

*Gadamer's Truth
and Method*

A Polyphonic Commentary

Edited by

Cynthia R. Nielsen and Greg Lynch

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Chapter 4

TM I.2.1

Gadamer on Play as Ontological Explanation

Jessica Frazier

The discussion of "play as the clue to ontological explanation" in section I.2.1 of *Truth and Method* offers a striking change of tone from the surrounding passages of historical exegesis. It presents an evocative series of images that include

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 . . . dance . . . the play of colors.¹

These lyrical illustrations serve as the foundation on which to build an ontological model that would subsequently pervade Gadamer's thought. The significance of this section can appear restricted to problems of aesthetics, but late in the chapter he indicates that his goal extends further than this: "The intention of the present conceptual analysis . . . has to do not with theory of art but with ontology. Its first task, the criticism of traditional aesthetics, is only a stage on the way to acquiring a horizon that embraces both art and history" (*TM*, 138). As we will see, Gadamer's model of play as the taking up of individuals into a constantly transforming medial structure is meant to encapsulate the nature of all structured activity (any form of *Spiel*) and ultimately the mode of existence of humans themselves. He hints at this through the wide latitude of his conception of play, treating it not only as something people do, or as games, but as any kind of patterned but open-ended formation. His list encompasses board games and ball games, organic forms and mechanical processes, physical forces and poetic allusions, dance, drama, spatial design, and even religious rituals and seasonal festivals. Through these many

examines the master metaphor of play emerges as a heuristic tool with which to unfold his historical exegesis of the West's approach to truth and improve on the dominant conception of truth as correspondence to an external reality.

Hence, the play metaphor is not merely a digression along the way. It bookends the whole of *Truth and Method*, making its first appearance in the epigraph from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke that opens the book. The poet observes and exhorts:

When you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner

... in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God:
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world's.

Here we already get a hint of the key theme of participating in something larger that connects with the structures of reality itself and adopting a view that empowers us while requiring that we rethink our very nature as individual subjects. The play metaphor returns in the final pages of the book where he turns from "the ontology of the work of art" to "the ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language." Here at the end, he uses it to reveal the widest implications of his thought—what he calls "the universal aspect of hermeneutics" (TM, 490)—and clarifies that the concept of play is meant to determine "what we mean by truth" (TM, 505). In 1962, two years after the publication of *Truth and Method*, he tried to explain his core ideas in the essay "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," and here he revived the play/game analogy as a way to show how hermeneutics alters conventional notions of truth.² As we will see, despite allusions to playing and gaming by previous thinkers, his use of the idea has a speculative, poetic tone that is all his own. It seems that Gadamer was digging deep into his conceptual imagination to find a metaphor that would express *directly* the universal generative structure that he felt he had discovered through his hermeneutic reflection.

The significance of this extended play analogy has been much debated in the secondary literature. It has been interpreted by those interested primarily in hermeneutic theory as a way of showing that all meaning-making contains a hermeneutic circle which leads to new, creative elements,³ or as the revelation of art's speculative yet ultimately contemporaneous way of revealing "the totality of our being-in-the-world."⁴ Those interested in Gadamer's place in the history of philosophy have seen it as an extended reflection on Plato's dialogues,⁵ a plagiarising of Herder in order to advance beyond Heidegger,⁶ or a way of merging Platonic, Hegelian, and Heideggerian elements into a unified "hermeneutic ontology."⁷ Some concerned with

the development of phenomenology have taken play as Gadamer's way of contributing to the phenomenological project by conceptualizing the "pure appearance" of things—an idea that might foreshadow "Derridean disruptive play"⁸—or conversely as his affirmation of the value of structuring principles of constraint that differentiates him from both Derrida and Heidegger,⁹ or even as a phenomenological critique of all standard substance ontology.¹⁰ For those interested in its religious and ethical implications, it may be a device that helps us counter subjectivism, understand human being-in-the-world, and learn how to listen properly to theological language,¹¹ a way of explaining the sacred,¹² a metaphor bridging Gadamer's dialectical ontology and the ethos of playful and creative exploration that he derives from it,¹³ or a way of modeling the life-giving, dynamic, "divine" characteristics of nature and our aspiration to become "ecstatically" united with it.¹⁴ Yet despite such interpretations of this chapter's role within the wider agenda of Gadamer's thought, it can seem to sit oddly within the book, wedged awkwardly between discussions of Kant's aesthetics and the methodological goals of the human sciences. Its apparent digression into the ontology of art makes most sense when it is seen in terms of the larger historical narrative within which it features.

In the following sections, I will situate this curious play chapter within the overarching narrative of *Truth and Method*, follow the trajectory of its argument, identify the structural features that make it such an apt model for the ontological nature of meaning and experience, and finally touch on its application to individual and communal well-being in Gadamer's later work. Along the way, we will see how Gadamer's structural analysis of play was meant to improve on the phenomenological models of his predecessors. Gadamer was mindful of how Heidegger had struggled through awkwardly experimental means of expressing the radical change of perspective his philosophy required—speaking of there-being (*Dasein*) or dwelling (*wohnen*) to express our world-embedded-existence, replacing the old realism of things and substances with a new ontology of language. In places, Heidegger had tried to create a new grammar that excised the subjectivist, objectifying view of the world by emphasizing verbs over nouns, for instance. But these methods as often obscured his real meaning as revealed it. His pupil was eager to seek a new method, and as Walter Lammi notes, "his straightforward discursive prose stands in marked contrast to the later Heidegger's 'oracular' or quasi-poetic ruminations."¹⁵ Metaphor suggested itself as a valuable explanatory tool. Gadamer said of the concept of play that

here as always the metaphorical usage has methodological priority. If a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual "original" meaning emerges quite clearly. Language has performed in advance the

abstraction that is, as such, the task of conceptual analysis. Now thinking need only make use of this advance achievement. (TM, 108)

With this in mind, in the play chapter, Gadamer essayed an alternative approach: a poetic trope meant to express the nature of Being.

1. PLAY IN THE NARRATIVE OF TRUTH AND METHOD: A SOLUTION TO SUBJECTIVISM

In many ways, *Truth and Method* is a Fall-and-Redemption narrative with the idea of truth in the West as its protagonist and play as the saving touchstone. Part I deals with our prelapsarian experience of truth in which we dwell in what he calls a natural *sensus communis*: we organically negotiated meanings according to each occasion or community and felt no Cartesian doubt, no distance from the world. But an increasingly subjectivist outlook came to predominate, exemplified in Kant's aesthetics; this led to a diminution of our sensitivity to meaning, anxiety about correctness, and a retreat into the idea that we only have access to private experience and individual taste. But in the second section of Part I Gadamer uses his play ontology to revive and reveal the actual nature of truth. We discover that it is not so much part of us as something of which we ourselves are a part. Armed with this new insight, Part II then goes on to look at the modern discourses concerning truth found in the fields of history and phenomenology. Here again we see confusions creeping into those fields, but Gadamer offers a further clarification diving back into Aristotle and Plato to pull up the problem at its roots. Finally, in Part III, he takes up the direction pointed out in the later essays of Heidegger and explains his idea in terms of language, ending in the last pages of the whole book with a return to the ontology of play, now used as a model of all our "understanding of the world" and any "event through which meaning asserts itself" (TM, 506).

Amidst all this, this section stands out because of its distinctive style within the text as a whole. Throughout most of *Truth and Method* (and in most other writings), Gadamer prefers to employ critical exposition of past views as his main way of developing an argument. It helps to contextualize every idea and allows him to show what is good and what needs correcting in each previous philosophy. Thus, he uses thinkers like Kant and Hegel to reject subjectivism or Dilthey and Heidegger to point the way forward. This tendency is particularly clear in the volumes of essays on Aristotle and Plato, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and others.¹⁶ This exegetical approach was an expression of his philosophical advice to situate oneself in relation to tradition and engage with it critically yet constructively.

But this 'historical' style could be just as obfuscating as the language-play of Heidegger. He was aware that his point often got lost in his own tendency toward historical explanations, and those around him sometimes referred to these digressions as *Gads*: they were his own unique methodological failing. Even as a lecturer, his students were unclear about whether he was doing philosophy or just intellectual history.¹⁷ But instead of "creating a special language" he wanted to make "the language which we normally use say what Heidegger speaks about."¹⁸ Against this backdrop, we can see the play chapter as an attempt to grasp hold of a clear metaphor that would anchor his account and do the difficult work of the finer ontological points of his radical new view of truth.

2. THE ARGUMENT FROM PLAY: STRUCTURE, PARTICIPATION, CREATIVITY

Gadamer's argument unfolds through a slow analysis of everyday language about the term *play* in which his core observations gradually build into an account of a distinctive *kind of being* to which we habitually pay all-too-little attention. In the first section, Gadamer justifies his ontologization of the image of the metaphor of play and games (which by then had become familiar in its uses by Schiller, Wittgenstein, and Huizinga, all of which Gadamer acknowledges) by arguing that the real subject of art-experiences is not the person but the "work itself" (TM, 107). He begins with an ontological twist on Schiller's earlier use of the play analogy: as an aesthetic concept, it usually refers to the playing subjectivity of the artist or the audience, whereas in part A on "The Concept of Play" he immediately announces his intention to use it for analyzing "the mode of being of the work of art itself" (TM, 91). This is supported with the observation that play only exists as such when "the player loses himself in play" in such a way that the game or activity proves itself to be the more fundamental reality (TM, 107).

He then goes on to explain the characteristics of play from this player-encompassing perspective. Across the range of different aesthetic, natural, and recreational phenomena that he describes, what defines them is an open-ended repetition of a "to-and-fro movement" in which it is not the substrate—the player or material—that matters but the occurrence of the actual form. Thus he insists that "the movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate . . . The play is the occurrence of the movement as such" (TM, 108). From the perspective of subjective persons, our immersion within such formations is absorptive so that there is no strain but rather a kind of naturalness to it, as when we are caught up in the refrain of a song (TM, 109). It may be

that he has in mind Heidegger's similar point about the absorptive character of ready-to-hand experiences.

At this point, Gadamer pauses to highlight the generalized nature of the movement that he has identified. He argues that human play is a "natural process" like the play of water or light precisely because man "is part of nature." More than this, artworks too "are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art" (TM, 109–110). The participation of the player in that whole entails a being in some structuring relation with something, whether a ball with its movements, a jigsaw puzzle with its shape constraints, or one person with another. Play happens "in between" these different constraints expressing itself as movement between them (TM, 113), as when chess players calculate the allowed movements of the pieces on the board or the spectators speculate on how the situation in a drama may develop. A further insight arises from the realization that different games gain their distinct identities by their differing patterns, "rules and regulations," or "structure that determines the movement of the game from within" (TM, 111).

Part B on "Transformation into Structure and Total Mediation" builds on this focus on patterned relations, hewing in on the underlying analysis of structure as a transformation of the actual human person into part of a structure. But more than merely incorporating the person into a certain formal interaction, this new structure genuinely redefines its parts, in that "something is suddenly and as a whole something else, [and] that this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil" (TM, 115). Here we begin to see the life-illuminating implications of this idea as an *ontology of human being*. Such immersion in structure reveals to us our immersive participation as a component within larger patterns. Gadamer tries to explain this in a key passage that is worth citing at length:

This gives what we called transformation into structure its full meaning. The transformation is a transformation into the true . . . it is itself redemption and transformation back into true being. In being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn. Someone who can perceive the comedy and tragedy of life can resist the temptation to think in terms of purposes, which conceals the game that is played with us . . . someone who can see the whole of reality as a closed circle of meaning in which everything is fulfilled will speak of the comedy and tragedy of life. . . . The being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its telos within itself. (TM, 116–17)

At this stage in the argument, he points to the purely formal, structural insight to which the analysis of play has led, stating that "the concept of

transformation characterizes the independent and superior mode of being of what we called structure" (TM, 117).

The immediately following discussion of recognition and *mimesis* in Plato and Aristotle is meant partly to refute the usual interpretation of art as imitation of reality—as in a still-life or a historical play. In the same way that Gadamer tried to move away from correspondence theories of truth, here he tries to overturn the mimetic account of art. He replaces it with an account that emphasizes the way every part of the whole event of interpretive experience is taken up into a higher or authentic (*eigentlich*) overall structure. So, in his example, the Achilles that Homer creates when imitating reality in the *Iliad* is never just a copy of the real Achilles; it is always richer in symbols, connotations, and interpretations than any original (TM, 118–19).

This is a crucial step toward *Truth and Method*'s revisionist conception of what any phenomenon really is; phenomena are not merely experiences subjective consciousness has. They are always one fragment of an overarching medial structure that transcends the subject/object divide. The contrast with old imitative ideas of truth allows Gadamer to highlight his recuperated conception of art. Focusing not on the template created by the rules of a game or text of a play but on the hermeneutic event of playing/performing/speciating, he sees each occasion as the arising of a fresh, encompassing structure that is uniquely created in each instance and includes the subject who experiences it. The metaphors demonstrate this aptly—each game of football is different, as is each performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet Gadamer is eager that we not misinterpret his claim in either of two metaphysical wrong directions: we must not revert back to a subject-object metaphysics and think that the presentation of a work is what some *subjectivity*—usually assumed to be the purportedly *real* entity—experiences. Each work is not "enclosed in the subjectivity of what they [the players] think, but it is embodied there. Thus it is not at all a question of a mere subjective variety of conception" (TM, 122). The work should not be counterposed to the "lifeworld," he says (using the terminology of the wider phenomenological tradition) (TM, 124). It should instead be seen as continuous with it. Nor is it a version of some more basic and more real pure *Form*; that would be to revert back to some Platonic Formalism that sees the *Gebilde*—the shape, pattern, or structure that creates the consistency of things—as the alleged really real part.

What kind of thing is left that play-like things might be? Borrowing the Hegelian language of *sublation* or being taken up into some higher encompassing reality, Gadamer says that in play things are superseded by their new collective identity. Each undergoes a "transformation into structure" (TM, 115) that is constantly "contemporaneous" yet does not "disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all. They all belong to it" (TM, 124).

The rest of Gadamer's long discussion of drama expands on this central idea. Subjectivism, which focuses on the experience of isolated individuals, is wrong-headed: artworks do not exist "in" the physical objects or the subjectivity of the players, but are really events into which all those things are taken up as a complex relationship that shapes the meaning. The need for a dynamic model rather than a fixed, atemporal view of things is demonstrated by the performing arts, which remind us that works are always coming into being anew through free creation. This helps replace the old notion of truth as "mimetic representation" or *Darstellung* with an improved idea of art as a structure that only exists through each case of "mediation" or *Vermittlung* (TM, 121–22). The discussion of festivals brings out the idea that we often live in just such a themed yet constantly-made-anew time (every Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Independence Day, etc.) and cultures often celebrate it as "sacred" (TM, 124).

Gadamer uses this idea of truth as a phenomenon of dynamic participation to build on Heidegger's thought, suggesting we are not merely *Dasein*—existing there—but actually *Dabei-sein*—existing there included along with something more that determines us. Thus "to be present means to participate" (TM, 127) rather than to be a Cartesian spectator onto our surroundings. Even Greek metaphysics, *theoria*, and presence-to-hand in Heideggerian terms can be rehabilitated as present, non-subjectivistic, participatory phenomena when seen in this light (TM, 127). He also uses it to connect his thought to Kierkegaard and the Lutheran idea of faith as a claim ever-renewed in life and through the unfolding work of revelation (TM, 128).

The final discussion in this chapter allows Gadamer to connect all of this with the artform to which German culture most clearly attributed wider metaphysical implications: tragedy. Looking back to Aristotle's analysis, we see that tragedy effects a kind of *ekstasis* that takes us into a situation beyond our own immediate concerns and brings us to a "tragic pensiveness" in which we see the whole "metaphysical order of being that is true for all" (TM, 133). Tragedy brings the consciousness of the spectator into "continuity with himself" (TM, 130). In a sense, it is art, play, and other kinds of participation that perform the *real* phenomenological reduction—by allowing us to be what we already are without its being obscured by specific goals and interpretations. Aristotle is a guide on this point; in a later essay exploring the philosophical value of literature Gadamer writes, "Aristotle made the convincing statement that poetry is more philosophical than history . . . how does everything that shines forth in the poetic word share in this transfiguration into the essential?"¹⁹ Part of this illumination is the way a play or game analogy helps our consciousness see clearly what it is doing from the medial perspective rather than our habitually limited, subjectivist, literally *self-centered* viewpoint. His subsequent accounts of pictorial arts, portraiture, sacred arts, and architecture

all show how communications that may seem mimetic can in fact be a representation of what we already know as something genuinely new, the being of which necessarily makes reference to the original yet adds something new and utterly unique by which it is defined.

3. PLAY AND BEING: FROM SUBSTANCE METAPHYSICS TO ONTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

So what insight was Gadamer trying to express through the idea of play? His painstaking analysis of the various examples works to show that all play is really a process by which many parts undergo "transformation into structure," and defining the nature of that structure became an important task in Gadamer's work. His writings on the semantics of poetry in the work of Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Celan,²⁰ on the nature of number and concepts in Plato,²¹ on dialectic in Hegel,²² on art and beauty,²³ on language in Heidegger's later thought,²⁴ and even on health as a form of balanced harmonic proportion,²⁵ are all areas in which he sees similar insights at work. Each develops the central notion of play as an encompassing, dynamic, relational structure. Boiled down, this play-structure is characterized by three essential defining features of (a) structure, (b) participation, and (c) dynamism:

(a) *Structural relationships are the defining medium of experience, giving shape to Being (which in phenomenology is always Being-for-us, insofar as we can encounter it). Structures are determined by proportions of similarity and dissimilarity, contrast and entailment. It is the proportions of relationship between parts that constitute any structure, making it what it is. Even distortions and departures from a given structure can only be known in relation to that structure; so, for instance, the jazz musician Keith Jarrett's gradual deconstruction of a classic melody into something unrecognizably new only makes sense in relation to the structure from which it departs. The most raw example of structure is perhaps mathematics; the number 6 really has a nature that consists in a formal position defined by relative degrees of differentiation and entailment to 1, 3, 12, 0.6, 6000, and so on. One of the richest examples of this is musical form: a piece of music is what it is despite transposition and change because of the proportion of its notes and durations. Play is Gadamer's way of bringing the purely formal element of structure to the fore. It captures what he means when he speaks of being tied to and enabled by tradition. Tradition is like the musical melody that a song inherits at each moment and builds on even when it breaks into something radically new.*

(b) *Play incorporates all its parts into a new uniting, encompassing, medial identity*—and so do art and all understanding. From the overview vantage point of the larger play or game that we are part of, our individual identity is sublated into a more relevant and powerful shared identity. Among other things, this is Gadamer's way of taking up the phenomenological theme of overcoming subject-object distinctions.

(c) *These structures always (and necessarily) have a dynamic, processual mode of existence.* Contrary to the kinds of timeless and unchanging structures associated with Platonism, in the world's real structures, it is impossible for things to stay the same because they are constantly being newly instantiated. The analogy shows this: there could be no game without changes and developments, and an artwork that was never looked at and interpreted anew would just be an object. This point builds on Heidegger's account of temporality; he reminds us that our sense of "care and the movement towards death" constantly drives forward the nature of understanding. (TM, 125)

To what extent is this specifically an account of aesthetic experiences and to what extent is it a universal account of experience itself? This chapter incorporates many instances of the structure in question, including games, artworks, natural phenomena, living in faith, applying law, and interpreting history. In his discussion of the tragic, he makes clear that what he is discussing should not be seen merely as an aesthetic matter but as "a fundamental phenomenon, a structure of meaning that does not exist only in tragedy. . . . Indeed, it is not even a specifically artistic phenomenon, for it is also found in life" (TM, 130). This universality is why Hamann and Scheler treat tragedy as "something extra-aesthetic, an ethical and metaphysical phenomenon that enters into the sphere of aesthetic problems only from outside" (TM, 130).

Admittedly, Gadamer does focus on aesthetic experiences in this chapter in explicit contrast to quite different kinds of "practical or goal-oriented participation" (TM, 129). He seems to assume that our focus on goals is allied with a subjectivistic self-centeredness that veils the true nature of the world by imposing our own concerns upon it. In this respect, he replicates Heidegger's present-to-hand and ready-to-hand (*vorhanden* and *zuhanden*) distinction and similarly prefers the one that lets us lose ourselves in the reality that we thereby encounter. Yet Gadamer makes it clear that he focuses on art precisely because it is more authentic to our fundamental mode of being, and analyzing it reveals what is always true of our experiential mode of being, and simpler but distorting way that we conceptualize experience to ourselves—seeing it as something that approximates a separate, fixed reality. Aesthetic experience is epistemologically superior in that it brings us into the right phenomenological attitude for seeing Being as it is in itself. It cultivates in us

the distance necessary for seeing, and thus makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us. A spectator's ecstatic self-forgetfulness corresponds to his continuity with himself. . . . 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 recognize ourselves. . . . What rends [the spectator] from himself at the same time gives him back the whole of his being. (TM, 130)

With this new model in hand, his hope is that we can now let the old correspondence model of truth be superseded by the new dynamic structure model. For Gadamer, this is already implicit in Kant, urged by Nietzsche, and central to Heidegger: we must stop thinking of art (which is the focus of the chapter) and truth more generally (which is the topic of *Truth and Method*) in terms of isolated subjects experiencing external objects and forming limited mimetic pictures. He declares that "there is something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation" (TM, 123). Its promise to secure reliable reference points for our purposes and calculations can be helpful, but what is gained from the new understanding of truth on the model of play is of much greater value. Play, which this chapter shows to be one instance of the wider phenomenon of transformation into structure, "is itself redemption and transformation back into true being" bringing to light what is hidden and revealing "the game that is played with us" (TM, 117).

Art and play are "the coming-to-presentation of Being" (TM, 159), and at the end of the sequence of discussion on play and aesthetic presentations of all kinds, it is Hegel who foreshadowed the ever-living, ever-new character of our understanding consciousness and the truths it helps to construct. His own analogy in the prologue to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* imagines a girl plucking fruit in an orchard then realizing that she too is an outgrowth and, as it were, a fruit of nature. This analogy is similarly meant to help us see that we are part of a larger, encompassing, structured but ever-growing phenomenon; in this case, we are "spirit conscious of itself as spirit" (TM, 168). Here Gadamer finally returns from his excursion into aesthetics back full-circle to philosophy: "For Hegel, then, it is philosophy, the historical self-penetration of spirit, that carries out the hermeneutical task" and play serves just such a self-penetrating purpose by revealing "the truth that manifests itself in art and history" (TM, 168).

Gadamer's investigation thus works on three levels: it illuminates the nature of art, it reveals the character of all interpretation, and—since all experience is for him a form of interpretive encounter and creative understanding—it presents a phenomenology of human Being in the fullest sense. It is with respect to this last dimension that the play chapter of *Truth and Method* represents the core of Gadamer's attempt to move beyond realist substance-metaphysics

and its accompanying conception of truth as correspondence. This dimension of his thought is relatively little discussed, almost as if he had at some point exited the phenomenological tradition in which he began under the tutelage of Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, and others. Yet we can interpret this chapter as the beginnings of what he hoped would be a path forward toward a new ontology, much in the way that Heidegger had sought in his later essays for new schemes for understanding Being in terms of language, of *altheia* or unveiling, and of dwelling understood as "the manner in which mortals are on the earth."²⁶ As had Heidegger with his focus on *language*, so in this chapter Gadamer is trying to strike out a new course with *play*.

A number of scholars have acknowledged this aspect. As Georgia Warnke puts it, the play account of interpretation "indicates how little Gadamer's view depends on a substantialist metaphysics."²⁷ The conceptual essences revealed in interpretation do not derive their truth from correspondence to a real reality beyond thought. Similarly, Donatella di Cesare interprets play as one of "the concepts that fundamentally undermine, unhinge, and call metaphysics of subjectivity into question,"²⁸ such that

it is play that, traversing hermeneutics, puts metaphysics into play. Even more so: the phenomenology of play presents itself as an alternative to all ontology or to any discourse on Being that claims to be final and fundamental.²⁹

Jean Grondin describes the ever-contemporary speculative structural nature of meaning as a "metaphysics of finitude,"³⁰ and Lammi has similarly described play as Gadamer's expression of the "temporal ontology" of language.³¹

It is perhaps Brice Wächterhauser who has most explicitly treated Gadamer's account of conceptual understanding as a "post-Platonic hermeneutic ontology" that formulates a phenomenological analysis of the structural prerequisites of our life-world, in order to go "beyond Being" and overcome the problems of "onto-theology."³² He reads the play-example against the backdrop of Gadamer's rehabilitation of Plato, showing how it describes the world not as an objective, mind-independent reality grounded in a substrate of hylomorphic substance but as a field of structural formations that shape the themes, patterns, or "games" that define each object, idea, action, and person as what it is. In this sense, it expresses the kind of relational formation of (constantly varying) similarity and difference that Plato tried to capture in his discussion of participation (*methexis*) and difference (*chorismos*) in the *Parmenides*. In Gadamer's Plato studies, number appears as another play-like structure that can serve as an "ontological model": "What is revealed [by Plato] is that the number of the unity of many is the ontological paradigm."³³ In his major essay on art, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer argued that Greek thought revealed how *symmetria* or proportion

and *harmonia* or fitting relation are both factors that describe the kind of structure in which a given relational proportion exists in sufficient continuity that it is able to anchor identity despite change—as when musical intervals define a certain chord or melody even when the notes become transposed into a new pitch or tempo. This idea that the relative proportion of connection and difference defines structures as what they are despite continual development and change was an important precursor of Gadamer's idea of play as defined by rules that give shape to each new instantiation.

4. LIFE AS CREATIVE PARTICIPATION: PLAY FROM SCHILLER TO HUIZINGA

Gadamer's use of the metaphor of *Spiel* (play or game) and *spielen* (to play)—took a powerful cue from its use by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Huizinga, although it also built on the notion of dialectic that Gadamer inherited from Plato and Hegel, two thinkers with whom he saw himself in continuity as much as with Heidegger. In taking up these influences and repurposing them, Gadamer aimed to express the way that art incorporates the thinking subject into an overall, constantly evolving phenomenon of meaning-making. Schiller had captured an important part of Gadamer's idea—the way that all our interpretation, thought, and indeed experience of reality consists in a constantly renegotiated balance between the structure of what we receive from the world and the openness through which it takes new form in the present moment as inflected by language, mood, memory, environment, etc. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer interpreted Schiller's relegation of art to an "ideal kingdom" alienated from "practical reality" (TM, 75) as one step in our journey away from a correct grasp on truth. Yet, nevertheless, he saw much to affirm in Schiller, approving of the way he and Goethe opened up the "symbolic" form of discourse as one in which everything "points towards everything else" (TM, 70), of his efforts to build on Kant's association of beauty with morality (TM, 69), and his work toward reviving a Greek model of life in which morality gives "shape to the whole . . . so allowing men to recognize themselves in their own world."³⁴

Above all, Schiller was a champion of the importance of play in human life, understood in the sense of a dynamic, engaged, contributory, creative approach to the world. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller argued that art allows a free play of the human faculties and used this to affirm the importance of liberty, spontaneity, and originality over against the "blind force" of brute senses, on the one hand, and social conventions, on the other.³⁵ Schiller set the scene for Gadamer by establishing an axis of "passive force" versus "active force," "material impulsion" versus

"formal impulsion," and "receptive" versus "determining" modes of engagement.³⁶ These two directions of force need "tempering" in "a free act, an activity of the person," and it is as a solution to this need that Schiller points to the natural human impulse found in "the instinct of play" that "unites the double action of the two other instincts."³⁷ An important part of being fully human is the use of this harmonizing, creative instinct to synthesize the world into ever-new creative contributions, and Gadamer aligns this idea with Friedrich Schlegel's emphasis on living feeling, Hegel's historicist idea of human nature as "finite-infinite," and the later skepticism toward the idea of a fixed reality that Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Stefan George, Georg Simmel, and Wilhelm Dilthey all expressed in their different ways (*TM*, 58). Yet here we also come to one of the ways in which Gadamer aimed to improve on Schiller's model by expanding it. Schiller limits the play instinct to art, but for Gadamer, as we have seen, this aesthetic application is only one illuminating instance of the more general way that experience works.

Another important source of the play metaphor was Johann Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens*, in which play was even more central to human nature—as the title suggests. Huizinga used it as a key with which to decode various aspects of culture, including law, war, ritual, and philosophy. Playfulness is an element in our most basic practices of thinking, speaking, and acting, so that "in the making of speech and language the spirit is continually "sparkling" between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty." In this respect, play seemed to be "one of the main bases of civilisation."³⁸ Huizinga's style of reasoning across disciplines and apparent dichotomies, in such a way that the concept could be seen to dialectically synthesize and rise above "the domain of the great categorical antitheses,"³⁹ may also have been an inspiration to Gadamer. He uses Huizinga to emphasize at least two things: one is the *medial* character of play in which all parts, including subject and object, are united, and another is the *fundamental relationality* of play that is exemplified in the tense "to-and-fro movement" that underpins both games and the attention of any spectator to an artwork (*TM*, 108). Medial unities and dynamic relations are ways in which play captures something universal in human activity. Finally, for Gadamer, Huizinga's account also highlights something that separates play from quotidian activity: its character as something that is a self-contained "closed world, one without transition and mediation to the world of aims" (*TM*, 112). It is because of this aspect, Gadamer argues, that play appears as both verb and noun in the common German sentence *man spielt ein Spiel*, or *one plays a game*, and it is also perhaps in this connection that play is linked to what is "holy," "sacred," goal-less, and timeless when one is caught up in it—as Huizinga notes (*TM*, 108, n. 6, 110, 112).

Beyond its obvious sources in Schiller and Huizinga, the metaphor of play also evoked other figures in Gadamer's philosophical history, both recuperating earlier conceptions of dialectic and highlighting their mistakes. Plato's dialectic was too determinate and static: it failed to stay true to the way that ideas actually happen in constantly evolving moments of mental encounter. Furthermore, it failed to acknowledge the porous borders and inter-relationality of forms: only through hints in middle period texts, such as the *Phaedo*,⁴⁰ and more fully developed in later texts, such as the *Parmenides*,⁴¹ did Plato begin to mine the implications of Zeno's paradox and Heraclitus' notion of change.

The metaphor also offered to solve some of the limitations Gadamer saw in Hegel's dialectic by affirming the open, infinitely generative character of structure (as demonstrated by the way each game's rules facilitate infinite new iterations). Hegelian elements pervade Gadamer's work,⁴² but where Hegel seemed to see completely open and unending development as a "bad infinite," for Gadamer the whole point of a game is that the rules can be applied in such a way that it can be played repeatedly with ever new possibilities. No final form is possible or even desirable since its fundamental being is creative. Thus, the play metaphor seems to be a valuable advance upon existing conceptions of dialectic: it redeems that notion from the features Nietzsche had criticized in the *Twilight of the Idols* as conceptually mummifying and Heidegger had similarly overruled in *Being and Time* as a part of the old, bad notion of metaphysics. But, above all, it offered an image meant to make us feel at home in the world as part of the natural play of history and to empower us as part of the dynamic, creative process of reality's unfolding.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS: THE PLAY STRUCTURE IN GADAMER'S LATER WORK

Echoes and applications of the play idea can be found throughout Gadamer's later works. Play becomes not only a hermeneutic model of meaning but also an ethical template for the vibrant, continuing, functioning existence of almost anything. On the small scale, it defines our own human health: in his later essays on health, this emerges clearly with reference to the "interplay" of the body's parts with each other and their surroundings:

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.⁴³

Musical harmony serves as the form of art that illuminates good mental and physical functioning: "Good health requires a harmonious relationship consonant with both our social and our natural environment. It is this harmony which first enables us to move in accord with the natural rhythms which govern our bodily life."⁴⁴ The Greeks had already intuited the connection between complex yet balanced structured activity that immerses itself collaboratively in its environment in their conception of the good life. Thus "What Plato seeks . . . as 'the good life' is not the pure exactness of a mathematical type, but the measured proportionality of a well-mixed drink of life," composed in the measure (*metron*) of what is "the appropriate, the fitting, and the needful at the favorable moment."⁴⁵ This, still, is the structure of a game well-played, and this 1960 chapter remains relevant to Gadamer's 1996 statement that he is addressing "each and every one of us who must take care of our own health through the way in which we lead our lives" and accept that this "expands into a much broader dimension of responsibility in our highly complex civilization."⁴⁶

On a larger scale, this structural relation of harmonious dynamic interplay also defined the constructive, collaborative, and diverse solidarity that characterized good community for Gadamer. Like Heidegger, he saw technological progress as a popular ideal that put private profit above development through fruitful engagement with other cultures and the cultivation of the environment's own life. It threatened modernity with an

immense increase in weapons technology and the destructive potential it harbours . . . 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.⁴⁷

By contrast, organic models of community replicate the play structure at the interpersonal level and thereby achieve "a sustaining solidarity which alone makes possible the organised structure of human coexistence."⁴⁸ A small example of this creative, collaborative human play—familiar to Gadamer himself—was the university community which "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."⁴⁹ A larger-scale example of this was global culture and its increasing multiculturalism, of which he was an early advocate, priding himself on his early liberal upbringing among female and Jewish intellectual friends in the culture of Breslau. Late in life he would describe cultural diversity as kind of game and a "training ground" where "otherness . . . contributes to the encountering of one's own self" in such a way that "the coexistence of different cultures and languages, religions and confessions supports us."⁵⁰

The principles of structure that shape play thus work *microcosmically* as an account of art, *macrocosmically* as a template for healthy communal life, and *universally* as an analysis of the phenomenological structure of Being itself. Although, arguably, Gadamer did not convey the wide scope of his metaphor very clearly in this long, elusive section of his *magnum opus*, elsewhere he did express the change that he hoped it would spark in his audience: "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" (TM, 58). Once assimilated into our perspective, this insight was intended to bring us to a kind of self-awareness that "will lead us towards a new equilibrium in the respective spheres of the body, the soul, and the harmony of the world as a whole."⁵¹ By understanding the sublation of the self into play, we may learn to sublimate personal identity into what Rilke, in the epigraph of *Truth and Method*, calls the world's own power, an extension of "the great bridgebuilding of God."

NOTES

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 104. Hereafter cited in text as *TM*. Where the German is cited or the translation has been altered, the page number of the original is indicated after the slash. The latter refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gesammelte Werke I (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990).
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 44–45.
3. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987), 48–62.
4. Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2002), 43, cf. 40–46.
5. Rod Colman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), 52–53.
6. Frederick Burwick, "The Plagiarism of Play: The Unacknowledged Source of Gadamer's Ontological Argument in 'Truth and Method,'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 25, no. 1/2 (November 1990).
7. Brice Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutic Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1999).
8. James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY, 1997), 171, cf. 140–47.
9. James Risser, "The Remembrance of Truth, the Truth of Remembrance," in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1994), 131, cf. 131–34.

10. Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2013), 48–61, 170–72.
11. Philippe Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 65–76.
12. Muharrem Hafiz, "The Place of the Sacred with Regard to Gadamer's Ontology of Art," *M.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 39 (2010): 97–116.
13. Jessica Frazier, *Reality, Religion and Passion: Indian and Western Approaches in Gadamer and Rupa Goswami* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 49–122.
14. Walter Lamm, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine* (London: Continuum, 2008).
15. Walter Lamm, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's 'Correction' of Heidegger," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 3 (July–September 1991): 487.
16. Many of Gadamer's essays on Aristotle and Plato can be found in: *Dialogue and Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1980); *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1988); *The Beginning of Philosophy*, trans. Rod Colman (New York: Continuum, 2001); *The Beginning of Knowledge*, trans. Rod Colman (New York: Continuum, 2002); on Hegel: *Hegel's Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1976); on Heidegger: *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley (Albany: SUNY, 1994). Numerous essays on Heraclitus, Parmenides, Husserl, and others, and even the biographical sketches of his colleagues are collected in *Philosophical Apprenticeships* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987).
17. Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 275.
18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Interview: Historicism and Romanticism," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 128.
19. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," trans. Richard E. Palmer, in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2007), 148.
20. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celam: "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, ed. trans. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: SUNY).
21. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*.
22. Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, cf. *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT, 1981).
23. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986).
24. See, for example, Heidegger's *Ways and relevant essays in Philosophical Hermeneutics*.
25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford: Stanford University, 1996).
26. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 147.
27. Wankle, *Gadamer*, 66.
28. Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 66.
29. Di Cesare, 183.
30. Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, 150.
31. Lamm, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, 66.
32. Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*.
33. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas," in *Dialogue and Dialectic*, 203.
34. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, 14.
35. Friedrich Schiller, "Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Collier, 1910), Letter VII.
36. Schiller, Letter XIII.
37. Schiller, Letter XIV. In Letter XIX Schiller alludes to his own kind of dialectic, minus the name, giving a description of space and time that resonates in Gadamer's analysis of the way that games function: "Before we determine a place in space, there is no space for us; but without absolute space we could never determine a place. The same is the case with time. Before we have an instant, there is no time to us; but without infinite time—eternity—we should never have a representation of the instant. Thus, therefore, we can only arrive at the whole by the part, to the unlimited through limitation; but reciprocally we only arrive at the part through the whole, at limitation through the unlimited."
38. Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 4–5.
39. Huizinga, 6.
40. Plato, *Phaedo*, 102b.
41. Plato, *Parmenides*, 129c.
42. See Jeff Mischering, "The Hegelian Element in Gadamer's Notions of Application and Play," *Man and World* 25, no. 1 (1992).
43. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Enigmatic Character of Health," in trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 116.
44. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Treatment and Dialogue," in *The Enigma of Health*, 132.
45. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image: 'So True, So Full of Being!,'" trans. Richard E. Palmer, in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2007), 204, 205.
46. Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health*, viii.
47. Gadamer, viii.
48. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Citizens of Two Worlds," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and

Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 219.

49. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Idea of the University: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 59.

50. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 234.

51. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Between Nature and Art," in *The Enigma of Health*, 85.

Chapter 5

TM 1.2.2

Gadamer and the Plastic Arts

Cynthia R. Nielsen

This chapter examines Gadamer's account of the plastic arts (*bildende Künste*) and how his claim regarding the performative nature of art applies *mutatis mutandis* to the plastic arts. Gadamer's discussion of the picture (*Bild*) is the central focus of the chapter; however, his insights regarding architecture will also be briefly considered. In the sections leading up to I.2.2 of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's investigation of art's ontology draws primarily on the performing arts such as drama and music. He emphasizes repeatedly that music and dramatic plays *are* their performances or enactments. That is, when it comes to our phenomenologico-hermeneutic experience of music and theatrical plays, apart from their various and diverse performances over time, they have no being. Their presentations emerge in their varied interpretative performances. However, the question naturally arises: how do Gadamer's claims about the "variability of presentation" apply to the plastic arts, which include painting, sculpture, and architecture?¹ That is, could a case for aesthetic differentiation not be made when it comes to these seemingly more static forms of art? As his account unfolds, it becomes clear that Gadamer rejects a Platonic understanding of *mimesis*, wherein the artwork as "copy" is understood as ontologically inferior to an "original" (*Urbild*).² In contrast, for Gadamer, a picture is not a self-effacing copy (*Abbild*); rather, a picture directs attention to itself, has its own significant, ontological "weight," and remains essentially connected to the "original." It involves, as Gadamer puts it, an "ontological sharing" (*ontologische Teilhabe*) or participation in the original (TM, 153/158). Moreover, the picture (*Bild*) discloses something about the original that we would not see apart from the picture's coming into being. Instead of a diminution of being, the picture is what Gadamer describes as an "increase in being" (TM, 141). Such an understanding opposes a Platonic view since Gadamer's account of the relation of a picture and an original is