement to worry about. His worldview accepted the finitude of humanity, but also accepted the mantle of robust humanism; as Stefan George had put it, his spirit looked out on the world of forms, forces and flows 'without steward'. He (and others) could only benefit from new insights—even perhaps those that were not quite correct yet proved fertile in some way. So, while his academic persona was reserved in its opinions, he was able to embrace modernity with optimism unconstrained by excessive nostalgia. His hope was for future growth, a sublimity afforded by modernity's new insights, rather than merely a return to past insights.

Whatever one judges to be his role in the rise, reign and aftermath of National Socialism,¹⁰ Gadamer more or less survived the war with his name intact, and was treated as a guide to a future Germany, and eventually even a future united community of nations. The texts we will focus on in section three—developing his views on health, society, art, ethics, the environment, cultural pluralism and more—all reflect a man who felt that he had received a mandate late in life to give his all to shaping a newer and better world. A cosmopolitan liberal youth, in old age he really stood on the edge of a world created by the UN, computing, and the open-access internet. As John-Paul II said on his death, Gadamer was the ‘noble humanist’ (Grondin 2003, 337).

His broader vision, beyond the issues of interpretation, would be touched upon by thinkers such as Donatella Di Cesare (2013, 3), Brice Wachterhauser (1999), Walter Lammi (2008), Jean Grondin (2024) and others. The scope of his work was also recognised by writers such as Carolyn Culbertson writing on his effect on epistemology (Culbertson 2024), John Arthos with regard to his poetics (Arthos 2014) and the notion of the *logos* in theological literatures (Arthos 2009), Joel Weinsheimer (1991) with regard to literary theory, Monica Vilhauer (2010) on his implied ethics, Nicholas Davey (2006) with regard to Nietzsche, Nihilism and Deconstruction, and Lorraine Code (2002) with regard to possible feminist approaches and others in the biographies, discussions and edited volumes of the decades that followed. But for long it seemed that the rethinking of education, health, art, science, nature and identity that he began had stalled, caught perhaps in the net of his meticulous tone, his historical ‘Gads’ and his reluctance to take up the dangerous tools of special terminology and strong rhetoric. Many of the technical insights into truth that he had revealed in *Truth and Method* have been assimilated into the modern Humanities. But many of the broader reaches of Gadamerian philosophy have slept patiently with their author, waiting until recently to be re-awakened.

¹⁰ Many, including Grondin, have addressed this topic in more careful detail than this book will attempt. See, for instance, Carsten Dutt’s (2001) interesting meticulous discussion of Gadamer’s actions and responses to criticism by Orozco and others.

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FOUNDATIONS



Truth: The Fabric of Meaning

Abstract Gadamer saw truth as rather like riding a bicycle: one has to learn to balance many forces in a dynamic, delicate, forward-movement through the environment. This chapter frames the traditional understanding of Gadamer's idea of truth within his wider historical narrative of holism and science, and his larger theory of meaning expounded through the analogy of 'play'. His revised conception shows us that our constant work towards understanding the truths of the world entails a constant evolution of oneself, in which truth does not so much bend to our subjective biases as call us to change our own horizon. It also requires an open attitude towards mystery, allowing what we can never know or fully capture to remain a part of our experience in its own oblique way. In this we see that Gadamer is in sympathy with the views of Jacques Derrida, yet sees a more communal, dynamic and creative force at work in language.

Keywords Truth • Science • Humanities • Poetry • Language • Derrida • Hermeneutics • Deconstruction

...every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which it alone is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear.
(2004, 454)

Gadamer's experiments with truth began early in his life when, as a lonely child, he had been given a bicycle. In the process of teaching himself to ride the bike, he had made the crucial discovery that no matter how much he 'clung paralytically to the handlebars', he could not force the object to his will. Only by relaxing and letting the bicycle find its way, collaborating with the mechanism, with gravity, and the road's surface in order to 'create equilibriums' could he make progress (Grondin 2003, 42). The project of riding a bike was not about 'a mute and rigid Something' (as some have seen his idea of interpretation; Errázuriz 2011, 41),¹ but a call to develop a dynamic, open relationship with a capricious point of balance. Such childish activities were forgotten during his years as a young man in Marburg and Freiburg, learning to play the various truth-games of philosophy. But that past experience had taught him that knowledge is not so easily gained as mathematical calculations and dictionary definitions seemed to suggest. Truth is more like a 'play' with complex rules, or perhaps even an improvised jazz performance (see Feige 2024), where the players must seek equilibrium with each other and then chart a path forward together.

The image of 'play' would stay central to his hermeneutics throughout his life, expanding to encompass games, arts, well-being, social dialogue—and the very nature of all experience. It resurfaced later as an extended analogy in *Truth and Method*, in which he likened all understanding to forms of multifaceted interplay: 'the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words' (2004, 104). He evoked the beauty and potential joy of immersing oneself in a broader play of forces that eventually yields a new experience. In other work, he celebrated the same process in interpretations of poetry and art where there is a 'play' between reader and text. Again, the same phenomenon seemed to be at work in the Lutheran tradition of hermeneutics which sought—at that time in the provocative work of Rudolf Bultmann—to treat scripture as an inspiration to interpretations meant primarily to yield a useful personal message. In all of this, what mattered was the process of collaborative engagement that yields something new, something that presses, resists, inspires and shapes us. Behind its assessments of Kant, Dilthey and others, *Truth and Method* actually aimed to recover our awareness of the whole of the world and our place in it.

¹ '...einem stummen und starren Etwas'; Errázuriz (2011, 20).

Many commentators on Gadamer have treated him primarily as a philosopher of textual understanding in the classic hermeneutic sense, dealing with topics such as the finding of meaning, the adjudging of truths and the contemporary negotiating of past discourse, traditions and intentions. Palmer's (1969) early important exposition charted Gadamer's new developments in hermeneutics against the background of earlier traditions including Dilthey and Schleiermacher, emphasising its widespread significance for discourses across and even beyond the Humanities. Warnke (1987) did crucial work to bring out Gadamer's position both within the gradual broadening of hermeneutics by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger and against the old Romantic conception of meaning as something hidden in the mind of the author. Coltman (1998, 12) ably evoked the 'intense nearness and striking remoteness' between Gadamer and Heidegger with special reference to their own inspiration from earlier thinkers, and Barthold (2010) brings out the way that Plato's dialectic provided him with a framework for dealing with other thinkers and themes. Scheibler (2000) has closely charted the departures in Gadamer's adoption and adaptation of the concept of language in Heidegger, while Costache (2016) has located Gadamer's views on understanding between Heidegger and Derrida, and Risser (1997) is one of the interpreters who shows how Gadamer's later works go beyond his sources.

These and other studies meticulously map Gadamer's position in Europe's long hermeneutic and epistemological traditions. He is sometimes portrayed simply as the latest branch of the hermeneutic tradition, and sometimes as a revolutionary figure who killed the old phantom of *objectivity*, and set up a new form of dialogical truth in its place. The decades of scholarship have brought out crucial insights into his more innovative ideas. It was he who seemed most fully able to 'undermine faith in the ideas of both method and objectivity', combatting positivism and the neo-Platonic craving for an 'absolutised' standard of meaning; on this account, 'Gadamer might therefore have entitled his book *Objectivity and the Limits of Method*', as Warnke has suggested (1987, 3). His solution for the death of the old kind of truth was to provide a model of *adequacy* of understanding through ongoing dialogue, and to assure us that we can 'amend some of our assumptions and... move to a richer, more developed understanding of the issues in question' (Warnke 1987, 3). Yet others have argued that his thought contains a return to a different kind of objectivity—a realism not of the 'thing in itself' (*Ding an sich*) external to consciousness in the old Kantian sense of the term, but of the phenomenological

theme (*Sache*) or Object (*Gegenstand*) that we encounter in consciousness standing over against (*gegen*) us, calling our attention to those truths which exceed our own limited subjectivity (see Figal 2002 and George 2022).

Gadamer's very choice of the word *Wahrheit* or 'truth' in the title of his longest work has contributed to the view that language is at the heart of his thought. Certainly hermeneutics' significance for epistemology and meaning cannot be overstated. But the place of truth needs to be decentred and realigned alongside other concerns in his work—as others have tried to do (with Risser (1997, 123) bringing out 'the ontology of living being' and the mode of poetic dwelling described in his work, Wachterhauser (1999) exposing his post-Platonic ontology and interpreters like Sullivan (1990) bringing out his wider Platonic vision of society and politics), or Lammi (2008) his Greek-inspired discourse of the divine—to give a few examples of wider interpretations. His title can be misleading, for there is more to his philosophy than meets the eye. We see in this chapter that the problem of linguistic meaning earned his attention precisely because it served as the foundation for what Gunter Figal calls his 'ontological turn', an account of reality premised on the insight that 'meaning is what word and thing have in common' (Figal 2002, 115). The shift to looking at the world itself in terms of meanings is comparable to Heidegger's recovery of Being as *Dasein*; Gadamer worked to explain this 'universality' of hermeneutics repeatedly to peers such as Rudolf Bultmann, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida.

The dynamic and complex character of hermeneutic 'truth' points to its organic, experiential fabric: the reality to which true statements correspond is the real empirical life-world which is flowing around and through us at all times. In many ways Gadamer's approach to language remains theological; he derived many of his views from Plato's gnostic attention to ideas as the higher reality, Hegelian conceptions of logic and *Geist*, and the Lutheran hermeneutic tradition, seeing words as a medium with the power to 'save' human consciousness. Properly understood, Gadamer's theory of meaning was meant to function as a transformative exercise in changing *us*, the readers, into beings that comprehend ourselves not as users of truth, but as a *constitutive part* of it, a part that changes as it dialogues with other people and the world, thereby changing Being itself. Kristin Gjesdal describes this as 'transformative world-disclosure' (Gjesdal 2009, 185), reminding us of its links with *Bildung* or self-development. Gadamer's later work sought to assure us that correct understanding can

be a ‘saving’ knowledge, as scriptural exegetes from Augustine to Bultmann, had long affirmed. Indeed, it seems his faith in language is that of a man who felt he had been ‘saved’ by the conversations of philosophy, and the inner dialogue of poetry. In many ways, Gadamer speaks of language’s ability to elevate us to higher forms of awareness, accessing a fertile realm of proliferating ideas, as a matter of personal experience.

We see in this chapter how his analysis of objectivity’s flaws was meant to restore a sense that meaning as we know it is *holistic*—weaving together all of our actions, values, memories and creative potential into an encompassing event or festival, an *Ereignis* or *Festspiele* as he sometimes put it. His revival of communal ‘taste’ as a guide to shared meanings was meant to invite us to enter the process of creating new ideas with a freshly self-aware constructiveness, like a player in a game. His interest in poetry and the arts sought to show us that truth is a living phenomenon, expanding through us in all we do. Philosophical Hermeneutics, then, is more than a theory of meaning: it is a guide to understanding how we encounter the very fabric of the world, and a philosophy of what we can *do* with our capacity for ‘world-disclosure’.

1 HOLISM’S END AND SCIENCE’S TAKEOVER OF TRUTH

As we have seen, *Truth and Method* begins by highlighting the idea that the natural sciences, now taken as the modern standard of truth, actually seek not ‘truth’ itself but a distinct kind of repeatable (verifiable and predictable) information. This information is not meant to generate a global picture of how things intrinsically are; instead it is essentially aimed at ‘a progressive knowledge of regularity’ (2004, 4–5) which is crucial to our ability to navigate the natural world. By all means it tracks real structures in the world, howsoever constituted, but this does not mean that it tells the whole or even the majority of the story. Most encounters in life involve complex truths and structures; we need to know *how* to do something or understand what the complex meaning of something is in culture, image, language or feeling, or we may try to comprehend what a person is telling us through the words that they call upon in that situation and moment. In the first section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer takes us back to the points in European history when we blurred this distinction between the different kinds of truth.

Concerns about correct knowledge were already firmly in evidence at the very roots of the European philosophical tradition, when Plato and

Aristotle both tried to develop a taxonomy of truths. This involved forms, particulars and degrees of participation in Plato, and practical, technical, poetic and other forms of knowledge in Aristotle. In the implicit hermeneutic approach taken by those classical writers, it was common to note not one but many senses of truth, knowledge and even love. Insofar as Plato drew on phenomenological analysis *avant la lettre*, he constantly sought to dissect the complex texture of human experience, recognising that—as Grondin (2001, 49) puts it—‘human understanding, acting, feeling, and loving’ are part of what we mean by *truth*, ‘for we relate ourselves to the world not only and perhaps not primarily epistemologically’.

In Gadamer’s narrative, the scientific misappropriation of the broader idea of truth was guided on its way by groups such as the Paris Occamists who sought to secure reliable conditions of certainty based on Aristotle’s observation of nature. These fourteenth-century nominalist philosophers of the University of Paris, following principles established by the English medieval sceptic William of Ockham, rejected the long-standing Platonic view that abstract ideas such as the ‘universals’ exist. The colour red, the number three, the idea of love, all exist only as terms designating indefinitely many instances, but their supposed correlation to ‘ideas’ in a landscape of meanings was rejected. This view, whilst seeking to get rid of false abstractions, had the revolutionary effect of bringing all existing things within the purview of empirical scientific study. All conceptual content of any kind—ideas, meanings, stories—were relegated to a shadow-realm of misleading semi-existence as mere psychological constructs. But just as medieval Platonists had conceived ‘the word wholly in terms of its species... without grasping the enigma of its incarnation’, so now these nominalists committed the reverse mistake: they failed to comprehend the element of experience, concept or ‘spirit’ in every empirical manifestation of an objective ‘thing’.² European culture became divided, and its denizens became excessively empiricist, devoting their attention to the objects that present themselves most vigorously to the five senses. In practice, the ascendancy of the Occamists in Paris encouraged other universities of Europe to focus on the growing natural sciences and paved the way for the dominance of the scientific method. This would come to cloak Europe’s view of the different things that truth can be for the next five centuries.

² See ‘The Nature of the Thing’ in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1976), for discussion of this history.

Renaissance Humanism, with its rich cosmological picture and fascination with classical thought and ideals of art and virtue, sustained a wider range of forms of truth. But this came to be compromised by the doubts and the ideals of certainty that governed Enlightenment Rationalism. Gadamer affirmed the holistic view of medieval thinkers such as Cusanus over the empirical triumphalism that he sees in Ockham and traced the effects of that divide well into subsequent periods of history. The term ‘Renaissance Man’ captured the way that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century thinkers retained a holistic ideal of knowledge. This can be seen in artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci ‘in whose total genius craftsmanship, mechanical invention and artistic genius were still undifferentiably one’ (2004, 80), scientists such as Francis Bacon who wrote both empirical and theological treatises and treated scientific method as a factual, moral, anthropological whole (see Gadamer 2004, 343), and the philosophers Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz who all sought to unite their mathematical study with their philosophical theories and their theological reflection. Indeed, Jens Zimmermann, who has called for the renewal of Western culture through Renaissance approaches to theology, argues that one of Gadamer’s goals in *Truth and Method* is ‘in effect retrieving the view of many Renaissance Humanists’ (Zimmerman 2012, 250). For those earlier thinkers the world of human experience lay present as a ‘sustaining medium of all these manifestations of the spirit’.

But the development of Galilean physics, with which Husserl (1970) struggled in his last work *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, and then of Newtonian physics (which emphasised the study of regularities in observational data, and for practical purposes approached them as ‘laws’), added further weight to the dominance of scientific methodology over other spheres of human inquiry. Gadamer (2004, 5) observes that these ‘new mechanics and their triumph’ provided a form of ‘truth’ based on induction and deduction from observed cases of repetition (e.g. the fact that apples drop again, and again, from trees to the ground). This was enormously useful for the practical purposes of prediction, but it was nevertheless different from the forms of information, ideas, usefulness, insights, communication, evocation and correspondence to experience, with which the human sciences deal.

Perhaps the point of final transition to the new regime of scientific knowledge came with the flourishing and abrupt fading of German Romanticism. The little-known figure of Hermann Helmholtz, a nineteenth-century physician and physicist with a special interest in vision

and thus in aesthetics, forms a transitional figure in *Truth and Method's* tale of truth. Helmholtz distinguished between two different kinds of induction. On the one hand there is logical induction, the epistemological process of generalising from regularities, which Hume posed as the basis of the metaphysics of causality. On the other hand there is what he called 'artistic-instinctive' induction, a multifaceted epistemological process in which the mind must make much broader connections, dealing with the subtle meanings of structural analogy rather than strict repetition. If the sciences of the British Enlightenment philosophers Mill, Locke, Hume and their German followers such as Kant were concerned with this structure of regularity, then the arts of the German Romantic, Humanistic and Historical thinkers from Goethe to von Humboldt to Droysen and Dilthey were concerned with the structures and principles that govern the 'hermeneutic' realm of meaning which deals in similarity, allusion and implication. Mill sought to apply the scientific inductive method to the 'moral sciences' (2004, 3), but Gadamer draws on Helmholtz to point out that the wider, more interpretive, allusive, creative kinds of knowledge remained the essential framework even for science's method of 'ironclad inference', for they provided 'unforeseen constellations that kindle the spark of scientific inspiration' (1976, 13). Thus the two traditions of truth continue—the scientific model charting regularities in sensory data and remaining triumphantly dominant, while the other 'artistic-instinctive' model, which seeks connections between complex meanings, stands silent and submissive in the background.

2 THE HUMANITIES, THE *SENSUS COMMUNIS* AND 'TASTE'

What was needed then was a method for retaining self-awareness of the whole and undivided realm of experience, whilst engaging in the necessarily selective and limited practice of conceptualisation and discourse. How should we best understand the nature, structures and optimal means of accessing truths about the world of our experience? How can we avoid misunderstanding and communicate effectively? How can we understand our own functioning and our goals as creatures within this complex yet meaningful medium? Attention to history and culture directs our attention to 'a kind of experience quite different from the one that serves in investigating natural laws' (2004, 7).

For Gadamer, a success story in the history of truth was the one-time German Minister of Culture and subsequent linguist Alexander von Humboldt. He helped to restore a more humanistic vision of the study of world history and its cultures, through his gradual realisation that, in Gadamer's words, 'linguistic science is the prehistory of the spirit'.³ It is through language that all products of the mind come. But in order to ground this historical study that aimed to do more than record dates of births, death and wars, a completely different 'science' for charting a completely different kind of experience was needed. Hints of this holistic conception of truth were retained in the field of historiography where Johann Droysen pointed out the unsuitability of scientific knowledge to historical study 'as early as 1843' (2004, 5). This kind of insight was also evident in the area of scriptural exegesis where exegetes such as Wilhelm Dilthey struggled with historical interpretation of literature that claimed to be timeless. Gadamer also notes that forms of science that pursue less regular data than Newtonian laws, such as statistical study and work that records algorithms in complex phenomena, help to capture 'a type of self-regulation that is conceivable less along the lines of the manipulable than of something living, of life organised in regulated cycles'.⁴ They let 'new models of self-consciousness come to the fore in contrast to mechanics and power-driven machines'.

In all these cases, the complex, dynamic, contextual, interpersonal way that we develop truth was acknowledged. Using these as a foundational framework, Gadamer directed his readers to a long-forgotten question ousted from serious consideration by the prejudices of the scientific academy: aesthetics and the elusive nature of 'taste'. The concepts of tact and taste are generally accorded little significance in modern thinking partly on account of their relativistic, subjective quality. But Gadamer tried to recuperate a once widely acknowledged notion that was meant to capture the kind of truth that shapes mercurially changing cultural tastes: the *sensus communis* or 'communal sense'. This was a term that Aristotle used to mean the agreement of the five senses in a single perception of the world, but in later Roman usage it could signify both the communal capacity of perception—that shared ability to sense with fair accuracy the contours of a particular setting or context. It could also mean the communal capacity

³ See the essay 'Man and Language' in 1976, 61.

⁴ See the essay 'On the Philosophical Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy' in 1981a, 14.

for understanding linguistic meanings and cultural morals via a shared judgement built up through the history of communicating ideas within a community. On this account, different villages or cultures might have quite different communal senses, and if amalgamated they would inevitably develop a new communal sense. Thus by definition a member of the community would be someone who is able to judge its meanings, and Giambattista Vico, one of the Renaissance thinkers most influential on Gadamer, emphasised that *sensus communis* is what people need to be taught to function in a community. He united the different faculties—of perceptual, linguistic, moral and also aesthetic meanings—in a single concept that one might today in English call ‘good judgement’.

Such a sense can transcend region or historical eras; a diligent and sensitive reader of Plato (or any Indian poet) must eventually become a member of his community, accessing his *sensus communis*, in order to understand his work. Hermann Helmholtz, who was at once a physicist and philosopher of aesthetics, pointed out the way in which understanding a culture requires ‘psychological tact that here replaced the conscious drawing of inferences’ (2004, 7): this tact or sensitivity to meaning was a cardinal virtue under the old aegis of complex, acquired, local understanding. One of the qualities of this old informal kind of truth was that rather than reducing the field of reality into a secondary, derivative, practical representation that offers a clear but brittle picture of the world simplified for use, the *sensus communis* maintained the ‘living’ and holistic character of experience. Gadamer (2004, 25) cites the eighteenth-century Pietist theologian-theosophist Friedrich Oetinger, in the works of whom ‘what people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries like to call “intuition” is brought back to its metaphysical foundation, that is, to the structure of living, organic being in which the whole is in each individual’.

The idea of a *sensus communis* applies not only to languages but also to manners, artistic taste, ethics and any kind of ‘text’ that is context-determined and requires interpreting. Gadamer (2004, 9) notes that it affects the original and true meanings of concepts such as “art”, “history”, “the creative”, “worldview”, “interiority”, “expression”, “style”, “symbol”, for we need this kind of context-aware tact to understand and communicate, to possess a coherent view of the world, to make effective art and receive art as meaningful (i.e. understand and use a style) or even to aid someone in the way that will best benefit them, i.e. to engage in ethics. These are all areas where ‘our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark’ (2004, 23). These different cases where we must learn to understand the

setting, history, current activity and balance of different people and factors that together point to an original meaning that is, in a sense, a cultural version of Gadamer's bicycle-riding experience.

An important implication is that tact does not excise fact from value; rather when we acquire taste sufficient to make us tactful, both fact and value interweave since, as Gadamer (2004, 25-6) puts it, 'the whole of life has its centre in the heart, which by means of common sense grasps countless things all at the same time'. In this way, then, 'clarity is "not enough for living knowledge"'. Rather there must be 'certain anticipations and predilections present' (2004, 25), and for Gadamer these predilections towards understanding are not so different from the forms of goodwill that underlie relationships, love or ethics. 'Fathers are moved without proof to care for their children: Love does not demonstrate, but often without reason rends the heart at the beloved's approach.' So too in the sphere of religion, tact, in the sense of a sensitivity to the total significance of something, is necessary to understand a worldview and its expressions in doctrine, practice, narrative, arts and ethics, and to negotiate them successfully. And indeed, the implication is that we require this kind of holistic understanding whether we seek to understand a set of ideas in order to translate them in discourse or whether we want to understand a world so that we can ourselves live in it.

Gadamer sets out this conception of truth according to its historical trajectory across European history from the Greeks and Romans through to the Renaissance, into Romantic aesthetics, and the birth of the Humanities. We discover that the more holistic conceptions were gradually displaced by the competing scientific, objectifying approach. Alongside Newton and the Enlightenment sceptics who thought in terms of laws and proofs, Kant played an important role in the narrative of truth's forgetting. His influential works on pure reason, practical reason, morals and judgement separated their respective forms of reasoning and knowledge into separate fields and contributed to the false dichotomy that grew between them. Gadamer notes that Kant relegates the communal sense of tact to a new purely aesthetic conception: 'taste'.⁵ This new idea, fashioned to reinforce the isolation of the arts from the sciences, assumes an air of elusive subjectivism and of relativism—varying from person to person. No idea could be further from the 'hard facts' afforded by scientific investigation. Arts and ethics thus became the antithesis of the hard,

⁵ See *Truth and Method* (2004) part one, section two.

factual sciences that shaped modernity, and the world gradually lost its holistic picture of understanding as something that must adapt itself to a complex, dynamic, vibrant reality. It concurrently lost its sensitivity to the *sensus communis* of communal, collaborative truth, falling into an overarching air of subjectivism and doubt.

3 PLAY AND THE GENERATION OF TRUTH

The first section of *Truth and Method* is essentially a historical genealogy of the modern idea of truth, but the second section develops more fully the ‘ontological explanation’ of the nature of truth. Here he uses the phenomenon of play as an example of a kind of activity in which something new is created through interaction with a set of basic rubrics—the rules of the game, or aesthetic principles of some given form. This activity, he will tell us, is essentially how all interactions, including intentional events like perception, thought and communication, work. They are all cases where some springboard that both inspires and limits us—a rubric, a word, an image, etc.—is the basis for a new development. Drawing on the book *Homo Ludens* by the Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), he characterises this as being like the ‘play’ we see in ‘game and drama’, ‘dance’, the ‘occurrence of movement’ or simply ‘something happening’ (2004, 104–105). In short, play here signifies any process that consists of interaction with forces and principles through which a new phenomenon is created. Yet it is not simply that some individual agent makes this new form: rather we are all taken up and sublated into a process of shared creation that incorporates all the players, rules and moves, so that play ‘merely reaches presentation through the players’. This creation of a ‘dynamic whole’ encompassing them all is, for his purposes, seen to be ‘the truly legitimate and original’ meaning of the word ‘play’ in all its many applications (1976, 53).

It is the pattern of playing, the structure of its activity, that Gadamer wishes to point to here. He builds up example after example so that the underlying characteristic of complex open movement within a field of constraining possibilities gradually becomes clear in its own right:

... the game is patterned in various ways... the particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. This is true universally, whenever there is a game. It is true, for instance, of the play of fountains and of playing animals. (2004, 106)

Gadamer's own style becomes abruptly poetic in his attempts to convey this dynamic, participatory, creative whole for which the playing of a ball--game is an exemplary image. Indeed, he quotes the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in describing the movement of play, which directly correlates to the conceptual movement of understanding:

To the movement in a determinate direction corresponds a movement in the opposite direction. The back and forth movement of the game has a peculiar freedom and buoyancy that determines the consciousness of the player. It goes on automatically—a condition of weightless balance, ‘where the pure too-little incomprehensibly changes—springs round into that empty too--much.’ (1976, 53)

In this account, Gadamer evokes the dialectical manner in which ideas always allude to other experiences, and implicitly refer to that which they are not, referencing the setting in which they have meaning. He implies that the very nature of ideas is to leap and grow through allusions and references, settings and interrogations. We are told something—that the table has been set, for instance—and we fill in the gaps with past experience and imagined projections based on all we have known, but we will only gain knowledge about the table as we interact with it, constantly confronting our assumptions with new experiences and ideas, which are themselves constantly being processed by our filters, yet which are constantly changing those very filters along the way.

We may ask why he uses a metaphor here, when there is such a danger that this pivotal point in his argument, his answer to the nature of truth and of Being itself, will be misunderstood. We have already seen in Chap. 3 that Gadamer was aware of what he felt to be Heidegger's stylistic failure as a philosophical writer. But he had also experienced his own difficulties in crafting an optimal explanatory method. One of the key challenges for anyone aiming to write cogently on ontological topics was the danger of reifying phenomena simply by identifying them. Arguably, Plato had done this with the ideas, Aristotle with substance, and Descartes with regard to the ego. It may be that metaphor provided an alternative that would allow him to allude to the characteristics or implications of a thing without according it an ontological status that he did not intend. Here he uses play, and elsewhere he gave a similarly close hermeneutic analysis of music, abstracting from the case to wider structures of experience (2021). In this he was perhaps influenced by Plato's reliance on analogies and sought to

borrow that simple, accessible method for his explanation. In his essay *Man and Language*, he also insisted that such things are ‘by no means merely a metaphor’ for they also have the power to *demonstrate* one instance of the truth to which they are alluding (1976, 66). In providing an analogy for the activity of understanding, he was also demonstrating the universality of that same structure across other manifestations in life. Fortuitously, Gadamer’s discussion of play and his occasional reference to ‘games’ also resonated strongly with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of ‘language-games’; the similarity to Wittgenstein’s thought was one that Gadamer himself acknowledged, feeling that the later Wittgenstein had righted analytic approaches to language by attending to the ‘context of life-praxis’, the organic, complex, everyday language of life.⁶

For some, Gadamer’s image of meaning as a ‘game’, in which the different subjects become part of a wider ‘play’ of meaning-making, seemed to imply the non-objective and therefore non-truthful character of texts. This struck many of his readers as a shocking implication, particularly when applied to scripture, contracts, testimonies and other important genres that claim binding authority. Reflecting his closeness with Rudolf Bultmann’s ‘demythologisation’ of scripture which he sought to stress during the 1960s, Gadamer himself acknowledged that ‘it may appear surprising at first to combine the deadly seriousness of faith with the arbitrariness of the game’ (1976, 53). *Truth and Method* faced attacks on his lack of a method for determining objective validity, particularly from Emilio Betti in *Legal Hermeneutics*, and much of its 1980s and 1990s reception struggled with the possibility that he had ushered phenomenological description into a decidedly subjectivist or pragmatist status.⁷ But Gadamer argued that if we think seriously about actual cases, we see that ‘play has a special relation to what is serious ... play contains its own, even sacred, seriousness’, as does the binding significance of truth in any given context (2004, 102). Play in its widest sense encompasses games, dances, plays of light, etc. and not only trivial activities like playing a game, playing with toys or playing with someone. In his usage, ‘play’-fulness was not

⁶For a more detailed discussion of links between Gadamer and Wittgenstein, and a sense of the hopes for a healing of the analytic-continental rift that have been pinned on them, see Lawn (2004, 21).

⁷See, for instance, Georgia Warnke’s 1987 study of the place of tradition and reason in hermeneutics, which focuses on defending Gadamer against the critiques raised by Betti, Habermas and Rorty.

about the trivialisation of our intentions, but about the new structures that we create when we work with words, ideas, things or people.

Furthermore, far from advocating a ‘death of the author’ where we need no longer pay attention to authorial intention, Gadamer defended the idea that the text or speaker delimits the potential range of new meaning. The analogy of a game is a helpful one; in order to play basketball one must learn the rules: bounce, do not kick, identify the baskets as targets, learn the principles of scoring, etc. The agreement to play is an agreement to follow these rules, and once one has begun the action of playing, one becomes part of ‘the play’ of the game; one’s individuality is immersed in the complex, shared, inter-relational whole of the game.

It is into the structures of meaning established by the game or text that we are assimilated as we come to understand it: Gadamer highlights that play is a form of existence that incorporates us into itself, rather than an activity of this or that person. Texts can also be like games in that they are best seen ‘as a dynamic whole *sui generis* that embrace even the subjectivity of the one who plays’ (1976, 53). In understanding texts such as books and artworks, sermons and scriptures, as well as testimonies, legal codes or scientific treatises, and even in having a conversation, we are assimilated into the collaborative ‘event’ in which the reader is woven, along with the text, context, associations and memories into a particular, unique structure.

Thus we do not *experience* meanings or truths so much as we become part of them in each case. Philippe Eberhard (2004) emphasises the usefulness of ‘medial’ phenomena for understanding this idea: the game, the conversation and the topic are examples of ‘medial’ entities into which subsidiary constitutive entities are assimilated and sublated. This was one of the most important corrections that Gadamer had to make to the standard interpretation of Plato’s doctrine of the forms; meanings are not the realities that lie *behind* words, but the ever-present, ever-new phenomenon that comes into existence through words.⁸ It is this that is ‘the thing itself’, as Gunter Figal (2002) puts it, and not some other thing referenced by the words.

⁸ P. Christopher Smith (2000) highlights the differences between Gadamer and Plato on this point and charts the re-reading that Gadamer was forced to apply to the Platonic dialogues in order to correct his doctrines.

4 THE CREATIVITY AND CONTROL OF TRUTH

Where then does the power of determining truth lie? How do we distinguish what is correct from what is not? One view is that the historical inheritance of past conventions, language games and existing ideas always form the matrix against which the validity of new truths must be judged. As in the example of a particular village's 'taste', one must learn the language or style of a place to judge what is right within that discourse. By implication, then, Gadamer offered a sort of 'coherence theory' of correctness. But this became the target of critique by his peers in the areas of critical theory and postmodern thought. Jürgen Habermas was the most well-known of the voices (including Manfred Frank and Hans-Herbert Kögler) that questioned Gadamer's apparent argument that the past always determines our new experiences of truth and should be taken as the arbiter of their 'truthfulness', for this seemed to imply that history contains an innately conservative dynamic. Gadamer had wanted to give texts their own life by freeing them from the sole intentions of the author or reader.⁹ But this also made him seem to be disempowering the interpreter, and disallowing any truly new developments.

Yet this reading of the Hermeneutic account of truth in the sense of 'correct language' failed to comprehend the place of the reader/interpreter of any text. We can return to the play analogy to see what interpretation really means. In a game the function of the 'player' is not merely to be a passive component who simply follows the exact rules and repeats past moves. Rather the footballer or chess-master may take the game in new directions, mining unexpected possibilities that others have missed. He or she contributes to the structure of the game in their own individual way, whilst remaining aware of the rules that shape it and of the other players who are co-creating that particular 'play'. The same, by extension, is true of meaning: we take up the conversation's themes, add to them and pass them back into the living exchange of conversation. Even in the hard sciences, the engineer learns the rules of physical forces and human materials and creatively manipulates (or rather '*dialogues with*') the possibilities to produce a bridge that must fit the demands of the setting. All experience is a dialogue with the conditions of the situation, and all discourse crafts something new to be tested within that situation—necessarily, thus,

⁹Georgia Warnke (1987, 48) emphasises the way in which he sought to free texts and readers from the old power accorded to authorial intention.

changing it along the way. Flemming Lebech (2006, 227) notes that one of the notions that must change in order for this idea to take hold is the very notion of the past—here channelled through history, tradition, or in the context of language, the received text or discourse. ‘The past is not just a relic’, he notes, for while our concretising patterns of thought tend to reify texts or memories, we must remember that they are in fact mercurial ‘effective’ phenomena, as Gadamer puts it, more like energies than things.

So the player, interpreter or speaker always helps to shape the game, text or conversation. Their conscious interpretation, cultural background and biographical formation all feed in to the new truth. But a further special creative contribution is also possible. When we as readers/players have self-awareness deriving from an understanding of our own background and activity, this then elevates our contribution to a conscious level and empowers us to *knowingly* shape the structures of significance. This is when the new activity becomes not imitation, but *art* insofar as we have begun to engage in a spirit of self-aware creativity (a creative state we will look at in relation to beauty and art in Chap. 6). It is in recognition of this that Anthony Thiselton (2009, 2–3) aligns Gadamer with Schleiermacher as a hermeneutic thinker who helped to redefine the ‘science’ of interpretation as an ‘art’, achieved in negotiation with the restraints of the medium. We help to discover all truths in line with the affordances of our own pre-understanding, but we do so with a greater latitude of freedom when we understand what we are doing.

Gadamer offers this definition of creativity within the ‘play’ section of *Truth and Method*:

From this viewpoint ‘reality’ is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aufhebung*) of this reality into its truth... the joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than what is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it: it is grasped in its essence. (2004, 114)

Despite his concern for methodological procedures, Gadamer was not merely trying to correct our idea of interpretation and understanding by advocating conformity to tradition here. His eye was on an ideal of truth that was not centred on criteria of ‘validity’, but creative engagement with a medium that is ‘infinite’, ‘fertile’ or ‘sacred’ as an experience. In his

discussion of play in *Truth and Method*, he cites Friedrich Schlegel's insight that 'All the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art' (2004, 105). Thus the understanding of any text, and the learning of any cultural outlook, consists in letting oneself be transformed, but also through that experience, transforming the theme we have been given. Gadamer claims that art is a consummation of the fundamental principles of play, a 'transformation into structure' (2004, 110). Meanings draw us into themselves, transforming to incorporate us into a new expanded range of interpretation. Interpretative disciplines like textual, cultural and religious studies, then, entail a constant process of personal change and growth: every new understanding means becoming someone new, whilst expanding the 'game' that the text plays with the community of readers (see Frazier 2023).

Religious literature and the truths that certain genres claim to express raise interesting questions here, as this appears to challenge models of scriptural authority. Indeed, Gadamer's view fits well with some claims of one of his major influences in the theological discipline of his time, Rudolf Bultmann. What matters in a religious text is not the factual propositions—as literalists would claim—but the impact of its message on the soul of the reader, its *kerygma*. This also implies that the 'true' meaning of a religious text seems to be dependent upon the particular mindset or community of reception. But, of course, this is not quite what Gadamer is arguing. One of the primary purposes of the analogy of the game, and the idea of taste, is to indicate the way in which one must 'learn the language', 'acquire the taste' or 'master the style'. As Gerald Bruns notes, 'part of its play is that it refuses to be played willy-nilly.'¹⁰ The speaking text and the listening mindset are both essential functions in the dialogical process of truth-making.

Thus, for Gadamer, texts still initiate the rules of the game that each plays with its readers: a text's game may concern the adoption of beliefs about world, divinity or revelation, as in the Islamic shahadah, or it may aim to inspire a new attitude like the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, or it may aim to train the reader in a certain form of thinking, like Plato's *Phaedo*. In each case we may participate in the author's intention—or we can develop something new and different from it. Both are valid, and both are inevitably creative to some extent—although their success as forms of communication and knowledge depends on their fit to the wider context.

¹⁰ See Bruns' comments in Gadamer (1997, 34).

If the new development departs too radically from the direction established by the text, then it will not be part of its meaning-game—in the way that a football player who suddenly decides to bounce the ball with his hand and throws it through a hoop has initiated a new and different game. Thus while all reading of *Hamlet* generates new ‘plays’ with its meaning, nevertheless one can only *alter* the work’s *own* meaning by working within the paradigms that it establishes itself.

The element of multi-lateral collaboration in correctness, then, which has been imperfectly promoted through the well-known catchphrase of the ‘fusion of horizons’, is essential to this way of thinking. We must negotiate the world of meaning, just as much as we must negotiate the world of numbers, of society, of fictive characters and situations, or of physical objects in the physical world. We are in dialogue with them, constantly creating new configurations that we pass on into existence.

5 SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND TRUTH’S ENDLESS GROWTH

This notion of understanding as a process of asserting ourselves into the flow of the past into future forms, such that it and we are both transformed, goes back to Plato’s approach to philosophising, for Gadamer. In his close readings of Plato’s works, he felt that he saw this whole process at work—but in Plato’s treatment of the forms and his depiction of Socrates’ life. In each dialogue, the ‘ignorant’ person who is still in need of greater understanding is always held by Plato to represent a more fundamental and more valuable position than that of the person who claims to possess knowledge. In Book Six of *The Republic* Plato describes the spiritual destiny of the person who is engaged in seeking knowledge:

...the true lover of knowledge is always striving after being—that is his nature; he will not rest in the multiplicity of individuals which is an appearance only, but will go on—the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his desire abated until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being, having begotten mind and truth, he will have knowledge and will live and grow truly, and then, and not till then, will he cease from his travail.¹¹

¹¹ Cited from Plato (1950, 355).

Here we see the process of understanding as an ongoing process of personal transformation, philosophy as a sort of ‘way of life’ as Pierre Hadot (1995) put it. Platonic texts such as these form a bridge with the eudaimonian philosophy of Aristotle (and indeed, Gadamer argued that Plato himself held a position much closer to Aristotle than is widely thought). The vision of human nature here is not merely that it should shed the body and achieve a changeless existence in the realm of ideas, but instead it should fulfil an innate *telos* of our nature which is to ‘live and grow truly’ in knowledge of the essences through the power of the soul. While some texts depict the realm of the ideas as a changeless state of perfection, later Platonic texts such as the *Parmenides* speak of the inalienable complexity and inter-mingling of the ideas with each other, and with the messy world of real things—as we will see in the next chapter. The task of understanding is never fixed, but rather explores an infinitely complex reality in which our minds already participate. Gadamer expresses it in terms of a rejection of the search for some reality ‘outside’ our native medium of empirical experience:

The nature of the hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true. Plato made this clear in his beautiful comparison of bodily foods with spiritual nourishment: while we can refuse the former ... we have always taken the latter into ourselves already. (1976, 9–10)

The biological motif arises again and again, as we will see in the next chapter: our biological matter is not unlike our mental matter, in that both participate in a wide realm with its own rules and also its own complex and dynamic principles, of which we are always a part. Understanding, like physical force, is always negotiating its own dynamic movement in relation to the environment—however much we might think that we have become still, or achieved a fixed end. Every understanding is always still mutating and growing within us.

Another Platonic treatment of this theme can be found in Plato’s *Lysis*, on which Gadamer wrote one of his earliest published essays. In it, he marvelled at the ideal consonance of word and reality that Plato describes there: language is meant to bring knowledge of complex real people and situations. For this it requires a new development of the knower, rather

than a staid confirmation of their pre-existing nature.¹² But, as Gadamer notes, language serves as an ethical standard for agency: we must balance our knowledge of the existing situation with our ideals for the situation we wish to create. The word-rich but deed-poor Athenians need to be reminded that our actions must hold themselves to the ideals captured in language. In writing that ‘it is not just at a particular hour in the history of Athens that the shadow of sophism accompanies philosophy, but always’ (1980, 3), he seems to be addressing a young German generation of philosophers who wanted their studies not only to inform them, but also to guide them beyond past mistakes towards a better future.

Such texts help to shape an ethics of not-yet-knowing for Gadamer, celebrating the state that he recommends as a way of life and influencing his ethics—as we will see in Chap. 8. They clarify the significance of his idea of human being as ‘historically effective consciousness’ (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). This idea is not only a reminder that we are always affected by the past. It is also a declaration that all history, including our most recent experience, exists precisely as material for the creation of the next moment. Thus ‘History is only present to us in light of our futurity’ (1976, 9). This carries on from Heidegger’s emphasis on futurity, but for Gadamer the future is a field of constant growth and discovery, indeed, he argues that this was already implied ‘in his doctrine of the productivity of the hermeneutic circle’. Gadamer’s fundamentally optimistic reading of the futurity and finitude of humanity comes to the fore through his philosophy of human learning as the growth most appropriate to our nature.¹³

He finds further confirmation of this idea from the other philosophers he believed to share aspects of this perspective, most notably from Hegel who always serves in his work as a partner in thought to Plato. Hegel’s phenomenology, like Gadamer’s, serves as both an ontology and an epistemic guide to the nature of thought. Yet from the perspective of the subjective consciousness, it offers a rich account of the way in which the soul experiences its finitude as a call to further development through understanding. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* grapples with this

¹² See Gadamer’s essay ‘*Logos and Ergon in Plato’s Lysis*’ in 1980.

¹³ Dennis Schmidt (2013) makes the connection between the Gadamerian understanding of visual art’s effect on the viewer and Rilke’s notion (influential on the Peter Sloterdijk book of the same name) that art tells us ‘you must change your life’.

trajectory of increased awareness, noting that the first awareness of the limitations of our present knowledge may bring disillusionment:

...Spirit has not beyond the substantial life it formerly led in the element of thought, that is beyond the immediacy of faith, beyond the satisfaction and security of the certainty that consciousness then had, of its reconciliation with the essential being, and of that being's universal presence both within and without. (Hegel 1977, 4)

The realisation of our innately dynamic, creative, never-finished nature can be difficult—like the negative sublime experiences of Blaise Pascal. But gradually the spirit's disappointment leads to a desire for new knowledge that is not only true, but revivifying and inspiring. Hegel's conception of greater understanding (in this case through philosophy) represented it as not only knowledge, but as fulfilment, passion and the restoration of the values once furnished by religion. One might even see Hegel's description as proleptically hinting at the early twentieth-century phenomenologists' hopes for a return to the 'life-world', and the raw, vibrant inspiration of immediate engagement with reality:

Philosophy is to meet this need ... [by] restoring the *feeling* of essential being: in short, by providing edification rather than insight. The 'beautiful', the 'holy', the 'eternal', 'religion', and 'love' are the bait required to arouse the desire to bite: not the Notion, but ecstasy, not the march of cold march of necessity in the thing itself, but the ferment of enthusiasm.... (Hegel 1977, 4–5)

Although Gadamer felt that his focus on language was more accurate to the nature of Being than Hegel's notion of Spirit (because the structure of language more explicitly preserves both the finitude of meanings and the infinity of their proliferation) (1976, 128), nevertheless he felt that the Hegelian understanding of thought's unfolding had kept alive a philosophical sub-culture that saw the ongoing search for knowledge as a pursuit not of stability, certainty and rest, but of 'ecstasy', 'ferment' and 'enthusiasm'. In such approaches to language, the ethos of understanding as growth is vividly expressed. We will see in Chap. 5 how this idea affected the nature of reality itself, in Chap. 7 how it shaped Gadamer's notion of the creative possibilities of consciousness and in Chap. 8 how it shaped the nature of culturally embedded ethics.

6 POETRY, MYSTERY AND LIVING TEXT

When Gadamer speaks of language, it often seems that he is thinking of informative texts, practical conversations or possibly scriptural material—perhaps because the problem of *correct* understanding of determinate information was so prominent in his time. It is certainly true that *Truth and Method* resonated with both the work of the American historian of science Thomas Kuhn and the hermeneutics of Biblical exegetes such as Hans Ebeling, Wilhelm Dilthey and Rudolf Bultmann. But it was actually a very different kind of language that interested him most. Personally, he had found technical academic writing to be a difficult process, for ‘is a complete transformation of the spoken word, somewhat like the transformation of the princess, in the famous fairytale of Hauff’s, who is changed into a frog’ (1992, 64). He felt that his own strength as a thinker lay in *teaching*, which consists both in speaking and in listening, writing that ‘I had a real talent for listening and replying and believe that that remains my talent: to listen even to the silent voice of an audience’ (1992, 62). In many ways this seems to have reminded him again and again that it was not technical writing he loved most, but *poetry*. It was to this genre that he returned later in his career when he felt he had adequately addressed the problems of accuracy and truthfulness.

The poetic genre provided a counterpoint to robustly epistemic kinds of interpretation aimed at securing *knowledge*, for poetry aims to stay evocative, allusive and semantically unstable. It affirms that very ambiguity, interpersonal creativity and un-decidability of meaning that causes such difficulty when we are seeking correct calculations or right courses of action. Suggestive ambiguity was a quality that Gadamer valued in poetry and was one of the reasons that he favoured Paul Celan and Rainer Maria Rilke, both being poets with what he called a ‘hermetic’ style. It poetry it is part of the poet’s intention that the poem should say far more than its author intended. Thus, ‘a poem that withholds itself and does not permit further clarity always seems more meaningful to me than whatever clarity one might obtain from the poet’s simple assurances about his intentions’ (1997, 68). This is because ‘what matters is the meaning of the ambiguity and indeterminacy stirred up by the poem’ (1997, 127) and the way in which each word generates a wider context of resonance, a unity which ‘can still be dark, laden with tension, split, cracked and brittle—the polyvalence ... [that] permits one meaning to resound and others simply to resonate’ (1997, 129).

Such poetry represented for him ‘language in a preeminent sense’ (1986, 106), a conceptual medium that is as mysterious and open-textured as it is fertile and powerful. Even when it is anchored in a particular focus of meaning, poetry still sways within the currents of wider seas. An open capacity of resonance is central here, and Gadamer was sceptical of seeing metaphors in poetic language because this can create an over-determined framework for interpreting the whole piece—turning what was an allusive symbol into a simply representational sign: ‘Where everything is metaphor, nothing is metaphor’ (1997, 131). Poetry is meant to be the form of language that leans into the diffusiveness and fresh adaptability of meaning, for it possesses a power ‘which makes audible what is in fact not said, but rather presupposed as an expectation of meaning, and indeed awakened by the poem—even if only to be broken as such’ (1997, 131).

This power of open resonance is not opposed to ‘truth’, but just reflects the more complex and diffuse truths of reality, rather than the concise and formalisable features on which we focus in the sciences. The poetic word was, for him, like a single light that disperses throughout the whole of a room, or a web with far-reaching strands, or a pebble that drops into a still pond to set in motion greater or lesser reverberations throughout the water, touching subtly on even the most distant corners. In Gadamer’s understanding of poetry, every word brings the whole of the world to light, and in this it exemplified a quality that all language has *in potentia*. J.M. Baker (2002, 165), a Hölderlin scholar concerned with the transition from Romantic to Modern styles of poetry, sought to use this hermeneutic position to question the modernist idea that poetry critically highlights our alienation from the world. Instead for philosophical hermeneutics poetry actually connects us with the world more effectively. Thus he argues that Gadamer’s turn to poetic discourse is also a project of world-saving: ‘Worldliness having been made more and more tenuous by the universal commodification of objects and goods, it becomes the place of poetry to return to objects a world in the space of poetry.’

This world-saving speaks directly to the phenomenological project. Without intending or realising it, poetry performs a phenomenological description and re-evocation of raw, living experience. In this it achieves what the technical language of Husserl’s *epoché* or the philological word--strategies of Heidegger’s later work had found so difficult. Husserl himself had observed that poetry has an innately phenomenological character, but

he never explored its implication in depth.¹⁴ Following Heidegger's lead, Gadamer tried to follow this neglected path of philosophical insight. Language brings to light the living context in which meaning emerges in our consciousness, and grows through our experience, becoming rich in resonance and ever-acquiring new scope. Gadamer had been struck by a biographical case that seemed to him to signify the way meaning can bring a person back to the register of real, raw life: the Jewish poet Paul Celan seemed to recover some degree of meaningfulness through language, in the wake of the sense of meaninglessness that the Holocaust inspired in him. Gadamer knew and often referred to Celan's account of learning to live again through language:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening but went through it. Went through and could resurface 'enriched' by it all. (cited in Gadamer 1997, 15)

Here language is revealed as more than a system of meaning: it is a process in which even non-meanings, experiences that defy and deny meaning, can play like the 'play of light' and creatively spark associations. It enables us to *make* meaning even where otherwise there might be none.

7 SELF AND BEING IN CELAN

A 1965 series by Celan called *Breath Turn* offered him a particularly fruitful resource for thinking about the processes of meaning formation and the strange kind of communication we find in religious texts. Celan called our attention to the hidden, inner, bodily breath from which sound—the original material of language—is formed. He evoked the way in which breath waits invisible but present within us, ready to become meanings of all kinds. For Gadamer this points us to both the structures of meaning that actually emerge in culture and an unseen prior layer of meaning--potentiality that is there in the background of all potential thought and expression, as yet unexpressed, enabling the text to exist yet also keeping

¹⁴Gadamer (1986, 112) noted that Husserl had observed that poetry performs an automatic epoché.

it always-provisional and open to possible developments. One way of putting this was to see actual ideas as merely the projection of something more complex; one might say that ‘the part of lived reality that can enter into the concept is always a flattened version—like every projection of a living bodily existence onto a flattened surface’ (1997, 82). Another way of putting it was in terms of some prior mystery underlying the forms of the empirical world, rather like Augustine’s idea that beneath scripture there lies an ‘inner word’. Gadamer refers to this idea from Augustinian hermeneutics repeatedly, and John Arthos (2009) has highlighted the importance of this ‘inner’ dimension of language for Gadamer: the theological notion of a latent ‘spirit’ behind scriptural texts provides a counterpart to the ‘incarnate’ spoken word of history. We might say that all language invites us to reflect on that origin and fabric of empirical reality that it presupposes.

Even Plato’s Forms, which seem to capture the ideal of a fixed and autonomous conception of meaning, actually represent mercurial and energetic living phenomena. Already, in his 1922 dissertation he had written that:

A Platonic idea ... is a divine or demonic but in any case living and acting being... whose life takes up intellectual space. It is more than a pleasant game when suddenly ideas begin to talk in Plato’s dialogues... in our thoughts we enter the precincts of the holy. (cited in Grondin 2003, 84–5)

Sixty years later, having been interrogated by Jacques Derrida about the intentions behind his project of ‘understanding’ others, Gadamer would try to clarify that these kinds of language told us less about applied interactions with the outside world (as science does) and more about *ourselves*. Self-understanding had hitherto been seen in the German tradition primarily as a form of self-reflexive awareness with the capacity to reveal a priori or transcendental certainties. But for Gadamer self-understanding ‘actually does not refer at all to the unshakeable certainty of self-consciousness’. Instead it:

...has a pietistic undertone suggesting precisely that one cannot succeed in understanding oneself... For who we are is something unfulfillable, an ever new undertaking and an ever new defeat. (1989, 97)

It seems that pietism's sense of spirituality informed his life-long pleasure in poetry, insisting that it is desirable and inspiring to have one's sense of self opened, expanded and taken beyond the limits of a secure 'I'. The very title of his Celan readings, 'Who Am I and Who Are You?' expressed his fascination with the idea that the 'I' who speaks the poem has become universalised to all readers and thinkers. Poetry performs a sense of shared identity:

Readers of lyric poetry always understand in a certain sense who I is... it is as if [the poet] no longer means himself, but rather also includes the reader in his I-character... this is especially true with Celan, where 'I', 'you', and 'we' are pronounced in an utterly direct, shadowy-uncertain and constantly changing way. This I is not only the poet, but even more so 'that individual' [*jener Einzelne*], as Kierkegaard named the one who is each of us. (1997, 69)

In poetry there is, then, an existential address to subjectivity per se that tries to raise us each out of our own determinate situation. Too often we subsume our native 'I'-ness into our surroundings and concerns, losing sight of what it is to be a subject living our lives. Poetry thus achieves a kind of liberation of the self into a broader poetic 'I' who is fluid and can become anyone. Language here relaxes its *control* over us and seeks instead to *open* us to wider awareness, cultivating heightened sensitivities and activating a feeling that the mysterious world beyond our immediate experience is full of potential selves, worlds, experiences, significances. This is linked, he writes, to 'a certain craving, an inner demand that constantly ran through my first ventures in thinking, above all in relation to the poetic word', which was partially met through the 'destruktion' of artificially fixed truths by learning to take 'concepts that have become rigid and lifeless and again fill them again with meaning' (1989, 98). This happens not by 'pointing to a mysterious origin', but by 'a process of criticism directed at concepts that no longer speak to us', so that they regain their 'interwovenness in living language' (1989, 99). When hermeneutics reclaims language, it also expands the Self.

Nothing expresses this vision like the actual poetry on which Gadamer focused and the commentaries that he produced. Many of the Celan poems hint at the process in which words are dug out of their hidden potentiality, falling into the silence of open reflection and coming to play like the 'play of light' or 'play on words'. One of the poems on which Gadamer comments seems to speak of the process of meaning formation:

...the life-mountain
 From its soil
 You knead anew our names...
 A tree-
 High thought
 Strikes the light-sound: there are
 Still songs to sing beyond
 Humankind

Creating his own 'poetic' cluster of meanings from this piece, Gadamer suggests that 'with all of our accumulating experience, we are the life-mountain' and the poem describes the shaping of our identity (the 'name') from 'the whole of our experience of the world which is constructed out of this material of experience' and which 'must be constantly kneaded anew' (1997, 75). This, for Gadamer, is the miracle of language, at which he had so long marvelled: it constantly responds to the silence of all that is merely possible by manifesting to it the world with its infinite mystery and fertility. He wrote in his epilogue to the Celan commentary that the title of the series 'Breath-Turn' 'designates the silent, whisper-like transition and alternation of inhaling and exhaling, whereby the "breath-crystal" of the poem emerges in pure form like a single snowflake' (1997, 162); for him this emergence of the meaning of any word is simultaneously an expansion of the self and a light shone onto hidden possibilities of reality. In this sense, all meaning is always already an intrinsically valuable phenomenon.

8 GADAMER, DERRIDA, DETERMINACY AND DIFFERENCE

Gadamer's conception of truth as the changeable, complex product of a process in which partners are brought together in living dialogue has—arguably—become widely accepted as a standard model, influencing thinkers from Richard Rorty, to Paul Ricoeur, to Charles Taylor. But in the years since *Truth and Method's* first success, important criticisms came his way from thinkers keen to defend what is marginal, silenced or otherwise disempowered in relation to 'tradition'. These points were emphasised by Habermas and Marxist critics, feminist scholars and psychoanalytic thinkers emphasising the unspoken influence of the unconscious, so great a concern for philosophers like Jacques Lacan.

Gadamer's famous encounter with Derrida in 1981 epitomised this point in some ways. Derrida rejected the older man's reliance on tradition and his assumption that a fusing of horizons is really an adequate way to try to understand another person's own distinct perspective. In response, Gadamer sought to reassure the younger man that his own position was equally open to the changefulness of tradition and the influence of unfamiliar voices: far from traditionalist polemic or rhetorical imagery, he intended simply a description of what always happens in all communication. Yet Derrida emphasised that 'there may be no possibility of deciding, from among [a concept's] competing meanings, one that is true or authentic' (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989, 2). Gadamer saw this point as encompassed by his own account of dialogue: only the community or context in which the meaning comes to light can—for its own purposes, and only ever provisionally—arbitrate a 'right' interpretation, as when a calculation turns out to be the right one for building a certain bridge, or a word the right one for translating a certain comment. The two points seemed to be complimentary, and three years later Gadamer attributed the apparent difference between their positions largely to the 'suppleness' of Derrida's French and the 'earnestness' of his own German style (1989, 93). But the main difference seems to have lain in what the two thinkers should be done with the essential ambiguity of meaning. Gadamer wrote that:

I too affirm that understanding is always understanding-differently... What is pushed aside or dislocated when my word reaches another person and especially when a text reaches its reader, can never be fixed in a rigid identity. Where understanding takes place, there is not just an identity. Rather to *understand* means that one is capable of stepping into the place of the other in order to say what one has there understood and what one has to say in response. That does not at all mean to repeat something after the other. (1989, 96)

The word understanding, then, was taken in the traditional sense by Derrida and his followers, when Gadamer had sought throughout his work to give it a new meaning. In fact, contrary to popular perception and John Caputo's (1989) accusation that he is a 'closet essentialist', Gadamer saw himself as more radical than Derrida. Where the latter's notion of *écriture* accorded a fundamental ambiguity to writing (such that we can never know what is intended by a word), Gadamer accorded that same

ambiguity to the word itself in all stages of use (1997, 181). There never is an original use, only different contexts which themselves flex and alter according to change of situation. Referring to Derrida's idea that language is always on the way to becoming a free-floating, author-independent, infinitely interpretable statement, Gadamer wrote, 'I, too, regard every utterance as "on the way to writing", as I called a short essay I wrote in 1983' (1989, 96).

Ultimately Gadamer saw his as the more realistic and optimistic view of communication. We are always floating in a sea of meanings, but we are always part of multiple structures within it. Thus he added: 'But what is writing if it is not intended to be read?' The radical implication of *différance*—that individuals might float completely freely in always infinite meanings—seemed obviously absurd, since individuals do indeed use language in real situations aimed at real actions and results. Derrida followed more conscientiously the rejection of all metaphysics and determinate truth widely ascribed to Nietzsche. But there is no "language of metaphysics" Gadamer insisted, 'there is only a metaphysically thought-out coinage of concepts that have been lifted from living speech... this phrase simply refers to the conceptuality that has built up in the history of metaphysics' (1989, 107). This building of concepts might be seen not as a rejection of metaphysics, but as the attempt to 'give new life to Greek thought and its power to address us today'.

Gadamer's work can be seen to attempt this enlivening effect for all language in all of its genres and goals. Hermeneutics assures us that we can become better at maintaining a grasp on the vast extent, living texture and constant creativity of thought, as it wells up from its hidden reserve of meanings and meaningfulness. In Derrida's perspective there was perhaps a lingering Cartesian view of the human as a user of language, and a tragic user of it, since language is a flawed and imprecise tool. But this was never in question for Gadamer: his philosophical reflection (and also perhaps his Hegelian, post-Platonic background) had convinced him that that we are *part* of the shifting language that we use, like a soft-bodied sea-creature, a jellyfish whose very being and activity depend upon the shifting fluidity of its medium.

It is also perhaps for this reason that Gadamer felt little desire to engage with the contemporary philosophies of the subconscious and unconscious; when one of his students, Hermann Lang (1977), published a book on hermeneutics and Lacan, he wrote an appreciative introduction but went no further in incorporating psychoanalytic insights into his own thought.

Unconscious realities and inexplicit contents of consciousness were something that he felt he had dealt with via his philosophy of poetic meaning. The idea that Gadamer lacks a philosophy of the unconscious,¹⁵ then, highlights the way in which psychology and phenomenology applied different frames to the more marginal, unstable, uncontrollable, resonant and widely disseminating meanings that exist for us. Indeed, the subtle and tremulous texture of the poetic is a necessary compliment to the more robust idea of structure that we associate with games, languages and sciences. Without both poles of meaning-making, our model of truth cannot hope to do justice to the living texture of reality. But we must not forget that our own subjectivity is as fluid, dynamic, creative and expansive as any other part of that reality. All language, concept and meaning float on a forceful current that takes us forward into a future that is as yet wholly fresh and unknown. Hermeneutics should pragmatically help us resolve disputes. But as Celan puts it, a proper appreciation of language should also remind us that there are ‘still songs to sing beyond humankind’ (1997, 75).

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¹⁵ Angelika Rauch-Rapaport (2003), for instance, argues that Gadamer needs Lacan to complete his understanding of the past influence transmitted to us through tradition, and failed to take advantage of this in his brief encounters with Lacanian thought.

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Metaphysics: Structure, Vitality and Pantheism

Abstract As metaphysics diminished in the twentieth century, Gadamer took up his own approach to ontology. His analogy of ‘play’ described Being as an encompassing phenomenon in which all things are essentially defined by their infinite, complex, dynamic relations. Language, understood as pure conceptuality, replaced substance. He saw proleptic hints of this account of Being in the works of Plato, Hegel and Heidegger: the complex positional relationality of all form and identity was ably expressed by Plato, not least in his ‘unwritten dialectic’ of the One and the Many. Hegel brought out the dynamism and fertile potential within in each form of existence, and Heidegger incorporated the insight that our own position in and as Being always inflects our conflicted attempts to understand it. Each helped to shape a Gadamerian position that can sometimes resemble the ‘pantheistic’ or ‘idealistic’ ideas of past philosophers. Finally, we consider what this means for the nature of metaphysics and metaphysical understanding of the self, and compare Gadamer’s thought with that of postmodern thinkers like Derrida, Deleuze and Badiou, looking at some more recent moves to reposition Gadamer as an objectivist, realist or metaphysical thinker.

Keywords Being • Ontology • Plato • Hegel • Heidegger • Deleuze • Badiou

...he sees the natural development of the simple into the complex as the universal law of growth of the divine creation and, likewise, of the human spirit. (Gadamer 2004, 26)

Once the old substance metaphysics had been roundly criticised by everyone from Hume to Nietzsche, and the divide between mind and world had been blurred by Husserl's new phenomenological way of defining 'the things themselves', what new way of looking at reality was possible? Woven through Gadamer's many works there was a metaphysics of complex, dynamic, interconnected forms, all shaped by certain universal conditions that—like Plato's transcendentals—define *what it is to exist*. Each sphere of Gadamer's intellectual formation added to this picture, with Plato illuminating the formal structure of webbed eidetic 'participation' between the ideas, Hegel revealing its medium of pure dialectical structure and Heidegger highlighting the ways in which it differed from the old notions of Being.

Gadamer's applied fields of reflection—in aesthetics, textual hermeneutics, historic interpretation, healthcare and social thought—all called attention to the way we ourselves negotiate and *add to* reality's ever-dynamic, ever-growing character. His studies of nature emphasised that it is the world itself and not only some secondary phantasm of experience taking place in the mind; despite taking the structure of experience as his cue, he remained a realist not a solipsist. In this chapter we trace the way his analogy of play describes not only language but also reality itself, and we consider how this ontology was deepened by his engagement with Plato, Hegel and Heidegger. Along with Grondin (2017, 2022), Wachterhauser (1999) and arguably Bernstein (1983, 34), Carman (2003, 8), Berendzen (2023, 202), Mackinlay (2016, 121) and even Vattimo (2002, 300), we take seriously the idea that Gadamer wove his sources into a different kind of ontology meant to overcome the problems of past metaphysics. We also briefly consider how it relates to other postmodern philosophies that struggled towards a new vision of the real.

I THE DEATH AND REDEMPTION OF METAPHYSICS

By the dawn of twentieth-century philosophy, the old pursuit of grand systems that try to describe the fundamental nature of reality had become increasingly taboo. Epistemic worries had dominated philosophy since Kant, and for many people the best one could hope to do was to set out

the conditions of human experience (in phenomenology), empirical observation (in logical positivism) or language use (for many Wittgensteinians). Elements of metaphysical thinking returned in the naturalising work of Quine, Kripke and others who urged a realistic engagement with scientific observation and the pressing needs of everyday life. But in addition to epistemological worries, there were also what we might call ‘moral’ ones. Nietzsche had deemed metaphysics a sick science, artificially ‘mummifying’ reality’s rich, indefinite, life-embedded texture into a dead world that only exists *sub specie aeterni*. He wrote:

Everything that philosophers have handled, for thousands of years now, has been conceptual mummies: nothing real escaped their hands alive. They kill and stuff whatever they worship, these gentlemen who idolise concepts.... (Nietzsche 1998, 16 (III.i))

By such damning words, the very motivation to construct a comprehensive account of the world with notions such as existence, ground and causation was thus rendered psychologically and spiritually suspect. So as science moved towards a standard model of physics, a grand unified theory of particles and forces, and a theory of everything that explains both large and small scales, Western metaphysics moved towards more modest goals.

Gadamer’s generation inherited this concern, and by the end of his life postmodernity’s ‘incredulity toward meta-narratives’ (as Jean-François Lyotard put it) was exemplified across much of philosophy, both analytic and continental. In his view, Heidegger’s ‘destruktion’ of the old tradition instilled in his pupils a profound mistrust of ‘representation and objectivation... a will to power which dominates the era of technology... the forgetfulness of Being’ and of mere ‘substance metaphysics’ (2007, 32). Across the channel, and in the analytic tradition of philosophy, Wittgenstein too had (in Gadamer’s view) flatly rejected all the ‘undemonstrable questions of metaphysics’ (2007, 39). These modern critiques spoke eloquently to feelings of disenchantment and alienation, furnishing philosophers with a target to attack.

One might say that the philosophical culture of the West lost one narrative of questing for a total, fundamental account of reality, only to have it replaced by two new ones that split the old project: a physics of the external world on the one hand and a phenomenology of internal experience on the other. Religion’s metaphysical claims were repositioned as edifying stories by revisionist thinkers such as Rudolf Bultmann, Paul

Tillich and even Carl Jung, while truths about physical cosmology became wholly the province of science. Those desiring a grand vision, then, shifted their attention to science while philosophers relinquished their claim to the real and the sublime.

Yet arguably, the old grand narrative tradition had adopted a new form, remaining alive in those who took up Heidegger's interests and his claim that 'to work out the question of being means to make a being—he who questions—transparent in its being', leading to a ontological programme based on the view that 'the explicit and lucid formulation of the question of the meaning of being requires a prior suitable explication of a being (*Dasein*) with regard to its being' (Heidegger 1996, 6). As Catherine Zuckert (1996, 1) has put it, twentieth-century philosophers were following Nietzsche 'in an attempt to reconceive the character of the Western tradition as a whole... on the basis of a conviction that modern rationalism has exhausted its promise and its possibilities'. But they were also following a new hope that Phenomenology could build better foundations. Gadamer was one of those who cherished this hope—although for him philosophy was not a 'doctrine or theory so much as a form of human existence'. His own challenge was to frame a 'metaphysics' that acknowledges the innately-perspectival framing of our knowledge, the open-ended nature of the truth we seek to understand and the value-pervaded nature of all our experience of reality. The old conception of dead objectivity needed to be superseded by a new idea of the real, much as Hermeneutics had crafted a new idea of the true.

Gadamer had seen something 'scapegoat'-ish about the vilification of traditional metaphysics: it did indeed seem that a specific form of absolutizing, reifying, certainty-obsessed 'onto-theology', distorted by the idea of substance, had allied itself with the physical sciences to shape a misleading ideal of objective materialism in Western culture. We have no evidence of a mind-independent autonomous concrete world that exists *sub specie aeterni*, as Nietzsche put it. But this did not necessarily invalidate all forms of metaphysics; many philosophical systems known to Gadamer, from Plato and Pythagoras to Hegel and arguably Leibniz, resisted the simple dualism of mind and world that lay at the basis of scepticism and its eventual repudiation of external and objectivity realities. So other resources were available to those seeking a way to understand our reality.

From a fairly early stage, Gadamer seems to have been sceptical that Western thought could now proceed without any thoughtful picture of the world, based on some well-founded conception of truth. In his essay

‘On the Philosophical Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy’ he wrote that ‘a people without a metaphysics...[is] like a temple without a sanctuary, an empty temple, a temple in which nothing dwells any longer and hence is itself nothing any more’ (1981a, 3). Metaphysics was beneficial in that it provided a foundation for understanding. But more importantly, it was also *inescapable* because certain universal conditions do define the fabric of all our experience and data about reality. Influenced by Plato, Gadamer saw metaphysics as an instance of reflective consciousness in general, that form of ‘thinking [that] constantly points beyond itself’ (2007, 31). This disposes us towards a reflective process that, according to the Greeks, naturally ‘points toward the One, toward Being, toward the “Good” which is present in the order of the soul, in the constitution of the city, and in the structure of the world’ (2007, 31). Hence towards the end of his life Gadamer was able to assert decisively that ‘Heidegger’s Destruktion of metaphysics has not, in my view, robbed metaphysics of its importance today’ (2007, 34)

But the challenge for a new metaphysics was to incorporate the empirical, hermeneutic conditions of experience that are prerequisites of all we know or *could* know. In Platonic terms, such a metaphysics must take into account ‘Plato’s understanding of the essentially open-ended character of human existence, and Plato’s sense of the “light” in and through which beings were disclosed as such...’ (Zuckert 1996, 73). It would be defined thus not through the too-easy reductive shortcut of ‘substantialist’ thinking, but rather as the inner condition of all experience, derived without assuming some separate ‘outer’ mind-independently objective reality. It would be the mind’s way of coming to terms with its existence, and extrapolating from it the nature of Being as we must understand it.

The wide range of frameworks that Gadamer used reflects the challenge of trying to get beyond the limits of reifying language without falling into Heidegger’s experiments with invented philosophical terminologies. Heidegger’s view of language had pointed the way; it led his pupil to assess the roots of the ‘belongingness of reality and word’ which we experience in our natural language use, and see it as attesting to ‘the primordial belongingness of man and world’ (Carpenter 1994, 116). Yet Gadamer’s oblique thought about reality has led to scholarly confusion: was he only speaking about truth and leaving aside the issue of some

mind-independent reality that sits outside our subjective minds? Or was he proposing some actual ontological theory that gives account of Being?¹

Gadamer himself ultimately confirmed that his account of texts also applied to things in the world and to reality itself. As Timo Helenius (2022, 285) has noted, ‘text’ was a case study for speaking about ‘any constitutive whole’, and as hermeneutics developed and expanded he sometimes spoke of texts when he intended a more ‘constitutive’ ontological analysis:

For the sake of simplicity, I shall speak of a meaningful total or whole as a text... Consequently, by text-interpretation is implied the totality of our orientation in the world, together with the assumption that deciphering and understanding a text is very much like encountering reality.²

By 1982 he seemed to be aware that his hermeneutics is also a total phenomenology of the world as we know it (and he was particularly clear about this precisely when he was in discussion with one of the other most prominent phenomenologists alive at the time, Paul Ricoeur). A number of recent thinkers have shifted towards acknowledging Gadamer’s *ontological* aspiration. Robert Paslick (1985, 418), for instance, notes a ‘general failure to see [hermeneutics] connection with the ontological position on which it is based’ while Brice Wachterhauser (1999) saw a ‘post-Platonic ontology’ at work in his thought, and others have taken the ontological turn of Gadamer’s hermeneutics to represent a new paradigm in the wider family of hermeneutic theories (e.g. Tsai 2011). Jean Grondin has increasingly affirmed the position that ‘Gadamer never says that his thinking wants to overcome metaphysics. He even claims that it “leads us back into the problems of classical metaphysics”... On the contrary, [Gadamer and Ricoeur] at times discretely underlined the metaphysical bend of their thinking’ (Grondin 2017, 29), finding his work to contain a ‘strong, somewhat metaphysical conclusion’ (2022). This has led to a realisation that his is an essentially ‘metaphysical hermeneutics’ (Grondin 2024).

¹ See Grondin (2024), George (2024), Figal (2021) and others commenting on the ‘hermeneutic objectivism’ and ‘hermeneutic realism’ debate, as well as Carpenter’s (1994, 118) interpretation of Gadamer’s account of the ‘speculative character of Being’ as an emanationism or incarnationism, the neo-classical accounts given in Wachterhauser (1999), Walter Lammi’s (2009) and Jessica Frazier’s (2008, 2022) arguments for his hermeneutics as a fundamental ontology.

² Gadamer made this comment in his 1982 debate with Paul Ricoeur.

This ontological dimension was also quite clear to Paul Ricoeur (2007, 19) who positioned his own study of metaphor in complimentary contradiction to the ontological concerns of the ‘German hermeneutic tradition’. It was also evident to Gianni Vattimo who explored the ontological hermeneutics and hermeneutic ontology through which Gadamer tried to go beyond Heidegger (Vattimo 2002). Gadamer himself tried to remind readers that the views of Heidegger and Hegel on the nature of Being, and the place of the individual within it, had been anticipated in a more comprehensive form in ‘the *logos* philosophy of the ancients’, and also had precedents in ‘Meister Eckhard, Jakob Boehme, Leibniz, or Franz von Bader’, thinkers with a distinct sense that it is Being itself that explores Being through us (1976b, 114).

Indeed, some of his most vehement criticism was directed at those who ‘totally distorted’ the views of previous thinkers in order to appear as if they had overcome them, as Heidegger stubbornly did with Plato and Hegel, treating them as a background against which his own philosophy could be flatteringly ‘profiled’ (1981b, 66). As he protested later in reflecting on the dispute with Derrida, one should not aim to refuse all metaphysics, but rather to use critique as a strategy for liberating the mind from the false assumptions embedded in any particular ‘coinage of concepts’. In his essay exploring the reasons for Heidegger’s rejection of Hegel, he says that ‘overcoming’ (*Überwinden*) cannot mean merely ‘divorcing’ or ‘putting behind us’ the pain caused by our loss of a viable metaphysical picture. Rather ‘overcoming’ must happen by learning to become accustomed to that pain: ‘We stay with it, as it were, even when we have gotten over it’, and so ‘that which we “get over” or “come to grips with” is not simply past and forgotten’ (1976b, 101). It was to this end that phenomenology had become the slender path by which philosophy might escape the old pitfalls and evolve to develop new grounds for our engagement with the world.

When it was published, *Truth and Method* must have seemed to stand within the tradition of anti-metaphysical post-Kantian, post-Nietzschean thought, since it told us we could only aim at local, situational, temporary truths, rather than any universal claims. Moreover, it told us that we can have no access to truths that lie beyond the subjective data provided by the individual speaker and interpreter, and it seemed to move away from metaphysics by telling us that truth is always limited by method. But these claims were not so simple as they seemed at first glance. For again and again in history we see the limits on knowledge that hermeneutics

highlighted—such as dynamic change, local specificity and mind-entangled materiality—used to illuminate the reality of the world (as, for instance, in Plato’s participation of the forms in the particulars, or Hegel’s dialectical structure, or the vitalists’ idea of nature as dynamically creative and encompassing ourselves). In fact, Gadamer’s whole body of work attests to a life spent digging out ontological insights from past thinkers, and using each as a different lamp onto the subtle structure of the real. In this chapter we will set out a few of these frameworks through which Gadamer tries to reveal that ontological structure. But first it is helpful to look at his most explicit attempt to build a ‘metaphysical’ model of his own.

2 BEING, SPIRIT AND THE STRUCTURE OF ‘PLAY’

When Gadamer spoke of texts in the curious chapter on play in *Truth and Method*, he used an analogy to suggest an original formulation of the structure of Being (in addition to using it as a way to explain the way we engage in meaning-making and language games, as we saw in the last chapter). In this he was inspired in part by Johan Huizinga’s celebrated 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, but also by Eugen Fink’s work on play which Fink saw as an ‘Oasis of Happiness’, an ‘elevated and exalted feeling for life... which has dominated the question of aesthetics since Schiller’, in Gadamer’s (1958) words. While much of his thought in *Truth and Method* must have been developed by the time he wrote his review, he was able to contrast his own ideas with those of Fink, seeing play as revealing a concise structural insight into a specific dialectical phenomenon, rather than as showcasing a particular contingent emotional state of human experience. Hence he wrote that play revealed not ‘a state of elevated and exalting feeling toward life’, but a peculiar ontological dialectic in which the player is taken into play which itself becomes the subject.³

He had wanted to develop Heidegger’s insights, but he did not want to use Heidegger’s invented terminologies. As we have seen, he preserved a cautious distance from Heidegger’s languages both of Homeland or *Heimat* (Hammermeister 2000) and of language as house of Being (Vattimo 2002). But what form of expression could he use when Heidegger himself had struggled to overcome the western grammatical

³ ‘nicht so sehr as jener Zustand erhöhten und enthobenen Lebensgefuhrs... als vielmehr wegen der eigentumlichen Dialektik des Spiels, derzufolge alles Spiel den Spielenden in sich einbezieht und selber zum eigentlichen Subjekt wird’; Gadamer 1958, 141.

‘subject-object’ structure to which the languages of Europe, the ‘Abendland’, were predisposed? By the time he had seen the potential structural, metaphysical value of the concept of Play, he was ready for something of his own that could take him beyond earlier thinkers. Certainly, play had been used by Heidegger to describe some of the boundaries of speculation, but Gadamer grasped his own innovative realisation that play pointed to a kind of meta-ontology, found in ‘the fact that play is not actually a behavior of the subject, but rather a structure of movement that exists even without a subjective location of play’.⁴ While most of his writings used revisionist history of philosophy as their method, in his own treatment of this concept we see a rare attempt to frame an ontology more directly, best showcased in his chapter tellingly entitled ‘play as the clue to ontological explanation’.⁵

Gadamer pointed to the way each object—whether it is a word, an idea, a physical thing or a sensory datum—exists within the interplay of a wider whole. It is defined by the overall structure of its qualities and potentialities, its relationships and causation, all as they exist over time in a ‘patterned but open-ended formation’ within the ‘constantly transforming medial structure’ of all history. In various places—including his epigraph, the chapter on play and the closing pages of *Truth and Method*, as well as in his 1962 essay ‘On the Problem of Self Understanding’—he took up ‘play’ as an illustrative image meant to explain how meaning and truth have this kind of structure: they are defined according to the changing contextual conditions of other language-users and the environment. But play’s image of the distinctive structure of semi-coherent, semi-improvised collective movement also had a still-wider application. Any actual game or play is a special kind of unity that preserves the individual as a constituent part of a single complex phenomenon. Gadamer observes that ‘the players are not the subjects of play’ but instead are aspects of it—sublated into elements of the game as an encompassing reality. The being of this unified

⁴He speaks of ‘the conspicuous use of the concept of play to describe speculative limit questions’ (*die auffällige Verwendung des spielbegriffs für die Beschreibung spekulativer Grenzfragen*) by Heidegger and insists that ‘play is not really an attitude of the subject as a structure of movement that can exist even without the activity of the subject’ (*das Spiel nicht eigentlich ein Verhalten des Subjektes ist, sondern ein Bewegungsgefüge das auch ohne subjektives Verhalten sei kann*) (Gadamer 1958, 141).

⁵See Frazier (2022) for a more extensive discussion of the significance of this ‘play’ chapter of *Truth and Method*.

complex phenomenon does not consist in a substance or substrate of any kind, but in pure relational activity:

The movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate... The play is the occurrence of movement as such. Thus we speak of the play of colours and do not mean only that one colour plays against another, but that there is one process or sight displaying a changing variety of colours... the primordial sense of play is the medial one. (2004, 104)

This ‘medial’ ontology of relational activity applies to any complexly unified relational phenomenon, from physical objects like a tree, to complex systems like a city, to non-physical phenomena like a story, to even apparently discrete and changeless universals like numbers or colours. Each of these has essentially the same structure as a game in which it is not the players but the whole activity that is the ‘actual subject’ in terms of which each individual is defined. As we saw in Chapter “Truth: The Fabric of Meaning”, the ‘play’ metaphor treated truth as something that ‘draws [the playing subject] into its dominion and fills him with its spirit’ so that it is experienced as a ‘reality that surpasses him’ (2004, 106). In this unity individual identities are incorporated but not destroyed by that union in the way that, for instance, a ring is destroyed when dropped into molten metal. Rather, here each individual is preserved and sublated in the unity of the medial structure of ‘play’ in the way that a new note becomes part of a chord, a single bird part of a flock or a single movement becomes part of a dance.

In each of Gadamer’s examples of play, a single medium takes on the appearance of multiplicity by becoming internally differentiated into separate forms: a single body of water becomes many waves, distinguished by the relative differential height of peaks and troughs of the surface; a single language takes on different meanings as semantic structures oppose and inflect each other; a single pattern of light through the trees has no substantial existence but is defined by relative tones of shade; and a single piece of music is defined not by its constitutive substance (shifts in air pressure, auditory experiences, marks on a page), but by the structural arrangement of contrasting pitch and tempo in which any particular piece consists, regardless of the pitch, tempo or instrumentation into which it has been

transposed.⁶ It is the ‘shape’ of the vibrations in the air, cast into a particular pattern of notes, which defines the piece. Human game-play is but one instance of a broader ‘natural process’ that includes water, light and music (2004, 105). This view of the world as a dynamic natural structure, constituted of unceasingly generative ‘playful’ patterns balancing structure and novelty, runs throughout his work. Entities of all kinds are best seen not as substances, but rather as patterns and parts of patterns.

‘What I am describing’, Gadamer explained in no uncertain terms elsewhere, ‘is the mode of the whole human experience of the world’ (1976a, 15). We are taken up into this structure from our earliest thoughts: ‘with the first word we speak we are involved in the whole game and play of language’ (2007, 381). We can see why he hinted heavily in his review of Fink that ‘in the end human play can only be conceived as a counterpart to the play of the world’ (1958, 141).⁷ Brice Wachterhauser has been perhaps the most explicit expositor of the ontological dimension of play for Gadamer, writing that:

Gadamer’s notion of ‘play,’ however, is not intended simply to make a point about the connection between our historicity and our individual development. Rather it is a basic ontological insight which informs Gadamer’s whole enterprise... One might say that for Gadamer Being itself is play. (Wachterhauser 1999, 155)

This insight is meant to go beyond the idea that language is or is the ‘house’ of Being, for the play analogy offers us a more concise analysis of the structure in which language itself consists. If for Gadamer ‘being that can be understood is language’, and Being that we can understand is the only kind we can speak of (or have ever spoken of) meaningfully, then we can say that the fundamental structure of Being as we know it—a structure which is constitutive, necessary and enabling to our world—is the ‘play’ structure. One might object that this analysis seems to describe merely the structure of ideas, of language. But, remembering that Gadamer is still a post-Kantian who rejects the possibility of any access to some world

⁶That is, the constitutive material of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* lies in no person’s imagination, in no performance, nor on any piece of paper or tape—if all of these ceased to exist, the piece itself as a structure would remain. *What* it is, its defining essence, seems to transcend its temporary and divergent instances of existence.

⁷*Menschliche Spielen am ende nur als eine entsprechung zu dem Spiel der welt gedacht werden kann*; 1958, 141.

‘outside’ experience and who further rejects the coherence of the very notion of ‘outsideness’, the structure of ideas is exactly what we mean by the fabric of reality.

Importantly, as Wachterhauser (1999, 161) puts it, we should not confuse ‘language’ as Gadamer discusses it with spoken natural language, the latter being a ‘tool’ that we employ in our verbal interactions with other people: ‘at best language is only secondarily a tool because it is the very medium of thought itself. As a medium...it provides the conditions and therefore limits the possibilities of what can be thought.’ Language, or what we might more helpfully call ‘structure’, thus serves as a kind of underlying frame for verbal natural languages; Wachterhauser and Grondin point to Gadamer’s Augustinian idea that it is the ‘inner word’ within a spoken word, a kind of virtual underlying thematic structure, that allows us to understand, develop and respond to it. It is this web of thematic connections and developments that defines the world, and we will see that through his readings of Plato and Hegel, Gadamer hopes to dive even further into that structure and claw back insights into Being.

Georgia Warnke highlights the way in which his depiction of play described a phenomenon that is both encompassing and individual, determining and participatory, received and created. Like many others she predominantly sees this as having to do with art and text (see Warnke 1987, 48–55), but she also notes that his discussion of art goes beyond the subjectivism of analysing individuals’ personal experience, towards a view of the artwork as itself binding and determining its viewers. Hence, she writes that ‘art is not something from which [viewers] awake into the mundanity of their ordinary existence but rather something that presents a challenge to that existence’ (Warnke 1987, 49). Ingrid Scheibler (2001, 153) has noted that with the play image Gadamer is borrowing Heidegger’s own variation on a Hegelian theme, attempting to overturn the subjectivisation of experience, and acknowledge the way in which a correct perspective on the world recognises the ‘self-transcendence’ of the individual in the medium of Being itself. The repeated signs that some kind of ‘self-transcendence’ is involved in what Gadamer is describing is a constant hint that he is trying to capture a truth about the nature of all substantive ideas of perceptions. When da Via (2022) asks whether Gadamer’s insight into apparently universal relativism is ‘self-refuting’, he points precisely to the sense in which Gadamer is not coining an objectively true statement, so much as defining the universal conditions of all experience: all experience and expression is embedded in a larger holistically defined and mutually

dependent set of terms. In this sense, his attention to ‘the thing in itself’ remains correlated to Husserl’s attempt to frame truth as ‘universal correlations between the structures of noesis, the act of consciousness, and noema, the object of consciousness’ (Zaborowski 2006, 358).⁸

In short, as we will see, each thing *insofar as it exists at all for us* is defined by complex, contextual and dynamic dialectical relations. That things are defined in relation is a universal condition of the ways that being appears, a transcendental condition, suggesting that the only truths we can know unconditionally are just such knowledge about our conditions—and even these are expressed in language that depends upon the conventions of our time. Yet this *dependence* does not prevent the thing being *true*. Gadamer was perhaps also reminded of his teacher Nicolai Hartmann’s development of the concept of emergence, informed by the Platonic notion of *methexis* or participation. In a sense, many things—from feelings about a situation, to communal identity, to language, to culture—can be seen as emergent phenomena in which many separate things become part of something unified that gives them a new identity. Medial realities surround us, and each is a small mirror of the whole.

There are a number of reasons why we generally fail to think in terms of this dynamic, participatory structure of reality, where objects are sublated into a ‘medial’ ontology that also recognises relations and larger shared phenomena like actions, situations, stories, values, communities, languages and so on. If each thing is really a nexus in an interwoven structure of forms, interactions, movements and trajectories, then a revisionist history of philosophy must learn to spot the mistakes—cases where that way of seeing the world has been buried beneath false dichotomies. As one proceeds through Gadamer’s vast range of essentially *commentarial* essays on thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Husserl, we see that false dichotomies are littered through past history and include assumed ontological distinctions between (a) eternal universals and changeful particulars, (b) subjective and objective knowledge, (c) internal (mental) and external (material) phenomena, (d) discrete individuals and their contingent relations, (e) essential and accidental properties and (f) an object and its telic trajectory of change. Again and again, he diagnoses these and other mistakes in the thinkers of the past, yet also seeks to show how their

⁸ ‘universale Strukturen der Korrelation von Noesis – Bewußtseinsakt – und Noema – Bewußtseinsgegenstand’; Zaborowski 2006, 358.

work hints at an underlying perspective that does justice to the real nature of the world.

Thus, although it is true that his work tried to give new voice to the ideas of the later Heidegger (1976a, 50), he also spent his career revising the popular belief that Plato had seen the world of ‘ideas’ as an inviolable realm of transcendent truths, and trying to revive hidden insights in classical, humanist, rationalist, pietist and idealist thought. Indeed, in his essay ‘Hans-Georg Gadamer: Urbanising the Heideggerian Province’, Jürgen Habermas (1983, 190) described Gadamer as a Heideggerian who had learned the craft of classical philology in order to forge ‘paths over which Heidegger can return from his self-chosen isolation’ from all previous thinking. Gadamer saw language as the medium in which reality is truly revealed, and identified a structural commensurability between beings that could serve as a clue to the whole, freeing us from his teacher’s fatalistic ‘oblivion of Being’ (see Wachterhauser 1999, 160).

If metaphysics, at least since Aristotle, is distinguished by its ‘universal claim’, then we must recognise Gadamer as a philosopher of this universalising kind. This is because although, by his sympathetic biographer and friend Jean Grondin’s admission, he was ‘not a thinker who likes to present his theses in an axiomatic or ostentatious manner’, he nevertheless ‘has a universal thesis to defend’ and often does so ‘dialectically, by taking up a suggestion or following the lead of a conversation, ... [or makes] his points historically while discussing the ideas of major thinkers’ (Grondin 2022, 25). For this task he had a phenomenological method of close analysis of the necessary eidetic structures of experience, and he had an object of study, although it was not substance or force that needed to be examined but the conceptual structure he called language. Naturally, he saw that many had shone a light on this structure before him, providing a string of insights through history that could be threaded together to describe an alternative history far from the onto-theological narrative of metaphysics. Heidegger’s critique, Gadamer insisted, could be accommodated within certain theories even of Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Schleiermacher or Kant: ‘in the end’, he asked, ‘is even the position which Heidegger tries to establish in opposition to Hegel trapped within the sphere of the inner infinity of reflection?’ (1976b, 101–102). If we read his commentary on past thinkers rightly, we see that—criticising with one hand, and restoring with the other—Gadamer was an heir of many philosophical traditions beyond the phenomenology of his time, weaving them all into a new hermeneutic ontology.

3 PLATO'S WEB OF IDEAS

Plato was the foremost of the thinkers who Gadamer reclaimed as architects of an ontology more successful than traditional substance metaphysics. A tradition of classical study existed in the Germany academy that saw in Platonism a special affirmation of direct intuitive thought, religious experience and the continuity of human mental life with the life of nature. The Tübingen School had explored the nature of Plato's 'unwritten doctrines', esoteric teachings rumoured to have been passed down orally to students such as Aristotle. The belief that there had been an implicit Platonic doctrine remained controversial yet influential in Gadamer's time. Meanwhile the German idealist tradition had maintained a 'Platonic' style of studying concepts as a central pillar of their approach to reality. The turn of the twentieth century saw a new crop of German scholars keen to establish Plato's significance in the new era of post-Kantian thought. The Marburg School was focused on Hermann Cohen, Ernst Cassirer and Paul Natorp in particular, and it sought to harness Plato to the scientific aspirations of the time. Natorp asserted the centrality of Plato's rational method, upholding the validity of Platonism as a guide to the nature of *knowledge about the world*—and not merely of 'psychological' ideas or intuitions contained within the mind. 'Being' was not to be understood as a thing or collection of things, but rather as the copula of correct assertion in scientific judgement. This school of Plato interpretation would in time become a target for Heideggerians who sought to liberate Being from scientific goals,⁹ but nevertheless the link between Platonism, German idealism and modern epistemological movements such as phenomenology had a profound effect on Gadamer—whose dissertation was supervised by Natorp.

But where the Marburg School drew on Plato for an understanding of *facts*, another popular thinker of the time drew on neo-Platonism for an understanding of *values*. Max Scheler, a phenomenologist who matched even the influence of Husserl in his time, took emotion and religion as his starting point for the recovery of reality—rather than beginning with mathematics and science. Scheler's explicitly theological work argued for a move away from 'the traditional systems of religious theory which lean either to Aquinas or to Kant and Schleiermacher' based on the conviction that 'natural theology is unable to perform its task of unification either on

⁹ Alan Kim (2010) has emphasised the importance of Heidegger's opposition to Marburg Platonism for the subsequent development of his ideas.

the basis of Thomism or on a basis derived from the philosophical era ushered in by Kant' (Scheler 2010, 12–13). The way forward lay in the Platonic tradition that passed through Augustine and Christian neo-Platonism to modern phenomenology, allowing the only possible route towards unifying religious outlooks:

Phenomenological philosophy is one which undertakes to look on the essential fundamentals of all existence with rinsed eyes, and redeems the bills of exchange which an over-complex civilisation has drawn on them in terms of symbol upon symbol... When this has been done, natural theology will more and more clearly reveal and demonstrate that *immediate* contact of the soul with God which Augustine, from the experience of his great heart, was striving with the apparatus of neo-Platonism to capture and fix in words. (Scheler 2010, 13)

Scheler's genealogy of the phenomenological tradition was thus distinctly Platonic and also implicitly spiritual in its affirmation of immediate experience. From Natorp and Scheler, then, Gadamer had access to a very different Plato from that whom Nietzsche had criticised, and he felt that, due partly to his Aristotelian orientation, 'Heidegger was not fair to Plato' (2007, 425). The Plato that Gadamer had come to know did *not* advocate the two-worlds division of mind and world, form and particular attributed to him (2007, 401) and was more a 'meta-mathematician' than a substance metaphysician (2007, 206). Gadamer's Plato had sought to go '*beyond being*' in his ontology (2007, 379); in short he followed a genealogy of Western history in which 'Plato was no Platonist'.

When Heidegger and his peers expressed doubt about Gadamer's potential for an original contribution to philosophy, it was to his expertise in classics that Gadamer retreated. Here, he felt sure that he had discovered insights fundamentally misunderstood by Heidegger. Seen as a kind of meta-logician excavating the basic structure of concepts, Plato seemed to be a successful pioneer in using transcendental analysis as the basis of ontology. He identified the conditions according to which something 'exists' in the sense that it is present in our awareness as a phenomenon. It is important to see the implicitly phenomenological element in Plato's method; the analysis of ideas, with their constitution and relationships, took human experience as the touchstone for assessing reality, whether in our focus on universals or particulars. Thus the doctrine of the ideas or

forms provided a way to reframe existence in terms of the conceptual identities that define all things.

But beyond the idea that forms equate to different discrete universals—of tallness, shortness and so on—Gadamer explored the hints of a still-deeper way of thinking about structure. In places, Plato seemed to analyse the prerequisite principles that make up all ideas: principles of similarity, difference and relationship. The ‘medial’ structure, to borrow his play terminology, is conceptual relatedness or ‘participation’, *methexis*. This participatory relatedness is seen on multiple axes at once:

...we have a threefold *methexis* (participation) here: (1) the *methexis* of the individual in the Idea, (2) the *methexis* of the soul in the Idea, but ultimately (3) the methexis of the Ideas in each other—for any thinking of something is a delimiting from and a combining with... my thesis, then, is this: these are three aspects of one and the same relationship. (1986b, 88)

This complex relationship casts another light on the play structure where the player expresses the rule, but in a new manifestation, and the game itself finds new life through this fresh form co-crafted by the player, yet this whole game can only be understood and played as what it is in relation to all other possible forms of game and experience. Complexity, unity and dynamism are all united in this activity.

Alongside participation, another idea that was central to Gadamer’s integration of Plato into his hermeneutic ontology was Plato’s doctrine of ‘unity and plurality’, also called the doctrine of the ‘One and the Many’. This rethinking of our habitual notions of individuation helped to illuminate the constitutive building blocks of structure and the very principles of structural unity. In Plato’s *Parmenides*, the apparent simplicity and autonomy of ideas was questioned by comparing a tall man to a shorter or a taller one. That exercise shows how anyone’s identity as ‘tall’ is in fact dialectically determined by his relation to the person with whom he is compared. So ‘the particular thing is just as much determined by the whole as is the whole by the many particulars’, and every identity is an ‘order in which a many becomes a unity, in the state and in the soul, in knowledge and in the structure of the world, [demonstrating] the law of the One and the Many, of number and Being’ (1980, 92).¹⁰

¹⁰In the essay ‘Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic’ he further expounds the centrality of number to Plato’s philosophy, as he does elsewhere.

Following the historical framework established by Plato scholar Julius Stenzel, the Platonic corpus could be divided into an earlier phase and a later phase in which the old rhetorical divide between forms and particulars dissolved into a more embracing conception of the relation between all ideas. Stenzel had suggested that the later Plato sought to resolve the philosophical problems accrued by the doctrine of the ideas, by developing a new doctrine focused on ideas of participation (of similar ideas) and distinction (of unlike ideas). These later dialogues, in which the figure of Socrates played a reduced role, did not take the forms to represent a higher realm of their own seen by the soul before death, but rather to be structures in which the empirical world participates. According to Stenzel's history, the application of the doctrine of the forms 'beyond mathematical and moral ideas to universal matters' had inspired the development of a new 'dialectic of dihairesis', the process of separating or differentiating ideas that is the core of analysis (1980, 129). It is to this that Aristotle referred when he spoke of the doctrine of the 'One and the indeterminate Two', and Gadamer argues that these 'later' ideas were already present in the logic of the earlier doctrine of the forms, blossoming in the later works, and passed on by his students. As he explained in his essay 'Plato's Unwritten Dialectic', the doctrine of the One and the Many was Plato's true and deepest doctrine.

The *Parmenides* was a key text for this revisionist picture of Plato, for in it the 'two worlds' idea that forms are separate from particulars was finally set aside by Plato's own questioning of the independent and eternal nature of the forms. The philosophical dialogue works to show that 'tallness' is an idea that manifests diversely relative to context. A tall man is only tall in relation to smaller men; in a room of still-taller individuals his essential defining features change in eidetic dependence on them. The 'tallness' that had appeared to be a universal idea, then, seems to be a complex composite of context-dependent cases. A similar puzzle is explored in the *Theaetetus* which examines the complex unity of letters that make up a syllable, and the *Hippias Major* which analyses the 'participation' of particulars in the idea they all share, as well as in the *Symposium's* discussion of the Beautiful as something that takes different forms in different things while retaining the common unity of the idea, and also in the *Phaedo's* provocative little question about whether one should make two by adding together two ones, or by dividing a single one in half (see the discussion in 1980, 130–134). In each case, the unity of the universal idea is revealed to be a complex unity in which ideas are contextually inter-related. As Graham

Priest (2014, 134) puts it, if we follow the *Parmenides* to its conclusion, it seems that all identities are ‘appearances’ that are neither wholly One nor wholly Many, but consist in ‘multitudes all the way down’ and relations all the way through.

Gadamer saw that it is these examples of the ‘problem of relativity’ that call us ‘to wake up and think’ (1980, 136). Plato’s key development, on this account, involved moving beyond the model of unity attached to general idea and towards a new ‘arithmetic’ model of unity. This structure is more clearly seen in mathematics: What is a number? We can take the number two, for instance: the number two is a quantity defined by the internal relation it reveals when halved to one, its lesser relation to three, its ability to double and become 4, its inability to multiply into any odd number, etc. While ‘twoness’ can be varied in its instantiation (two decimals, whole numbers, or sets of multiplicities), what defines its ‘twoness’ is always a particular relationship to other quantities. Even numerals that are distant from a given number are implicated in its nature by the wide web of arithmetic relations; in the final analysis, the identity of the number two is inseparable from that of all numbers.

This semantic relationship defines any unity in mathematics, and Gadamer holds that Plato comes to see that it applies to any other idea as well. We have seen that it applies to the adjective ‘tall’. So too the noun ‘dog’ falls under the genus ‘mammal’ through its relationship of similarity to other warm-blooded animals, but it can also be defined in contradistinction to cats, or in greater contrast to crocodiles, and greater contrast still to rocks, colours, abstract concepts or times of year. Yet these very different things are part of the broader range of similar and contrasting ideas that define the original idea. This is the implication intended by the discussion of forms in the *Parmenides*.

The centrality of similarity and dissimilarity (collection and division) is expressed in the doctrines of participation or *methexis*, and difference or *chorismos*, and the method of distinction or *dihairesis*, found in the *Parmenides* and *Philebus*. For Gadamer these insights led to key insights into complexity and dynamism, seen in Plato and Euclid’s definition of a sum as a ‘plenum of ones’, the *Timaeus*’ doctrine of soul as linked to a ‘motion’ from self-sameness to difference and Aristotle’s development of the ideas of *arche* and *telos* as a movement of each fundamentally dynamic identity towards evolution of its essence (1980, 141–144). Gadamer reads classical thought, with its many aporias, questions and hints, as a coherent whole gradually revealing the internal complexity of all beings as semantic

structures interlinked into a complex eidetic network that defines all Being: ‘What *is* revealed [by Plato] is that the number of the unity of many is the ontological paradigm’ (1980, 203).

Of course, it is a special *kind* of unity that is described here—not a *substantial* unity that defines the being of things in terms of some underlying physical ‘stuff’, but a non-substantial, *structural* unity in which each identity implies and relies upon every other. There are broad analogies with Alain Badiou’s attempt to use set-theory, the representation of multiples, as an ontological schema, and Deleuze’s Leibnizian idea that one could construct an ontology from ‘folds’—mere relational configurations of a single medium. But in his own work Gadamer emphasises the continuity between Plato’s mathematics and his own hermeneutics of language, using the ‘word’ as a pre-eminent example of inter-relational identity. He writes:

When Plato realised that the word of language is both one and many, he took only the first step... But there is another dialectic of the word, which accords to every word an inner dimension of multiplication: every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which it alone is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. (2004, 454)

Walter Lammi (2008, 57–63) points out that Gadamer also uses Plato’s image of a spinning top—something that seems still to the naïve eye, although in fact is in constant motion. This image symbolises the way in which ideas necessarily incorporate plurality and change according to each context, interpretation and application so that they can constantly give rise to new ideas that are implied in them. The notion draws on Plato’s discussion in the *Phaedo* of the soul as a creature that is surely immortal because just as cold gives way to heat and heat eventually to cold again, death too cannot stay static but must inevitably give rise to its contrary, life. The *Phaedo*’s argument itself does not go far in proving the necessity of an afterlife, but it does point to the way in which ideas are inevitably linked to other dialectically related ideas. So too, the top spins by shifting from one side to another and thus constantly changes within itself, even though to the outward eye it may not appear to be moving at all. We are all part of this conceptual motion which defines all that seems fixed and solitary, and in this Platonic ontology it connects us with the mercurial and complex character of life.

According to this Platonic notion of relative, dynamic identities, ‘the whole idea of grounding itself underwent a total reversal’, allowing the real to be defined in terms of conceptual structures, rather than the substances and forces of physics (2004, 247). The dialectical method by which Plato had developed and repeatedly refined his ideas had gradually revealed this truth. Thus Gadamer celebrated:

...dialectic as the supreme and ultimate demand for an account and a foundation... striving to ground at a deeper level what was proven with the intuitive evidence of mathematical theorems, to reduce surface and figure to number, and that, in turn to its elements, unity and plurality. (1981a, 143)

Where common-sense realism imposed a duality between what is not experience and what is, the dialectical analysis into basic structures of similarity and difference undercut this divide and acknowledged that for us there has only ever been, and only ever can be, the multifaceted medium of ideas of which each individual is a part (1981a, 162–163). In Gadamer’s revisionist view, the ‘dichotomisation of reality into universal and particular, idea and appearance, the law and its instances, needs just as much to be eliminated as does the division of consciousness into consciousness on the one side and its object on the other’ (1976b, 56–57). Subsequent to the mimetic implications of the allegory of the cave in *The Republic* (in which the images seen by unenlightened humans on the walls of the cave are ‘images’ imitating a separate external reality), dialogues such as the *Philebus* and the *Timaieus* are contexts in which ‘Plato replaced *mimesis* with *methexis*’ (2007, 316). Individual beings, dialectically defined, each turn out to be infinite ‘insofar as that which differentiates itself from within itself is not limited from the outside by the boundary of something else from which it differentiates itself, it is infinite in itself’ (1976b, 57).

Far from a ‘two worlds’ philosophy, here was a doctrine that unified mind and world, humanity and nature, universal and particular, the worldly and the eternal. In this genealogy, a profound holism characterised both pre-Socratic and Platonic thought, as later it would characterise Renaissance Humanism, and return in a modified form in phenomenology. This was reflected in Gadamer’s observation that the wisdom (or *sophia*) referred to in the word *philosophia* consists of ‘the true, the *logos* common to all things, the cosmic law, universal ground, and universal meaning, the union of being and thinking’ (1981a, 141). Modern epistemology had lost sight of that more all-encompassing vision of

understanding that was embedded in the earliest forms of philosophy. This classical background could easily go un-noticed: Walter Lammi (2008, 52) highlights the way in which Greek conceptions of ‘life’ frame Gadamer’s inquiries into human experience, and distinguishes the Greek notion of *bios*—the individual defined in terms of what Gadamer calls ‘biographical’ life, from *zoe*—the principle of all life, evoking the ‘zoological’ organic realm in which we participate and in which our own individuality is submerged. Lammi notes that Gadamer’s work on the Greeks expresses sympathy with *zoe* and the chthonic renewal of organic life, growth, death and transformation. In this sense his Plato served the impulses towards life that Nietzsche associated with Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, not the search for a timeless truth associated with Apollo.

Plato’s achievements remained determinative throughout Gadamer’s life to the extent that in 1988 he proclaimed (in a documentary on his thought) that ‘Plato ist mir Leben’. He also reasserted the relevance of Aristotle to philosophical hermeneutics’ worldview, depicting his account of evolving identities (governed by a *telos*) as a contribution to Plato’s insight rather than as a different and alternative system. The Aristotelian analysis of natural change and growth echoed Heraclitus’ affirmation of temporal change, and Hellenic material provided many of the answers for which Heidegger was seeking. He wrote that ‘the hermeneutics I developed... tried to carry forward Heidegger’s turn away from his transcendental account of himself, albeit not in Heidegger’s direction of an inspiration from the poetic mythos of Hölderlin but rather in a return to the open dialectic of Plato...’ (1981a, 56).

There were also hints of the alternative ontology in the mythic imagery of the *Timaeus*. The *chora*, the formless potentiality against the background of which the concrete world exists, questioned the priority of the ‘concrete’ world of everyday objects by positing something prior and enabling. The *Timaeus* also resonated with the methods of physics, which thinks about fundamental reality in terms of mathematics rather than in terms of substances and forces, and recognised that our view is affected by the very viewpoint from which we observe:

...the mathematical construction presented in the *Timaeus* has exercised a powerful fascination... Plato’s play in the *Timaeus* with the way the world was constructed [his *Weltspiel*] has in fact had a continuing influence over the centuries, via Kepler and the Romantic philosophy of nature offered by Schelling—right up to the present time. As quantum physics teaches us

today, it remains a relevant problem in relation to how far mathematical relationships can enable us to get closer to reality. (2007, 403)

In the Platonic picture, then, Gadamer had already at the start of his career encountered an idea that appeared to undercut scholastic substantialism and the assumptions of Newtonian physics.

Gadamer saw the same holism at work in the classical world's popular visual culture, as well as its scholastic philosophies. The Greek religiosity of spirits and gods spanned the realm of ideas and values on the one hand and the natural world on the other. In his study of changing attitudes to art he celebrated the way Greek thought saw material forms as a locus of divinity:

... [later in European civilisation] art was no longer understood as a presentation of the divine in the self-evident and unproblematical way in which it had been understood in the Greek world. There the divine was manifest in the temple, which in the southern light stood out against the natural background, open to the eternal powers of nature, and was visibly represented in great sculpture, in human forms shaped by human hands. (1986a, 6)

This changed with the introduction of Abrahamic ideals of transcendence:

... this became impossible with the arrival of Christianity. The truth of Christianity with its new and more profound insight into the transcendence of God could no longer be adequately expressed within the visual language of art or the imagery of poetic language. For us the work of art is no longer the presence of the divine that we revere. (1986a, 6)

Gadamer suggested that this Greco-Christian heritage has an 'alien character' to both the Greek worldview and the 'philosopher's god' that developed in the course of Western history (1976a, 46–47).¹¹ We were told that there are two separate worlds of eternal and changeful Being, and the Platonism of the *Republic* was brought in to defend a dualist view, contrasting the worldly particulars with the divine ideas. But for Gadamer's

¹¹ The philosophical return to a medial view of the divine can be seen already in the biblical reading of philosophical-theologians like Spinoza, who notes in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* that Spirit—'ruakh' in the biblical text—acts as a form of encompassing divine reality that enters and speaks through the prophets.

revisionist view, Plato stood at the root of a holistic metaphysical tradition that united everything into an eidetic web where all things become a configuration of shared eidetic form within a medial reality that inter-relates all.

4 HUMANISM AND RATIONALISM

According to *Truth and Method*'s historical scheme, the Renaissance heralded a return to these more 'holistic' perspectives after the medieval scholastic 'ontotheological' approach that Heidegger had disparaged. Erasmus, Francis Bacon, Giambattista Vico, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Jean D'Alembert, Auguste Comte and even Descartes flourished in a period when Renaissance Humanism had revived classical interest in a unified naturalistic account of politics, aesthetics, nature and logic, and the more problematic influence of 'Cartesian' scepticism had not yet set in. Furthermore, for some of these thinkers, Kant was yet to separate human critical reason from other forms of more organic activity. This was also a period before the scientific ideal of knowledge required us to 'sever one's bond with life' by doubting the veracity of the world encountered in our experience—a view that Gadamer attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey.¹² In Humanism, according to this narrative, the softer Greek virtues of *historia* and *phronesis* were given their due alongside *scientia* and *sophia*, resulting in a greater appreciation of knowledge 'that it is directed towards the concrete situation [and] must grasp the "circumstances" in their infinite variety'; this way of understanding reality was championed by Vico and led in Bacon's view to 'virtually another way of philosophising' that was quite different from ontotheology's search for universal principles and first causes (2004, 19, 21). Gadamer followed the idea of a *sensus communis*, an acknowledgement of how shared, adaptable meaning-systems shape our sense of the world, as propounded by these thinkers, and saw that although it 'appears here mostly as a virtue of social intercourse... there is nevertheless a moral, even a metaphysical basis implied' (2004, 22).

All of this was taken up by pietist preachers like Friedrich Oetinger (2004, 23–25), for whom truth had to refer to the reality of the real living man and not merely to texts, nor to subjective opinions. Oetinger was an obscure Lutheran minister and who turns up repeatedly in Gadamer's writings and who struck a holistic note in rationalist times: he saw the *sensus communis* 'as the source of all truths, the very *ars inveniendi*, in

¹² Gadamer characterises Wilhelm Dilthey's view of Scherer in this way in 2004, 6.

contrast to Leibniz, who bases everything on a mere calculus metaphysicus'. From it he was led to derive general principles so that 'in contrast to the violent anatomization of nature through experiment and calculation, he sees the natural development of the simple into the complex as the universal law of growth of the divine creation and, likewise, of the human spirit' (2004, 25). Oetinger is also forward-thinking in his approach to epistemology, for he sees how our natural instincts and intuitions inform us of 'the structure of living, organic being in which the whole is in each individual'; in Oetinger's words which Gadamer quotes, 'the whole of life has its center in the heart, which by means of common sense grasps countless things all at the same time' (2004, 25). While it may seem far from the empirical studies of science, or the careful eidetic analysis of Platonism or phenomenology, both the Humanists and the Pietist see everyday experience in its naturalness and richness as something from which we can excavate the principles that define reality itself.

Descartes' contemporary Jacob Böhme produced writings that 'have been influential in all German revolts against the Cartesian tradition' (Paslick 1985, 410) and influenced the conception of Being that Heidegger evoked to his students. Heidegger (1985, 117) wrote that the distinctive quality of Schelling's thought was its 'continuation of an attitude of thinking which begins with Meister Eckhart and is uniquely developed with Jacob Böhme'. Böhme's theosophical work hinted that the mind brings a new dimension to nature, defining the world not as a physical object to be studied so much as 'a life which is the outcome and growth of all lives, and is mixed'. He encouraged his readers to see themselves as a product of the world and thereby as a source of insights into it:

... imagine another life to grow... from all the lives, which, though it had grown from all the lives, was free from all the other lives, and yet possessed all the essential properties of those lives... nothing is strange or difficult to it; for it beholds only its root from which it grew. As a fair flower grows out of the rough earth, which is not like the earth but declares by its beauty the power of the earth... so also is every man. (Böhme 1920, 5–6)

This image of human life as a growth of all lives, yet free and able to possess the properties of other lives, growing in beauty and declaring the power of its source was an idea that fit well with images in Hegel and Spinoza as the 'highest self-consciousness of Spirit' or of divine substance (2000, 279). These accounts portray humans as creatures that grow from

nature, and actualise its latent capacity to see and understand itself and to reflect and amplify it creatively. Far from being subjects whose cognitive limitations block the view of reality-in-itself, we are ourselves an excellent source of knowledge about the reality that we are *part of*. Thus the path to total understanding passes back through the self into nature and thence to the roots of reality. Spinoza famously wrote that in ‘knowing itself and its body under the aspect of eternity, our mind necessarily has knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God and is conceived through God,’¹³ while Leibniz saw minds as positional mirrors of the universe as a whole, informed by a natural harmony with it:

Souls in general are living mirrors or images of the universe of created things, but minds are also images of the Divinity himself, i.e. of God, the author of Nature. They are capable of knowing the system of the universe, and of imitating aspects of it through sketchy constructions of their own, each mind being like a little divinity within its own sphere.¹⁴

These ‘sketchy constructions of their own’, like Spinoza’s ‘third kind of knowledge’, referred to speculative thought, the vital reflective awareness that animates metaphysical thinking. While Spinoza, Leibniz and Böhme are only occasionally mentioned in Gadamer’s writings, nevertheless they provide touchstones for very different ontologies than substance ontology on the one hand and naïve scientific realism on the other. Yet as in his interpretation of Plato, Gadamer valued aspects of their systems that others often elided, and unlike many before him who had sought to build a metaphysics on speculative reason, Gadamer saw that the dynamism and positionality of the very method of speculating must always affect the results. Much rationalism had shied away from this insight. Much scepticism had used it to abandon the search for world-truths. But a better metaphysics must be able to accommodate this way that *method* feeds into *truth*. One key thinker who had tried to incorporate an acknowledgement of eidetic relationality and dynamism into his ontology was Hegel, and it was for this reason that he played such an important role in Gadamer’s attempted ontological ‘restoration’ of metaphysics.

¹³ See Spinoza’s *Ethics* 5: 24 and 30;

¹⁴ See Leibniz in *The Principles of Philosophy Known as Monadology*, 83.

5 HEGEL AND THE COMPLEX UNITY OF ‘SPIRIT’

Hegel forms a crucial bridge between Plato’s analysis of concepts and the modern philosophical traditions of phenomenology, fundamental ontology and transcendental analysis. Gadamer’s understanding of Hegel was derived from extensive close reading, rather than from interpretations projected backward through Kierkegaard or Marx, for instance. His ‘hermeneutic’ Hegel was a surprisingly neo-Heraclitean thinker of Plato’s ideas (1976b, 111). He had asserted that Goethe’s ‘mystery of the organic growth of things’ was sublimated and enshrined in his own philosophy where each form contains within it the dialectical seeds of new developments. It was in part the attempted synthesis of scientific, historical and logical thinking with a religious ontology that led him ‘to make good the organic unity’ (in Gadamer’s terms) of all these things according to a single principle (1981a, 222–223). *Truth and Method* quotes Hegel at length at one point to show how both biological human being and art as a culmination of the forces operative in biology, history and consciousness, all manifest *and extend* the raw resource of nature/spirit:

...just as the girl who presents the plucked fruit is more than Nature that presented it in the first place with all of its conditions and elements—trees, air, light, and so on—insofar as she combines all these in a higher way in the light of self-consciousness in her eyes and in her gestures, so also the spirit of destiny which gives us these works of art... is the spirit of tragic fate that gathers all these individual gods and attributes of substance within one Pantheon, into spirit conscious of itself as spirit. (2004, 160–161)

Overall, the idea expressed in Hegel’s conception of Geist, ‘Spirit’, which attempted a ‘grand synthesis of Christianity and philosophy, of nature and spirit, of Greek metaphysics and transcendental philosophy’, was one before which history should ‘stand full of wonder’ (1981a, 49). This was because it preserved the essential logic of Plato’s dialectic, was continuous with the Cartesian examination of consciousness and anticipated Heidegger’s linguistic mode of thinking about ontology, all whilst taking a vast remit into view ranging from history to logic to art. Hegel added key insights to the hermeneutic world-picture of a *linguistic* reality, here expressed effusively by Gadamer:

Language is not an instrumental setup, a tool, that we apply, but the element in which we live and which we can never objectify to the extent that it ceases to surround us.

This element that surrounds us nevertheless is nothing like an enclosure from which we could ever strive to escape. The element of language is not a mere empty medium in which one thing or another may be encountered. It is the quintessence of everything that can encounter us at all. (1981a, 50)

Here Plato's insight into the participation of all forms, both universal and particular, meets the 'medial' element of 'play', in an attempt at a single all-encompassing concept.

There was a certain caution, however, in Gadamer's treatment of Hegel. Referring to the newer developments in Italian, English and German Hegelianism, he agreed with Benedetto Croce that there was a 'need to discriminate what is living from what is dead in Hegel's philosophy' (2004, 337). He felt that Hegel had misconceived Spirit as being capable of completion in a single comprehensive whole, and he had made this mistake partly because he also over-estimated the self-transparency of which consciousness is capable (an ideal of lucid self-awareness that became obsolete after Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, says Gadamer; 1981a, 49). Hegel was also influenced by the Christian conception of God as an absolute fulfilment of 'omniscient' knowledge; this left 'no question of Hegel discipleship' for anyone who now accepted the necessary finitude of our own access to truth (1981a, 50).

But one of the key lessons that Hegel's philosophy taught the Western tradition—a lesson that Gadamer wants to retain in the foreground of Philosophical Hermeneutics—was the rejection of any Cartesian separation between the observer and the object. This was a fundamental 'subjectivist' mistake that had sent centuries of philosophers down the wrong path, but Hegel had healed the ontological divide between self and other in his comprehensive account, consequently interpreted by many as an 'idealism'. 'What we have here' in Hegel's model, says Gadamer 'is something truly universal in which you and I are the same'.¹⁵ It is a 'genuine universality of spirit' in which the individual recognises itself as 'only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life' (2004, 245), which 'finds

¹⁵ See 'Hegel's Dialectic of Self-Consciousness' (1976a, 72). This showed a strong optimism regarding the ability of the individual to rise above the will, not rejecting it, but channelling it into a level that transcends subjectivity.

itself there and to its satisfaction, knows its singleness was wrong' (1976b, 72).

This unity in turn gives rise to an ethical, and even spiritual, way of 'making oneself at home' in the element of spirit (an expression of Hegel's that Gadamer found 'beautiful'; 1981a, 51). Hegel was distinguished by a genius for expressing the view from within Being; in contrast to Descartes' theatre-like subject, his subject existed as part of the conceptual landscape expressed in all thought. Making oneself at home in that landscape involved both understanding one's situation and actively participating in it with the innate agency that defines our specific nature as conscious beings. Hegel is both most valuable and closest to his flaws when he seeks to explain the capacity of self-conscious beings for understanding themselves as 'spirit conscious of itself as spirit' (2004, 160–161). Gadamer saw this version of phenomenological self-awareness as related to that of Heidegger (1976b, 114), but was careful not to endorse the idea of Absolute Spirit, that is, of the possibility of any completed and all-encompassing totality that dissolves the limits of our native finitude. This is one of the reasons why he used the terminology of 'language' rather than that of 'Spirit':

...in contrast to the concept of spirit that Hegel drew from the Christian tradition, the phenomenon of language has the merit of being appropriate to our finitude. It is infinite as is spirit, and yet finite, as is every event. (1976a, 128)

One of the most important implications of this linguisticity of Being is the way in which it lies open to infinite future development in an 'open dialectic' (an idea shared by Schleiermacher as well as Plato) of continuing movement and relationship that recalls the 'growth' of all living organisms, and all themes taken up repeatedly through history (see Gadamer's essay 'The Heritage of Hegel' in 2007, 327). In the case of human life this capacity for development manifests not only as dynamic interaction, but also as personal growth and creativity—two ideas we will consider in greater depth when we look at art and spirituality.

6 GADAMER AND HEIDEGGER: THINKING *INSIDE* BEING

We come to Heidegger, who is the most obvious source of Gadamer's thinking about Being, but also perhaps the most misleading. Heidegger's thought famously brought what had previously been called 'ontology'

back to the fore in the special formulation he gave it as ‘the question of Being’. This project unfolded in different ways, from *Being and Time*’s programmatic prologue, to the revised accounts in essays such as the *Letter on Humanism*, and the more allusive hints at a different attitude of approach to the whole matter in *Building Dwelling Thinking*. Many of the later essays recommended a way of thinking about Being that was different from previous forms of ontology, acknowledging that we cannot conceptualise it neatly as if from an external God’s eye view, and instead seeking to create a changed way of experiencing it. In this project Heidegger was adamant that the old manner of thinking about the nature of humans, of objects and of Being—found in metaphysics, philosophy and science—was flawed. A new approach would think the problem of ‘beings’ by more direct reference to awareness of humanity’s situatedness as part of Being itself, and with greater precautions against reducing Being itself to our always-limited thought of it.

Gadamer characterised Heidegger’s project as equal parts rejection of the past and invitation to the future, writing:

...the break with tradition that took place in Heidegger’s thought represented just as much an incomparable renewal of the tradition... Would [Hegel’s] final form of Western metaphysics be outstripped by the radicalism with which Heidegger stirred the oldest questions of philosophy to new life? Or would the circle of the philosophy of reflection, which dashed all hope of freedom and liberation, force Heidegger’s thought too back into its orbit? (2007, 347–348)

The puzzle that Gadamer tried to address in essays like ‘Heidegger and the Language of Metaphysics’ was how Heidegger might deal with the ‘the indeterminateness and undeterminableness of what Heidegger calls “being”’ and proceed towards the ‘eschatological self-consciousness’ at which he hinted (2007, 348). Gadamer felt that already *Being and Time* intended something quite different from the ‘horizons of transcendental phenomenology’ with which his predecessors had been concerned, and this becomes increasingly clear in essays like *On the Essence of Truth* where an altogether ‘new concept of “essence”’ was sought (2007, 350). Being could no longer be identified as a contrast to nothingness, for even what is missing reveals its essence perhaps even more lucidly than what is present (Gadamer gives the example of a pocketknife we appreciate most when we need but have lost it; 2007, 351). Essence seemed to be an ultimately

unelidable reality, quite different from merely what is contingently present, for it is always present—though sometimes in forms we do not recognise as such. Gadamer seemed to read his teacher's works as a struggle with the old bad tools of metaphysical thinking whilst continuing the essential journey towards what that thinking tried to capture. For Gadamer we are always encountering the essence of Being precisely in its expressions, uses and active creation through language. Thus he wrote, 'In the up-and-down movement in coming into being and passing away it—is "there."'

Is this the old metaphysics? Or is it the language of metaphysics alone that achieves this continual coming-to-language of our being-in-the-world? Certainly it is the language of metaphysics... Is not language always the language of the homeland and the process of becoming at home in the world? And does this fact not mean that language knows no restrictions and never breaks down, because it holds infinite possibilities of utterance in readiness? (2007, 354)

For Gadamer, Heidegger's critical attempt to 'cancel' the problems of metaphysics was a new step on the path to a better understanding both of Being and of the sense in which we can have that understanding of Being:

For in speaking, there always remains the possibility of canceling out the objectifying tendency of language, just as Hegel cancels the logic of understanding, Heidegger cancels the language of metaphysics, the Orientals the diversity of realms of being,¹⁶ and the poet everything given. But to cancel [*aufheben*] means to take up and use. (2007, 355)

In this, we start to see real ways in which the pupil differed from the teacher. The *Letter on Humanism* pointed to the importance of thinking that does not pander to 'causal', 'calculative', science-led conceptions of existence that are focused on 'explanations and proofs', but which rather preserve humanity's essential nature as the self-reflective 'ek-sistence' of Being (Heidegger 2011, 155). Unlike 'working and effecting' which are activities 'directed toward beings', thinking 'belongs' to Being in a special way—although not simply as the thinking of a person who 'looks out at' Being as onto an object. Indeed, the whole essay emphasises humanity's

¹⁶Gadamer characterises 'Oriental' language as figurative in contradistinction to Indo-European language and so seems to have Chinese languages in mind here.

own inescapable place ‘within’ language as the ‘house’ of Being, such that it is inappropriate to think beings ‘as such’ in the old metaphysical way. Being is ‘not God and not a cosmic ground’ (Heidegger 2011, 159). Rather Being has to be thought in terms of a ‘genitive’ relationship; thought is the thought that belongs to Being:

Thinking... lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being. Thinking accomplishes this letting. Thinking is ‘*engagement par l’Être pour l’Être*... I do not know if it is possible to say both of these (“par” et “pour”) at once, in this way: *penser, c’est l’engagement de l’Être* [thinking is the engagement of Being]. Here the possessive form “de l”...’ is supposed to express both subjective and objective genitives. In this regard ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental ‘logic’ and ‘grammar’ seized control of the interpretation of language. We today can only begin to descry what is concealed in that occurrence. The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation. (Heidegger 2011, 147–148)

We can see why Gadamer was keen to argue that language need not be constrained within the specific subject-object, object-predicate grammar of Indo-European languages. Heidegger had insisted that thought must retreat a step to comprehend its own more basic form:

Thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and dangerous than the ascent... The dominance of that region [of metaphysics] is the mediate and deeply rooted basis for the blindness and arbitrariness of what is called ‘biologism,’ but also of what is known under the heading ‘pragmatism.’ (Heidegger 2011, 173)

The ‘widely and rapidly spreading devastation of language’ must not mislead us, for in our standard use:

Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being. Instead language surrenders itself to us as our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings... We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative business-like way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs. Even the assurance that something

is inexplicable belong to these explanations and proofs. With such statements we believe that we confront the mystery. As if it were already decided that the truth of Being lets itself at all be established in causes and explanatory grounds or, what comes to the same, in their incomprehensibility. (Heidegger 2011, 151)

In this passage all scholastic metaphysics of first causes and ultimate explanations are rejected. So too, philosophy must escape Cartesian assumptions and remember that:

... existence here is not the existence of the *ego cogito*. Neither is it the actuality of subjects who act with and for each other and so become who they are. 'Ek-sistence', in fundamental contrast to every *existentia* and '*existence*', is ecstatic dwelling in the nearness of Being... Because there is something simple to be thought in this thinking it seems quite difficult to the representational thought that has been transmitted as philosophy. But the difficulty is not a matter of indulging in a special sort of profundity and of building complicated concepts; rather it is concealed in the step back that lets thinking enter into a questioning that experiences—and lets the habitual opining of philosophy fall away. (Heidegger 2011, 167)

Being is to be experienced rather than opined upon as the mental projection of individual subjects (a Cartesian model) or a map of causal and grounding relations between individuals (a scholastic model).

Such thinking is rarely achieved, however. It is not enough to adopt 'critical' approaches: 'Philosophy, even when it becomes "critical" through Descartes or Kant, always follows the course of metaphysical representation. It thinks from beings back to beings with a glance in passing toward Being' (Heidegger 2011, 159). Those systematic thinkers still engage in 'technical' thinking without realising that, where Being itself is concerned:

The rigor of thinking, in contrast to that of the sciences, does not consist merely in an artificial, that is, technical-theoretical exactness of concepts. It lies in the fact that speaking remains purely in the element of Being and lets the simplicity of its manifold dimensions rule. (Heidegger 2011, 148–149)

Here the surrounding quality, our embeddedness, the complexity and evocative movements of Being are all betrayed by the reduction effected in scientific ideas of the world. The 'technical-theoretical' approach of science imposes an artificial (*kunstlichen*, or in a more positive reading,

‘artful’) exactness of concepts that does not correspond to the ‘manifold dimensions’ (*mannigfaltigen dimensionen*) of Being. Real thought about it, by contrast, should be rigorous in maintaining sight of the way in which it is determined as a self-reflective activity belonging to Being itself, and does not reduce the manifold character of things.

Gadamer’s task was to take up these hints and develop them into a positive, constructive approach that leads thinkers back to Being in this new way—rather than closing off the whole question (a defeat that some post-Heideggerians seemed happy to accept). In a sense, his work developed a synthesis of Heidegger with his own channelling of Plato, Hegel, Leibniz and others, resulting in a position that was none of those sources alone, but a kind of ‘Gadaggerian’ view (as Saul Kripke’s reworking of Wittgenstein constructed a new ‘Kripkenstein’).

One step was to resist the over-simplification of beings into discrete entities; for this Heidegger’s language of ‘gathering’ was helpful. The essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* can be read as an attempted phenomenology of this right attitude of thinking about Being. The ‘dwelling’ of the title refers directly to the discussion at the beginning of *Letter on Humanism* of language as a dwelling place for humanity, but having begun with reference to actual buildings, these are then repositioned as exemplar instances of the fundamental human experience of being on the earth (Heidegger 2011, 245). His poetic description of a bridge characterises it in terms of its bringing into relation a cluster of environmental features:

The bridge swings over the stream with ‘ease and power.’ It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge expressly causes them to lie across from each other... With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighbourhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream. (2011, 248)

More is added to this picture—the sky, the community of mortals who use it and the ‘haleness’ of the divinities who highlight the blessing it brings. The important idea here is that the bridge is defined as the ‘gathering’ function, rather than as an object, and it evokes a wave of inexhaustible meaning much as poems, words, as all encounters do for Gadamer. All of this helps us to rethink the nature of what we have hitherto called

‘things’: ‘Gathering [*Versammlung*], by an ancient word of our language, is called thing.... To be sure, people think of the bridge as Primarily and properly merely a bridge; after that, and occasionally, it might possibly express much else besides; and as such an expression it would then become a symbol.’ But this is the wrong way of looking at it, for ‘the bridge, if it is a true bridge, is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol’. Heidegger clarifies how we must modify past approaches:

Our thinking has of course long been accustomed to *understate* the essence of the thing. The consequence, in the course of human thought, has been that the thing is represented as an unknown *x* to which perceptible properties are attached. From this point of view, everything *that already belongs to the gathering essence of this thing* does, of course, appear as something that is afterward read into it. (Heidegger 2011, 249)

He goes on to chart and caution against the schematisation of space as ‘spatium’ and then into ‘extension’, the regularised and measurable formulation of space. Such spatial schemes are useful, but it is the dwelling that Heidegger describes as a gathering that is ‘*the basic character of Being, in keeping with which mortals exist*’ (Heidegger 2011, 254).

Having rethought the nature of ‘things’—a project Gadamer built upon in his 1960 essay ‘The Nature of Things and the Language of Things’—the next step was to rethink the ‘world’ of which they are part. To critical eyes, Heidegger’s account of things could seem dangerously close to a kind of idealism, and Heidegger was careful to distance himself from what he called the subjectivism that he saw at the bottom of those positions—as was Gadamer. Heidegger made it clear that humans are not the source or location of beings or of Being. Rather in the last analysis it is always Being that ek-sists through us as a kind of self-reflective ‘counter-throw’ (*Gegenwurf*); we ‘receive’ it. Thus ‘Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being’ (Heidegger 2011, 166–167).

We might ask whether any Being exists that is ‘external’ to thought and the language that is the ‘house of Being’. Certainly Gadamer does not explicitly say that ‘things’ external to the thought of humanity exist or do not exist. But the very language of internality and externality fall out of use here and the division seems to dissolve in a critique of the old notions of subjectivism and objectivism. Some commentators address the issue; George Pattison addresses the charge of idealism in his discussion of intentionality, showing how his early *History of the Concept of Time* touches on

the idea that ‘every lived experience, every psychic comportment, directs itself toward something’. Pattison notes that ‘in order to escape solipsism it is not of itself sufficient merely to observe that when I think I think “of” something, since this gives no guarantee that what I think of really exists outside consciousness’. For him Heidegger’s response is that:

...the customary way of posing the question already involves a misrepresentation of the fundamental issue. We should not begin with the classic scenario of an inner psychic event on one side and a physical object out there on the other. No matter how hallowed by convention this picture may be, the question it suggests is only a derivative, or secondary, issue. (Pattison 2000, 88–89)

In the right comportment (*Verhalten*) towards reality one sees each thing not as an outer or inner thing, but like the bridge, as something that ‘embraces the whole complex of lived experience in which I embrace the [thing] itself’ (Pattison 2000, 88–89). In Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought* he notes that the schematisation of this relation into form and matter—form being seen as the realm of rationality and subjectivity, and matter as the outer unthinkable realm of the object itself, is another powerful narrative that obscures our true experience of the world. Here, what is done in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* with a bridge is done instead with Van Gogh’s famous painting of the shoes. There is no primary ‘thing’ there that owns different properties. Rather there is an aesthetic meaning happening each time we look and that is the real object presented in the painting. The message that he expounds here (and also in *The Origin of the Work of Art*) is that we should direct our attention rather to the *phainomenon* as ‘that which shines forth from itself. It is no mere appearance.’ This is the real, not some shadowy ‘stuff’ that exists ‘outside’. In making this cognitive shift, we become, as Pattison puts it, the ‘phenomeno-logist... one who allows the theoretic gaze to rest upon the phenomenon’ (Pattison 2000, 96). This does not entail a subjectivisation of reality but rather an admission that the phenomena are the reality in which we are, the world that surrounds us, and the true nature of ‘Being’ insofar as we have ever meaningfully conceived of it. Any other scheme of how Being functions through posited causal or other hidden rules is just that—a scheme—of the world as we actually encounter it.

Gadamer also saw idealism, solipsism and the notion of ‘thinking’ as something we can consider wholly in the abstract, as something like a

category mistake that fails to understand the proper nature of its topic. He wrote that:

Fichte took for granted that everything that is supposed to hold true must be brought forth by activity. By this he of course means a mental construction. And this has nothing to do with the absurd notion of solipsism that haunted the foothills of nineteenth-century philosophy. Construction, production, and generation are transcendental concepts describing the inner spontaneity of self-consciousness and its self-unfolding. (2007, 239)

It was essential to him that we find a way to incorporate the immersive reality of thought and language into all thinking, so we can understand it not only as the *content* of every idea but also as the *framework*. But this was part of what the model of ‘language’ promised to do. Gadamer’s essays on Heidegger typically laud his teacher’s contribution at the outset, but often end by pointing beyond him. He found Heidegger to be indebted to—and even at times subsidiary to—previous thinkers in more ways than he would have himself recognised. In a sense, Heidegger’s approach to Being through poetic language still curiously resembled Plato’s analysis of the forms, or Aristotle’s attempt to trace the *telos* moving identity of all things, or Hegel’s analysis of the dialectical ‘inner infinity of reflection’ (1976b, 101–102). In many respects it was the radicality of Gadamer’s attachment to the model of language that Heidegger had introduced—a model that spoke to him through Plato and later hermeneutic traditions—that inspired him to plumb the depths of its aptness to our understanding of Being. He wrote of this later in life in a passage that is worth quoting at length, comparing Heidegger’s approach with his own:

Certainly in these early years, Heidegger never imagined that even to the end of his life he would lack the conceptuality he needed for his life task. He himself expressed this point later on when he spoke of the overcoming of metaphysics or of the ‘language of metaphysics’... He knew that language was like an element that carried us within it, and yet he himself often had to use violence and turn language against itself!... I have not, however, tried to go back [as he did] and trace the steps that thought has taken in the West and then treat this as a wrong path; rather, I have dedicated my own hermeneutical efforts to entering into a conversation with Plato and Plotinus, Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, or whoever, in order to at least partially gain ground in my attempt to find the right language for what I myself was seeking. (2007, 369–370)

For many this will seem a Quixotic search, since it may be the case that all insights into the nature of Being become ideas, and the content all ideas become objectivised in practice—even if one is supposed to keep them alive as a process, an insight or a second-order way of experiencing our experiences, as it were. But Gadamer held out for a constitutive analysis of experience that would reveal truths about Being which we could ‘know’ whilst undergoing their mercurial manifestations—manifestations that were occurring not least in that very oblique and changing knowledge that we try to have of them. To ‘know’ Being is to watch it happening in and around oneself in a certain sort of way. In pursuing this project, he extended Heidegger’s ideas into a more comprehensive and unequivocal approach to the nature of Being, developing his own extension—a ‘Gadaggerian’ ontology of a dynamic, infinite, dialectical web of inter-related Parmenidean and poetically resonant forms. As we will see in the next chapters, it was also this vision that allowed him to see language as a fabric that furnishes our world, our individuality and our destiny as creative contributors to Being itself.

7 CELEBRATING BEING: VITALISM AND PANTHEISM

An interesting issue is raised by the fact that many of the thinkers who touched upon the conception of Being that Gadamer develops saw it as somehow divine. As we observed in looking at Gadamer’s life and cultural milieu, he was a secular man—at least from the perspective of conventional theistic belief and practice. Yet he constantly handled thinkers who aligned Being with immanent divinity; often they did so most emphatically when the distinctive characteristics of dynamic, interconnected creativity were most prominent.

An obvious example was Hegel. His conception of Being was one of the most capacious that Western philosophy has attempted, spanning concrete objects, mental ideas, cultural forms and historical events. Dialectical structure united them all into a speculative unity that in its utmost fullness is possessed only by the divine. Perhaps because of this, some came to see Hegelian thought and other similar systems of varieties of ‘pantheism’, despite Hegel’s rejection of both the doctrine that all individual things are God and the doctrine that individuals do not exist, only God.¹⁷ Subsequent

¹⁷ Hegel gives his own characterisation of these two forms of pantheism (and his qualified rejection of them) in his critique of Spinoza in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

commentators have seen a more complex relation with the ideas circumscribed by pantheism in Hegel and his peers; Gary Dorrien (2012, 13), for instance, describes his thought more along the lines of ‘a relational panentheism... offering an alternative to pantheism *and* the static being-God rejected by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas’. What exactly pantheism is, then, needs to be made clear in thinking about metaphysics of unified, all-encompassing and dynamic Being.

The designation ‘pantheist’ first came into use in regard to debates about the idea of whether a single universal substance or material would be mere matter (pan-*hyleism*) or divine (pan-*theism*). The first use of the word was in Raphson’s 1697 work *De Spatio Realis*, which contrasted a view that all is derived from matter, with the view that both mind and matter consist of some different encompassing eternal substance. John Toland developed the term further in his 1705 *Socinianism Truly Stated, by a Pantheist*, which emphasised the divinely eternal quality of the fabric of the world. Thus early pantheism was originally conceived in opposition to simplistic material ontologies and was part of a broader intellectual movement spanning the thought of Jonathan Edwards and George Berkeley as well as Raphson and Toland, aiming not to divinise nature (a later, Romantic approach), but to subsume material substantialism under ‘a more fundamental principle, namely, the discursive space that defines intelligibility itself’.¹⁸

Stephen Daniels (2001, 182) terms this ‘semantic pantheism’ and contrasts it with what he calls the ‘extensional’ pantheism associated with Spinoza’s single substance and what Raphson would have called the pan-hyletic idea that a single material constitutes everything and is to be equated with God. Toland, in his *Letters to Serena*, would later distinguish between the ‘mere’ materialism he attributed to Spinoza and his own pantheism of ‘active matter’ which interpreted substance in terms of active

¹⁸Stephen Daniel (2001, 181–183) describes the early approach as one that saw a mind-matter-God analysis of things, and the notion of God as a ‘person’ that it entailed, as simplistic: ‘In their view, to speak about God as a particular subject or a spiritual substance or mind is to think about God derivatively. They maintain that to think that God’s identity is intelligible is already to invoke a more fundamental principle, namely, the discursive space that defines intelligibility itself. According to them, this space of intelligibility is much more appropriately called God than a subject whose identity depends on differentiation within that space.’

force as well as spatial extension (a view akin to later ‘vitalism’).¹⁹ His view influenced interpretations of Baruch Spinoza’s idea of God as a universal substance in his 1677 *Ethics* and also informed Gottfried Leibniz’s attempt to draw both material and mental phenomena under a single explanatory frame; in correspondence with Leibniz, Toland had personally emphasised the importance of a unifying philosophy that encompassed all forms of being under a single scheme.

The idea of pantheism was thus born of a time when the connective ground of things was not a single, fixed concept, but encompassed a range of ideas including materialist, vitalist, semantic, divinising and other forms of unified Being. Indeed, the range of different options for thinking about a single unifying reality was more similar to India’s wide range of monisms—of Bhedābheda’s transforming substance, Pratyabhijñā’s dialectically diversifying mind or Bhartṛhari’s pure linguistic conceptuality²⁰—than of the supposedly singular tradition that thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger had attributed to the West. In this milieu, Being was both a thesis about unity and a question about which are the most fundamental features characterising it.

But the label ‘pantheist’ gradually became seen as derogatory to philosophers and heretical to theologians. It had come to be posthumously associated with Giordano Bruno’s vitalistic interpretation of God as a principle at work in the natural universe, for which he was executed in 1600 as a heretic by the church. It was then associated with Friedrich Jacobi’s claim that Spinozism reduced everything—and God as well—to mere ‘substance’. Jacobi’s claim seemed to denigrate God, but did not fully explain to which conception of this universal ‘substance’ it referred. The resulting ‘Pantheism Controversy’ raged in Germany during the late 1700s and early 1800s, and was associated with substantialist and Spinozist debates, and covered with a pall of suspicion, even to twentieth-century Germans of Gadamer’s generation. It eventually became associated with the reductionistic tendencies of scientific materialist and atheist world-views, following Jacobi’s association of pantheism with nihilism (a word he coined in this connection), and Schelling’s concern that it had

¹⁹ See John Toland’s *Letters to Serena* written in 1704, and in particular Stewart Duncan’s (2012) discussion of Toland’s view.

²⁰ See Frazier (2014) on the range of different ontologies classically included within the Indian traditions of ‘monism’.

deterministic implications, failing to separate God from the will of men and the existence of evil.

Gadamer almost never uses the word ‘pantheism’ for any of the thinkers that he studies, perhaps because he is sensitive to the diverse applications of that term and the rhetoric it evoked. Yet he was particularly sensitive to the continuities between his predecessor phenomenologists and the classic medieval theologians, seeing Hegel as continuous with the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, for instance (1976b, 114). He saw Dilthey, in turn, as continuous with Schleiermacher whose ‘pantheistic background is always clearly in evidence’. In one brief passage he characterises pantheism as a view that ‘every act, as an element of life, remains connected with the infinity of life that manifests itself in it. Everything finite is an expression, a representation of the infinite’ (2004, 54). Here it is the connectedness of things, and the way that each unity contains, anticipates or manifests the whole, that distinguishes the metaphysically pantheistic systems that interest him and that often, as in the case of both Hegel and Dilthey, think about reality in terms of experience.

Did Hegel mean that God is no more than human *Geist*? Or did he mean that human ‘mindedness’ is a participation in some other divine life that was above and beyond the human? Was Hegel, as many of his post-Kantian predecessors had done, committing himself to some form of Kantianised Spinozism, claiming to grasp freedom and nature as modes or emanations from some common, although indeterminate, substrate? (Pinkard 2002, 303)

These questions have been answered differently by different interpreters of Hegel. But—transposed into the phenomenological framework—they can also be asked of Gadamer’s thought. How are Being or Language framed here as an ‘ultimate reality’ than which nothing higher can be said to exist (at least in any sense open to human experience), and which possesses classic ‘divine’ qualities of unity, ipseity, infinity, eternity, sovereignty, necessity and omnipresence? To what extent does Gadamer stand in line with the metaphysical views of Plotinus, Eckhart, Leibniz, Hegel or Schleiermacher? Robert Paslick (1985) stresses his contribution to the development of ‘non-dual’ dialectical ontologies that ran through Boehme, Schelling and Heidegger; John Caputo (1989) accuses him of covertly reintroducing Hegelian essentialism into the post-Heideggerian project, and in passing; John Cooper (2006, 218) ranged him alongside

other thinkers as an ‘implicit Panentheist’. There is surely a monistic quality to his hermeneutics of an interconnected medial structure in and through which all things have their co-defined and constantly dynamic existence. But to what is it helpful to position him as a pantheist?

Gadamer speaks of pantheism occasionally and in a number of ways. He aligns Leibniz, Otto Ranke, von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Hegel as pantheistic and criticises the last three for believing that individuality can be ‘pantheistically embraced within the absolute’ in order to achieve a completion, fulfilment and final state of existence—something that he thought was impossible since to exist *is* to expand upon Being (2004, 337). Similarly he sees Leibniz’s ‘windowless monads’ as a pantheism that fails to acknowledge the principle of ‘life’, which is that the individual only ‘becomes what it is by carrying itself out’ (2004, 221). Indeed, Gadamer seems to associate pantheisms with an excessively completionist, totalising, fulfilment and finality-seeking attitude to the world; Ranke’s mistake, for instance, is to think that ‘a universal and yet immediate participation in, a co-knowledge of, the universe’ can be fully and finally achieved. Yet Ranke’s famous remark that ‘he would like to extinguish himself’ should be rightly understood as pointing to what Dilthey saw more acutely, that ‘this self-extinction is in fact the expansion of the self to make a universe within’ (2004, 207), where the universe envisioned is itself complex and evolving. Gadamer affirms those historians for whom it is life itself that acts through history, expressing itself in each of us. But this must remain always mediated in the particulars and perspectives of history. He warns us against those pantheists and monists who seek a more ‘immediate’ unity, like Ranke, whose Faustian historical aspirations serve as a cautionary tale:

For Ranke, self-extinction is still a form of real sharing. We must not understand this concept of sharing in a psychological and subjective way but in terms of the underlying concept of life. Because all historical phenomena are manifestations of universal life, to share in them is to share in life. This gives the word “understanding” its almost religious tone. To understand is to participate immediately in life, without any mediation through concepts. Just this is what the historian is concerned with: not relating reality to ideas, but everywhere reaching the point where “life thinks and thought lives.” In being understood, the phenomena of historical life are seen as manifestations of universal life, of the divinity. Understanding and penetration mean, indeed, more than a human cognitive achievement and more than merely the creation of an inner universe—as Dilthey, contradicting Ranke,

reformulated the ideal of the historian. It is a metaphysical statement, which brings Ranke very close to Fichte and Hegel, when he says: "The clear, full, lived insight is the very pith of being made visible and transparent to itself." (2004, 207–208)

This, says Gadamer, is essentially a hunger for Hegel's Absolute in another form. What mars it is that it fails to respect what the 'play' analogy emphasises, which is the dynamic element, seen in the fact that the unity is constantly being remade and can never exist without arranging itself from one perspective and telos, or another. The historian must remember that 'the whole continuity of universal history can be understood only from historical tradition itself', which means that 'history is not only not at its end, but we its interpreters are situated within it, as a conditioned and finite link in a continuing chain' (2004, 196–197). Pantheism always risks committing to a too-complete, finished, total and singular whole.

Yet Gadamer also sees that pantheistic systems are on the way to a correct appreciation of Being, particularly where creative participation are part of the 'life' of the whole. He writes, for instance, of Schleiermacher's influence on Dilthey that 'the pantheistic background is always clearly in evidence. Every act, as an element of life, remains connected with the infinity of life that manifests itself in it. Everything finite is an expression, a representation of the infinite' (2004, 55).

In effect, the broad term 'pantheism' is used in such a range of ways that it must be hermeneutically unpacked in order for his position to be clarified. One can distinguish at least three possible 'pantheisms' (in the senses in which Gadamer uses the term) that are relevant here: (a) *dialectical pantheism*, the idea that all things are related in such a way that they constitute or are necessary to each other's identities and are in some sense 'one'; (b) *medial pantheism*, the view that all things, including thought and matter, are actually ontologically united as forms of a single medium, whether that medium is a kind of encompassing substance, or a vital energy, or a 'semantic pantheism' of shared structure; (c) *divinising pantheism*, an approach holding that some kind of ontological ultimacy (often aligned with ideas of the 'divine' or 'sacred') should be recognised as being present in the world that we experience as Being—and present even in us.

Each of these positions is found in some way in Gadamer's ontology. All things (that we know or can know) are entangled in their nature; this

kind of unity has obvious connections with Hegel's dialectical identity, but is also seen in Schleiermacher's idea of the individual:

...Schleiermacher's presupposition, namely that all individuality is a manifestation of universal life and hence 'everyone carries a tiny bit of everyone else within him, so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself.' Thus he can say that the individuality of the author can be directly grasped 'by, as it were, transforming oneself into the other'. (2004, 188)

For Gadamer there is also a unity of constitutive nature that spans all phenomena; all identities are constituted of the same universal underlying features of unity and plurality, participation and differentiation, and dynamic relational structure. This point, as we have seen, he particularly learns from Plato. Finally, the world of experience possesses qualities of unity, universality, fundamentality and creativity that are classically taken to characterise what is ontologically highest, and Gadamer does occasionally make this point in relation to his own ontology—as we will see in the chapter “Spirituality: The Self in the Whole” when we look at his version of hermeneutic spirituality or religiosity. Yet his picture of Being contrasts with crude substance pantheism of the kind that Heidegger rejected and which we (arguably) see in Spinozist pantheism. Instead of a hylomorphic ‘stuff’, existence is more like a web of relations in which each thing's identity is triangulated and yet constantly transformed.

8 THE SELF AND THE NATURE OF METAPHYSICS

One challenge posed by such holistic conceptions of Being is the need to situate the individual self within the whole that constitutes yet exceeds us. The question for us as conscious beings is how to comprehend our position and manage our agency as part of the life of the world that enfolds us constantly. Indeed, since the whole could not be simply known or experienced in some objective totality, one challenge was to give account of how the self's knowledge and its experience of reality need to be redefined. This had long been a concern in philosophy, and as one of his sources Gadamer used Hegel's notion of *Bildung*—which he understood as creating a person with the ‘power of keeping the manifold points of view present to the mind’ in a detached way that enables it to transcend its own perspectives and preferences. Through this process of Being-informed self-understanding and development, experience itself ‘moves by

expanding into the manifoldness of the contents or as the continual emergence of new forms of mind' (2004, 349); self and world both evolve in co-determination. Gadamer agreed with this possibility that we can make ourselves open to 'other more universal points of view', but differed from Hegel in insisting that '*Bildung* always contains a residue of one's own initial standpoint'.²¹ Knowledge then was both possible and transformative of our own ego, but also always inflected by our subjective starting point.

This issue of how we can understand the world around us, granted our perspectival and interactive embeddedness in it, had larger implications for what metaphysics can be and for understanding how metaphysical knowledge is not just something we possess. Rather it is an ongoing *practice* that plays out in our lives. We can never have some total non-perspectival description of all reality: but what Grondin calls 'universal' knowledge can be vouchsafed insofar as we understand what we can encounter of the nature of the phenomenon that happens around and in us at all times. This nature can be discerned precisely through hermeneutics as 'a universal aspect of philosophy' calibrated to analyse the 'fundamental constitution of Being'. We can even *perceive* this nature directly when we observe it taking place through us, noting its dynamic growth and far-reaching connectedness (although this does not mean that our account of it is comprehensive, or uninflected by our own position). Grondin points out that Gadamer's assertion towards the end of *Truth and Method* that 'understanding occurs in interpreting' applies to ontological understanding, as much as to any other knowledge (Grondin 2022, 25, 30). In short, to know Being is to perceive its live fabric moving around us, seeing how it works, as we interpret the world into new realisations that themselves augment it.

For Gadamer, this idea lay at the root of the Hegelian dialectic, insofar as it sought to understand the way in which finite individual parts constitute the nature of Spirit as more than merely a sum of separate items. All is changed by every 'part', and when this dialectical realisation of one's place in things is achieved, 'we have now entered the homeland of truth' so that the world 'is no longer the foreign country of otherness into which consciousness seeks to penetrate'; rather, we feel that:

²¹ See Odenstedt (2008, 560), on the ways that Gadamer draws on Hegel, but also resists his idea that the cultivated mind achieves a detached view.

Now, in contrast, consciousness as self-consciousness is a native of the land of truth and is at home in it. For one thing, it finds all truth in itself. For another, however, it knows that it embraces the entire profusion of life within itself. (1976b, 59)

This is essential to the attitude that his ontology is meant to inspire in the person who adopts it. There is a kind of ‘letting go’ to this realisation that we both actively play and are passively played by Being; as Ingrid Scheibler (2001, 169) puts it, ‘we are part of a game that is being played with us far more than we are masters of our own fate’. In places he uses the imagery of a festival; when we are ‘in’ a festival we are at once aware of it, and also feel it around us as something we are ourselves helping to create. Artworks similarly become themselves always anew—as experiences rather than as objects—through our very consideration of them. Such examples help to correct the objectifying tendencies of philosophy’s traditional propositional discourse. They also remind us that metaphysics is perhaps as similar to an art experience as it is to the making of a map or inventory of things. One could even see the truth-experience as a kind of ecstatic practice:

A spectator’s ecstatic self-forgetfulness corresponds to his continuity with himself... For [in art] it is the truth of our own world—the religious and moral world in which we live—that is presented before us and in which we recognise ourselves... the absolute moment in which a spectator stands is both one of self-forgetfulness and of mediation with himself. What rends him from himself at the same time gives him back the whole of his being. (2004, 125)

We cannot escape the finitude and localness of our situation, but we can sublimate it into that larger world-process of which it is a part, making room within ‘that peculiar intimacy of one’s own inner life’ for what Hölderlin called ‘thoughts belonging to the shared spirit’ (Gadamer 1996, 151). In his search for a new form of the conception of the *holē ousia* or ‘whole of Being’ understood as a reality ‘in which we are and who we ourselves are’ (1992, 190), Gadamer drew on these and other precedents. As we will see in the next chapter, he implied that what is good for a given individual is determined by the context of systemic thriving in relation to that thing’s goals; in this it was similar to Plato’s account of health as ‘that process

which, by virtue of its self-contained and self-producing living power, finds its place within the totality of nature' (1996, 88). But even this construction of the individual life, and of ethics, is based upon Gadamer's ontological redefinition of individuals as functions within a larger and dynamic whole that can never exhaustively be known or completed.

9 GADAMER AND POSTMODERNISM

Gadamer's more systematic claims about reality, such as we have highlighted here, might seem to confirm his critics' worry that he had failed to live up to the radicality of the modern critique of metaphysics. He seems strikingly different from his more classically postmodern contemporaries. Ricoeur's post-Heideggerian hermeneutics explicitly made room for a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', retaining its scepticism that any claim to truth could have an objective and unmotivated character. Gadamer thought about subjective motivations in positive terms, but Ricoeur sought to honour the warning given by Freud, Nietzsche and others that ideas all serve ulterior motives—regardless of their truth-status. Thus on Ricoeur's reading, any 'disclosure of the fore-structure of understanding' that Gadamer might achieve must arguably further distance itself from such truths (see Helenius 2022). Derrida, and Derrideans like John Caputo, also expressed a concern about Gadamer's failure to achieve sufficient radicality, and Evink (2022, 304) suggests that 'the main difference between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction will be found in their understanding of metaphysics and in the status they give to conceptual philosophical thinking and writing'. For many, Gadamer already seems too metaphysical to be a successful heir of phenomenology and the critiques expressed in postmodernism.

Yet Gadamer expressed his own counter-concern about postmodernism's attempt to elude the language of truth, description of reality or assertion of what prerequisites must obtain for even our prejudices and powers to be able to distort truth. When Derrida accused him of remaining within the 'language of metaphysics', Gadamer questioned whether it is really valid to set up an ill-defined notion of assertive language and then disqualify anything that seems, even vaguely, to fall within that category; in his famous 1989 debate with Derrida he insisted that 'this is a poor, inexact expression. There is no language of metaphysics.'²² This was

²² See his comments as reproduced in Michelfelder and Palmer (1989, 121).

couched within his overall response to Derrida: the kind of ‘metaphysics’ he was doing applied to all action, insight and communication, even to the critical act of rejecting metaphysics.

One attempt to escape metaphysics that he found problematic was Derrida’s suggestion that the *chora* in Plato is an idea that might escape onto-theology and real presence. As a concept in Plato’s *Timaeus* that seems to emphasise space, enabling and formlessness, rather than limit, constriction and specificity, the *chora* seemed to point beyond Being as we usually conceive of it. Gadamer considered this reading, but argued that there are more fundamental insights that apply even to this primal space. The indeterminate dyad—the basic structure of identity in which something is dialectically defined according to what it is not—still determines the essence of the *chora*. So there too we find the principles of Being as differentiation, participation, structure, dynamism, necessarily manifested; indeed, the idea of a *chora* is another ‘play’ of themes in the constant creative upwelling of language. Here Derrida rightly points to certain themes—such as pure prerequisite possibility, the fore-structure of fore-structure, as it were. But from Gadamer’s perspective, this is not a move away from meaning, but a move to new meaning of a particularly large and dialectically insightful kind. As Richard Palmer says,

...[Derrida’s] trace does not lead us to the beyond of the One or to the Divine. What it leads to is necessity—based on mathematics. He says that intertextuality leads one in many directions; on the other hand, interpretation is a game in which one has to go along with the meaning in which one participates. Gadamer complains that the richness of going along with a meaning and participating in it are not found in deconstruction, however much it may open up new horizons.²³

In the *Timaeus*’ images of ‘world-soul’ situated in the primal space of the *chora*, Gadamer agreed that there are proleptic hints that reality should not be defined as a fixed, objective, fundamentally material sphere. He rejected any mistakenly ‘substantialist’ interpretation of the *chora* as a kind of material that takes on different forms, as Plato’s analogies with gold and perfume might seem to suggest:

²³See Richard Palmer’s introductory comments to Gadamer’s essay ‘Hermeneutics Tracking the Trace [On Derrida]’ in 2007, 375.

...both of these examples cause one to think more in terms of the concept of matter, of the hyle of Aristotle, of an ultimate matter that has no formal determination at all, rather than the space that creates a place for something [den Platz machenden Raum]. Certainly the chora that takes in everything, as it says in 50d, is itself expressly called 'formless,' like the formless dough out of which the baker or potter would make something. Or again, this chora is said to be like the mother or the wet nurse who first carries and nourishes the self-forming, living thing—but this is a completely different realm of ideas. (2007, 399)

In fact, the primal space is not a stuff, but instead it 'is positioned in the middle between being and becoming and is presented as that which mediates' (2007, 401). For Gadamer, Derrida misses this since he reads the *chora* as part of a cluster of 'dazzling allusions' connected with other tropes of the 'beyond' in Plato:

...since in the chora in the *Timaeus* there seems to be a beyond, a beyond that is neither sensible nor mental, Derrida believes he recognizes in the *Timaeus* the same beyond that in the *Republic* is introduced as that which is beyond being. In doing so Derrida links this [view of metaphysics] with the late Platonism of the early Christian period... Derrida thinks he can call all three as witnesses to his same anti-metaphysical meaning, and in this way he can pick up on a threefold trace. For in all three directions of meaning something ungraspable is shown: the good as the beyond of being, the beyond that grants space or place, and the beyond of the divine one. In his view, these three form a many-leveled ensemble. (2007, 401)

Derrida's ambition to find something mystically 'beyond' is essentially mythical thinking rather than philosophical thinking, however—seeking an image that will support a deconstructive attitude of mystery, without actually asserting any pre-worldly reality or fact. But for Gadamer, what the text actually leads to is a necessary conceptual structure that defines all being and that is most obviously expressed in mathematics:

What it leads to is a necessity—and there can be little doubt what necessity is being referred to here: it is the necessity in mathematics. Certainly the structure of Euclidean geometry is something astonishing and wonderful... What kind of puzzling rationality of a third dimension is this, Plato asks, that allows the space-giving [the chora] from within itself only these five complete bodies [of geometric form] that all fit perfectly into the complete sphere of being? What limits are shown here, and at the same time what

concession is shown by necessity... Even the demiurge can change nothing about this, because so much necessity is involved in it. (2007, 402)

Close reading of Plato's account of the *chora* shows that it is not a hazy mystery, but is in fact surprisingly concise—both in the nature of what it creatively facilitates and in its apparent constraints. As with the fabric of mathematics, the nature of existence seems to allow for infinite possible manifestations, but this does not mean it allows for all and any manifestations, for the conditions we observe set hard-edged limits to what is possible; just those conditions are a major part of what Plato aimed to discover through his dialogues. Philosophical haziness, Gadamer implies, is not an adequate alternative to concise constitutive analysis. Nor does the critical recognition of hidden motives and traces of power behind all our statements entail any denial of their truth, or their potential for commensurately creative and positive elements.

10 GADAMER AND IMMANENCE: DELEUZE AND BADIOU

After all, Gadamer has not been alone in trying to defend the use of Platonic, Hegelian, Spinozistic or other insights to craft a revised version of 'metaphysical' truth. Other post-Heideggerians have tried to 'to reorient oneself in... cosmo-theological space' as Caputo suggested, by rejecting old ideas of transcendence and returning to a focus on what is 'deep down in the depths of our experience'. The result of moves such as these has been a wave of 'philosophers of immanence', developing theories of 'post-transcendence', to borrow a phrase coined by John Caputo and Michael Scanlon (2007). The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, writing only a little later than Gadamer, reclaimed Spinoza, Leibniz and Henri Bergson to similarly go beyond the scepticism about metaphysics found in Nietzsche and Hume. Positioned as a younger man somewhat distanced from the German tradition's scepticism towards traditional philosophy, Deleuze was even more explicit about his desire to reinvigorate the project of ontology; he proclaimed himself a 'pure metaphysician'.²⁴ In many ways his ontology echoes those associated with the later Heidegger and of Gadamer in that it seeks to escape the polarity of subject and object, stressing instead the pure plane of empirical phenomena that is absolutely immanent in that it is 'in itself... not in something, *to* something; it does

²⁴ See Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Arnaud Villani (2007, 42).

not depend on an object or belong to a subject' (Deleuze 2001, 26). Thus at the beginning of *Pure Immanence* he describes an *immanent* form of reality—what he calls a 'transcendental field':

What is a transcendental field? It can be distinguished from experience in that it doesn't refer to an object or belong to a subject (empirical representation). It appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self. (Deleuze 2001, 25)

His phenomenological reduction here strips back the subject-object intentional focus, and with it is left with a kind of raw 'impersonal consciousness', a field that cannot be stripped away by any reduction. It is within the potentiality of this field that all identity and difference (whether of objects, categories or forces) exist as two equal poles that underpin form, change and the world as we know it. In texts like *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze's model distinguishes itself from past metaphysics by stressing difference rather than identity, variation rather than continuity over time, the multiplicity that characterises all things rather than the nominal 'oneness' by which we assign things a particular identity. Thus the 'material' of which this pure empirical field is constituted is pure 'becoming', the 'increase or decrease in power (virtual quantity)' (Deleuze 2001, 25–26). This is an idea not far removed from Plato's relativisation of the Forms in the *Parmenides*. Further, his ontological reduction reveals not substance, as in Spinoza, nor the idealism of a transcendental subject, but instead pure empirical phenomena without reference to any reality that might be considered external—in this sense, he notes that is a 'univocal' ontology.

In *Thousand Plateaus*, he and Félix Guattari described the multiplicity that each thing is in its connection to all others, and—much like Gadamer's assimilation of the individual to a facet of an overarching dynamic relational play—they argue that the old unities such as people, objects and ideas are actually complex phenomena subject to 'flight, movement, deterritorialisation and destratification' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). A person is many thoughts and memories over time and many molecules passing in and out of the 'body'; the nation of France is innumerable trees and plants, people undergoing different events, and territories arbitrarily assembled; the idea of 'freedom' is a historically constructed concept meaning many things through different contexts and applying to each

individual and community with new meanings, always influenced by its opposition to conceptions of restriction, of conscience, of expression, or fairness or respect or rights, etc. Multiplicity characterises all things, and hermeneutic attention to context, history, relations, contrasts; one's own limited, conflicted, transforming perspective is needed in order to understand any given thing. In this sense Deleuze can even be seen as a bridge between the hermeneutics of Gadamer and of that of Foucault by whom he was influenced. Indeed, he described the proper activity of philosophy as a necessarily historical methodology that 'rather than repeating what a philosopher has to say, has to say what he must have taken for granted, what he didn't say but is nonetheless present in what he did say'—a statement that almost serves as a description and vindication of Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to philosophy (Deleuze 1997, 136). He himself applied this approach in *Difference and Repetition* which approaches the problematic roots of philosophy's focus on representation as a kind of 'detective novel' (Hughes 2009, 24), although his way of understanding philosophical ideas was accused of being insufficiently critical, much as Gadamer *seemed* to make it harder to escape the conditions of the past. One might also note that Deleuze's approach was read by Alain Badiou (2000) as a kind of monism.

Yet both Deleuze and Gadamer embraced the challenge of constructing an ontology where we can think of things in new terms grounded in relation and change. Where Gadamer uses the analogies of the 'play' ontology, or Celan's idea of the 'breath-crystal' of poetic language to evoke this structure of multiplicity, Deleuze and Guattari also used the analogy of the rhizome—a biological form like a tuber that contains unrestricted multiplicitous future development contained within itself and able to reconnect with and decentre the origin (unlike the 'root' which insists on a constant symmetrical structure of splitting into two and remains dependent on its origin-point). The rhizome expresses a number of key features that make it an apt model for an alternative metaphysics. One is the radical multiplicity of possible structures of meaning that can be figured and reconfigured according to 'principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). Another is the internal multiplicity of each identity so that no centre can be found for any individual person or thing. As they put it:

A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature... Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first: 'Call the strings or rods that move the puppet the weave. It might be objected that its multiplicity resides in the person of the actor, who projects it into the text. Granted; but the actor's nerve fibers in turn form a weave...' An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8)

All of this is subject to an innately dynamic creativity, for 'a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). So too no account of any multiplicity or of its most basic principles is constitutive; there are always multiple possible configurations of the same unity; they can be variously 'mapped' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 13). This model is contrasted with the 'sad' image of a tree of meanings that one must follow in a linear, controlled fashion; Instead, this ontology involves 'acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment'. This image complements Gadamer's emphasis on the past that furnishes each starting point, offering a renewed emphasis on present possibility and future development.

Here we see another post-Heideggerian ontology of 'assemblages' of diverse constituents in a 'multiplicity [that] is taken up in a structure' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). Deleuze even draws on the example of different arts to analyse that structure; where Gadamer observes that play includes the play of notes in music, so Deleuze writes that 'when Glenn Gould speeds up the performance of a piece, he is not just displaying virtuosity, he is transforming the musical points into lines, he is making the whole piece proliferate' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). Yet alongside this substantive agreement, a difference in emphasis can be found in their views of meaning. The Deleuzian 'rhizomatic' model might seem opposed to traditional genealogical analysis in terms of 'trees' that chart a

determining path of meanings that accumulate through history—an approach associated with Gadamer’s notion of effective historical consciousness, in which present truths appear determined in a linear causality by their past sources.

By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the constant plurality and potentiality of meanings to be developed in quite different ways, outstripping their apparent history. But their model is best likened with Gadamer’s models of poetic meaning, and the ‘festival’ structure of art, where a vast potential ‘web’ of meaning becomes open to view as something to which we are always already necessarily contributing. There is a greater recognition of the potential for power-based distortions in their work. Whereas Gadamer’s *sensus communis* gives the air of being organic and basically democratic, and a poetic interpretation tends to stay more open and egalitarian, by contrast Deleuze and Guattari note that ‘there is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). Consequently Deleuze adopts a cautionary tone: one should always keep in mind elided potentialities as well as present realities. This is a conscious echo of the critical attitude he attributed to Spinoza and Nietzsche—an attitude of ‘critical and deconstructive’ power that is ‘without equal’, but which nevertheless always springs ‘from affirmation, from joy, from a cult of affirmation and joy, from the exigency of life against those who would mutilate and mortify it. For me’ he wrote, ‘that is philosophy itself’ (Deleuze 2004, 174).

In further works, Deleuze pressed his reading of Henri Bergson into service (Deleuze 1988a) and sought to redeem Spinoza by refuting the charge of pantheistic substantialism and attributing to him a purely modal philosophy of ‘difference’ and ‘univocity’ (Deleuze 1988b). Deleuze’s student Alain Badiou has continued the development of Pythagorean-Platonic, Spinozistic-Hegelian insights. Badiou reads Gadamer as having abandoned the idea of truth and turned instead to the supposedly non-philosophical field of poetic exegesis,²⁵ whereas for him it was not poetry but mathematics that offered the purest analogy for the structure of truth. Drawing on the mathematical notion of ‘sets’ in *Being and Event*, Badiou

²⁵ Badiou writes that not only had the French thinkers Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze all abandoned philosophy for cultural analysis, while ‘Gadamer’ had turned merely to the interpretation of Celan’s poetry (see Badiou 1999, 28).

too tries to express a unity that is, on closer inspection, a structure of multiplicity among multiplicities. But perhaps a more significant feature of his work in relation to Gadamer is the way in which he pressed this analogy into service to illuminate the question of the nature of the whole of things, and our attempts to conceptualise it. Set theory implies that there can be no set of all sets, and accordingly Badiou rejects the Leibnizian, Spinozistic or Hegelian idea that the completed totality of the whole can be equated with God. The idea of the infinite, he asserts, must undergo ‘laicisation’—secularisation so that we are able to appreciate the whole as an incomplete-infinity (like Gadamer’s Hegelian ‘bad infinite’) without requiring that it become or take the place of the divine.²⁶ In a letter to the philosopher Peter Hallward, Badiou defines the religious, in contrast to his own atheist philosophy, as concerned with what is ‘inaccessible’, and it becomes important to him to suggest a way of conceiving infinity that neither forecloses it as a complete concept, nor reifies and mythologises it as something semi-mystical, nor even elevates it into something inaccessible to human thought and thus ‘transcendent’. Hallward notes that Badiou’s theory that infinity is not an extent but rather a ‘subtraction’ or ‘withdrawal’ from the possibility of complete articulation of every whole seeks to escape what he sees as religious conceptions of the infinite:

Whether this withdrawal refers to a transcendent and thus inaccessible presence beyond presence, to a One-beyond-being, or instead to a pure subtraction from every category of presence, is what distinguishes philosophy proper from the religious alternative to philosophy. (Hallward 2003, 5)²⁷

In this sense, Badiou replaces the religious ‘sublime’ experience of seeing the whole, with what he sees as the secular alternative of seeing the infinite as an unlimited field of possibility stretching to the horizon without ever being completed. He is even sceptical of Nietzsche’s observation that for the human in the world, as for a ship upon the sea, ‘there is nothing more awe-inspiring than infinity’ (Nietzsche 2001; fragment 124). Here his roots in French debates about ‘laïcité’ or secularity provides an

²⁶ See Badiou’s development of the idea and implications of set theory as a rough framework for understanding multiplicity as constitutive of entities, and particularly explores the ‘inexistence of the whole’ as a resistance of the old fascination with the whole as a reified and mythologised ‘divine’ entity.

²⁷ See Hallward (2004) and also Hallward’s discussions of them in *Badiou: Subject to Truth* (2003).

interesting contrast with Gadamer's own background of German liberal reconceptions of the divine in terms of 'spirit', 'vitality', 'word'. Again, writing with a more polemical tone, Badiou emphasises the challenge of expressing an ontology that resists past problems of either divinising Being or becoming disappointed with its 'merely' immanent reality. But Gadamer, in his usual re-appropriative way, borrows both secular and theological concepts that express the positive features of infinity, growth, potentiality, mutuality and future-facing wholeness. As ever, his fundamental mood is constructive rather than critical.

Nevertheless, despite such subtle differences, Gadamer, Deleuze and Badiou together all provide ways of channelling the post-Kantian, post-Nietzschean, post-Heideggerian heritage towards new forms of metaphysics, based on different kinds of universal truth. They share an interest in what we might call 'transcendental' ontologies rooted in structural analysis of the way that empirical phenomena (constituted here of the structures that define conceptuality itself) are necessarily constituted. As Grondin (2024, 125) says, these are thinkers in a sub-tradition of Western thought that wishes 'to escape the Nominalist and constructivist understanding of language that Gadamer stigmatizes in the last section of *Truth and Method*... [seeing in] language a manifestation of Being itself'. Such views acknowledge that every manifestation of Being is 'distinguished by its perspectival view of reality', like Leibniz's monads; yet 'all these visions, in their infinite variety, remain visions of one and the same universe' like Leibniz's 'beautiful image of a city considered from different angles'.

Seen in line with this alternative tradition of ontology, Gadamer can be seen as a metaphysician of 'pure immanence'. The insights of older thinkers like Plato find new expression in this account of ever-manifesting, dynamic, multifaceted, interdependent, meaning-filled Being. Like the 'metaphysics of Light of Platonism' (Grondin 2024, 127), Böhme's life containing all lives and constituted from them, Hegel's 'garden' of dialectic where each thing contains a fecund inner creative potential or Leibniz's mirror-world where each mirror consists in an outward-looking infinity, Gadamer's ontology was not the kind of thing that Nietzsche characterised as a 'mummified' onto-theology of fixity, finality and dead, wholly knowable Being. Rather it tries to express an ontology built from the vital, interdependent, creative relations that shape all things.

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DEVELOPMENTS



Goodness: Beauty, Ethics and Value

Abstract Gadamer is known for his writings on aesthetics, health and pedagogy, but few think of them as constituting a larger axiological project of exploring the nature of the Good. This chapter explores his often-implicit ethics and value theory, and the way it tries to resolve the schism between facts and values, Being and the Good. It looks at his dynamic, transformative account of value (again drawing on the analogy with play), and see how it reveals a human desire to be *changed* by immersive experiences of value, unlocking new degrees and forms of holistic flourishing. This view has connections to Plato, Aristotle and the idea of a hidden harmony in all things, and it is demonstrated in his accounts of beauty and physical health. Yet while it may seem to favour a conservative leaning towards the status quo, we see how—contrary to some critiques of Gadamer—it actually values fruitful disruptions, challenges, diversity and new growth.

Keywords Ethics • Value • Health • Aesthetics • Beauty • Harmony

When we find someone transformed we mean precisely this, that he has become another person. (2004, 111)

When Gadamer directed his attention to the topic of beauty in his celebrated 1977 essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, he was turning back

from decades of fighting over *Bedeutung* and *Sprache*, meaning and language, to the arts which had sustained his own sense of the good for half a century. He reminisced at ninety-six that:

I came out of a natural scientific milieu but from the beginning I was drawn to art, although art did not play any special role in my parents' home or in my relationships in school at the time. Nevertheless, I found that I was very receptive to great poetry from very early in my life. (2007, 411)

Gadamer's life spanned the whole long stylistic arc from nostalgia for poets like Hölderlin, through the challenge of symbolists like Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gustav Meyrink, Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George, to the revolutionary styles of full-scale modernism. He underwent the First World War's reversal of mood, the first hints of minimalist architecture and the revolutionary 'situation of extreme modernity' exemplified in Cubism (1986, 8–10), and artists in diverse media such as Bertolt Brecht (1986, 9), Pablo Picasso (2007, 330) and T.S. Eliot (2007, 351). His own love of verse was first explored within poetry circles of men and women, Jews, Christians and atheists who together read hermetic poems that seemed to invite wide-ranging readings. To some extent the arts had come to serve as a kind of spiritual practice for Gadamer's generation of middle-class, agnostic youth, providing visionary moments of illumination and a sense of like-minded community. Importantly, they were also associated in German culture with *Bildung*, the 'upbuilding' of oneself, and took on a role in the postmodern secular worldview of thinkers like Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Lyotard and also surely Ricoeur and Rorty as 'a source of moral value' with a 'redemptive function' that operated in lieu of religion.¹ Art, then, held a special place as a modern tool for achieving joy and solidarity, enlightenment about self and world, and personal ascent towards higher ways of existing.

1 A GADAMERIAN ETHICS?

Indeed, he seemed much more interested in art than in ethics. As Richard E. Palmer noted in his preface to Gadamer's essay 'On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics', Gadamer seems to have tried to address the possibility of deriving an ethics from his position, perhaps modelling

¹ See, for instance, Devereaux (1991).

himself on Heidegger's turn to ethics in *Letter on Humanism*. His approach was to reaffirm 'the enduring value of an ethics based on ethos, as Aristotle's was, in contrast to the duty ethics put forward in Kant's transcendental philosophy', and Palmer takes this as 'a lifetime of commitment to Aristotle's *Ethics*' based on which he developed 'an ethics relying on the Aristotelian ethos of finite human institutions and training, without recourse to transcendental subjects or subjectivity'.² Indeed, Gadamer might be seen as essentially an Aristotelian, but this misses much of what is novel in his thought where he also drew on Plato, and derived original analyses of health, beauty and well-being.

A helpful historical framework for understanding Gadamer's relation to ethics is as part of a generation of authors who felt that the old project of building a global moral code on objective principles had failed and that art offered a new hope to 'derive moral values from an extra-moral source'; Mary Devereaux (1991, 59) aligns him with Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Jean-Francois Lyotard in this respect, although she is sceptical that a positive morality can be found in this way, defining moral value as something that must act cohesively 'to our benefit' (1991, 71). Others have questioned whether Gadamer really saw the good for humans in such simplistic terms or have tried to 'reconstruct' what he might have said if he had turned his thought towards a more direct theoretical formulation of practical wisdom as ethics—as he seems to have hoped to do. Carlo da Via (2021, 747) points out that he apparently wished in 1996 to analyse 'what ethics is, and what it means that one can talk about something practical in theoretical terms'; accordingly, da Via has tried to reconstruct a Gadamer account of ethics as something suited to shared life on the model of 'practical reasoning' rather than 'techno-scientific rationality', and his study provides a particularly rich analysis of the ways that Gadamer might have conceived of a specifically *phenomenological* approach to ethics which begins from the core, raw intuitions that shape ethics itself. Here we start from the perspective not of Gadamer's historical writings or his account of phenomenology or Aristotelian practical reason, but of his account of *value* as such in aesthetics and well-being, in his readings of the experiences of beauty and of health.

Approximately a third of *Truth and Method* dealt with aesthetics (Part One concerns the experience of art, Kantian aesthetics, the ontology of

²See Palmer's preface to 'On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics' in Gadamer 2007, 274–5.

art, and stands as an equal component to Part Two on the Human Sciences and History, and Part Three on Hermeneutics and Language). As *the* text most commonly associated with Gadamer's overall philosophy *Truth and Method* was primarily taken to be a tract on the nature of language; yet art was arguably his more frequent and (in his eyes) more fruitful object of reflection than mere language. Further, his work on the poetry of Celan, on the nature of theatre, his talks on Stefan George and the concern with the nature of art in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* all led his thought away from the neutral notion of mere communication to the affective, aesthetic and ethical notion of the Good.

One of the reasons for the focus on art was that it played an important functional role in the working out of Gadamer's basic tenets: he used it to recuperate key components of hermeneutic philosophy that he felt had been missed or marginalised in the modern history of European thought. In *Truth and Method* it was the 'truth' of aesthetic taste that provided a foil to the over-emphasised 'truth' of scientific fact. In Gadamer's readings of Plato (and he started the *Relevance of the Beautiful* with a reminiscence that his very first study was on art in Plato), it was the forms of the Good and of Beauty that provided a mutable and relative foil to the supposedly fixed and determinate forms of number. Given his extensive treatment of the arts, and his analysis of the distinctive nature of aesthetic experience and its insights for all experience, art might seem to be the key to his phenomenology.

His own analysis of art and aesthetic experience clearly followed on from Heidegger's discussion of art in essays such as *The Origin of the Work of Art*, and *Poetry, Language, Thought*. But certain concerns were distinctive to Gadamer; the focus on arts (rather than texts in this case) allowed for reflection on *value* per se. He treats this topic in terms of 'beauty' but by no means limits it merely to what is pleasing and ornamental. To the charge that his thought on art dealt only with aesthetic questions, Gadamer pointed to the way that beauty and goodness are united in Greek philosophical discussions, explaining that 'I borrowed the idea of the beautiful at the end of *Truth and Method* from the Greek concept of the *kalon* [the fine, the beautiful], and that includes the inseparability of the good and the beautiful.'³

³ See Gadamer's essay 'A Look Back over the Collected Works and Their Effective History' in 2007, 413.

Beauty, he argued, is a concept with a special philosophical capacity. It can illuminate the nature of human constitution, development and well-being in a way that mere text and dialogue cannot, because it goes beyond matters of meaning, to questions of *meaningfulness*. Indeed, although Gadamer did not develop the theme more fully until his late body of writing on ethics and health, beauty even seems to hold the key to answering one of the most insoluble problems of philosophy: the fact-value distinction. In the proportions of the stars, of music, of nature, of the healthy organism and of love, there lies a way of identifying the principle that leads each person to value something. In turn, this may tell us something about what value itself is and how it can arise out of mere relations, experiences and emotions.

So while Gadamer saw himself as largely standing apart from debates about ethics as traditionally conceived, we argue here that he did engage in the philosophical project of *axiology*, the broader analysis of value *per se*. Robert Dostal notes that:

Gadamer himself does not profess to contribute much to ethics beyond the effort to reclaim and rehabilitate *phronēsis*. He writes that the very ‘idea of a moral philosophy seems to be stuck in irresolvable difficulty’... He also writes that he sees no way from the later Heidegger to an ethics, but that the way to a moral philosophy remains open through Kant and Aristotle. (Dostal 2022, 28)

The discussions of *phronesis* might themselves be taken as a route to engaging the ethics of interpersonal relations with respect and acknowledgement of mutual dependence, from within the worldview of hermeneutics; Smith,⁴ Vilhauer (2010, 121–126) and others have taken this direction. Yet Gadamer’s self-professed wariness of engaging the formal field of moral philosophy does not close the way to a more fundamental axiological project that assesses the structural nature of any good, informed by the broader Greek notion of *kalon* which recognises ‘the inseparability of the good and the beautiful’ (2007, 413). He engages the idea of goodness much in the same way that he had already tried to give a transcendental account of meaning, truth and objects: using previous thinkers and illuminating examples to elicit insights that point towards a model. As

⁴ P. Christopher Smith (1988) countered the view of Gadamer as largely disconnected from ethics, by taking his discussion of *phronesis* to genuinely address the problem of how to make an ethical judgement.

interpreters, this means that we see few direct accounts, and much commentary on other thinkers who wrote about beauty, well-being, morality and goodness. With this in mind, we can discern an attempt to illuminate the nature of value itself, using Plato in particular and targeting art, health and flourishing as windows into the issue. In this chapter we explore and develop these implications of Gadamer's philosophy of beauty, unravelling its insights into the wide range of ways in which we value something—including beauty and meaningfulness, love and friendship, deep satisfaction and spiritual commitment.

One interesting implication of his phenomenology of value is its relevance to the philosophical puzzle that is often termed the 'fact-value distinction'—this being the apparent typological distinction between facts and values, and the question of how values can arise out of a world of mere facts. It is generally accepted by philosophers that we can neither argue that something should be of value based solely on any facts about it nor explain why anything is intrinsically (rather than merely instrumentally) good. This accords with the perceived *primitiveness* of values; we often have difficulty explaining *why* we find something beautiful, or love someone, or care about an idea, or have faith in something in the sense of committing to its value. Although we may give functional reasons (that it is useful for our survival, or as a way of ennobling one's personality, or it strengthens society), this merely defers the question—what is it about survival, nobility or society that is *innately* good? For Gadamer this manifested in the problem of 'taste' and why a particular value appeals to a particular people in an involuntary way.

The problem hinges on the apparent disjunction between the intrinsic properties of things and our valuing of them which seems to correspond to no property of that thing. But this touches upon Gadamer's move 'beyond objectivism and relativism' as Richard Bernstein (1983) put it, according to which the usual divide between subjective taste and objective facts is dissolved in the unity of a given raising up of different individuals into a shared superstructure with a being and nature of its own. Just as Gadamer used his 'play-ontology' to clarify the nature of *truth*, so too it helped to explain the nature of taste in art and also, by extension, of *value* in life itself—an analysis further developed in his interpretations of the good in Plato and *phronesis* in Aristotle. One crucial insight that he brought from his own experience was the diverse, yet non-arbitrary character of people's taste. Far from choosing what we value, it chooses and governs us; in this sense it is 'real', and 'objective' in a way that is relevant

to recent debates on moral relativism. We are ourselves ‘remade’ by art experiences. This means that the nature of art must also be revised, for—perhaps more obviously than with concrete objects—artworks (and by extension all value-bearing phenomena) are ontological events that change all that touches them.

2 PLAY AND THE STRUCTURES OF BEAUTY

We have already seen that Gadamer’s ontological account of art as ‘play’ was part of a larger ontology in which individuals are taken up and transformed into a shared medial structure that defines them all. This sense that it is the nature of things, and not merely our subjective perception that he is describing, is one of the first points that he insists on in his treatment of the play analogy in *Truth and Method*. Getting to the bottom of the experience of art is not a matter of explaining a subjective experience, but rather a matter of describing the ‘mode of being’ of art.

When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, not the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. In analysing aesthetic consciousness we recognised that conceiving aesthetic consciousness as something that confronts an object does not do justice to the real situation. (2004, 102)

He reinforces this:

The subject of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence... (2004, 103)

This shifting of the explanation of aesthetic experiences away from subjectivism and towards the nature of the artwork is his first step in a broader analysis of all forms of value for any person, thing or situation and not merely of aesthetic values.

The rule-bound creative movement of play takes up subjects, objects, relations and events into something that encompasses them all. He uses the example of games, speaking of ‘the structure that determines the

movement of the game from within [rather] than by what it comes up against' (2004, 107), but he also speaks of festivals, dialogues and all performance, as clear cases where we are talking about something that involves and is co-created by everyone. In a number of later essays, Gadamer realised that it is perhaps music that best demonstrates this continuity of art through changeful complexity.⁵ Music is, by definition, a continuity-in-transformation that Gadamer calls 'hermeneutic identity'. He uses the example of improvised music:

Let us take the case of an organ improvisation. This unique improvisation will never be heard again. The organist hardly knows afterwards just how he played, and no one transcribed it. Nevertheless, everyone says, 'that was a brilliant interpretation or improvisation,' or on another occasion, 'That was rather dull today.'... Obviously we are referring back to the improvisation. Something 'stands' before us ... So it is the hermeneutic identity that establishes the unity of the work. (1986, 25)

This striking example tries to show that the identity of an artwork is a flowing, never-the-same structural theme-in-movement—and the same can be said of everything else that is part of the 'play' of the art experience (and of Being in general): we too are improvised themes being 'played' moment by moment in new ways.

In all these cases, it is the 'occurrence of the movement as such' that matters, and this is what he means by 'essence'; we see it in 'the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears and machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words'; movement is an important idea here, and he uses it repeatedly to try to alter our way of seeing what kinds of things are involved in experiences of value. It is not individual things, but *movements* that make them:

The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement... Thus we speak of the play of colors and do not mean only that one color plays against another, but that there is one process or sight displaying a changing variety of colors. (2004, 104)

⁵ See *The Relevance of the Beautiful* and Gadamer's 1988 essay 'A Philosophical Postscript' (later retitled 'Music and Time' (2021)).

In experiences of art we become part of the structural change of the situation's overall content as new interpretations are generated, changing us as they arise and helping to define the artwork itself. One might say that what the artwork does is change us, alter our structure of experience, association, memory, attention, intention, etc., and this is part of its importance and power. It leaves us altered and fused into it in some way; meanwhile reciprocally we have made the artwork into something new.

This is important for the definition of self: art is an exemplary case in which we can see that every encounter redefines us in more and less radical, integral, continuous or revolutionary ways. The artwork is itself 'grounded' in a wider historical-cultural context so that it too is continually defined by and redefining of culture and history.⁶ The implication is that all things, persons and objects are co-defining structures, dynamically changing through time and relation to their environment and the plurality which they themselves are at every moment.

We have seen the metaphysical implication that one can understand all objects and also oneself and one's life—as a temporally extended structure, like a symphony or a visual pattern. In touching on this idea Gadamer is struck by the non-anthropocentric perspective that it suggests:

The fact that the mode of being of play is close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals *too* play, nor it is correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play *as well*. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that *man* too plays. His playing is a natural process. (2004, 105)

This insight acknowledges 'the primacy of play over the consciousness of the player' (2004, 105): ontologically it is as much the artwork that happens through us, as it is we who experience the artwork.

This Gadamerian model of art and aesthetics has been articulated in different contexts, although rarely as a generalisation of a notion found in cases of beauty as of success or *value* of any kind. The idea that the author's intention should not be taken as the true measure of meaning in a work feels more obviously persuasive in art than in linguistic discourses aimed at information or debate. It is a natural place from which to critique the idea that artworks are physical objects, to emphasise the participatory nature of

⁶Ingrid Scheibler (2001, 168) makes this distinction between two views of art's transformative function.

art, to question the Romantic ideal of feeling as consigned to an interior realm and to expand the range of kinds of experience we might consider art-like. Nicholas Davey captures well the sense that Gadamer intended not a reinterpretation of subjective aesthetic experiences—a subset of human life, but rather a major rethinking of all that we undergo. The paradigm of art, hermeneutically conceived, reframes all experience as phenomena that:

...in addressing us assert a truth claim which demands a response, such that to refuse it would be disingenuous. When an artwork speaks we experience a ‘concretion of meaning’. Its subject matter addresses us on its own terms, directly, irrespective of our willing and doing. Before the artwork ‘subjectivity and self-consciousness’ fall away ... Such experiences betray a relation of value.... (Davey 2013, 22)

In this respect, as Davey (2013, 30) notes, Gadamer breaks from Plato as a guide and sees art as something that adds more being, more truth to reality. His account asks for a rethinking of art as carrying a truth that commands a truth-event to occur, in which we ‘meet’ a truth which bids us to reform ourselves in relation to it. But what if this picture is meant to apply to a wider kind of experience even than art? What if it applies to all cases where value is concerned, from judgements of beauty, to ethics, to well-being?

3 OUR DESIRE TO BE RESTRUCTURED

The reshaping of the self by such encounters is partly under our control and also partly out of it. As Gadamer points out, we cannot insist on mere ‘alteration’ or *Veränderung*; we must accept that we will undergo *Verwandlung* or metamorphosis (2004, 111). This means, as Odenstedt notes, connecting these issues in Gadamer to Catherine Malabou’s notion of ‘plasticity’, that ‘alteration touches only upon what a thing has, while transformation changes what it is’. And Gadamer implies that contextually induced presuppositions are not mere properties that the individual has but something that she is. As Gadamer says: ‘In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it’ (Odenstedt 2008, 575). In terms of the analogy of games, the structure of each ‘play’ is collaboratively composed by the individual players, the rules and field of play, etc., and this means that sometimes transformative interactions are forced upon us. As such,

experiences of this kind might seem dangerous and invasive events that we would reasonably want to avoid. Yet to the contrary, in the case of art we see humans constantly seeking out aesthetic experiences and the change they bring. Indeed, it is the otherness of the encounter—that is, its ability to transform us in unexpected ways into something fresh and different—that furnishes much of its appeal. This leads us to an insight about human nature: we *want* to be changed.

Gadamer uses the analogy of games that are capricious and unpredictable, involving the risk of facing something unpredictable, something that commands us:

The movement to and fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that here is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself... there always has to be... something else with which the player moves and which automatically responds to his move with a countermove. Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord. (2004, 106)

Embedded within this passage is the seed of a Gadamerian philosophy of Otherness not as what is unknowable, but as what can radically change the self; we will explore this further in looking at Gadamer's thoughts on community and pluralism. Art encounters, like dialogues, and even negotiating a landscape, entail 'a risk for the player. One can play only with serious possibilities' (2004, 106). There may even be a significant loss of continuity with the past self who entered the game: 'one may become so engrossed in [the serious possibilities of the game] that they outplay one, as it were, and prevail over one.' But that possibility of being outplayed is part of what we seek in experiences and encounters with anything new: 'The attraction that the game exercises on the player lies in this risk'. This is in harmony with his ideas on truth already encountered in chapter four, where we saw that believing in the truth of a text consists in letting ourselves be shaped by it.

But there is also a meta-level of self-consciousness that is involved in art in a way that is not necessarily present in other cases. Aesthetic experiences are, arguably, non-instrumental and insofar as we know the experience is aesthetic (e.g. that it is an artwork of object of aesthetic value we are contemplating) then we are engaged not only with the thing, but also with the very principles of creating, contemplating and becoming. Instrumental

goals are gradually transcended as we pause before a painting, start to read something as poetry, begin to love a person or start to ‘have faith’ in something for its own intrinsic value. Following Johann Huizinga, we might say that the aesthetic sphere is a ‘sacred precinct’ of transformation that ‘sets off the sphere of play as a closed world, one without transition and mediation to the world of aims’ (2004, 107). Insofar as it is an aesthetic phenomenon taking place, the aim is not primarily about achieving a particular goal (e.g. understanding the artwork, winning the beloved, etc.), but rather it is always actually about creatively uniting the continuity of the past identity with the contribution of the new elements, to shape something new that is emerging:

Every game presents the man who plays it with a task... Thus the child gives itself a task in playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself. (2004, 107)

Crafted artworks (as opposed to aesthetic phenomena) are special cases for they intentionally aim at affecting another person, sending some theme forward for diverse new appropriations, but with a certain kind of change in mind. The artwork, then, is a structure that aims at further transformations in association with an as-yet unknown field of participants: it is for this reason, says Gadamer, that the strange openness of a stage to the audience on one side—leaving it incomplete, unfinished, open to the new—is not a flaw, but a fulfilment of the purpose of the play itself. Performance art is a ‘consummation’ of play, for it spotlights the phenomenon of ‘transformation into structure’ (2004, 110), inspires it widely in an open way that involves multiple interpretations at the same time, and provokes self-awareness of our own creative participation as we see those around us mirroring our own changes.

This whole analysis unites the qualities of both *energeia*, vital changeful energy, and *ergon*, a completed work or shape, combined in the idea of a structure (*Gebilde*) that has a real identity yet is constantly transformed. This structural changefulness, as we have seen, is something that Gadamer believed Plato and Aristotle, each in their own way, to have established as fundamental, with Aristotle in particular ascribing it to living beings. Yet living organisms might seem categorically different from artworks, as art changes only through its interaction with others, while organisms contain the principles of constant change within them. Hence:

Expressing the thought of the Greeks in general, Aristotle had already described self-movement as the most fundamental characteristic of living beings. Whatever is alive has its source of movement within itself and has the form of self-movement. Now play appears as a self-movement ... exhibiting so to speak a phenomenon of excess, of living self-representation. (1986, 23)

The Relevance of the Beautiful contains an extended discussion of the universality and value of transformation, here addressed in the context of beauty and the nature of play. One of his goals in the essay was to correct the mistaken dichotomy between human genius and natural beauty in Kant's aesthetics, and the confusions that have since resulted from this. To refute that view he reasserted the performative, context-determined, constantly created, 'festive' nature of aesthetic phenomena, and to do this he drew a close connection between aesthetic phenomena and living beings using Aristotle's model of self-movement to show that both have an innately unfixed identity—unlike the notion of order so dear to the Pythagorean Greeks. Art is open to an excess of undetermined future possibilities, like Aristotle's order of nature.

Astronomical order had presented an apparent counterpoint to the complex and irregular human world, offering 'one of the greatest intuitions to be found anywhere... in marked contrast with the ambiguity and instability of human affairs' (1986, 14). The desire to align with that purely regular order is expressed in the image of humanity's gaze towards the heavens (in Plato's *Phaedrus*). In Gadamer's narrative of Western history it is this desire for regularity, carried through certain traditions of Christianity and of rationalism, that found new life in the Enlightenment and in the Natural Sciences, finally emerging as the epistome of truth; but Nature and Art both challenge that title by revealing the importance and value of 'excessive' transformation that develops a theme into new structures in an open and creative way. Thus, notes Gadamer, the *Phaedrus* myth goes on to tell of how humans can regain the heavens through their own experiences of worldly beauty, conveying the message that 'the essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality... but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful conclusions' (1986, 15).

Through this framework *The Relevance of the Beautiful* makes a compelling statement about the way in which art functions as a transforming and transformative structure that mirrors the vital, changing nature of all things. When this principle enters into the psychology of humans, it is

expressed in the distinctive experience of ‘freedom’—with all of excitement, anxiety, challenge and hopeful motivation (1986, 46); thus art also heightens our awareness of and participation in the basic existential truth of our freedom. He does not say so, but one implication would be that freedom is an incomplete idea, stripped of its illuminating potential, if it is not coupled with understanding of our desire to change, rather than simply to be reinforced in our sameness.

Gadamer is eager to distinguish between mere ‘alteration’ of that which ‘remains the same and is maintained’, and more radical transformation in which:

...something is suddenly and as a whole something else, [such that] this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil. When we find someone transformed we mean precisely this, that he has become another person, as it were. (2004, 111)

This contrasts with the tradition-oriented, past-facing, continuity-prioritising, conservative image of Gadamer. We must accept that in life as in art and all action, profound new realities are created that are ontologically equal to past ones so that good art is by no means necessarily art that fulfils old tastes; some of the best art makes new tastes come into being. A number of critics have taken Gadamer’s conception of art as one that favours conservative tastes and languages,⁷ but this is something that Gadamer explicitly denied, and which he tried to illustrate with his interpretations of the poems of Paul Celan.

Art’s realities are equal to the ‘real world’ realities, although they are different in modality:

Transformation into structure is not simply transposition into another world... inasmuch as it is a structure, [the play] is, so to speak, its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside it. Thus the action of a drama—in this respect it still entirely resembles the religious act—exists as something that rests absolutely within itself. It no longer permits of any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all verisimilitude... a superior truth speaks from it. (2004, 111–112)

⁷For example, Devereaux 1991. See also Buckman’s 1997 critique of related assumptions by Devereaux.

Gadamer observed the way this has sometimes been a source of anxiety—even crisis. Brecht’s dramas, for instance, involve a deliberate attempt to destroy ‘the identity of everything usually expected of a play... to transform the distance of the onlooker into the involvement of the participant’ (1986, 23–4). Those, like Brecht, who question the completedness and separateness of art are really philosophers revealing its true nature, and creative practitioners adding extra energy to the speed and radicality of its change.

In seeking art we seek to enter into this vast and unpredictable play of structural transformations and be ‘raised up’ (*Aufhebung*) into new forms that are ‘revelatory’ and ‘heightened’ (2004, 114). Being aware of this while it happens lets us—in Plato’s terms—elevate our consciousness to knowledge that we exist ‘in the logoi’ (2004, 113). Art helps us see this ‘transformation into the true’, allowing us to perceive ‘what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn’, which also means being able to ‘perceive the comedy and tragedy of life’; we can acknowledge life as part of ‘the game that is played with us’ by reality, presenting us at all times with ‘a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities’ (2004, 112). Art, rightly experienced, gives us irreplaceable existential instruction in the true nature of reality and our being.

4 THE NATURE OF VALUE: HARMONY AND HEALTH

But the question still remains of the relative value of different structural transformation—the difference between ‘good’ improvisations, artworks, games, decisions or lives and ‘bad’ ones. What makes one encounter one structure as positive and another as negative, one as pleasurable or helpful and another as painful or harmful? What makes us love an artwork, story or indeed a person? From this structural perspective, we can ask ‘what kind of transformation does a structure encounter as having value to itself (or to anyone/thing else)?’ In this question the narrower problem of art opens up to wider questions of value.

Some speculation is needed here as Gadamer rarely pursued questions about ethics or value directly, seeing his philosophical remit primarily as phenomenological. He tried to describe what is, rather than give a prescriptive account of what we *should* do. Nevertheless, in places he explores the basis of implicitly ethical phenomena like human flourishing, the nature of friendship, the basis of respect for others, and the most natural and illuminating means of making decisions about our own lives.

Expanding on his ideas about experience and transformation, we might guess that in some cases people pursue and welcome a transformation because it appeals to them. This means that in some sense it complements the structure that they already were. One person is attracted to the calm mystery of Rothko, while another loves the irreverent challenge of Picasso, and the difference is based on the trajectory of their own personality (with its long roots drawing on cultural context and historical background) and the circumstances of the moment. A change is thereby effected that contributes to the trajectory of the individual, just as an organism grows in an environment or a piece of music develops its theme. In some cases the change is not a choice, as when new development is forced upon us (in an accident, for instance, or a sentence addressed to us out of the blue, or a story we didn't expect to like that surprises us with its unforeseen emotional power), but the same principle applies. To determine the difference, an overarching account of value in structural development is needed, and while Gadamer didn't deal with this head-on, he did address it obliquely through themes of success in play, beauty in art and health in life.

On play, he wrote that each game 'has its own proper spirit' which is determined by the way it is 'patterned in various ways', differing in each case (2004, 107). A degree of continuity is significant as that which establishes identity in the game itself; when one suddenly stops kicking the ball and bounces it, one has stopped playing 'football'. In the case of music we see this in the phenomenon of timing which—he noted—is curious in that it is naturally different for different people. So too timing in narratives, or in one's life has its own inner determination, such that 'the continuity of the uniform temporal flow that we can observe and measure by the clock tells us nothing about youth or age'; instead people have 'autonomous time', an 'autonomous temporality' that similarly applies to events, artworks and festivals (1986, 42). This autonomous temporality is like the changing innate tempo of a piece which is indicated in the composition by 'those vague tempo markings that composers use to describe the individual movements of a piece of music ... the correct tempo can never really be quantified or calculated'. It can be discerned, however, with the 'inner ear'—that sense which involves becoming sensitised to the movement of the structure in question, learning to see the rules and allowing ourselves to internalise them, if only fleetingly (1986, 43–4). Here there is a kind of *sensus communis* not of communities, but of all kinds of meaningfully structured identities.

As David Vessey (2007) notes, Gadamer's discussions of time (as it manifests not in the empty time of clocks, but rather in the full time of works such as art-objects, festivals and music) effectively serve as his own theory of time-consciousness, equivalent to the more explicit discussions that are so prominent in Husserl, Heidegger and Ricoeur. It captures a sense of content-determined temporal measure that is quite different from the clock-time that accords so ill with our own subjective way of undergoing life. Experiences of boredom and bustle are difficult because they do not serve this innate tempo that we have. Ideally, we must sensitise ourselves to the given language, style, theme, logic or temporality of the phenomenon at hand, but:

...this is only possible on the basis of the central structure which must be left intact if we are not to destroy the living unity of the work. In this respect the work of art does resemble a living organism with its internally structured unity. In other words it too displays autonomous temporality. (1986, 42)

This autonomy manifests in what he calls an 'organic unity' that guides the essence, hermeneutic identity or inner movement of a thing:

In philosophical thought, art has always appeared in close proximity to life in the fundamental sense of organic structure. Everyone understands when we say that a work of art in some sense maintains an 'organic unity'...the work seems to possess a kind of center. (1986, 42–3)

This 'center' constitutes its own autonomous guiding nature, relative to which any subsidiary goal it seeks is merely a mediating expression of its own purpose:

...we understand a living organism as a being that bears its center within itself in such a way that the various parts are not subordinated to any particular external purpose... this purposiveness without purpose, as Kant so well described it, is as characteristic a feature of the organism as it clearly is of the work of art. (1986, 43)

One should not assume that the future structure must *repeat* the past structure. It is always changing, and there is a point in every symphony at which a new theme or movement should be introduced, for the good of the whole. To know how best to do this, however, one must learn a thing's character, as in architecture where, as Gadamer put it,

...we have to go up to the building and wander round it, both inside and out. Only in this way can we acquire a sense of what the work holds in store for us and allow it to enhance our feeling for life... when we dwell upon the work there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us. (1986, 45)

So one's sensitivity or 'inner ear' for the structure of things, must be cultivated so that we can best see what they are and where they might best go. 'Sensitivity' here corresponds to the way that Gadamer had also tried to recuperate the Kantian senses of judgement (*Urteilskraft*) and taste (*Gesmäck*): in each of these attitudes that might be seen as straightforward rational procedures, he intends us to imagine something more like a 'craft' in which we learn a certain feeling for a given environment.

Although Gadamer does not explicitly do this, it is fascinating to apply this model to the experience of appreciating people or beliefs. To truly understand a person we must 'tarry with them' as Gadamer puts it, learning their tempo, their organic structure (and also points of disruption, division, disunity) and their *possible* forms of organic unity. We must allow them to change us and 'enhance our feeling for life'. This kind of relation is hinted in the phrase 'a marriage of minds' (1986, 32), and the same might be said for the sympathetic yet also transformative change that comes over us when we come to value a culture or belief system.

5 PROPORTION, MEASURE AND HIDDEN ORDER

Value then lies partly in the harmony of complimentary factors that we see in action when any organic, dynamic development is sustained as a unity. This is what is happening when a melody arises and is developed, or when an organic system becomes a living being and grows, or when a story is invented and takes on a reality and intrigue of its own. The discussions of aesthetic phenomena in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* were one way for Gadamer to undertake a structural analysis of value in such systems, probing what it means for there to be relations of appreciation, contribution and positive development between things. He saw much of this as having been anticipated by Plato's doctrine of the Forms, particularly in the later dialogues, and (according to Gadamer) his 'hidden doctrine'.

But what governs this harmony? Is it simply a matter of balance and stability, a peaceful and quietist quality, or can there not be value in radical change, rebellion and even destruction, as thinkers like Derrida, Habermas

and Deleuze suggested? Gadamer was keen to clarify that he was a modern, not a romantic who saw the inner essence of ‘beauty’ as placid and conservative, and here, as so often, he took his cue from Plato. On the interpretation he gained from Jacob Klein as a student at Marburg, Plato saw beauty not in terms of taste or pleasure, but in terms of goodness itself. But on Gadamer’s reading, the good can be further analysed in terms of a central concept: *symmetria*, or ‘proportion’. In the *Philebus* Plato considers ideals of harmonious proportion based on the mathematical principle of a consistent relation between different elements—like an equation that remains constant across variables, or a system that can be scaled and instantiated in different ways. It is not any simple form or number that matters, but the sustained proportion that is created by in the relationship between different things. Thus ‘what Plato seeks in these dialogues as “the good life” is not the pure exactness of a mathematical type, but the measured proportionality of a well-mixed drink of life’ (2007, 203), which is subject to the appropriate measure (*metrion*) of what is ‘the appropriate, the fitting, and the needful at the favorable moment’ (2007, 205).

In turning from the good of art in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, to the good of well-being and human flourishing in *The Enigma of Health*, Gadamer introduced the analogy of music again, but this time focusing on harmony. A particular measure of relationship, sustained and complementary, is what governs musical harmonies, providing an example of qualitative value (as of a beautiful chord) based on juxtaposed difference-in-relationship. This, he felt, was a helpful model for health as it applies to human bodies, minds, lives and communities. He wrote of ‘health’ as a matter of good relationship between multiple factors:

Good health requires a harmonious relationship consonant with both our social and our nature environment. It is this harmony which first enables us to move in accord with the natural rhythms which govern our bodily life. (1996, 132)

This harmony of the self is also found in Plato’s *The Statesman* (the dialogue that Michel Foucault used to analyse the way in which governmental ideals have tried to legislate for the care of individual subjects).⁸ In *The Statesman*, what Gadamer finds significant is an ideal ‘not only of what

⁸ See Michel Foucault’s 1977 seminar *Security, Territory, Population*.

can be measured externally (*das Mass*), but also what is “fitting” or “appropriate” (*Angemessenheit*). This fitting quality is specific in form for each individual and context, and cannot be generalised, yet it constitutes the living being more than any particular material substance does: ‘the whole system of self-regulating processes which take place in the body and in the human social environment possesses something of this “appropriateness”’ (1996, 133). The role of the doctor is depicted as one who allows equilibrium to come into being in a way that is specific to each patient (1996, 136), cultivating and curating this harmony. But the doctor is not alone, for *mutatis mutandis* by extension this also applies to the teacher, and the poet (and, as we shall see, the political leader; 1996, 134). The conductor of any such harmonious situation, whether doctor, composer and conductor, poet, teacher or leader, must learn to identify the harmony, see its potential and guide its organic development without forcing it.

There is thus a unique skill—a kind of hermetic sensitivity—required in dealing with such cases. Gadamer uses the story of Goethe’s cure to illustrate the way in which the ingredient that ‘works’ for any given system (here the patient) is often unknown because it relates to a hidden and specific harmony waiting to be fulfilled:

There is a well-known and astonishing story about how Goethe at the age of eighty-one managed to survive a severe illness which had led his doctors to give up all hope for him. Suddenly, he demanded water. The doctors granted him this request only because his condition appeared fatal anyway, but the process of recovery actually began with this draught of water. (1996, 135)

Anything that is ‘alive’ in some way requires a sensitivity to it not as an object but as a living system. As Naas has emphasised in his account of *The Statesman*, measures that are of use or real meaning in any way require reference to the implicit *mean*—the context-appropriate amount.⁹ The statesman must decide what size of settlement is right for the people and what conditions warrant going to war, just as the sculptor must decide what size statue is right for the setting, the orator must decide what speech is right for the situation and the philosopher must know what *life* is so that she can see what methods and insights illuminate it.

⁹Naas (2018, 111).

However we must remember that a ‘harmony’ in the technical sense of the word is not necessarily ‘harmonious’ in the conventional sense of being pleasant, calming or easy. It may be necessary to rebel, to change or to change what is around us; the harmony is always ‘new’ and compared to what was there before, it may look similar or different, but what matters is that it should be complimentary in relation to some theme in the context of which it encourages a kind of ‘thriving’. There is a particular kind of dialogue of the parts here, such that they are what Gadamer calls a ‘genuine dialogue... creating the opportunity for the other to awaken his or her own inner activity’. The theme of holism comes out again here, as Gadamer pushes back against the mereological image of chords, parts, states or even bodies. The relation of the parts is really a taking up of those individuals into the whole theme, but the theme may require those parts to be sharply contrasting in their character. Indeed, one could not make a chord or any piece of music if all the parts were relentlessly the same note. They *must be different*, but in such a way that a new unity emerges.

In his essay ‘Life and Soul’, Gadamer contrasted the mechanical metaphor of the body with the very different analogy with a mind:

The soul is not made up of parts as the body is made up of its various organs and members. As living things we are fully present in each of our different states or conditions. We are wholly taken up by anger, completely shaken by fear. We are not angry or fearful in just one part of the soul. (1996, 149)

And again in an essay on *Hermeneutics and Psychiatry*:

The soul does not represent just one particular domain among others, but rather reflects the totality of the embodied existence of the human being. This is something which Aristotle knew. The soul is the living power of the body itself. (1996, 173)

As we have seen, things are best understood in terms of the larger, more complex, dynamic natures of which they are a part and in which each element alters the proportion of the whole, as does all observation and context—much as even a single subtle note can inflect the whole musical piece with yearning, foreboding or exultation. The holism embedded in Gadamer’s ontological picture means that we can never see potentially discordant, disruptive or marginal elements as separate from the nature of the ‘harmony’ created by the whole. Counterpoint, dissonance, inversion

and interruption each shape the broader ‘measure’ that defines something, and may in fact be essential to its nature—much as unpredictability is an essential counterpoint to regularity in a Jackson Pollock painting or disruption of expectations is part of a John Cage composition. As Gadamer observed of modernist painting, sometimes a harmony of parts that is not ‘harmonious’ in the usual sense of the word is core to something’s character.

From artwork to personhood to society, the same essential insight into value applies. Gadamer’s model of the ‘enigmatic character’ of the health of the human person tries to do some small justice to this psycho-biological aggregation that we are, describing us as a complex system in a constantly negotiated balance with external forces that have their own inner nature:

We are ourselves part of nature and it is this nature within us, together with the self-sustaining organic defence system of our bodies, which is capable of sustaining our ‘inner’ equilibrium. This is the unique interplay of functions which constitutes life. (1996, 116)

As psychoanalysis had noted, it is difficult to analyse ourselves and prescribe solutions. Our conscious values may not be our unconscious ones, and what we want may not be what will create our greatest level of health. The conscious agent is not fully in control of itself and cannot simply choose what to find beautiful, who to love or what to believe. All of this contributes to the *hidden* element in our own lives.

It is partly this that makes beauty, love and all our sense of ‘the good’ so mysterious to us ourselves and to any observer. Gadamer reminds us that we are a mystery to ourselves by reference to a line attributed to Heraclitus: ‘The harmony which is hidden is always stronger than that which is revealed’ (1996, 115). We are often surprised that an unexpected note, colour, person, experience adds precisely the element that, unlooked for, nevertheless creates value. This can be applied to lives, artworks and societies, as we will see in the final chapter. If harmonies were more transparent, we could reliably create great art or music by mathematical analysis. Even if a piece of art can be created ‘by the numbers’, the world of its audience cannot so that one may be surprised when a successful franchise, for instance, suddenly fails to appeal. Gadamer himself used the example of pop music which must surf the waves of current taste to find that formulation that appeals. If it only repeats what one already knows it falls into the category of that which isn’t not really art but just a reassuring

repetition of what is familiar; ‘this is the origin of kitsch and all bad art.’ Nor should we seek what is prestigious for it may not perform the real anti-egoistic work of art, which ‘transforms our fleeting experience into the stable and lasting form of an independent and internally coherent creation... in such a way that we go beyond ourselves...’ (1986, 52–3).

Indeed, a good development may be good *only in relation to* a prior lack, as Plato suggested in *The Symposium*. In his essay ‘Anxiety and Anxieties’, Gadamer approvingly cited the German theologian Jacob Böhme’s definition of the defining ‘quality’ of something as *Qual*, ‘meaning agony or anguish’ (1996, 155). Böhme’s theosophical analysis of divine creativity (controversially) interpreted the divine need to create as a sort of positive lack or disequilibrium which underpins the existence of potentiality. He wrote that:

The being of each particular thing is characterised by the isolating pain or anguish which is unique to it. It perseveres in being in its own special way, gives itself form and so unfolds its own particular quality. (1996, 155)

Such an apparent un-health can take many forms including ‘emotional disturbances’, ‘obsessive love’ and ‘religious mania’ (1996, 167). But there is no universal line that tells us when such extremities are healthy or unhealthy, and the balance may shift. What is taken as ‘possession by demons who must be driven out’ may in another context be seen as ‘divine inspiration’, and often it is these disharmonious harmonies that turn out to be the most distinctive moments of our lives or aspects of personality—a point that Gadamer makes in connection with the work of Michel Foucault (1996, 169). It was in madness, he points out, that Hölderlin created some of this most epoch-making work.

To express the way in which what was challenging or problematic suddenly becomes positive and natural, we can turn again to Gadamer’s memory of learning to ride a bicycle. In that experience he saw how something can tip suddenly into equilibrium:

What is astonishing about this experience is that as soon as one learns to do it properly it immediately seems so much easier than it did when one still had to hold tightly onto the handlebars with the greatest effort. Suddenly one gains a sense of equilibrium and then it is as if everything simply goes by itself, as we can see with those young people who are able to speed by with

folded arms. This image should serve to make it clear that this sliding scale of effort and relaxation is a quite natural part of human life. (1996, 161)

He also gives the example of tree-cutters using a saw, who must find between them the perfect balance of forces that make the saw work smoothly. All of these are cases where it may seem that one is involved in ‘*mechane*’, making something new (health, activity, art, goodness) by altering the natural world and replacing it with something human-made. But in fact it is a case where we must collaborate with what is naturally occurring and coax it towards a latent and waiting hidden capacity that needs our intervening hand to bring a new balance into play. Medicine is a good reminder of the way that values arise out of underlying neutral realities, for ‘among all the sciences concerned with nature the science of medicine is the one which can never be understood entirely as a technology, precisely because it invariably experiences its own abilities and skills simply as a restoration of what belongs to nature’; as such it represents a wider category of special knowledge, which Gadamer calls ‘a peculiar kind of practical science for which modern thought no longer possesses an adequate concept’ (1996, 38–9). Many of these insights into the unique sensitivity, understanding and co-operative art of medicine occur in an essay that Gadamer titled ‘Apologia for the Art of Healing’.

The counterpoint of effort and relaxation could be seen as expressive of the way encounters challenge us and are then incorporated into our nature. We cannot value something, it seems, without some inner movement forward towards a new self. It is perhaps for this reason that, where Heidegger emphasised death as the defining feature of the future, Gadamer asserted the positive importance of unfolding futurity for the very essence of human beings. In this he comes across as a kind of optimist, keen to combat the pessimism and fatalism that some existentialism had fostered.

I still believe that I am right to claim that we must rigorously deny the possibility that human life can be lived without a future. For as I see it, it is a distinctively human fact that we must always keep the future open, and with it new possibilities.

In his essay titled ‘The Experience of Death’, he linked this idea to Aeschylus’ play *Prometheus Bound*, in which Prometheus’ gift to humankind is less the gift of fire, than the gift of being able to forget death (1996, 64). It is that which allows humans to leave their despondent

existence in the dark cave and to carry forward hopeful and open-ended new projects of discovery, creation, love and belief.

There is a relation to Aristotle's notion of *telos* here insofar as it is an attempt to define the kind of identity that relates to things that mutate over time, and in this sense Gadamer contributed to the tradition of grappling with humanity's problematic relation to change and finitude (a tradition that included Aquinas who sought to grasp what the identity of temporal things *in aeternitatis* would be). Aristotle had attempted to define identity as something that changes, but he could not assume some end goal predetermined from outside of each thing by a creator (as many later Christian thinkers did). This meant that he needed to determine the *telos* in an *intrinsic* way, seeing it as something that gets the rationale of its mutations simply from nature of the object itself; in this he was close to Gadamer's non-theistic, open-ended account of a world in universal free-fall of transformation. But it is change that generates a measure of value, creating something with a sustained organic or systematic spirit of its own over time, that we call *identity*. It is this kind of measure that governs our values when it comes to lifestyle, friends, love, art and ethics.

6 THE NATURE OF VALUE

While Gadamer also had something to say about social ethics (and in the later decades of his life wrote about the dangers of an overly monocultural, traditionalist, conservative notion of communal identity), in this chapter we have asked whether Gadamer's treatments of beauty and health can yield an axiology of value in general. To what extent has he given us a substantive account of value here? Is it realist or subjectivist, singular or pluralistic? And how universal is this account; should the moral values that govern our actions, for instance, really be seen in terms of the mercurial 'measure' that defines beauty for art and well-being for living beings?

We can see that Gadamer's good might be described as *emergent* in that it ontologically arises and depends upon the subsidiary measure of relation among parts (although once in existence it can affect those parts). It is in this sense that it takes values to be a property that can arise out of situations, insofar as those situations involve an organic unity, a diachronic identity relating to possible paths of development and degrees of fulfilment of desire and potential. Value is something that comes from, subsists upon and is pertinent only in relation to specific facts of such a kind that they comprise a value-bearing situation. In this the theory can appear

coherentist, such that the value in question relates to a situation to which it corresponds as a correct, well-reasoned or fitting response; arguably this makes it similar to what are sometimes called ‘fitting attitude’ theories of value.¹⁰ This leaning towards fittingness, appropriateness or situation-embeddedness in determining what is right for agents in a situation can be seen implicitly in his use of past thinkers. We can see this in the characterisation of his ethics as one in which ‘What is right and good is not just useful for achieving a certain goal but also what a right-minded person would do’. Thus, moral action ‘depends so much more on our being than on our explicit consciousness’ (as *eidos*). It is not a matter of the abstract application of rules, but a vision of what a good life is like, the actions we choose ‘spread out into the whole of our external social being’.¹¹

Curiously, because of this it is also secondly a *realist*, *objectivist* account, where its existence and nature depends on the configuration of actual situations; yet because subjective states are an aspect of this where persons are involved, it is real-world value that is partly *dependent on* the subjective mind. Thirdly, it is *relativist* in that is grounded in the total context and will alter in nature according to variations in that context. Fourthly, it is therefore a *pluralistic* phenomenon that admits of different variations that also have value of different kinds. Fifthly, it is *dynamic* since its diachronic development is as much part of the structure as any synchronic arrangement in the moment, and finally, it remains suited to serve as an *ideal* that guides our actions insofar as we are ourselves the kind of beings for which temporal, world-embedded, developing existence is our intrinsic nature.

We might see similarities between this account of value and holistic accounts that see values as pertaining to different scales of systems that make up an ‘organic unity’, as G.E. Moore called it. It also shares with some pragmatists like R.B. Perry the view that values as we experience them derive from the existence of subjective states like desiring, interest and purposiveness. Gadamer’s own theory of organic unities—exemplified in any case where a phenomenon is defined by a dynamic and developing measure of relations between different parts—was a way of articulating a robust yet systematically relativist notion of value. That context-dependent relativism reflects the status of value as an emergent phenomenon

¹⁰ See Howard 2018 for a survey of these approaches to ethics, and a discussion of ways ‘fittingness’ might be construed.

¹¹ See Richard Palmer’s preface to Gadamer’s essay ‘On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics’ (2007, 276).

produced from the triangulated relations of all the aspects of the whole situation in question. That too requires its dynamic rather than static character: like art and organisms, it has what Cynthia Nielsen (2022), speaking of the movement and leeway that art demands, calls a ‘dynamic ontology’.¹² Yet value remains objective in the sense that it cannot be reduced to any individual’s subjective view, and this relates to its function as an *ideal* or basis for guidance insofar as it genuinely is the direction in which some form of flourishing lies. All of this can be missed insofar as Gadamer’s ethics is usually treated merely in relation to his emphasis on dialogue and otherness (key social virtues to which we will return), or to the focus on *phronesis* through which he sometimes tried to replace a Kantian style of deontology (see Dostal 2022). But if we broaden our view beyond interpersonal ethics, and look at value itself, we see that Gadamer gestured towards a systematic, coherentist notion of the Good as a kind of triangulated harmony within Being.

But we have tried to stress that Gadamer, in his use of ideas like harmony and health, does not mean some peaceable, pleasant and rather conservative idea of a status quo. A thriving measure may need radical change, or a marginal element without which the whole does not work. The disproportionate consequences of action in Wagner’s Ring Cycle, or the surprise transformation at the end of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, or Heathcliff’s unhealthy obsession, or the ideal of loving one’s enemies, are all examples where phenomena that are deeply ‘unharmonious’ with their setting in the conventional sense, create something of great significance and conceptual provocation through their challenging, asymmetric, novel structures. If, as Grondin says, Gadamer replaced the stoic Kantian ethics that demands we conform our will to rationally recognised duty, with a natural ethics of more organic skill in sensitivity to tradition and custom (see Grondin 2015),¹³ this is not to say that one must defer to the existing situation; true history-making makes something meaningfully, helpfully, healingly *new* out of what has gone before.

Yet it is also important that one not think that there is only one possible harmony, one proper development. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that structure is dependent on scale; one individual may draw value from a profound asymmetry of power, while for the community as a whole that asymmetry impedes organic health and development. In a particular

¹² See Nielsen 2022 on the movement and leeway that art demands.

¹³ See Grondin’s (2015) sketch of Gadamer as offering a non-Kantian ethics.

moment we may enjoy immersion in a wave of social media, but a whole life tuned into it may be a failure of reason, agency or even good entertainment. Values pertain to smaller and larger regions in different ways; in this sense Gadamer agrees with axiological holists and reason-contextualists like Jonathan Dancy (1992), who see that different reasons may obtain at different scales or overlapping regions. What is good for an individual or a village may not be good for the society as a whole.

Indeed, artworks that are good in the sense of being complex and humane often illustrate precisely this point that a diversity of value structures can co-exist, and we must learn to negotiate them concurrently. In the novel *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, two developments of a single theme are offered, for it tells both the tragic story of Cathy and Heathcliff, two lovers struggling with the class system of the time, and the hopeful story of Catherine and Hareton, two people given the freedom to overcome prejudice through mutual care. There is no 'right' answer to the riddle of love posed in *Wuthering Heights*, but the overall structure of the novel is precisely a counterpoint of multiple possibilities for the audience to further triangulate into a value of their own, drawing from them a lesson for society and love.

Such examples give a taste of the multiple harmonies that are possible for every structure. One might similarly observe that Stefan George's world-affirming heroic poetry was appropriate for Gadamer as a young man, while later Rainer Maria Rilke's questioning humility and Paul Celan's more challenging verse were what he 'needed' as he came to value uncertainty, attentiveness and mystery. So too, the same principle applies to love, in that a person who strengthens us and creates calm will inspire love in certain contexts, while someone who calls us to follow new plans or ideals will do so at another. And so too with cultures: different persons, communities and cultures will be struck by different values, and we may see useful wisdoms in them relative to different contexts. Yet one cannot change one's values without changing oneself in some degree, and this may also explain why heartbreaks, or loss of faith, are not just painful experiences, but a kind of *injury*: we have lost a part of ourself and cannot recover until we have become differently structured again, something that only time and new development can achieve.

One can imagine that one of Gadamer's first critics, Emilio Betti—the legal scholar who complained that hermeneutics left no clear basis for discriminating between truth and falsehood—might have similarly complained here that there is no room for right and wrong. As Devereaux

(1991) puts it, there seems to be a ‘paradox of appealing to art for the firmly rooted values morality used to give us’, when one of Gadamer’s main points is that there is no single eternal and universal truth or value that any work of art can give. We will see what Gadamer considered to be the form of flourishing proper to communities in the final chapter, but in general it seems right to see Gadamer not as a pragmatist, as Richard Rorty sometimes implied, but as a context-relativist of a particularly exacting kind. Ethics is not something we can subjectively choose or wilfully alter, but it can only arise from context, and manifest in application to a context. In a sense, he remains an Aristotelian adherent of normative ‘natural goodness’, as Philippa Foot put it in her own axiology, seeing goods as determined by the *types* of thing to which they pertain.¹⁴ Yet since clear natural kinds do not really exist for him, goods are complexly embedded in multiple and changing contexts that we need an equally complex and dynamic sensitivity to discern. As Gadamer says,

...the knowledge that gives direction to action is essentially called for by concrete situations in which we are required to choose the thing to be done; and no learned and mastered technique can spare us the task of deliberation and decision.

All wisdom in the area of morals and values must involve a deliberative sensitivity that we learn and hone throughout our lives. When we set out abstract principles of this kind, we must also work to keep the living, organic framing of their relevance alive in our minds:

As a result, the practical science directed toward this practical knowledge is neither theoretical science in the style of mathematics nor expert know-how in the sense of a knowledgeable mastery of operational procedures (*poiesis*), but a unique sort of science. It must arise from practice itself and, with all the typical generalizations that it brings to explicit consciousness, be related back to practice. (2007, 231)

¹⁴ One might draw a limited comparison with Philippa Foot’s (2001) attempt to rebuff subjectivist accounts from non-cognitivists like Hume and intuitionists like Moore, in her *Natural Goodness* where she agrees with Montaigne’s hint that we must judge human values in relation to the ‘form of the human condition’ that every man bears.

In ethics as in art, love and even religion,¹⁵ value emerges from contexts that change. Love, beauty, faith and goodness require living wisdom if they are to sustain their value, and repeatedly thrive anew across the changing landscapes of our lives. This is the basis of ethics here: it is not respect for an unknowable Other that ensures our moral disposition for them (as Bernasconi and others have argued, emphasising Levinas' approach)¹⁶; rather it is the process by which the other is drawn into a shared construction of shared value, part of a co-created organic unity with its own Good. It is only as future-looking sensitive creators implicitly driven by a hunger for change that we really create ethics—primarily rooted not in fear of violence, but in cultivation of the good.

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¹⁵ In the same essay titled 'Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy' Gadamer points out that even Augustine's shift to scripture as a stable basis for faith turned out to be an insight into the need for interpretive context-sensitivity (2007, 233).

¹⁶ See Bernasconi's 1995 Levinasian critique of Gadamer's ethical reasoning.

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Spirituality: The Self in the Whole

Abstract Although he was not himself a believer in sacraments, soteriological doctrines or a personal God, Gadamer was well aware that his ideas drew on a legacy of self-understanding and self-cultivation with roots in the philosophies of ancient Greece, German mysticism, poetry and piety, as well as the *Bildung* tradition of European thought. Even in his seventies, his readings of favourite poets—Stefan George, Paul Celan, Gottfried Benn, Rainer Maria Rilke—showed how they express, as he put it, that ‘for us all that the experience of the divine is unavoidable, even when “God denies”’. In this chapter we see how he developed a model of our basic human desire for an ‘experience of the whole and ourselves in the whole’—and of how that desire could be fulfilled. Far from the idea of transcendence central to religion for thinkers like Levinas, Derrida and Marion, Gadamer unites Stoic and Platonic, Pietist, and *Bildung* traditions in a distinctively modern form of spirituality. Focusing on three key elements—the creative shaping of one’s life, the knowledge of the self as part of the whole, and a recognition of the infinity and ultimate mystery of the world—his vision of a future spirituality is at once ‘sublime’ and secular.

Keywords Spirituality • Pietism • Self • Divinity • Hadot • Levinas

...the publisher’s introduction went on to quote two of Stefan George’s poems. I will never forget either of them. It was as if I had been struck by

lightning and did not know what happened to me. ‘Sparkle and glory! Thus awakens our world.

Like heroes we conquer mountains and continents.

Young and great the spirit looks without steward.

At the fields and flow that surround it.’ (Gadamer quoted in Grondin 2003, 48)

As a child at the dinner table beside his older brother, Hans-Georg must have observed a curious interplay between the two sides of his family: on the one hand there was the committed pietist spirituality of his mother, relatively unconcerned with proofs, creeds and institutions. On the other, this co-existed with his father’s scientific sceptical agnosticism. In his father, a successful chemist, he also observed the vigorous confidence of twentieth-century science tempered by the vast cautions of a chemist’s conscientious methodology—a modesty that he valued and about which he reminisced in his eighties (1992, 183). Nowhere in his upbringing did he feel strong pressures to conform to any doctrinal orthodoxy, and wordy espousal of beliefs had little place in his home environment (although his father’s preferences for the robust natural sciences over the apparent vagaries of philosophy weighed heavily on him). Yet he developed his own sensibility to issues of beauty, discovery, well-being, self-knowledge and self-cultivation.

His view of the good life grew naturally out of rich traditions of literature and poetry (from Søren Kierkegaard to the poet Stefan George), and the example given by heroes of classical philosophy such as Socrates and Aristotle, and more recent thinkers who saw a divine spirit in nature (like Friedrich Oetinger) or a possibility of re-forming consciousness (like Max Scheler). Later in life he would become a friend of Pope John-Paul II, attending conferences at Castel Gandolfo, yet without ever confessing any Christian faith.

One might say that the contemporary popular epithet ‘not religious but *spiritual*’ applies in an exemplary way to Gadamer. He was born just when it was becoming normal to stand outside the church but alongside non-conformist spiritual writers and traditions of *Bildung* or self-cultivation. He wrote of the Breslau of his youth as a modern, cosmopolitan, multi-religious setting. Thus Gadamer’s life challenges the oppositions of religious and secular, traditional and modern, Christian or pagan that have tended to shape discourse about religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He did not struggle to fit his ideas to any religious tradition

(unless it was that of the Greeks); in this he was unlike Franz Brentano, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo with their Catholic backgrounds, or Jewish phenomenologists such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, or even the polemical atheism of Nietzsche. Gadamer seems to have been—from the beginning—a secular but spiritually inclined Humanist and a devotee of the religion of art.

He repeatedly acknowledged how important theology was for his teacher Heidegger, and any religious aspects of the student's philosophy would inevitably be positioned in relation to his teacher's own life-long quest 'to find an adequate expression for the experience of Christian faith'. For Heidegger this meant rejection of 'the God of philosophers... because it would be nothing but a metaphysical idol', whilst remaining 'on the lookout for a truly divine God which alone could save us' (Grondin 2014, 104, 127). The difference between Heidegger's making space for a 'God' and Gadamer's affirmation of immanence might be seen as 'the difference between a mystic and humanist' (Tsai 2011, 174).¹ But things were not so simple. While Gadamer was perhaps the most philosophically traditional of phenomenologists—devoted to the insights of Plato, Aristotle and Hegel—he was one of the most religiously modern in his eclectic approach to spirituality.

Aesthetic experience seems to have been the route towards spiritual matters for young, non-confessing people of his generation. When asked at ninety-six by Jean Grondin what had been the 'star' that guided his whole philosophical trajectory, he replied, 'What I was trying to do above all was to uncover a place for what seemed important and true ... to open up a space for the experience of art and its neighborhood to the standpoint of philosophical questioning' (2007, 411–412). The phrase 'art and its neighbourhood' hints at the sense in which art was only the portal to a larger sphere of personal philosophies, practices and goals that German culture held ready for the inquiring modern mind.

Indeed, he seems always to have been assured that alternative cultural possibilities lay waiting for him, should the traditional resources prove inadequate; he wrote that it was not Spengler's 'world-historical mood of pessimism' that most affected his outlook, but rather Theodor Lessing's *Europe and Asia* that 'had a truly profound effect on me... based on the

¹ Reflections on Heidegger and religion can be found in 1964 in 'Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology', and in 1976 in 'Meaning, Spirit, God', and 'The Religious Dimension in Heidegger'.

wisdom of the East’ which ‘put the totality of European accomplishment-oriented thinking in question’ so that ‘in this way for me something like thinking began’ (2007, 6). In this chapter we will focus not on Gadamer’s impact on theology,² but on the ways he built his own vision of spiritual life, and scattered hints of it throughout his work on diverse topics from the proper interpretation of Greek thought, to the nature of poetic experience, to our ‘sublime’ self-understanding as one small part of nature, and indeed of Being itself.

Although his work and autobiographical comments indicate that he was not himself a believer in gods, sacraments or soteriological doctrines, Gadamer was well aware that his ideas drew on spiritual traditions. Society around him was undergoing a spiritual crisis—both in the early twentieth-century wake of Nietzsche and in the aftermath of the two wars, existentialism, the impact of Vatican II and the rise of alternative ‘hippy’ culture. His hermeneutic approach meant that it was important never merely to reject ideas, but always to seek new resources—not least in the global cultural history seeping into the European consciousness. These included ideas from ancient Greece, novel Christian exegesis, German Romanticism, pietism, modernist poetry and more. Even in his seventies when he was far from the influence of Marburg Theology and Heidegger, his readings of his favourite poets—Stefan George, Paul Celan, Gottfried Benn, Rainer Maria Rilke—showed how those writers express ‘for us all that the experience of the divine is unavoidable, even when “God denies” and refrains’ (1992, 120).

While he was not traditionally religious, Gadamer spoke unabashedly of universal ‘desires of the soul’ such as ‘the inner desire of the human soul for a meaningful interrelatedness of the whole, which should also ground the meaning of one’s own life and desires in agreement with “nature”’ (1992, 228). He argued that such a desire cannot be fulfilled by science and theoretical knowledge alone but requires metaphysics in its deepest and perennial form as a picture of reality that accounts for our immediate experience, the sense of personal and universal transformation that calls us to seek a better future, and the vitality of the world by which we are always already surrounded and changed. In certain parts of his vast body of work, Gadamer reveals a coherent perspective gleaned from those non-traditional spiritual resources; although he did not speak much of what one might call

²For discussion of Gadamer’s impact and views on Christian theology, see, for instance, Oliva 2022.

his own ‘personal’ philosophy, he often expressed an outlook on life that guided him for almost a century. In that perspective the spiritual is understood as ‘the vital and ongoing shaping of man’s knowledge of himself’ with particular regard to the special forms of flourishing most appropriate to our lives (1981, 156).

The works that touch on spirituality put certain themes front and centre; these include (a) our philosophical intuition towards seeking to understand the whole, (b) the human capacity for shaping the world in a self-aware creative spirit and (c) our ability to sustain a non-reductive comportment by acknowledging the world’s infinitude, unceasing changefulness, irreducible diversity and possibly infinite range of reality’s manifestations, letting these insights inform us in all things. These three elements of a future spirituality—the whole, creativity and the infinite—form a vision that is at once ‘sublime’ in its emphasis on modest wonder at the reality that surrounds us, and ‘secular’ in rejecting the need for a God or some other transcendent point of reference. He shares little with the religiosity of Heidegger, Ricoeur or Levinas; rather, he stands in a tradition that linked the sacred to ‘the highest form of spirit’ and ‘the unity of sensible appearance and the reality of the divine’ in most modern Western cultures, and sought new ways to unite that sacred with ‘our own being and desires’ (1992, 87).

1 SPIRIT: PIETISM, SCIENCE AND THE OPENING SOUL

Gadamer’s first encounter with spiritual matters was through the introspective religiosity of his mother’s family. The Swabian tradition of German pietism reached deep into his maternal heritage, and although his mother suffered an early death when he was only four years old, the continued presence of her family, and the image he held of her, meant that pietism affected his sense of what a spiritual life could be.³ He was impressed by tales of her character—so different from the authoritarian scientific demeanour of his father—and her memory was kept alive by his older brother who maintained a strong religious faith, encouraged perhaps by a difficult life suffering from severe epilepsy that led him to be confined to a sanatorium until 1944 when he died, a ‘cripple’ during the closing years of National Socialism in Germany.

³ Jean Grondin gives an account of Gadamer’s memories of his mother and her brand of faith in Grondin 2003, 20–22.

Gadamer came to realise from the possessions that his mother left behind, that she was a deeply spiritual person whose interests turned repeatedly to the cultivation of the soul: amongst her possessions was a book by Baron von Feuchtersleben entitled 'On the Dietetics of the Soul' (*Zur Diätetik der Seele*) and a copy of Mendelsohn's *Phaidon*. In later work he references Jakob Böhme, and in his youth became a life-long admirer of Kierkegaard who so resonated with the inner life and ideas he knew to be elsewhere propagated by thinkers such as Miguel de Unamuno, Theodor Häcker, Ferdinand Ebner, Martin Buber, Viktor of Weizsäcker, Franz Rosenzweig, Friedrich Gogarten and others (2000, 276, p 282).

This literature set a distinctive tone, quite different from the eschatological theologies of Catholic or more mainstream Lutheran thought. Feuchtersleben's 'diet for the soul' advised that 'Man should find his recreation in reflecting on his relation to the things of this life. To all has this power been vouchsafed; by all should it be exercised.' And this reflective life of 'self-cure and self-reflection' is contrasted with the hurried efforts of the philosopher and poet to stimulate a 'violent and instantaneous effect on the public' (von Feuchtersleben 19, 14). Gadamer's understanding of pietists was that they 'emphasised application against the dominant rationalism' (2004, 27). Thus in contrast to those who debated matters of doctrine and affiliation as an urgent matter of soteriological concern, pietist thinkers such as Böhme encouraged a liberal attitude to such matters, writing:

...a Christian is of no sect. He can dwell in the midst of sects, and appear in their services, without being attached or bound to any. He hath but one knowledge, and that is, Christ in him. He seeketh but one way, which is the desire always to do and teach that which is right... Therefore I say that whosoever fighteth and contendeth about the Letter, is all Babel. The Letters of the Word proceed from, and stand all in, one Root, which is the Spirit of God. (Böhme 1901, 3–5)

In line with this attitude, doctrinal wrangles were not a part of the religious heritage that touched the young Gadamer's life, and in later years the general affirmation that all religious text is rooted in the 'Spirit of God' was an idea that would accord well with both Rudolf Bultmann's influence and Gadamer's own account of the capacity of all text to communicate diversely, yet with complete significance to different individuals.

German mysticism and pietism would remain central themes in his understanding of German intellectual history. His later defence of Hegel against Heidegger's critiques involved pointing out the former's continuity with pietists and mystics such as Jakob Böhme and Meister Eckhart (1976b, 114). Importantly he wrote that pietism taught him not to cultivate the assertion, strengthening and identity of the soul. Rather it taught that 'the pathway to faith led through the shattering of one's own self-understanding and self-certainty... for human beings self-understanding is something that never comes to an end, something that is always again to be undertaken, a duty always still to be performed' (Grondin 2003, 22). This idea of the shattering and constant re-making of the self as a positive spiritual path would come to underpin the ethical and spiritual dimensions of his Philosophical Hermeneutics. In chapter six we saw how it manifested in *art*, revealed as an arena in which we can satisfy our desire for personal change and development.

Thus his pietist heritage also entailed a critical attitude towards oneself and a critique of institutional religion with its dry, uninspiring character. He describes liturgy before the First World War as something that 'lacked any magic whatsoever'; the music that should have been such an important tool for inspiring a personal spiritual engagement 'was ruined with the introduction of electricity [and new styles of organ]. There was just a great roaring and noise so that you couldn't hear anything anymore. And the same was true in the church services of the time: they were terrible' (Grondin 2003, 25–6). Kierkegaard's critiques of church-based religiosity struck a chord for Gadamer as for so many others: spirituality might be found elsewhere, but could rarely be found in the mainstream channels of religious life.

In any case Gadamer was not likely to take these spiritual influences in an orthodox Christian direction. Younger and in a sense more 'modern' than Heidegger, Gadamer was essentially an agnostic with a spiritual disposition nurtured by art. He had been instilled with a confidence and interest in the biological sciences by his father Johannes Gadamer, who was a pioneering pharmaceutical scientist responsible for life-saving developments in medicine. As tense as the relationship later became, Gadamer spoke of his father in old age with pride and admiration—not only because of the concrete benefit that he had achieved for the world through the medical applications of his research, but also because of the confident, clear-minded commitment to truth that his father personified. Shortly after the publication of *Truth and Method* he spoke of his father's integrity

as an expert witness, depicting him as something of a rebel who would not bend to pressures but was conscientious about representing information accurately (1992, 183). When Emilio Betti later questioned *Truth and Method's* implications for jurisprudence, Gadamer could look to his own father's manner in court as a remembered model of conscientious commitment to truth. One of his regrets was that his father did not live to see that he too had served truth in his own way and also with the hope of concrete benefit for the public.

Yet his personal relationship with the natural sciences could be a difficult one, beginning when his father pressed biology upon him as an ideal career. He had to struggle quite hard through his youth to argue for the viability of a life in the humanities and felt that he never really succeeded (2007, 5). In many respects, his experience was of science as an evangelical perspective, with religion treated as a *laissez-faire* private experience, available to all, nourishing but not forcing itself upon him. The 'spiritual' seeped in at the interstices through literature, poetry and music. On his deathbed, his father summoned his son's teacher, Martin Heidegger, to ask whether philosophy could really serve as a viable vocation for the young Hans-Georg (Grondin 2003, 29). Yet the son never came to resent the sciences; *Truth and Method* can be seen as an extended and careful treatment of the fundamental differences between the humanities and natural science, but it is filled with appreciative examples drawn from nature, and his later work on health sought to integrate his realm of philosophy, art and ethics with his father's world of biological systems and harmonious physical forces.

Science also contributed its own critique of institutional religion, focused in this case on propositional belief. Gadamer judged that he underwent his religious confirmation 'a little too early', lacking the opportunity to weigh up the doctrines to which he was acceding. Later he rejected much of conventional belief. He seemed to agree with his father's professional opinion as a chemist that 'he could make no sense of transubstantiation', and his decision that he could not personally believe in the afterlife 'in the sense the religious do'. Thus Gadamer saw himself as someone who felt 'with a certain amount of regret' that he had 'no religious faith at all' (Grondin 2003, 22–5).

Yet beyond the issues of doctrinal debate and church attendance, there was considerable room for a fruitful union of science and spirituality. While his father rejected much of Christian doctrine, he 'thought the secret of nature as such is proof of something that is not the object of natural

science'. 'That certainly existed' for his father, he said, 'but for him the church certainly did not' (Grondin 2003, 23). The Catholic physicist Clemens Schaeffer was a good friend of his father's, and Gadamer's close relationship with Rudolf Bultmann and his philosophy later represented a powerful bridge across the apparent gulf between religious and scientific perspectives. Later, when he became a visitor at Castel Gandolfo, his contributions to theological discourse found a positive resonance in the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Ricoeur and others working outside the strictly realist approach to interpretation, whilst the Catholic Church meanwhile continued to nurture an enduring interest in physics and natural cosmology.

In many ways, Gadamer's experience of being torn between the personal, elusive life of the soul and the robust work of science refracted one of the most influential debates of the time, which asked whether the rise of scientific thinking was a positive or a negative influence on human life. Hegel, Spengler, Lessing, Heidegger, Hönigswald and even Gadamer's great-aunt-in-law had all written on the theme. This also fed into debates surrounding the heritage of Kant and Hegel, and the search for a formal, transcendental philosophy. At a personal level, his father's disappointed expectation that young Gadamer would contribute to the practical world of scientific achievement meant that science was a discipline in respect of which he would have to justify himself repeatedly, whether explaining the structure of language, or describing the constitution of a healthy life. But for him the relationship between science and spirituality was a hopeful one, capable of a happy equilibrium that his mother's pietist religiosity did not gainsay, and his father's balanced outlook seemed to have achieved.

2 GOD: THE PRESENCE AND MESSAGE OF THE DIVINE

Yet there is a striking silence about the idea of God in Gadamer's work. This is partly—one suspects—because he did not believe in the transcendent personal deity of biblical doctrine and partly because the word 'God' seemed so weighted with historical implications and hermeneutic imprecision that it could serve little purpose in his philosophy. The word appears in his discussions of Greek thought, Christian thinkers and texts, and poetic uses of the idea (most explicitly in his discussion of Paul Celan and Gottfried Benn; 1992). But more often he refers to the idea of *Geist* or Spirit, replacing the idea of a personal controller and judge with a more dynamic and immanent conception of divinity. This notion plays an

important role as one model of more vital, elusive, relational, non-substantial conceptions of Being found in German thought. There is no phenomenology of religious life, and little hermeneutics of scripture in Gadamer's work such as we find in Heidegger, Scheler, Bultmann or Levinas. Instead one needs to seek other conceptions of the divine in his eclectic writings.

Indeed, he interprets the modern era as having lost its sense of possessing access to the 'divine', an access once present in the 'powerful sculptures of the Greek gods', in 'the evocation of the divine in poetry—in the epic, the tragedy, and finally also in the Platonic myth of souls as well as the Aristotelian or Stoic world-god', or in 'Christ himself as the last God who was present in the sensuous-experienceable world and reality' (1992, 87). He sees such contexts as somewhat closed to us in the modern era, although theologians often saw his work as a valuable reminder of the historically unfolding, ever-new and ever-personal nature of revelation history and 'God's inner richness' which it reveals (Oliva 2022, 361). But overall he was little concerned with the idea of a personal God; he even charges the Christian idea of transcendence with having 'demythologised' the old world of immanent gods, and ushered in the very different, more abstract conception of the divine that shaped 'the magnificent humanistic-Christian unity, which we call the Western tradition of our culture' (1992, 87). This was a culture with an impressive tradition and set of insights to offer, but it was also the culture that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had criticised so roundly.

The idea of God was most significant for Gadamer when dealing with a thinker for whom it seemed to be an important idea. Although not a believer himself, Gadamer's hermeneutic imagination brought him within the orbit of theological thinking when he was trying to understand someone who dealt with belief. He engaged from time to time with Augustine, Schleiermacher and other Christian thinkers. But more often the notion of the divine came into play in his consideration of Greek thought. Here, the concerns of ontology, metaphysics and phenomenology came together in consideration of ultimate realities. According to his historical account, the idea of Being was connected with the divine at the very root of Western philosophical thinking, for even in Plato's thought 'the question of the being of Beings was posed in terms of the highest and most eminent of beings, namely the divine' (1978, 45).

Yet the divine here did not necessarily signify a single eternal reality standing above nature. The animistic divinity of ancient Greece loomed

large in his imagination partly because he saw that ‘a Platonic idea... is a divine or demonic but in any case living and acting being’; the ‘precincts of the holy’, as Plato conceived it, lay within thought itself.⁴ As Lammi has argued, Greece was an important resource for thinking about reality as a dynamic phenomenon, and this insight helped to counterbalance the supposed eternalism of Plato which Nietzsche had so vehemently attacked (Lammi 2008, 52). Gadamer did not indulge the fantasy that Ancient Greece was a proto-monotheistic society; he recognised that at the popular level it was immanentist, animist and polytheist. The divine was always already being experienced in the forms and ‘was visibly represented in great sculpture, in human forms shaped by human hands’. By contrast, and speaking from the perspective of Christian culture with its transcendence of God, in modernity ‘the work of art is no longer the presence of the divine that we revere’, and consequently the modern malaise includes feeling bereft of comparable spiritual sources (1986a, 6).

Hegel’s thought was also a major source for Gadamer’s thinking about the divine, but again the ideas that he derived from it were far from standard theistic ones. Hegel’s conception of divine spirit described something that resembled ‘a fluid, spiralling, relational pantheism ... offering an alternative to pantheism *and* the static being-God rejected by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas’ (Dorrien 2012, 13). In many respects Gadamer fitted well into the longstanding German tradition of nature-religion, and in places he seems close to the mood of sublimity expressed by thinkers like Schelling and Schlegel and poets like Novalis, Rilke or Hesse. Of a trip to Brazil he wrote, ‘What are we at all in the face of this strange, indifferent grand power of nature? The boundless nature of this land that we were crossing in a speeding train was of a truly superior reality’ (1986b, 125). As Vallega (2022, 465) observes and as discussed earlier in chapter five, while he is known for his primary interest in interpersonal relations, in places Gadamer also admitted the presence of a larger order of reality with which we are in dialogue, being ignored as the background to our action, yet always confronted as the cosmos as a whole. We must forge a dialogue between consciousness with the ‘immensity, silence, ruthlessness, and impiousness out of which thought comes into question’ regardless of whether each individual sees this as ‘God’, ‘Being’ or simply ‘nature’.

⁴From Gadamer’s 1922 dissertation completed with Paul Natorp, on Plato’s idea of desire (Grondin 2003, 84–5).

3 LUMINARIES: POETS AND INSPIRATIONS

As he grew from youth into adulthood, Gadamer turned towards the intimate revelations provided by German poetry and its explorations of the inner world. From Goethe through Hölderlin, Rilke, Jean Paul and moderns such as Paul Celan, he read voraciously. Like many of his generation he was caught up by the charisma of Stefan George who was an early luminary in his life. Indeed, the George Circle exemplified an important kind of space in which Gadamer was able to find meaningful ideals, and a form of community that went beyond the limitations of the church congregation or political rally: the *reading group*.

The tradition of reading poetry together as a group united in open discussion provided Gadamer with a distinctive template for understanding human inner life, and its communication with others.⁵ Here spiritual life manifested as a combination of factors, including attending to one's inner experience, adopting a regular self-cultivating practice, opening the self to some expanding and inspiring influence from outside, adopting a community of like-minded and mutually beneficial people, and open exploration of a non-physical realm of meaning. As we have seen, he shared social space with not only men of his own background, but also Jewish friends and women such as his first wife, a singer who introduced him into a social set full of authors and artists. In reading circles the solidarity of such groups—middle class, educated, cultured and somewhat cosmopolitan—was aimed at shared creative discovery of meanings, rather than pursuing some specific social effect or political reform. The Stefan George circle, in particular, had injected an ideal of spiritual solidarity among the young into German society, weaving together intellectual life, aesthetic sensitivity and personal development. Although little is written about it in his work, he described himself to the Stefan George Seminar of 1978 as 'one of many, who since their youth have been a witness to the fascination which has emanated from this poet and his poetry' (1992, 83).

The poet was as fascinating as the poetry itself; many in Gadamer's generation sought a teacher who 'was to unite a group of humans and fill them with a new spirit' (1992, 86). George seemed to be this teacher. He had written of great heroism, but nobly eschewed additional wealth and fame when an invitation from the National Socialists to become a

⁵ See Grondin's account of Gadamer's experiences in circles devoted to Stefan George and others, as well as the texts of his addresses to the Stefan George circle later in life.

flag-bearer of the movement led him to refuse, and discreetly travel to Switzerland (like so many poets including Hermann Hesse) where he died. As a result, he seemed a model of integrity for those seeking to maintain relative independence during the Second World War. Robert Norton describes how George was seen not only as a poet but also as a pedagogue who modelled a new way of leading the young, and an architect of the twentieth century like Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhi, Vladimir Lenin, Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau and Paul von Hindenburg (Norton 2002). As Gadamer later noted, he was anticipated to be the ‘founder of a new human community’ (1976a, 133), encapsulating the general air of excitement about the new era that many thought was soon to dawn over the world.

But George also laid the seeds of one of Gadamer’s central themes: human ‘reintegration into the greater totality which supports and nourishes us’ (1992, 84). The reader of poetry, in the period of their reading and reflection, partakes of a dialectical movement between their own subjectivity and the world’s infinite play of meaning. He described it to the Stefan George circle in 1978 in terms of a Hegelian ‘good infinity’:

This good infinity [of Hegel] is the whole. In as much as the verse and art are themselves such a whole, they incorporate us in themselves. We are ourselves encompassed in a manner that the whole would be present for us as the whole. We encounter it rather as the totality and the vastness, wherein everything is, only through adhering to what has been allotted to us, i.e. the *nomos*, whatever it may be.

The poets Gadamer preferred all emphasised different themes, but they shared a broadly cryptic, symbolist style that required diligent and creative interpretation from the reader. For Gadamer this style meant that poems might *speak* of a larger whole (as of nature or life), but they also forced their readers to *enact* a holistic thinking from the poetic symbols outward to the larger realities that they evoke. The unique hermeneutic event of poetic interpretation entailed an ability to bring us out of the transitory, meaningless passing of moments into an intense appreciation of a *given moment* comprehended in the particularity of its complex relation to the whole. James Risser interprets this existential attitude as a kind of liberation from history’s forgetfulness:

As creatures of time, all things threaten to escape our grasp. We are entangled in a life in which the events of that life fade more and more in its very passing. Against the natural distancing within life, Gadamer thinks that the poetic word has the ability to counteract this existential reality, as if it were able to bring the transience of time to a standstill. The success of the poem is able to provide us not just with our access to the world but with a familiarity that is at once a making ourselves at home in the world... (Risser 2022, 56)

The poetry of Paul Celan was a particularly important site of reflection on the idea of a relationship with the divine. Celan says little of God, but Gadamer treats his frequent address to a 'you' in his poems as a discourse with a religious dimension—rather in the style in which the earlier Jewish thinker Martin Buber had explored the distinction between worldly and divine persons. 'Is it meaningful to ask who this You is?' Gadamer asks of the interlocutor Celan addresses in his poems, wondering whether it is God. He implies that from a phenomenological perspective all other subjects are equal, and in a sense interchangeable, in their 'other'-ness:

Even the Christian love commandment does not determine the extent to which one's neighbour is God, or God one's neighbour. The You is only so much and so little I as the I is. (1997, 69)

God is but another self, although it is 'the closest and most distant of all'. Yet God also features in Celan as the ultimate source from which meaning arrives: he suggests that in one poem God is intended in Celan's image of the muse who must 'hesitantly load' the net of the poet 'with stone-written shadows' (1997, 83). As with Rainer Maria Rilke's 'angels', the divine is portrayed as that which gifts us with meanings and meaningfulness from some mysterious source that 'was with us once before, un-/touched by thoughts'. Celan's cautious modernist version of a divine relationship resonated with the unconventional spirituality of Rilke. Both adopt an 'infinite discretion' in relating to the divine in the limited forms we might be able to encounter (1997, 87–8). It is perhaps through Celan that Gadamer most fully enters into the worldview of a disappointed theist: Gerald Bruns notes that his interpretation of Celan has a post-Judeo-Christian perspective, highlighting the poet's 'theology of a self-withholding heaven' with no 'flowing message of salvation'.⁶ These readings allowed

⁶See Gerald Bruns' interpretation in the introduction to Gadamer's (1997) essays on Celan.

Gadamer to translate his own hermeneutic worldview into a theological discourse in which the sacred is hermetically hidden in the text of the present world, and accessible only through saving ‘messages’ that we must strive to access through the unending work of understanding.

Approached through the work of poets like Celan, the care of the soul belonged not to religion so much as to culture, the reflective medium in which existential questions can be worked out. Further, contemporaries such as Rudolf Bultmann and Max Scheler had encouraged the idea that modern generations should feel entitled to rethink and redefine the spiritual life, assuming the authority to creatively transform their religious heritage. Such thinkers confirmed for Gadamer what his Pietist upbringing suggested to him—that religious doctrine and the propositional truth of its tenets are always less important than the human project of sensitising ourselves to the beneficial implications of each message that the world sends us.

4 CULTURE, BEAUTY AND THE GROWTH OF SPIRIT

But this poetic spirituality was not merely a private, subjective matter. As we saw in Chapter five, the theme of integrating humanity into the unified whole of Being runs through Gadamer’s work. It takes many forms but always shows how the individual plays its own defining role in the complex, dynamic, inter-relational constitution of reality. As Tsai comments in assessing the way that Gadamer’s account of understanding in art and in general allows a self-transforming expansion of the original experience, ‘Heidegger emphasizes the oneness of being, and Gadamer emphasizes the multiplicity of being. Therefore, Heidegger is primarily interested in the primordially of truth, while Gadamer is more interested in the multiplicity of truth’ (Tsai 2011, 178)⁷; there is a drive towards expansion, dynamism and pluralisation at the heart of Gadamer’s ontological turn. All individuals make a creative contribution to Being. This participation, informed by a higher level of understanding, can be refined into something intentionally creative and new: a special form of contribution seen in culture’s constant emergence into history in ever-new forms. Art, in this connection is a medium of self-understanding, and an active task for all subjects with the power to channel their perception into new forms of

⁷ *Darum interessiert Heidegger sich hier vor allem für die Ursprünglichkeit der Wahrheit, aber Gadamer vielmehr für die Mannigfaltigkeit der Wahrheit.* Tsai 2011, 178.

reflection and agency. Art fills an important function in making us ‘at home’ in the world, for even interpretation is a form of creative participation in Being.

Creative participation is a theme that surfaces repeatedly in Gadamer’s writing—in games, art, dialogue, festivals, pedagogy and music. Yet again, music serves as a helpful exemplar of the activity that we are always engaged in, yet shown in its highest form. Gadamer confirmed that where language ‘lags behind’ music can carry us forward, and he praised the polyphonic abilities of choral performers (particularly in Gregorian chant, Flemish polyphony and operas; 2021, 472–4). These genres represent the skilful deployment of meaning in its most complex, dynamic and harmonic form. The musician brings the curious temporal phenomenon called life into interplay with the curious temporal phenomenon that is existence itself. In connection with music he wrote that whoever understands something is also someone who ‘brings-to-stand in the middle of the entire movement, the passing-movement that we call life and which, in all its duration, does not cease to have a temporal shape’ (2021, 475). The musician transforms that smaller kind of time that defines our finite lives into a musical piece of an even smaller temporal nature; yet what he thereby creates in the listener through the experience of a piece of music seems to transcend time itself. He writes that music ‘is like a lingering, in which not a now, but rather time itself stands a while’. In music it is almost as if we enter into a different kind of being, where ‘nothing stands except the moving itself’. Thus the ‘gifted conductor’ (and here Gadamer was thinking of Herbert von Karajan, for whom his essay on the topic was written) as well as ‘in principle each of his musicians (or the director as well as each actor) can in the end only be a model for us and the interpretive sciences’ (2021, 475).

Music here has a distinctly phenomenological dimension—for rather than telling us the nature of existence in propositional terms, it makes us experience it directly in a form uniquely suited to our own kind of consciousness. Furthermore, we can see music’s constant expansion into new manifestations and variations with visceral clarity, happening all around us in each new piece of music and each new performance. In the modern world with its vast canvas, the largest ‘global communication’ of music to date is now happening, and with it Gadamer hailed the coming ‘ambassadors of such a music culture of humanity’ (2021, 475); musicians who choose to serve as midwives of that culture of humanity are spiritual heroes of the modern age.

It is the self-reflective awareness of one's contributory role that distinguishes the creativity of minds from that of other organic forms. In this respect Gadamer found Hegel's analysis of self-reflexivity indispensable for elaborating the creativity of which self-aware Being is capable. Far from the 'ubiquitous coercion of things' in traditional realism, Gadamer argues that in the Hegelian perspective 'the experience consciousness has is that all handiwork is a matter of the spirit' (1976b, 73–4). Our transformation and elevation of reality reveals reality's own essence; 'from this viewpoint "reality" is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aufhebung*) of this reality into its truth' (2004, 114). Hegel himself was a model of this process, having followed the 'power of expression in the spirit of Luther, German mysticism and the Pietist heritage of his Schwabian homeland'. Yet Hegel gave it a radical new expression, condensed into its essential form as dialectical spirit through his own creative thinking. It is because of this view of the human as a potentially far-seeing creator that in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* Gadamer describes art as 'an increase in Being' (1986a, 35). Every time that we feel the unique thought-provoking, meaning-activating character of any artwork, we are seeing Being stretch and expand around us—indeed, we are the ones expanding it.

This view of human creation as an extension of Being is tied up with his critique of Kant in *Truth and Method*. He notes that Kant's idea of 'free beauty'—that natural harmony and excellence of form that apply to spontaneously developing forms in nature and the unconscious play of ornamentation in art—holds that such things are said to retain the intrinsic value of being 'beautiful "in themselves"' (2004, 39). Kant's idea of free beauty is characterised thus:

True beauty is that of flowers and of ornament, which in our world, dominated by ends, present themselves as beauties immediately and of themselves, and hence do not require that any concept or purpose be consciously disregarded. (2004, 40)

It is this idea that is lost when Kant develops the idea of 'genius' as a separate, exclusively *human* kind of creativity, alienated from nature by its dependence on intellect and the human ability to objectify and analyse. The idea of genius assumes that the mind is in some way *not* natural, not a function of nature, and this has contributed to the alienation of humanity from its participation in the whole. By contrast the true 'player' within the game of Being achieves a naturalness through which he or she becomes

an instrument of the whole, letting it speak in the form of human consciousness. In *Truth and Method*, he says it is like being part of making a piece of music: our isolated agency is expressed in terms of something larger that governs our consciousness (2004, 105).

Schlegel expresses it well when he says that '[a]ll the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art' (2004, 105). This natural expression of Being takes place to greater or lesser degrees in all expression and activity, but it is inflected by a particular awareness of the self within the whole when art is informed by philosophy. This is why the role of the artist overlaps with that of the philosopher who seeks to bring the world into view; in these contexts we acquire an improved self-identity that sees itself in the light of all reality with its vast nature that can never be totalised and seeks nevertheless to contribute to it.

5 HOLISM: TECHNOLOGICAL VERSUS PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

We saw in the previous chapters that Gadamer was concerned about the takeover of humanity's picture of the world by the natural sciences, and we will look at the way this affected his diagnosis for modernity in the last chapter. But his worry about science also had spiritual implications, for when over-extended to the whole of life the scientific worldview seemed a kind of disease of the mind. It reduced meaning, value and all the kinds of reality that are complex and non-physical, to mere quantities of matter or force. Gadamer's worry about the psychology of technological thinking was informed by his distinction between the discrete information-fields addressed in the empirical sciences and the complex phenomena we see in history, literature, ethics, aesthetics, anthropology and all arts. Jean Grondin has called this the problem of a 'nominalistic' worldview, equivalent to a kind of reductive materialism that presides 'when all reality is reduced to scientifically ascertainable matter and all spiritual realities are deemed to be unreal' (Grondin 2023, 1). Excessive nominalism leads us to ignore universals, generalities and abstractions including emotions, ideas and overall assessments of value. It makes us blind to those 'truths... that enable us to participate in a realm of meaning that procures orientation and guidance' (Grondin 2023, 8).

In an essay published in 1976, Gadamer argued for *The Natural Inclination of Human Beings Toward Philosophy*—a bold claim that he used as his title. This was particularly bold given his usual cautious and commentarial style of philosophising. The essay stands at the heart of his ‘middle period’ of confident, clear expositions in which he was trying to explain the implications of what he had written in *Truth and Method*. In the essay he evokes a battle for the ‘kingdom of the thinking mind’, with science in its reductive technological form on one side and philosophy in its most holistic, expansive form on the other. The fundamental contrast between science and philosophy is painted in more vivid colours than in *Truth and Method*, with science characterised in somewhat neo-Heideggerian terms as a practice of dominating the external world. Philosophy, by contrast, is explained as the development of insights into ‘the whole’ of reality.

Complete technophobia was alien to Gadamer’s outlook: as Grondin says, ‘he had studied with some of the most famous Neo-Kantians of his time: luminaries such as Paul Natorp, Nicolai Hartmann and Richard Höningwald, all strong believers in the sacred authority of science, as was the case with Gadamer’s father’ (Grondin 2023). But, like Heidegger, he felt that the empirical sciences typically represent ‘an immature phase of the knowing spirit’ (1981, 140), and try to ‘purchase the certitude and controllability of their knowledge and the secure path of their progress by renouncing comprehensive knowledge in the grand Aristotelian style’ (1981, 144). Foregoing the wider view of philosophy, people now look to science with a ‘new note of expectation’ that anticipates answers to questions for which it is ill-suited (1981, 147). He asked:

Should the questions to which science does not know the answer be shunted aside even though they still concern the human mind and have called forth the grand answers of the religions, the mythologies, artistic creations like the tragedies, and intellectual works like the Platonic dialogues? (1981, 149)

Scientific truths have a way of obscuring the more holistic, subtle, abstract or pervasive issues present in human experience—issues science does not recognise or know how to answer. A Darwinian analysis of someone’s behaviour in light of evolutionary adaptations may touch on real factors, but alone it is incapable of balancing them with those inherited biological factors, new differences in personal environment, the pervasive background of socio-cultural setting and the difficult-to-capture real

events of psychological autobiography. In comparison to the hard data of science, philosophy seems like ‘an irresponsible flight into a world of fading dreams’ (1981, 150). But just as Bultmann had ‘demythologised’ religious truths, science now needed to be demythologised in its turn, for our ‘natural inclination’ towards cultural, psychological and philosophical concerns cannot easily be felt when we are in the midst of securing the concrete and immediate goods that technology provides. He asks whether, in the future high-tech setting, there will remain ‘still time for leisure and for leisurely speculation about the insoluble questions that once occupied philosophers and that found their resonance in human minds far and wide?’ (1981, 139).

Gadamer’s critique of science acted as a springboard meant to propel us towards a contrasting way of life: we must ‘pose the questions that unceasingly stir our desire to know, questions that truly spring from wonder’. Such questions include:

Is there merely time at all, or is it merely in us? Why is there anything at all and not nothing? And what is consciousness and self-consciousness, in which everything exists once again? How should we understand that this self-illuminating luminosity that we call consciousness will eventually come to an end? How should anyone who thinks this understand it? (1981, 145)

Such things concern not particular phenomena or tasks but our ‘whole orientation to the world’ (1981, 144). The fragile life of the environment, death, the psyche, language and politics all stand beyond the easy mastery of science, but are essential to the well-being of the human mind in its ‘spiritual’ life which is as important as its biological life (1981, 149). Thus philosophy’s perspective is ‘a perduring inclination of the human being that characterises him as essentially as his knowledge of death and the fact that he buries his dead’. Such religio-philosophical thinking seeks that which is ‘displayed in everything as the true, the *logos* common to all things, the cosmic law, universal ground, and universal meaning, the union of being and thinking’ (1981, 140–1). Where death and finitude loomed so large for other thinkers of his time, Gadamer saw creativity and philosophy as just as central to human existence as death. What is needed is to revive our sense of life and reality as a whole, regaining with them a visceral realisation of possibilities.

At various points, Gadamer emphasised the holistic forms of knowledge that can be found in European history, from the nineteenth-century novel,

the *Geisteswissenschaften* of the German academy, the *Lettres* of the French literary-philosophical tradition, to the essays and later Liberal Arts of the Anglo-American intellectual world. All of these fields were engaged in the ‘ongoing shaping of man’s knowledge of himself’ in a form exceeding that which is available to the methods of natural science. Philosophy offers a kind of reflection able to achieve and express insights about the whole of things. It thus serves as an indispensable mirror for the whole of reality and a spiritual necessity for the self-understanding and flourishing of the kind of beings that we are.

The im-practical, but essential, nature of philosophical knowledge explains why philosophy was linked with beauty in the saying of Thucydides ‘that the Athenians philosophise and love what is beautiful (*philosophoumen kai philokaloumen*)’; indeed, the implication is that *philokalon*, ‘love of beauty’, might have been a good alternative word for the human project of understanding (1981, 141). As we saw in the last chapter, beauty is linked with the general human orientation to value in all forms including ethics. No number of facts alone will ever be able to tell us what decision to make, for that depends on the formulation of goals and values (1981, 148). Hermeneutic understanding is meant, amongst other things, to help us recover the true nature of beauty, with it regaining our access to all values that takes us beyond local goals towards the ‘higher’ concerns of the Good. Even in the modern age, sites of beauty remain a ‘theological relic’, the ‘holy of holies’ of human activity (1981, 139).

One of the most impassioned and direct of Gadamer’s essays on personal well-being is an address that he made to a gathering of fellow admirers of Stefan George. In this 1978 piece he can be heard speaking to like-minded followers of a shared spiritual guide, describing a ‘secular’ arena of spirituality in which enthusiasms and insights flourish in interest groups, rather than in churches. His language, at once enthusiastic and spiritual yet also wary of traditional religious terminologies, shows the way in which the epic-prophetic poetry of writers such as George was felt to transcend the divide between the sentimental poet and the rational philosopher. As he tells us in his essay ‘The Verse and the Whole’, metaphysical poets help us craft a language in which to give a ‘thinking justification’ of ourselves, in the sense of the Greek phrase *logon didonai*, a ‘giving account’ of oneself (1992, 83).

In Gadamer’s view of him, George sought a universal perspective in which (here Gadamer quotes him directly): ‘I and You, Here and There, Once and Now endure next to each other and become one and the same’

(1992, 84). His poetry tries to recapture what is ‘mythical’, ‘the whole’, ‘the church’ and ‘the knowledge of a whole people’ (1992, 89), in cultural forms able to ‘renew the whole’ by finding ‘communicatively effective words which would satisfy everyone’s endowment for justification’. The poetic function that he accorded to George led Gadamer to merge the figure of the poet with that of the philosopher (reassuring his poetic audience not to be ‘too frightened by the word philosophy’; 1992, 87–90). He suggests that the poet becomes an exemplary philosopher precisely when he or she uses the evocative quality of poetic language to illuminate the whole around us. Here art is philosophy, and both serve as a mirror that humans can use to understand their lives:

Art—Whether picture, word, sound, song, or whatever its origin was or present function may be—means, in the final analysis, a way of confronting ourselves... the world as a whole—the whole of our world experience—has become present. And even the most silent forms of modern painting, which radiate a brooding silence, evoke in us the ‘you are that.’ (1992, 90)

Speaking to the Stefan George seminar with its shared interest in world religious histories, Gadamer even gives an Indian cast to his treatment of the theme of ‘the whole’, alluding to the famous phrase *tat tvam asi*, or ‘you are that’ of the Upaniṣads, made popular in German thought by philosophers and poets from Schopenhauer to Hermann Hesse.

Knowing the whole, then, as achieved through philosophy and poetry, entails not a list of facts but an *experience* that perceives the nature of the whole, like Socrates who realises the ‘One and Many’ structure of reality, with its dynamic and infinite reach, spreading throughout the wide range of meaning. In poetry this means submitting to the ‘gliding ... gracefully dancing self-movement of the verse’ (1992, 91). Gadamer uses the phrase ‘Christ dancing’ to capture the sense of sacred and celebratory movement that pertains to the knowledge of the ever-changing world and our activity in it, through which we are always already creating ourselves and our environment. But perhaps even more important than our own satisfaction in this process is the service that is done to Being itself—that ‘incorporating whole’ (2021, 474). For the extraordinary states we may achieve through these various holistic disciplines are also states achieved by Being itself.

6 MYSTERY, INFINITY AND HUMILITY

All of this reflection on Being from within is reminiscent of Spinoza's 'intellectual love of god', Hegel's 'absolute spirit' or Schlegel's notion of *heimlichkeit* or 'being at home in the world'; yet Gadamer's version of this attitude involved a crucial caveat, however. Our view of the whole must never slip into a too-easy sense of completion, such as the simplistic idea that is neatly encapsulated in misleading words such as 'world', 'universe', 'whole' or 'Being'. The mind can never possess a finished picture of the universe, or an Absolute form of knowledge in the Hegelian sense; it must correctly recognise Being's infinite possible forms, its changefulness and our own inability to know Being objectively and completely. Thus Gadamer asks us to stay open to the 'challenge and invitation to try and think that which continually transcends the limits of human understanding' (1986a, 5).

This entails being able to preserve the further limit of our knowledge within our understanding of it and more—to incorporate what is unknowable into our picture of the world and the identity, emotions and plans which that picture creates in us. Gadamer asks, 'Is it not crucial to man's knowledge of himself that he, like Socrates, knows what he does not know, and never shall know?' The knowledge of what we do not know is what Heraclitus termed 'the wise'—here signifying 'what stands above and behind what we can know and recognise' (1981, 149). Heroes of the 'wise' include both Socrates with his constant invitations to doubt and humility and Diogenes with his focus only on the omnipresent but unattainable sun rather than the material gifts of the visiting Emperor Alexander. These heroes evoke a past model of philosophy as 'the cognitive ideal of pure contemplation that proceeds toward a highest knowledge beyond all the sciences' (1981, 144). But one of the features distinctive of such forms of knowledge is that they do not seek finality, closure, total knowledge and complete certainty. Knowledge must be an ongoing practice, rather than a single act.

The attitude demanded of us here requires recognising the ever-changing nature of things—in themselves and in our understanding of them. This means their ultimate unknowability must be held in delicate counterpoint with thought's tendency to capture fixed and contained truths. It is important that Gadamer is not merely recommending that we acknowledge the provisionality of our perspectives. This would serve to ensure the accuracy of our knowledge, but only insofar as it cuts short the

scope of understanding. Gadamer's approach is more 'positive' in holding that some more engaged form of understanding even of things that cannot be perfectly known is nevertheless possible and desirable. One should actively strive to grasp what can be known of the principles, conditions, dynamics, patterns and possibilities of phenomena, rather than simply shutting our eyes or looking aside in disappointment at the limits of our knowledge. One would fail to do justice to Being if one failed to acknowledge the phenomenal nature, dynamic transformations and ultimate limits of the world as we experience it, but nevertheless he hints that the unknowable character of reality can be approached by a special kind of attitude that mentally stays open to the ever-being-made-anew character of reality, whilst taking pleasure in the part that unfolds in our own inner life. He described this attitude as one that 'our civilisation will have to learn ... again':

... a step on this path of learning is living in poetry. It is more than a kind of exercise in relaxation ... Living in poetry is one of the ways in which we experience being moved within ourselves. In this only are humans able to find their self-fulfilment. Our education will again have to return to and acknowledge what inner value is and what living in poetry means, and certainly also what for the devout living in prayer means and what for all of us living in the unutterable word means. (1992, 91)

In many ways Gadamer's diverse, scattered writings on the nature of philosophy, poetry, art and religion all attempt a gradual *personalisation* of the imagery of playful movement first introduced in *Truth and Method*. His motto for the book had already hinted that conscious engagement in the play of reality is the most fulfilling of all activities:

....when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner...
why catching then becomes a power
—not yours, a world's. (2004, vi)

In philosophical terms, 'we must continually renew what we hold to be true', by 'preserving [*bewahren*]'—not external orders or institutions, but all of what we are' (1992, 91). The sublime element in his thought can be seen here—blending a sense of wonder at our vast reality with a sense of our individual place in it all. But this was combined with a modern twist on the older tradition of the sublime: we not merely passively observe, but

also actively contribute. Wonder is transformed from something inert into something inspired, responsive and inventive: in-complete Being itself becomes our muse, and in return we become the organ of its self-understanding and increase.

7 IMMANENCE VERSUS TRANSCENDENCE: LEVINAS AND MARION

Returning to the wider heritage of phenomenology, Gadamer differs strikingly from many of his peers. His conception of religious life was very different from those proposed by Emmanuel Levinas or Jean-Luc Marion, for instance—thinkers for whom irreducible otherness, transcendence and personalism are paramount. Gadamer's emphasis on immanent phenomena seems to be exactly the kind of ontological focus that was rejected as 'pagan' by Levinas or as 'idolatrous' by Marion. In the essay 'Hermeneutics and Beyond', Levinas contrasted his own Judeo-Christian philosophy of the 'beyond' with an opposing attitude focused on immanence and Being, which he attributed to Philosophical Hermeneutics. The latter was identified with 'an order where all sensible signification goes back to the appearance of the world (that is, to the identification of the Same, that is, to Being)' (Levinas 1998, 106). In contrast he depicted the idea of God as something that

...might believe it goes beyond the world or listens to a voice more intimate than intimacy... an experience which this thought thinks precisely that it surpasses. This thought aspires to a beyond, to a *deeper than oneself*—aspiring to a transcendence different from the *out-of-onself* that the intentional consciousness opens and traverses. (Levinas 1998, 100)

He describes the idea of intentionally conceiving of a thing, the holding of an idea in the mind as:

...sight aiming (*visée visant*) straight as a ray, at the fixed point of the goal... This is the presence of what can be rediscovered, which the finger designates and the hand grasps; a 'maintenance' [maintenance] or a present in which thought, thinking according to its measure, *rejoins* that which it thinks. (Levinas 1998, 104)

There, Levinas argues, 'is the thought and psyche of immanence and satisfaction', and it stands in contrast to 'the originality of the psyche staking a claim beyond the world' in response to 'the idea of God and even the enigma of the word "God"—which we find, fallen from who knows where or how and already circulating, enormous, in the guise of a noun, among the words of a language'. For Levinas ontology is 'the adventure that, from Aristotle to Heidegger, theology ran when it remained a thought of Identity and Being'. But the task of modernity is to free itself from these self-referential limits. He here demonstrates his continuing commitment to the isolation of the observing self (described here as a 'monadic interiority') from that which it observes, rather than any continuity of existence or identity. The Judeo-Christian attitude, he argues, is one of 'love, more precious to me than the full possession of oneself by oneself' (Levinas 1998, 105–7).

By contrast, Walter Lammi's interpretation of Gadamer's understanding of 'divinity' emphasises participation and immanence:

Discontinuity underlies the coming together of the whole as whole, as living whole, as divine whole... within finitude life goes around and around forever. The eternal dance of the cosmos fits the human to the divine. (Lammi 2008, 116)

In its own way, the 'pagan' Greek tradition contains resources for acknowledging the way that we are exceeded and called to a never-ending engagement by the divine. But this remains quite different from the conception of transcendence that drives the Abrahamic theism of Levinas and Marion. The contrast is helpful in clarifying the immanentism of the secular ontological tradition of which Gadamer is a part and its tendency to attribute intrinsic value to 'Being'. Jean-Luc Marion's theology similarly seeks 'a God without any condition, not even that of Being', with regard to which there can be 'no common measure' with metaphysics (Marion 2012, 45 and xxvi). For him, ontological concerns short-sightedly target nothing more than an 'idol' of the true divinity (Marion 2012, 206–7). By contrast, Gadamer's commitment to the content of empirical reality, as a philosopher and the son of a scientist, is thrown into relief. Given Marion's criteria for what he deems metaphysical 'idolatry', one might ask whether Gadamer's approximation of divinity falls into the category of a merely metaphysical 'God' which is:

so absolutely and universally foundational that it can be conceived only starting from the foundation, and hence finally as the withdrawal of the foundation into itself, metaphysics indeed constructs for itself an apprehension of the transcendence of God, but under the figure simply of efficiency, of the cause, and of the foundation. (Marion 2012, 35)

There is no cosmological argument hidden in hermeneutic phenomenology, insofar as it is disinterested in the origins of existence. In his phenomenological analysis Gadamer is not trying to find some ‘other’ thing than worldly existence, lending actuality, order and power to the empirical realm we inhabit. In this sense he is not looking for a ‘Ground of Being’; at most he makes room for a Rilkean possibility of Being’s being ‘opened’ to what is more than itself through a ‘saying’ that bears some resemblance to ‘giving’ in Marion’s thought (see Dahl 2023). But he is equally disinterested in Marion’s idea of a ‘radically non-ontological field that is irreducible to anything we have derived from our understanding of the worldly *ens commune*’ (Marion 2008, 286). Instead, he is a kind of empiricist who takes his cue from the fabric of existence as presented in our immediate experience: that is what is described in the ‘ontology of play’ in *Truth and Method*, and (for him) ultimately what is described in Hegel’s *Geist*, as well as in Plato’s dialectic. If Levinas’ definition of paganism is ‘a radical powerlessness to get out of the world’ consisting ‘not in denying spirits and gods, but in situating them in the world’ (Levinas 1935, 6–7), then this would seem to apply to anyone who disregards the idea of a realm beside, behind or beyond experience. In this respect, in many ways it may be right to consider Gadamer a ‘pagan’ or ‘idolater’ in the specific senses that Levinas and Marion give to these terms. We may also, as we saw in chapter five’s study of infinitely interconnected Being, see him as a pantheist.

8 SUBLIME SPIRIT: FOUCAULT AND HADOT

A different way to see Gadamer is as part of the alternative classical tradition of philosophy as ‘technology of the self’ and ‘way of life’—ideas developed by the influential historians of classical thought, Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot. Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics as a way of thinking and living more expansively provides the resources for applying his philosophy as a form of spiritual exercise. In his accounts of beauty, love and value, he offers an account of how fulfilment and the elevation of the

individual may be found. In this respect, his work fits well with the theme of ‘care of the self’ that Foucault noted in his analyses of European thought, highlighting the Greek tendency to treat the knowledge and care of the self as a virtue:

Christian asceticism, like ancient philosophy, places itself under the sign of the care of the self and makes the obligation to know oneself one of the elements of this essential care ... one can ascertain that the care of the self constituted not just a principle but constant practice. (Foucault 2000, 94)

This logic of care focuses on a turning inward to discover what the self already has to tell us of its nature and impulses which are linked in some way to the ‘divine’. Repeatedly we see:

the idea of conversion to oneself (*ad se convertere*), the idea of an existential impulse by which one turns in upon oneself (*eis heauton epistrephēin*)... the impulse by which the soul turns to itself is an impulse by which one’s gaze is drawn ‘aloft’—toward the divine elements, toward the essences and the supracelestial world where they are visible. (Foucault 2000, 96)

On Gadamer’s reading, Plato is part of this movement; the *Meno* models the activity of reason, the *Phaedo* reveals the soul’s engagement in non-concrete realms of pure concept, and the *Symposium* shows how our deepest dynamics of desire drive us towards Goodness itself. Foucault sketches how, in subsequent centuries, this model was altered to entail a struggle against the self, and the imposed formation of it, rather than a progressive discovery of it and recognition of its connection with the ‘higher’ world. Thus, as Max Weber had noted, religious practices often involved renunciation of some part of oneself. Yet the earlier ideal of cultivating a positive relation with the self retained its influence, helping to shape both Christian mysticism and Romantic conceptions of the sublime experience afforded through nature and art. For Foucault, at any period of history the ‘truth games’ of culture may lead to altered forms of production, communication and power, but they can also lead to ‘technologies’ that:

...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain

a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (see Foucault 1988, 16–20)

Much of Gadamer's thought could be placed along the axis of this tradition, promoting knowledge of the self, understanding of its connection to the whole as a 'good' and a proactive command of one's own creative inner life. This fits particularly well with the French classical philosopher Pierre Hadot's situating of philosophy as a classically conceived 'way of life'—as William Konchak (2018) has noted. Although Hadot criticised Gadamer's interpretative approach (situating it in line with Nietzsche and Heidegger) as allowing for potentially 'phantasmagorical' readings of past thinkers, nevertheless they both identified similar embodied, transformative and semi-religious features in classical philosophy. Hadot sought in his study of Greek traditions to emphasise that the conception of life that framed philosophy was not *zoe*—vital life force, but *bios*, life as an intentional practice undergone through time. Theory and art were all part of this formation and not paradigmatically distinct from more identifiably 'spiritual' practices like ascetic restraint, appreciation of the present and resignation to finitude.

Hadot acknowledged that the Gadamerian approach elicits from classical work its interest in 'a truth that may be achieved only by transforming oneself' (Hadot 2010, 76), and Konchak discussed ways that interpersonal dialogue, play and our responses to beauty and nature operate in precisely this way, showing continuity with both the Greek tradition of spiritual exercises and the German tradition of *Bildung* (Konchak 2018). In this light we can see that Gadamer's ideal 'way of life' is a constant openness to letting encounters change us, all framed within a holistic perspective (shared with the philosopher, physicist and physician) that thinks in terms of the creative works, dynamic processes and meaning-filled harmonies that each 'game' of the world contains. By analogy, we are like themes within a symphony, organisms in a garden, organs in a body, players in a game, words in a poem. Hadot and Gadamer both advance an ideal of a kind of human disposition (Hadot calls it that of 'The Sage') who 'never ceases to have the whole present in his mind, never forgets the world, thinks and acts in relation to the cosmos' (Hadot 2002, 229).

Yet in Gadamer's case the relation to the cosmos involves a commitment to its open and evolving meanings, keeping in mind how our view of the cosmos incorporates the locus and limits of our own subjectivity, and also takes into account its dependence on others. In his version, the

philosophical view of the whole does not pretend to objectivity and closure and knows its understanding is as much a practice as an item of propositional knowledge. There is also a difference between Gadamer and Hadot; Hadot's emphasis on the Stoics led him to focus on calm, peace, painlessness and self-lessness as a motivation in Greek thought. The 'View from Above' that Hadot explores in the work of thinkers such as Marcus Aurelius aims to minimise the importance and desires of the individual.

But Gadamer is more affected by the Socratic and Aristotelian models that strive to *elevate* the individual and recognise his power to shape the reality around them. The Romantic heritage of Goethe, George and others also added to his thought, building a sense of the sublime into his aspirations for the elevated individual. Nature for him is not so much that which 'loves to hide', as Hadot suggests in *The Veil of Isis*; rather it is the paradigmatic exemplar of growth, dynamism and creative flourishing—it is itself the 'sage' that guides us all. Thus, he prefigures Catherine Malabou's suggestion: 'let's go back to Aristotle: some alterations corrupt us, while others make us better. The difficulty is knowing how to distinguish the two, which is a virtue. For this is indeed a moral problem: we need to recognise the transformations that might lead us towards something better, and those which are likely to cause us harm' (Malabou 2020).

How should we live in the distinctly modern condition of recognising that existence is a mercurial medium that surrounds yet *exceeds* us; that all is change, interaction and creation; and that we must now learn to live without certainties of the old kind? What can a 'sublime' experience become for us today, for those who no longer seek the Gods of ancient animism or Abrahamic monotheism? What does the hero of philosophical hermeneutics look like?

For modern Western society Gadamer diagnoses a need to 'acknowledge what inner value is and what living in poetry means, and certainly also for the devout what living in prayer means' (1992, 91). This self-understanding needs to be lived as an experience of the infinite upwelling and resonance of existence in each immediate moment. He retained an almost pietist sense that one should privately seek 'the God of innermost feeling', as he put it in a 1961 talk devoted to the German dramatist Gustav Rudolf Sellner (1961). In this way we may achieve an 'experience of the whole and ourselves in the whole' in opposition to the specific, local, ultimately inadequate solutions offered by science (1992, 91).

Gadamer's attitude accords well with the Kantian sublime insofar as it requires an ability to hold the vast and boundless object that surrounds

us—whether nature, or cosmos, or existence itself—in the mind, in a state of wonder rather than dissolution. As Kant suggests, there can be a form of ‘dynamical’ might that has power, but not dominion *over us*—and we relate to it through a kind of reason that stands over the senses—synthesising and analysing what the senses tell us without being limited to them.⁸ One might say that, with Gilles Deleuze, Catherine Malabou and Alain Badiou, Gadamer embraces sublime experiences of Being, where reality appears as a complex, dynamic, interconnected, transforming and *transformative* medium. Understood through philosophy, and experienced through art, we can orient ourselves in wonder towards existence, fulfilling a longstanding motivation of philosophy and making ourselves ‘at home’ in the world. Yet we can also sustain postmodernism’s insight into our limits, allowing for non-closure in a pro-active way that makes us creatively engaged in contributing consciously to the rivers of meaning and meaningfulness that flow through Being, and make us, even as we are making them.

Again and again the sublime experience appears veiled in Gadamer’s thought, reminding us that he never gave up on Being’s capacity, if rightly understood, to bring life and light to human life. In a supplement to *Truth and Method* he wrote:

total understanding and expression adequate to it—are limit cases of our orientation in the world and of our infinite interior dialogue with ourselves. And yet I want to say, precisely because this dialogue is infinite... there is opened to us the infinity of what we understand in general and what we can make part of our own minds. There are no limits to the interior dialogue of the soul with itself. (2004, 548)

Language—the hermeneutic word for the empirical fabric of reality—was only another word for experience in its ontological constitution as something with the ‘generative and creative power to unceasingly make this whole once again fluent’ in our experience (2004, 553). Grondin saw hermeneutics as a quest to ‘rediscover something of this Platonic, “essentialist” if one wants, understanding of Being’ as freed from the ‘Nominalistic caricature’ of it. Being here follows ‘a Platonic understanding, [where] the being that truly merits the name of being is not only the individual

⁸ See Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and also his development of Edmund Burke’s ideas in *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime*.

material thing since this individual partakes in an order that shines through in the world and which can be contemplated'. Grondin goes on to highlight that there has been a long-standing project of world-revealing reflection that Gadamer continues here, echoing approaches that span history from Plato, to Romanticism, to the modern immanentist search for wonder:

the Platonic tradition and the Middle Ages saw in the transcendentals, like the Beautiful, universal attributes of Being and not mere constructions of the human mind. These qualities would shine through Being, just as the Beautiful would shine through everything there is and even be that which shines the most (*to ekphanestaton*) in this world. (Grondin 2023, 9–10)

For a man who remembered 'not only Plato and Dostoyevsky but Beethoven and Rabindranath Tagore, and also the mystical tradition from Plotinus and Meister Eckhart up to the Quakers' as part of his upbringing, the spiritual side of the quest for a proper understanding of the world could hardly have been alien to him. Uniting such influences, the idea of a 'sublime' spirituality, inspired by proper understanding of the self in the whole of things, found a new expression in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. But there it was adapted to all the most penetrating challenges raised by 'the dark, magical word "phenomenology"' (2007, 9), preparing for the difficult century that followed for the West, and the hopes of a new dawn for global culture.

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Globalism: The Organic Unity

Abstract Gadamer's vision for the modern world was of a global multi-culture that revelled in encountering other points of view and sought to grow through those meetings. He envisioned a culture willing to sacrifice fixed truths and unchanging traditions for the vitality of discovery, change and cultural evolution. The Gadamerian ethics of dialogue and understanding addressed the needs of a twentieth century that was in the midst of multi-cultural migration, sensitive to the genocidal dangers of prejudice and fast becoming 'global' through the influence of the media, travel and increasingly cosmopolitan cultures. His dialogues with Habermas and later discussions about nuclear threats and environmental co-operation both sounded a warning and recalled to him utopian experiences from the poetry groups and classrooms of Marburg, Freiburg and Heidelberg. In the later years of his career Gadamer insisted on the value of global diversity, and in this final chapter we look at the Gadamerian approach to cultural relations, global creativity, conflict resolution and the possibility of a shared future global growth.

Keywords Gadamer • Globalism • Conflict • Multi-culturalism • Dialogue • Modernity

*Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner...
why catching then becomes a power
— not yours, a world's. (2004, vi)*

In February of 1994 when Gadamer was in his nineties, he attended a retreat on the island of Capri where Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo and other thinkers of the post-Heideggerian tradition were gathered to explore the theme of 'Religion and the Religions'. His colleagues had spoken on Abrahamic themes. But it was Gadamer, thirty years older, who called their attention to the *multiplicity* of 'other religious worlds and other cultural worlds' that was implied in the title (1998, 225). Essentially still a classicist and historian of philosophy at heart, he was arguably the most global of the participants in his field of academic training. Further, having watched a number of his teachers and colleagues compromise themselves ethically during the Second World War, Gadamer had seen the need for a global perspective that embraced plurality as necessary and positive for all individuals and communities; to this purpose he himself became one of the architects of contemporary pluralism, influencing Pope John-Paul II's teachings on reconciliation and ecumenism, and the wider language of cultural and political 'dialogue' in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Already, by 1961, he had begun to guide Europe's attempt to understand itself philosophically as a multi-culture. Encouraged by the German academic establishment to aid the 'healing' of German universities after their involvement with National Socialism, he wrote an essay on Europe's Jewish heritage which he described as standing alongside Greek philosophy as 'the primordial thoughts of the West' (1992, 155). The Jewish heritage of Europe served as a reminder that pluralism was not a new feature of Western culture but the continuation of a history-long process of growth—already evident in Ancient Greece and in Christianity's cross-continental, multi-cultural mixing of diverse religious heritages. The modern world now faced that pluralism in a new way, however, partly because of the broader structures of political administration (nation-states, continental alliances and global treaties), media connections and the power of its representations, and the ease of modern travel. Consequently 'In our era', he wrote, 'the lives of human beings on earth are being forged into a unity, [and] we are becoming particularly conscious of the narrowness of

the traditions in which we Europeans live' (1992, 155). The distinctive challenge of our time is that we are aware of the plurality that is growing around us and must choose the attitude with which we will repel or welcome it.

In Gadamer's time the main expression of inter-cultural failure had been the Second World War. Quite apart from the devastation it wrought, it brought anti-semitism and suspicion of cultural 'Others', nationalist proclamations of superiority to the cultures with which it fought and the complete desolation that came not only with military and economic defeat, but also with a cultural and philosophical sense of having been proved wrong. In an essay on nihilism in German twentieth-century poetry, he cited the poet Gottfried Benn's expression of 'the German fate' that needed to navigate beyond its post-religious realisation that 'to no prayers/ever a God appears', and its apocalyptic vision of 'the human race dying/ from crime and racism' (1992, 113). The threat of a global failure of relations between cultures and the very concrete devastation it could bring felt immensely real.

As a philosopher of eighty-six years, he also raised the alarm on the environmental crisis and nuclear armament. Wary of being seen as an alarmist and anti-modern older thinker, he declared that he 'would not like to fall under the suspicion that these reflections merely betray the unchecked desire of a very old man to develop perspectives on the future from out of our present darkness' (1996, 80). Rather, as an early and pre-scient environmentalist, he was absolutely certain that disaster beckoned due to the extreme form of scientific thinking developed specifically by the West and its tendency towards unchecked use of resources in pursuit of progress: the issue was not contingent ecological problems, but a fundamentally unsustainable use of what is limited. Technology's progress was not defined in personal, cultural, historical or holistic terms. It was defined purely in terms of technological ability, acquisition of capital and commodities.

In *The Diversity of Europe* he argued that all cultures would have to co-operate towards a solution to this problem that the West was propagating globally:

This is the new situation in which Europe—and not only Europe—finds itself after the developments of the last decades. We are no longer alone in our small, fragmented, rich, and multifarious portion of the earth. We become involved in an event and are threatened by an event, which is not

limited to our narrow homeland... For the first time an arsenal of weapons has been created, whose use does not guarantee victory, but would rather result only in the collective suicide of human civilisation. And perhaps even more serious—for as far as I know, no one knows how to master this crisis—the ecological crisis, the exhaustion, destruction, and desolation of the natural basis of our home, the earth... everyone involved in the political or economic is very conscious of the fact that we are slowly approaching, in the West and the East, the border zone of life and survival. (1992, 223)

His response was to shape and pronounce a vision of a 'global' world of hermeneutics writ large, a dialogic philosophy of cultures. This is a perspective that has had considerable impact at the sociological level; it went some way towards countering the 'clash of civilisations' idea which, long before Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, had been advanced in other another form by Hegel. Contrasting with this historical prognosis, Gadamer promoted a model of harmonious plurality and beneficial dialogue from diverse sources ranging from the agoras of Athens and the feast-table of the *Symposium* to the power-sharing, pluri-vocal conversations of the university 'seminar' and the poetry-reading groups of his youth. This model he applied to macrocosmic communities that he believed possible beyond the limits of the nation-state, religious ethos and linguistic divisions. New bonds of complex community had to be formed through a kind of dialogue that leaves no speaker unchanged. Peaceful co-existence would not suffice; with Gadamerian globalism comes a vision of a dynamic, engaged, creative experience of co-created global flourishing, in which no participant can be ignored.

1 POSITIVE PLURALITIES: EDUCATION AND STUDY OF CULTURES

Gadamer's vision for the modern world was of a global multi-culture that revelled in encountering other points of view and sought to grow through those meetings. This meant choosing to sacrifice the comfort and clarity of certainty about one's own fixed truths, exchanging them for the spiritual vitality of constant discovery and change. The flow of cultural resources made available by good education, global media, travel and migrant cultures facilitated the fruitful sharing of 'that vast wealth of knowledge which flows towards each and every human being in the transmission of human culture—poetry, the arts as a whole, philosophy,

historiography, and the other historical sciences' (1996, 1). In his eighties, this wide-ranging access to cultural media fed what he described as:

... my own deepest hope, or perhaps should I say, dream: that from the shared inheritance which is gradually being built up for us from all the different human cultures across the globe we might eventually learn how to recognise our needs and address our difficulties through becoming explicitly conscious of them. (1996, 78)

He thus proclaimed the existential and philosophical gifts of globalism: its promise to offer new answers to problems that had persisted for centuries, as each culture resorted to the same ideas repeatedly without any advance. For Gadamer, ancient Greece (which he recognised as being culturally very different from twentieth century Europe or North America) offered the answers most pertinent to contemporary problems. For some others around him it was India, or East Asian cultures (which were dear to Heidegger as providing 'non-metaphysical languages' (1992, 129) and came to provide some of the most avid students of his philosophy), or the resources of Jewish culture (so influential on thinkers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas). The challenge was to recast the modern condition of cultural and ideological plurality that some find innately problematic, as a fundamentally positive phenomenon.

Committed to the idea of dialogue, Gadamer was sensitive to the danger of monologue and monoculturalism. In a piece called *Notes on Planning for the Future* (in 1992) he warned that the West was at risk of dominating the world and forcing an unhealthy form of co-existence, enforced by rampant armament and cultural imperialism, rather than real engagement. A better model was needed, and as usual Gadamer's method of advancing conceptually was to closely analyse concrete examples. In his interest in societal dialogue, he used the microcosms of scholarly study in Classical and Oriental studies, of Socratic education, and the complexities of healthcare as examples through which he could explore the nature of positive pluralism. Indeed, his personal experience of those phenomena meant that they suggested to him a 'lived example' of the method that he championed.¹

¹ See Veith 2015, 168. Veith seeks to trace the way in which Gadamer essentially puts Hegel's historical dialectic into practice in his own philosophical method, although he alters it to incorporate a distinctive critical consciousness.

One root of Gadamer's distinct optimism about the possibilities of dialogue was grounded in his own sense that Classical study of Greek sources really must be understood as study of a *different* culture, removed in time and space from the predominantly Western European and American outlook of so many classicists. Athens was not some continuous and pristine root of 'the West'. He experienced the process of understanding Plato or Aristotle as a leap into another worldview. This must, in addition, have seemed to apply to the different sub-disciplines of classical philology which, in his youth, incorporated not only Greece and Rome, but also the Persian texts of Iran and the Sanskrit texts of India. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Hegel had attended closely to what they knew of Indian thought, and Heidegger had felt that East Asian perspectives spoke to his own philosophy more perhaps than modern Greece—which he visited but with which he felt little sympathy. Heidegger had described his experience of Greece as one in which 'what I had sensed and expected did not appear', acknowledging that 'maybe the notions that I had brought with me were exaggerated and misleading' (Heidegger 2005, 8). But Gadamer had always felt that Heidegger failed to understand the Greeks in their own right and not merely as the root of Western European thought. Gadamer, by contrast, had worked from his earliest essays onward to understand Plato and the Greek philosophers in terms of their own cultural, religious and political horizons. In many respects, Gadamer's Germany was the nation that had sought to *study* the East rather than to *colonise* it, and in this respect he seemed proud of its commitment to truth rather than power.

As his work gained in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s he saw that the dialectic found in Plato's dialogues, and imperfectly imitated in the German university system, had broader implications for a truly global process. Writing as someone who had been tasked with trying to help purify German pedagogy after the Second World War, Gadamer suggested that universities had the capacity to create a 'new social force' and a new sense of community (1986, 10). This 'solidarity' was a component in Gadamer's ideal, shaped during his years in the post-war administration of German universities trying to create a less elitist educational system. He sought ways to minimise hierarchy, prescribing 'a healthy relationship of the numbers of teachers and students' in order to preserve 'a tremendous immediacy in contact between professor and student'. Echoing Plato, he argued that the seminar form as exemplified in the teaching of professors like Heidegger had helped to prevent arrogance and dogmatism:

Anyone who believes that he already possesses the truth is going to become dogmatic, isn't he? And by contrast with that, Heidegger, during his early years prior to *Being and Time*, the years of the growth of his thought, was truly amazing, even fantastic, in his interaction with students. It was amazing how he took every question that was asked and saw something in it that was positive. (1992, 6)

In his 1986 address at the University of Heidelberg entitled 'The Idea of the University: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow', Gadamer explicitly used the university as a template for the wider world of communication and discovery. Even under the restrictions of 'bureaucratised teaching and learning systems', it is 'everyone's task to find his free space. The task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein' (1992, 59). Successful teachers were important examples of good leadership, for they helped to maintain necessary openness in the university, creating an organic, dynamic, living 'universe' among the generations who pass through it:

There is this chain of generations which pass through an institution like the university, in which teachers and students meet and lose one another. Students become teachers, and from the activity of the teachers grows a new teaching, a living universe... I think this small academic universe still remains one of the few precursors of the grand universe of humanity, of all human beings, who must learn to create with one another new solidarities. (1992, 59)

This model of community is a dynamic combination of generations, views and voices which are constantly shifting, overtaking and becoming each other. Only the person who seeks little more than *confirmation* of his existing views, rather than truthful testing and growth of them through sincere learning, will want to be mirrored by the people around them. That person will always consider the holders of different views as enemies, rather than as fruitful sources of new information. Thus Gadamer writes that:

We do not require a naïve recognition in which our own world is merely reproduced for us in a timelessly valid form. On the contrary, we are self-consciously aware of both our own great historical tradition as a whole, and in their otherness, even the forms and traditions of quite different cultural

worlds that have not fundamentally affected Western history. And we can thereby appropriate them for ourselves. (1986, 11)

Europe itself is a prime example of a unity that is also an internal plurality and in which each unit must deal with the other:

Here the other in his otherness is placed very near. This neighbourhood of the other is at the same time conveyed to us in spite of all the differences between us. The otherness of the neighbour is not only the otherness to be shyly avoided.

It is precisely in engaging with others that each culture develops a sense of itself:

It is also the inviting otherness which contributes to the encountering of one's own self. We are all others and we are all our own selves ... Also the coexistence of different cultures and languages, religions and confessions supports us.

Confusions and conflicts do not disprove the viability of this situation; rather they form part of the complex fabric of ongoing dialogues that always build some form of relationship in the end:

We all, as humans and as peoples and as nations, break the laws of such co-existence infinitely often, and yet in actual life, with the goodwill of partners, something common is always rebuilt. In general this appears to me to be the same task everywhere. And it appears to me that here, the diversity of languages, this neighbourhood of the other in a narrow space, and the equality of the other in an even narrower space, are a true training ground. (1992, 234)

Viewed from this philosophical perspective on dialogue as a universal process, successful cultural encounter is a microcosm for personal development and vice versa.

2 CONFLICT AND THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

But how does this 'positive' globalism function in the more difficult cases governed by disagreement, ill-will or an unwillingness to engage? As we have seen, Derrida had accused Gadamer of making the naïvely optimistic

presupposition that all encounters are or can be a positive collaboration (see Michelfelder and Palmer eds. 1989). Gadamer's optimism must have seemed like a wilful blindness to the danger of ill-will and conflict, curious in a philosopher who had witnessed both the radical failure of nationalism to countenance a cultural Other and twentieth-century dictatorships' refusal to co-exist with other perspectives, as well as difficulties associated with extreme fundamentalist or supremacist behaviours. Such issues seemed to receive little recognition in hermeneutic thought, a fact reflected in his failure to take up the Nietzschean tone of critical philosophy, and his preference for a Diltheyan tone of empathy (Gadamer and Strauss 1978).

But as we have seen in looking at his ideas of truth, the proper purposes of art and the personal evolution of the self, Gadamer treated disagreement and change as phenomena that can be valuable vehicles of development if both sides learn to listen to each other. Translated to the political level, this meant that dissenters and revolutionaries, heated debates and even genuine conflicts could potentially make a fruitful contribution to the flourishing of any given culture or relationship. The key was to be open to discussion, empathy and possible evolution in one's own understanding. Gadamer had long advocated this idea that what is most alien can be most beneficial; speaking of the experience of wonder, he wrote, 'Does it not come to me in the face of the alien and the strange?' (1981, 145).

This positive value of conflict also manifested in philosophical debate. For something to develop or even to gain a clear expression of its own internal logic, it must generalise and broaden its purview by encountering that which is opposed to it—an essentially Hegelian idea. He explains this in a passage that celebrates differences as a direct expression of reason's universal presence and coherence within the principle of dialectic:

There is no friendship, no marriage, no relationship of love in which the inner sense of mutual trust between human beings does not grow through conflict and reconciliation. This mystery of reconciliation is the secret of Hegel's dialectic. It is called synthesis. (1981, 35)

But 'synthesis' does not mean here the uniting of two perspectives—rather it is the process of mutual understanding that identifies the shared frameworks that span differing ideas, thus generating a higher understanding and a bridge by which two perspectives can meet. This is an outcome of conflict that produces not bland agreement but a broader

understanding rooted in the principle of ‘reason in the cosmos... the nous, which is at work ordering and distinguishing in all the formations of nature’ (1981, 35). Egoism focused only on benefit to oneself or one’s own community can only work so far in a shared world; some form of concord will always eventually be required.

Gadamer’s idea of disagreement has been taken up by thinkers such as Alasdair Macintyre (2002), challenging the idea (evoked by Derrida at the Capri meeting) that dialogue must take place among a community of like-minded people aiming to ‘mimic a small esoteric and egalitarian, friendly and fraternal community’ (Derrida 1996, 3). Instead Gadamer allowed for the idea that argument, disagreement, even ill-will can yield personal growth when framed within the horizon of a shared constructive project that remains open to the other. In his essay ‘Citizens of Two Worlds’ he wrote that ‘a type of self-encounter can also occur with another and in relation to what is different’ (1992, 219). Fixed theories and plans cannot do justice to the actuality of history because, as he puts it, ‘our plans tend to shatter and our actions and omissions tend to lead to unexpected consequences’ (1981, 46). We must, in a sense, allow rebellion in ourselves—and struggling to resolve conflict is one of the best ways to do this.

This struggle against oneself is not a trivial requirement or an easy task: in Gadamer’s lifetime Germany’s moral deliberations under and after the Nazis had provided one of history’s most powerful arenas for testing out one’s ability to question dogma and admit one’s failings. One figure whom he saw as having failed to confront his own mistakes, was—inevitably—Heidegger, who famously failed to issue an apology or even an explanation of his support for National Socialism during the war. Gadamer looks at Heidegger’s failure in a deeply psychological way, as an example of someone who has never learned to admit defeat:

I have a biographical and psychological explanation for Heidegger’s stubborn unwillingness to issue any such statement. The truth is that as a little boy Heidegger was all too much admired and adored at home. He never learned how to lose. A person who, in the first three years of life as a child, never learns how to lose will never learn that his whole life long. (1992, 12)

His image of Heidegger, the stubborn man who could not countenance a loss of face stands for all those who are unable to allow for the temporary self-diminishment which is a positive and necessary precursor to revised understanding, discovery and growth. By contrast one thinks of

Gadamer's Socratic ideal that the person who really seeks truth should be willing to be dissuaded of their original beliefs if the counterargument is adequately convincing—and who should not fear this happening.

3 HIGHER UNDERSTANDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Georgia Warnke (2022, 87–88) has emphasised that Gadamer's basis for solidarity is not a social contract meant to facilitated greatest benefit, nor a sum of the individual wills of the people, nor an expression of 'collective ethnic and cultural identities'; rather it is 'a substantive bond with others that cannot be constructed out of individual dispositions and attitudes but rather works sometimes to constrain them'.² For Warnke, Gadamer's idea of solidarity between people is rooted in 'our collective responsibility for deciding practical questions'. Surely this is an important part of what he saw as the practical reality of social life, and the dialogues it demands for our continued ability to survive and thrive in the world. Yet alongside this pragmatic dimension, there also seems to be something more, a Socratic, Hegelian, *Bildung*-like idea of community based on the shared personal value of mutual evolution through exchange of views. Dialogical community is also a kind of spiritual practice, effective not least because it reflects the truth of how reality works. Gadamer's idea of true pluralism as requiring a kind of dialogical humility resembles Gianni Vattimo's call for 'weak thought' in which rationality must strip itself of power, 'give up ground, not fear withdrawing toward the so-called twilight zone, not be paralyzed by the loss of the luminous, single, and stable Cartesian reference' (Vattimo and Rovatti 1983, 11). Yet Gadamer chooses this 'weakness' in the light of his metaphysics, not as a postmodern way of avoiding metaphysics.

Engaging difference, working through disagreement and allowing oneself to be changed, thus, constitute a radical 'hermeneutic' approach to global community. They form a procedure that has the benefit of generating new insights as we proceed towards ongoing new understandings and resolution in ever-higher concepts. An obvious example is family: in reality there may be extensive difference and disagreement between the members, and bonds of blood and upbringing may not be enough to sustain

²Warnke draws analogies with Tommie Shelby's reflections on Black solidarity and ultimately situates Gadamer closer to Habermas than Rorty, in the light of his affirmation of the possibility of pluralistic communities and his rejection of mere similarity as the basis of solidarity.

solidarity. But in a healthy family we hope to see conversation, honesty, gradual growing together and individual improvement through time evolving into ever-new situations. One might also see this played out in political or religious disagreements where, rather than one side persuading one another or arriving at shared conclusions, both must 'raise' the debate to another level by agreeing on a common notion of legitimate viewpoint, or freedom of belief, or commitment to tradition, whilst also bringing their genuine differences of experience and perspective to the table. The dialogue then creates a new theme which allows continued engagement on new terms, and also illuminates aspects of the existing beliefs. Charles Taylor, for instance, used this idea to suggest that the higher insight that arises from the mutual tolerance of difference is that a democratic freedom of conviction, practice and speech is necessary for the multi-cultural communities of global society (see Taylor 1999 and 1994).

A further illuminating image that Gadamer applies to this process of growth-through-conflict is that of conflicting interpretations of poetry. He writes of his readings of Paul Celan's poems that another reader may find that she thinks the same as him and thereby gain a sense of confirmation from his interpretations, but alternatively, she may have thought the same but not realised it, and will thereby gain clarity and awareness. Or different again, the reader perhaps 'believes that he or she has understood these poems differently and better' in which case, he tells us, 'still more is gained'. For 'at that point such a reply will move us all along—closer to the poetic work' (1997, 63–4). Understood in the right way, disagreement is better than agreement because it proliferates our options for understanding things, opens up our awareness and sensitises us both to the possibilities of interpretation and to the nature and power of our own personal intuitions. This, Gadamer recalls, was once practised as a form of reading that aims to stir up ambiguity and indeterminacy, recognising these features as ones that stand at 'the very center of the hermeneutic struggle' (1992, 127).

By implication, the fruitful outcome of a conflict resolution is not a single practical solution, but the making visible of a whole complex of perspectives, of the situation in its inter-related web of significances and of the worldviews that underlie the conflict. Informed by this, in order to resolve specific points like 'Is there or is there not a God?' one might ask 'what is meant by the idea of God here? What kinds of existence are we asking about, and how are they related to the nature of thing about which we are asking? What evidence is being valued here, and what is being

sought or given? What rides on the answer to the question, and what motivates it? etc.’ Conflict allows one to scout out the area of possible answers and interpretations, bestowing an ever-expandable ‘view from above’ of the topic at hand.³

The hermeneutic approach to conflict resolution would presumably require an illumination of the total opposing interpretations of the situation, as well as a foregrounding of the shared concerns or values that have led to the dialogue in the first place. One should hermeneutically bring into the light all those ideas and issues embedded in a conflict, on both sides, seeing how they form an inner logic which must be understood in itself and in comparison for any dialectical resolution into a higher order of agreement. Maribel Blasco has noted that the process of hermeneutic unpacking resists the ‘handbook’ approach to cultural understanding, which sets out ‘bridge concepts in advance and forecloses avenues of challenge and discovery’. Drawing on cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, he notes that a Gadamerian approach to inter-cultural understanding values surprise as an ‘extraordinarily useful’ tool for achieving understanding (Blasco 2004, 136). The process of *hermeneutic* conflict resolution cannot let the participants fall back full on existing beliefs; rather it must generate new discoveries, changed perspectives and at least slightly new identities that make participants ready to become new people in a new situation. While they may be frightened of the unknown new self they have become, they should also be excited by the arrival of the new, with the possibilities and insights it brings.

4 PERSISTENT LISTENING AND DEEP COMMUNITY

Gadamer’s hermeneutics has been used to question the form of globalisation that deals with cultural plurality by building ‘cognitive deep structure’ concepts to serve as a shared language across cultures, while resisting the complex revisionism needed for true dialogue (see Jung 2011 on images of cultural ‘Others’ in the global public sphere). Such ‘comparative’ strategies are appealing, but they also run the risk of essentialising cultures into crude monolithic ‘types’ such as the orientalist image of Judaism as a ‘religion of law’, contrasted with the image of Christianity as a ‘religion of love’, or the idea of the ‘West’ as apt for muscular progress,

³ See Frazier 2020 for an application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics to comparative study of philosophical ideas and theories.

and the ‘East’ for timeless wisdom. Here Gadamer can serve to remind us of the ‘overlapping and interpenetrating nature of different cultural backgrounds’ (Jung 2011, 90) so that all such characterisations remain only provisional and strategic, always subject to alternative formulations. Jerome Veith (2015) has explored the ethical implications of the ‘openness’ of the hermeneutical process, with its addition of a ‘critical’ dimension to Hegel’s strategies for mediation and dialogue. Jason Springs (2012, 1) has also used Gadamer to suggest that we ‘give intolerance its due’, respecting the way in which it can be a bearer of ‘deep moral and religious commitment’, but only as long as we commit to the dialogical experience long enough for the dialogue to sink in and have its effect.

Yet we might ask what sort of community can accept such deep disagreements, and continue? Is such difference not fundamentally opposed to any kind of *enduring* relationship? In an address in 1983 to an audience gathered under the auspices of the Papacy at Castel Gandolfo, he used the example of the smaller communities of the Greek city-states to argue that community, solidarity and friendship remain at the heart of any successful society able to countenance disagreement and plurality and yet continue thriving together. Groups living together can achieve a ‘self-evident commonality which alone allows for the common establishment of decisions’, backed by a ‘presumption of solidarity’ expressed in the ‘concept of the friend [which] articulated the complete life of society’ (1992, 218). Among such friends ‘everything was held in common’—and as Warnke noted, it is this friendship-based commonality, not ideological agreement, which provides the foundation for a shared arena of dialogue. Gadamer writes:

No one wants to assert that the romantic image of friendship and a general love of one’s neighbour are the supporting basis for either the ancient polis or the modern technocratic metropolis... [yet] the progress of science and its rational application to social life will not create so totally different a situation that ‘friendship’ would not be required, that is a sustaining solidarity which alone makes possible the organised structure of human coexistence. (1992, 219)

The implication is that, although we tend to feel in the modern West a horror of disagreement—perhaps because of the objectivist-truth-based framework established on one hand by scriptural ideals of truth and by contemporary scientific discourse—nevertheless it is something more

intuitive and visceral than agreement, potentially derived from a genuine interest in the other in their whole, complex character that must in the end lead us to stick to the relationship. For the resolution of interpretive conflicts, then, ‘a reader need not be scholarly, or especially learned. He or she must simply try to keep listening’ (1997, 67).

Ultimately, however, Gadamer holds that the possibility of enduring conflict may be altered by crucial changes in the nature of our encounters—the most devastating of which has been the massive armament of communities. He referred to this repeatedly in his later work and saw it as part of a series of factors that are creating a new kind of global-scale danger in modernity. In his 1996 collection, *The Enigma of Health*—a title referring to cultural as well as physical health—he acknowledged distinctively modern problems for communal well-being. These included mass-media’s effect on the individual sense of judgement, the facilitation of widespread hostility enforced by militarism, the destructive economic monopolies rooted in corporate takeovers, government corruption, and the arms and drugs trades, and the profound altering of human lifestyle based on technological comforts. Such modern dangers derive from:

...the immense increase in weapons technology and the destructive potential it harbours; or of the dangers posed to the condition of human life by the technological progress from which we all benefit; and then again of the arms trade, which is as difficult to control as the drugs trade; and not least of the deluge of information which threatens to engulf our human faculty of judgement. (1996, viii)

But to return to problems of dominance and monovocalism, he saw these problems precisely as the result of cases where pluralism breaks down and a few or even a single voice comes to dominate the conversation. We see this both in the sense in which science has come to dominate the West, and the West has come to dominate the world (‘It was just Europe which took this path’; 1992, 225). Plurality and argument must be allowed to happen, endure, struggle and develop into a new perspective. Otherwise further problems result, including excessive sensitivity, aggression, a loss of higher ideals and goals, and a failure to map out choices, alternatives and truths beyond our own existing view. All of this systematically fails when any culture develops an ideology or situation that sets aside the need to live with others and engage with them.

5 LANGUAGE, PLURALITY AND THE GROWTH OF SPIRIT

We see that dialogue, self-expansion, co-creation and educative conflict, all form aspects of positive ‘play’—which we now see includes development, growth, flourishing and creativity. We also see that for Gadamer this was a principle that applies to reality, to texts and arts, to individual lives and to flourishing communities. What was perhaps the most *directly political* application of these ideas came in the form of a plea to politicians not to repress those factors by repressing the emergence of *global* culture. In 1965, as *Truth and Method* was just beginning to earn him a public voice beyond the university system of Germany, Gadamer published an article in the *American Academy of Science* that aimed to get the ear of international politicians and strategists. It offered *Notes on Planning for the Future*, as the title put it, and warned of the dangers that lay in seeking to produce an ‘ordered world’ that would be ‘continually frictionless’, ‘perfectly administered’ according to a ‘predetermined content’ that championed, amongst other things, the ‘ideal of neutrality’ and of ‘scientifically objective’ politics (1992, 169). Although such administrative structures, imposing regularity from above, have an important function in developing or destructively unstable countries (1992, 178), more broadly they are merely another manifestation of the scientific template for knowledge and of the drive to dominance of what is living, complex, surprising and uncontrollable.

Gadamer felt that it was the victory seen in science’s technological success and the economic supremacy that it brought, which had led to the increasing take-over by Europe and North America of the ‘developing’ world. He cautioned his audience about the pernicious way such ‘progress’ becomes adopted as a Trojan horse for the cultural ideas of the West:

Many countries in this world are in search of a form of civilisation that would accomplish the trick of uniting their own traditions and the deeply rooted values of their forms of life with ideas of economic progress derived from Europe. (1992, 200)

This was a prescient observation of the principles by which technological and economic development have led to a disproportionate dominance of certain countries in modernity. He went on:

The greater part of humanity is facing this question. It addresses us as well. Are our schools and educational programs actually employed in the right way, when we export them to the third world? Or are they in the end only grafted, causing more alienation of the elite from their ancestral traditions, rather than contributing to the future of these countries. (1992, 200–201)

As a rector who had called for more ‘worker students’ in post-war Germany, he was sensitive to the way in which class divisions played a factor in the potential stunting of culture’s coherent progress. He continued with specific reference to the damage already done, and the possibility of a reversal of influence, which might flow from African and Asian cultures back into the West:

The tragedy of the ‘black Orpheus’ is well known. We stand admiring the artistic talents of Africa or Asia. Our sculptors, our painters, our musicians and our poets marvel and learn. (1992, 201)

‘Marvelling’ and ‘learning’ should predominate, rather than imposing and exporting, so that a more organic multi-lateral globalism can develop naturally, not as an imposed structure, but as an ‘equilibrium’ that has its own regulative systems as any organism does (1992, 174). Gadamer acknowledged that the reality of such an organic process may not be as smooth or lucrative as the cultural, economic or military imperialists’ future world. It would have to allow for genuine differences of religion, ethos and ethics, rooted in the different situations of each culture. But this uncertainty is in fact a normal and healthy part of society and is only ever temporarily avoidable by dictatorial controls. He drew on the ‘much-maligned’ existentialist idea of a *situation*, associated primarily with Karl Jaspers:

To find oneself in a ‘situation’ involves an experimental moment... [people] claim that they must ‘put themselves in the situation’ before they are able to recognize the really expedient and possible from many alternatives. ‘Situations’ do not possess the characteristics of a mere object which one meets face to face... Even the adequate knowledge of all objectively given facts, such as are provided by science, cannot fully encompass the perspective as seen from the standpoint of a man involved in a particular situation. (1992, 173)

Applied to the plurality of cultural perspectives, this challenging passage suggests that we must see ‘from the situation’ we are in, and see not only our immediate experiences and prospects, but also what is ‘expedient and possible from many alternatives’. The perspective that we form privately, secure in our own situation, may not be adequate for negotiating the situation. Gadamer backs this idea up with a concrete example of what this may entail. In the 1960s he saw that the world was fast moving towards technological dominance of ‘a technically uniform civilized man’ supported by ‘the use of a correspondingly uniform language’. Even then he saw that ‘English is far advanced in filling that role’ (1992, 176). But, while this uniformity is clearly suited to solving certain specific goals, it cannot replace the far-superior benefits of simply ‘learning another language’, expanding into new ways of thinking and expressing ourselves, and the possibility of having unfamiliar experiences. Every language carries its own world within it, containing its own ‘inner infinity’ which is given as a gift to the person who learns it:

This boundlessness is preserved still more when man, while learning a foreign language, steps into an alien system of meanings and, by comparison, experiences the wealth and poverty of his own speech ... The age of *posthistory* into which we are now proceeding will find its limits in this distinctiveness of man. (1992, 178)

Interestingly, here Gadamer suggests that the irreducible distinctiveness of people, languages and meanings can have a reviving effect on history itself, renewing it with the real challenge of discovery and expansion of meaning. But for this globalism must have plurality; it must be a multi-culture. While it must oppose all forms of harm, it must in other respects allow for the possibility of difference and provisional disagreement, creating an almost Habermasian ‘public sphere’ which allows this. But the Gadamerian ‘public sphere’ exists not merely for the purposes of a ‘negative liberty’, to borrow Berlin’s (1969) term. Josef Simon (1994) has suggested that the idea of a ‘world’ is connected to the idea of conscience in Gadamer’s thought—i.e. in knowing that our worldview is ‘ours’, a contingent view among many, we bear a responsibility for relating it to the wider community. This seems right yet fails to foreground that the responsibility is not only ethical in the sense of respecting others, but also aesthetic in the sense of maximising the potential value arising from Being itself. Pluralism is, in a sense, an artwork as well as a moral relation. If one

is, as Charles Taylor has suggested, to thrive socially by having the members of society pursue the purposes they personally own and affirm, those purposes must be able to co-exist, and that means more than tolerance (see Taylor's (1985) discussion of positive liberty). They must be in some sense shared and co-affirmed as part of a larger 'whole' purpose that is itself created by all. Without that larger sense of purpose, no atomistic freedoms can fully succeed or even make sense of themselves in the world.

This may have to allow ideas like 'democracy' and 'freedom' to take on wider meanings. Indeed, Gadamer, whose perspective spans a century, notes that in some contexts 'democracy and freedom' can mean liberalism and in others it can serve as the catchword of 'speech control' or 'a device for mass-manipulation and domestication' (1992, 178). No single plan will do; organic pluralities must be able to live and thrive in their dynamic equilibrium, and we will have to comprehend their situations and learn all of their languages and perspectives, piloting towards not only a shared society, but a shared ideal of what society can become that has emerged naturally out of the group.

Seen in this light, the global situation of relative pluralism and connection, facilitated by the modern ease of immigration, travel and media access, affords us invaluable opportunities. In addition, viewed from the broader, 'medial' perspective, this means that pluralism nurtures the ongoing expansion of concept, reality and history itself that Hegel called the progression of *Geist* or Spirit. All encounter and its provocation to understanding makes this contribution. But there must be a sustained space for dialogue in order for synthesis to occur and actualise the creative potential for transformation in the self, in relationships, communities and ideals. The social and the spiritual are united in this, and the arts, as we have seen, have a special place in this process.

In his later years and after his death, Gadamer's thought has become a tool for many fields. Paul Kidder (2013), for instance, has used Gadamer as a foundation for understanding the necessarily collaborative and practical creativity of architectural design, and John Arthos (2013, 166) has applied Gadamer's insights into poetic interpretation to illuminate the wider range of 'works that pass down as self-consuming artifacts lacking fixed texts or nominal ones—[such as] bardic epics, the Mandala sand-paintings of Tibetan Monks, the improvisations of classical Jazz musicians' all of which display a 'radical commitment to an unfolding identity and a divestment of authorship' (Berlin 1969). In the area of theology, Pui-Ian Kwok (2005, 39) harnesses Gadamer's thought (alongside that of Gordon

Kaufman) to her own notion of ‘dialogical imagination’, a process through which Post-colonial subjects can synthesise multiple traditions into their own theological contribution. This collaborative principle is also strongly present in internet-based cultures and participatory technologies, which only began to really develop their more sophisticated uses towards the close of Gadamer’s life. In all such cases, equal speech and openness must be sustained for a true evolution of dialogue; structures of dominance—where something can buy pre-eminence financially or win it by merely being more entertaining or accessible—threaten this. Where encounter, change and transformation fail, power arises and begins its fatal disruption of the natural processes of equilibrium and creativity.

6 OPEN UTOPIANISM

What are the positive and negative extremes possible for concrete societies in this view? Pui-Lan Kwok’s application of Gadamerian dialogue to global participation in the living evolution of theology reminds us that one of the roots of hermeneutics lies in the early Lutheran tradition’s bold biblical exegesis, its restoration of private individual relationships with the divine and the facilitation of vernacular texts capable of popular interpretation. The change, pluralism and creativity of contemporary ‘globalism’, with its unprecedented geographical spread, are not necessarily more radical than cultural transformations of the past: modernity is part of a broader historical pattern of creative up-wellings of ‘the modern’. In principle this empowers individuals, communities and cultures to take conscious part in the growth of the world.

Yet one group may fail in its respect for the equality and depth of other subjectivities and see another group as contributing only negative factors to history; in this case we see history’s darkest crimes aimed at wholly silencing others. Genocide, recurring repeatedly in human history, is the most extreme result; it is not only a result of ethnic hatred, but also a result of the belief that all history would be better without a certain contribution, and an attempt to dictate for all people a more monovocal, unilaterally determined unfolding under a singular guiding control that aims to order the organic growth of things. By contrast, Gadamer’s philosophy essentially has ‘bottom-up’ socio-historical determination at its heart. In contrast to Grace Jantzen’s (2003) feminist critique of Gadamer as sustaining Heidegger’s fascination with mortality, we see the ways in which

his work is—like that of Aristotle, Hegel and vitalists such as Oetinger—oriented predominantly towards the themes of creativity and growth.

One might call his approach a form of ‘open utopianism’ that requires sustained multi-lateral dialogue under conditions in which participants are both open to change and co-operative in co-creating new goals and values. Yet this raises interesting questions about the viability of an ethics that cannot offer any final goal in advance—other than this possibility of organic shared development. We might compare Gadamer’s picture of history with that interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* that sees in it the structure of a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of education and self-development.⁴ What would it mean if society were to orient not towards an eschatological plan, but instead towards an open-ended, ceaseless odyssey, a ‘Camelot’ where one does know what will be said at the round table, but only that the table will always be open to all? Gadamer used the image in Plato’s *Symposium* of humanity’s unceasing biological reproduction, as an analogy for the way in which historical traditions ‘exist as an ongoing reacquisition that proceeds into infinity’ (1981, 60). But this was not intended to discourage the formulation of hopes, movements and goals however, whether religious or secular:

There is indeed no disputing that the Christian and non-Christian histories of salvation—and even histories of un-salvation (*Un-heilsgeschichten*) such as the Nietzschean one of the mounting European nihilism—are a legitimate need of a human reason explicitly conscious of its historical character. Just like all other history, however, universal history too always must be rewritten insofar as it does not possess its absolute datum as does *Heilsgeschichte*. (1981, 60–61)

Utopianism here resists a final form, since growth is in the very nature of things according to hermeneutics’ ‘ontology of change’, as Susan Hekman (2003) puts it. In her study of the dialectical background of hermeneutics, Lauren Barthold defends the value of open goals and plans, arguing that ‘humans function best when aiming at diffuse goals’ (Barthold 2010, 124). By analogy, jazz could not exist if its development were not always at least partly open, and a symphony that never engages us with anticipation in the unforeseen development of its themes would be a thin

⁴ See the views of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Rorty 1996, 91, Lovlie 1995, and Saeverot 2023.

work of art. Walter Lammi (2008, 57) has highlighted the way that Greek cosmological notions of the ‘indeterminate whole’ or the *apeiron*, the ‘divine unlimited’, are the dominant unit of analysis in Gadamer’s hermeneutic worldview. This sense of futurity offers an alternative to the nihilism or nostalgia with which many thinkers have approached the modern situation. In Habermas’ terms, it is Gadamer’s attempt to ‘urbanise’ the infinite, many-goaled, future, preparing it to be lived in.

Gadamer did not fill in the details of how this might be achieved, remaining close to his own philosophical expertise and his hermeneutic methodology of treating case studies in historical philosophy and everyday experience. But it might be helpful here to bring Gadamer and Foucault into dialogue (as others have done) to think about ways that power can be concretely mediated, and creativity facilitated in a society that remains ultimately committed to open collaborative growth and discovery. In his study of the transforming notions of governance through European history, Michel Foucault contrasted the Greco-Roman notion of the state with the Ancient Near Eastern notion of the leader as a ‘shepherd’ or ‘pastor’ who is connected to his flock through a relation of ‘constant, individualised, final kindness’, to ‘foster a flock day by day’ through ‘individually kindly power’ that is ‘closer to “devotedness”’ and means that he ‘must also know each one’s particular needs’ (Foucault 2002, 302–3). Foucault notes the way in which this ‘pastoral’ power of the leader-as-shepherd is opposed in Plato with the very different leadership of the statesman who is seen as a ‘weaver’—one who

...was to weave strong ‘fabric for the city’, ‘binding different virtues, binding contrary temperaments... The royal art of ruling consisted in gathering lives together ‘into a community based upon concord and friendship,’ and so he wove ‘the finest of fabrics.’ The entire population ‘slaves and free men alike, were mantled in its folds.’ (Foucault 2002, 306–7)

Foucault’s observation, echoing Plato’s problematisation of the theme of governance, is that the pastoral model was concerned with an individualistic devotion to each, yet it was possible only for the shepherd of small communities. In *nations*, a more large-scale unit, the politician could not ‘sit by each person, feed him, give him concerts, care for him when sick’. As a result, obedience, answerability, unilateral visibility and sacrifice become features of the expanded ‘pastoral conception’ of leadership,

introducing a ‘game that neither the Christians and the Hebrew imagined’.⁵ In a way, Gadamer tries to restore some of the principles of small communities within the woven community of state—emphasising the forms of affection, care and give-and-take that can arise in the intimacy of a neighbourhood, café or pub, village or locality, university or reading group, family or workplace, councils or forum. But this emphasis is primarily rooted not in sentimentality or even in moral concerns; it flows from the metaphysics yielded by his early twentieth century phenomenological training, harvested from the seeds of insights in Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Boehme, Kant and Oetinger, Dilthey, von Humboldt and Vico.

Many thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have responded to the general sense that we have crossed a divide in Western history and must now attain to new possibilities by attempting to shape a different way of seeing the world. Martin Heidegger encouraged us to inspect and appreciate the strange gift of Being without taming it into familiar concepts, and Jacques Derrida called us not to settle for simplicities, but poise ourselves in a light-footed ever-readiness for new possibilities. Gilles Deleuze has encouraged us to see ontology not as a catalogue of *what is*, but as a constant emergence of possibilities—of what *can be*. Pierre Hadot invited us to remember that philosophy must be lived, and Michel Foucault reminded us to take responsibility for the self that is inadvertently shaped in such systems and forms of interaction—mindfully curating what we become. These philosophies, then, are both practical tools for living, and pictures drawn from rigorous analysis, phenomenological observations, logical necessities and transcendental arguments. Similarly Gadamer’s open, pluralist society is rooted in his ontology.

What we have tried to show here is only one of these pictures, meticulously built across the decades of a life spent watching some of history’s most rapid and violent changes. In many respects, it is Gadamer’s place as the father of hermeneutic philosophy that gives his ideas their importance: he is the author of an account of meaning, truth, dialogue and understanding that today is assumed in interpretative disciplines, cultural encounters and basic understandings of people, artworks and societies. But his offering is greater than this; he discovered that his insights opened out into a larger vision of the whole of Being spreading around us as a

⁵ Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’ Toward a Critique of Political Reason’ in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1987, Vol. 1*, James Faubion ed. Robert Hurley etc. trans. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.311.

sublime, creative, interconnected spectacle. He discovered that a kind of *creative transformation*—a thoughtful, empowered contribution to the world through not only what we do or say, but what we *are*—is what existence urges upon us.

In many ways the sum of his vision is captured in words that he himself borrowed from his student Ernst Meister:

I still allow myself to believe that there exists an order in the vault of the heavens, in the arched truth of space. Though bent by the human eye this heavenly infinity itself bends iron, bends the will, though mortal, yet to be a god. (Cited in 1996, 91)

In all our lives, the heavenly infinity is necessarily bent to accommodate the human gaze in all its unfixed finitude. Yet the mortal is always *en route* towards being a god. In Gadamer's thought, secular as he is, there is a particular sense of the omnipresence of sublime, futural, infinite, beautiful ideals that lie beyond our small wills. They are not only possibilities for humanity; they are already woven into the fabric of our Being. Our decision is whether to acknowledge and live up to them or not. The Gadamerian does this not because a God will judge us or even because it best serves survival and ego. Rather it is the creative power afforded by our natures that can decide what we wish to do with the small yet bright part of Being that we are.

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