

## “Anti-rationalism, Relativism, and the Metaphysical Tradition: Situating Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics”

### Introduction

In what sense can it be said that Hans-Georg Gadamer is an “anti-rationalist?” Answering this question requires clarity about the particular strain of “rationalism” that is the focus of much of his thinking and is, ultimately, the impetus for the critique mounted by his philosophical hermeneutics. It is worth noting that Gadamer wrote his habilitation dissertation (*Habilitationsschrift*) under Martin Heidegger, whose concerns about the historical development of Western metaphysics, particularly the moral and social implications of modern rationalism, had a deep and lasting impact on Gadamer’s thinking. In light of his explicit alignment and appropriation of a number of Heidegger’s philosophical insights, one might be tempted to identify Gadamer as a representative of an extreme variety of anti-rationalism, insofar as he is seen as the inheritor of Heidegger’s radical historicism and the moral relativism that is attendant to it. Additionally, the emphasis on the historical nature of human understanding in Gadamer’s writing, most prominently in Part 2 of *Truth and Method*, has led a number of interpreters to conclude that he denies all possibility of transcending the finite boundaries of our temporal experience.<sup>1</sup>

However, not only did Gadamer refute the charge of relativism throughout his career, but his relationship to the metaphysical tradition, particularly that of Plato and Aristotle, runs deep. Indeed, in Gadamer’s later work, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, one witnesses the development of his own moral philosophy, and much of his other writing – particularly his work on language and hermeneutics in Part 3 of *Truth and Method* – has deep roots in the metaphysical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Richard Rorty’s highly selective reading and appropriation of Gadamer in Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); also see Leo Strauss’ criticisms of Gadamer in their correspondence, which can be found in Strauss and Gadamer, “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 5-12.

tradition that runs from the Presocratics through Plato, Aristotle, Neo-Platonism, Augustine, and Hegel.<sup>2</sup> This essay aims to shed light on the particular variety of “anti-rationalism” that belongs to Gadamer in light of the *prima facie* tension in his thinking between these historicist and metaphysical influences.<sup>3</sup> It will do so through a discussion of Gadamer’s concerns about methodologism in the humanities, his ambivalent relationship to the philosophy of Heidegger, and the historically-informed account of transcendence underpinning his life’s work. In light of this discussion, it will be argued that what Gadamer opposes is a distinctly modern form of rationalism, which he believes the ancients – far from being complicit in its distortions – offer us resources for confronting.

### ***Lost Truth & the Human Sciences***

The central concern of *Truth and Method* is the recovery of an experience of truth that has been threatened by methodologism in the humanities or the modern “human sciences” (*Geisteswissenschaften*), whereby texts and other cultural phenomena are seen as historical artifacts, whose meaning is understood in terms of an objective retrieval and exposition of information, i.e. the ideas in the minds of the individuals from whom such artifacts originated. Gadamer traces the lineage of this approach to the study of the humanities back to the post-Kantian tradition, showing how Dilthey had drawn heavily on subjectivist epistemological foundations in Schleiermacher in order to establish a positive science of interpretation, which represented a new meaning and purpose for the field of “hermeneutics.” What Gadamer terms “aesthetic consciousness” and “historical

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<sup>2</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, “Gadamer’s Realism: the ‘Belongingness’ of Word and Reality,” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 150.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Grondin acknowledges this apparent tension in Gadamer’s thought as well when he remarks that “hermeneutics would [seem to] contain or imply a repudiation of metaphysics (as appears evident in the work of Heidegger, for instance).” Since Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics sees reality as accessible to human beings through a variety of interpretive frameworks of understanding, an ultimate account of Being would appear to be problematic, “which would signify the end of metaphysics, understood as a reflection on Being and its ultimate principles.” Grondin, “The Metaphysical Dimension of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology: Figures and Themes*, eds. Saulius Geniusas and Paul Fairfield (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 125. Grondin’s essay, however, demonstrates the various ways in which Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics entails or implies metaphysical aspects of being.

consciousness” is essentially the distanced attitude of the modern interpreter of such cultural phenomena, who no longer treats the latter as offering insights into the nature of human life and the choices with which the interpreter, himself, is confronted. Instead, this subjectivist epistemology bolsters the notion that ideas can be treated as data, accessible to the neutral observer of historical life, whose approach to the social world parallels that of the natural scientist, given the requisite detachment from the prejudices (*Vorurteil*) of his own historical situation.<sup>4</sup> The understanding of the work of art or the historical text as having significance for the life of the interpreter by virtue of an application to present circumstances has, for Gadamer, essentially been lost or sacrificed to the idea that the ultimate reality of such works is the objective fact of their expression, as representations of the minds within their historical period.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the normative purpose at the heart of *Truth and Method* is the recovery of the possibility of truth, which Gadamer believes is under assault due to the methodologism or “rationalism” of the modern human sciences.<sup>6</sup> The threat that Gadamer sees “method” posing to “truth” is thus the understanding of historical life as mere data, which is no longer capable of

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer famously refers to this insistence that knowledge of reality requires the removal of all prejudices as the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudice.” See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer’s model of authentic interpretation is that which has traditionally been practiced in the fields of theology and law where scripture and statute, respectively, are thought to achieve their meaning by virtue of an “application” to the life and circumstances of the interpreter. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

<sup>6</sup> In the decades following the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that the purpose of his text was strictly phenomenological or descriptive with respect to its account of interpretation, rather than normative. I have argued that such remarks must either be taken as highly qualified, in the sense that Gadamer was describing *genuine* or *authentic* interpretation, or render *Truth and Method* guilty of having committed a performative contradiction. See Holston, “Two Concepts of Prejudice,” *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 174-203. A similar critical observation is made by Alasdair MacIntyre in his review of *Truth and Method* when he says that Gadamer’s avowal to have been purely descriptive in that text is a testimony to the power of the views against which Gadamer, himself, had written, and therefore, that “Gadamer partially misunderstands his own book.” MacIntyre, “Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*,” *Boston University Journal* 24, no. 1 (1976): 41-46. Lawrence Hinman, for his part, has argued that Gadamer’s retrospective account of *Truth and Method* would render the text entirely irrelevant, since describing what one always inevitably does whenever one understands or interprets anything excludes the possibility of acting otherwise. See Hinman, “Quid Facti or Quid Juris? The Fundamental Ambiguity of Gadamer’s Understanding of Hermeneutics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40, no. 4 (1980): 512-35. Frederick Lawrence appears to echo, at least in part, the interpretation I have given to Gadamer’s remarks when he broadly characterizes the *quaestio facti*, which Gadamer claims to be his exclusive focus, as asking the question, “what are we doing when we are being *authentically* human?” Frederick G. Lawrence, “Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosopher of Practical Wisdom,” *Theoforum* 40 (2009), 270. Emphasis added.

shedding light or insight onto the situation of the present. The notion that individuals' utterances are facts to be observed and recorded entails the "nominalist presupposition" that reality is merely the neutral or value-free account of the social scientist, which fosters a "relativist skepticism" about the idea of truth.<sup>7</sup> The lynchpin supporting this entire approach to the past, on Gadamer's account, is the subjectivist epistemology of historical consciousness. The human word cannot be objectified in the manner of the modern social sciences, as it were, unless the observer is conceived as somehow autonomous and thus more or less than human – either a god or a beast, in Aristotle's terms – insofar as he is outside of any community. In other words, only the abstraction of an isolated subject that is a spectator, not a participant, vis-à-vis the "reality" of facts being observed can sustain this relativization of the truth claims of each historical culture.

It is for this reason that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics prioritizes a "rehabilitation of authority and tradition,"<sup>8</sup> which is aimed at restoring a view of interpretation as fundamentally dependent upon an historical life and community of interpreters. In other words, the importance that Gadamer attaches to the role of "prejudice" in understanding is rooted in his critique of the idea of an autonomous subject who stands apart from the reality he observes. That our prejudices facilitate as much as they occlude meaning is thus of profound significance from the point of view of preserving truth over against the view that reality is merely historically observable expressions of mind. For Gadamer, coming to see truth no longer in propositional terms, i.e. as descriptions of a static reality of "things," but as an "event," in which past and present are continually mediated by the prejudices that constitute one's identity, thus serves the purpose of "the rehabilitation of the possible truthfulness of belief."<sup>9</sup> Without such mediation, one alienates the past, standing over and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Books, 2004), 278.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosopher of Practical Wisdom," in *Hermeneutic Rationality*, eds. Maria Luísa Portocarrero, Luis Antonio Umbelino, Andrzej Wierciński (Berlin: Lit, 2012), 270.

apart from one's history as a distanced observer, who objectifies and truncates the latter's meaning. In Gadamerian terms, such an approach silences or turns a deaf ear to a partner in a dialogue, and we become closed off to the truth claims that the past would otherwise make on us.

But what does it mean for truth to be understood as an "event," instead of in propositional terms? Is not truth the speech that accurately depicts a state of affairs or set of verifiable phenomena in the world? Rather than understanding truth as a descriptive claim about a reality of things that are "out there," objects to be documented by an observer or autonomous subject, Gadamer collapses the subject-object divide of modern Cartesian thinking to reorient us to the idea of truth as an experience one undergoes, since the event of truth is always for one who is a part of, or participant in, reality. In his account of Gadamer's critique of historical consciousness, Jean Grondin refers to the "lost metaphysical experience" of the humanities, which entails more than a mere loss of information from the past, but the neglect or absence of an important relationship with our history: "the humanities teach us truths and real-life lessons, in the sense that history used to be seen as a *magistra vitae*."<sup>10</sup> Like the metaphysical experience of beauty, which is purposefully chosen in Part 1 of *Truth and Method* to provide a palpable example of the transcendent as an event one undergoes,<sup>11</sup> the historical texts of the humanities are able to speak to the life of the present, bringing the interpreter "in play" as a participant in a dialogue with the past, who experiences truth as a "revelation" or an "increase in Being."<sup>12</sup> Such knowledge actually changes the person who is part of the encounter with the past, expanding their horizon of understanding and providing a greater depth of experience (*Erfahrung*) that prepares one for further encounters.

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<sup>10</sup> Grondin, "The Metaphysical Dimension of Hermeneutics," 128. The reference is to Cicero's *De Oratore*, which reads, "*Historia magistra vitae est*," or "History is life's teacher," and it expresses the notion that the past serves as a guide and as a source of wisdom for the present.

<sup>11</sup> See Daniel L. Tate's excellent discussion of the importance of beauty in this regard for Gadamer. The ontological affinity between beauty (*kalos*) and truth (*aletheia*) is this movement by which the transcendent comes to be known while at the same time receding or withdrawing from view. Tate, "Renewing the Question of Beauty: Gadamer on Plato's Idea of the Beautiful," *Epoche* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 21-41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 129.

Consequently, the hubris of a ruler like Kreon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, or the fidelity to community of Socrates in Plato's *Crito*, each bear a particular revelation – in the literal sense of a revealing or disclosure – regarding a life well-lived that offers guidance to the interpreter in the present. Again, this is not as a static body of information, but a relatable *insight* into reality that actually changes one's perspective and judgment. To be sure, not all such engagements with historical texts are of a metaphysical character and thus, not all texts are capable of transcending their time in this way. Certainly, Gadamer is well aware that the potential for the enlargement or deepening of one's horizon of understanding is not equal among all such historical works. It is in this spirit, in fact, that Gadamer points to the existence of a group of texts, which he refers to as "classical," that emerge as the "work of history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and, he believes, prove their transcendent quality within history by repeatedly speaking to the life of the present, shedding light on the choices (*prohairesis*) individuals continually confront as part of a shared reality across time.<sup>13</sup> For Gadamer, this enlargement of the horizon of the present or increase in being – in short, the event in which such truths are experienced – is inconceivable without the very historicity of the one whose particular life is ultimately shaped by their insight.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Early Heidegger***

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Objections have been raised against Gadamer that the acknowledgment of such historicity or context dependency renders the truth of whatever insights are encountered merely relative. Ronald Beiner, addressing such charges by those, such as Jürgen Habermas, explains, "The issue is not one of truth versus relativity, as Habermas tends to present it, nor of validated knowledge versus unvalidated opinion; the issue, rather, is one of the truth of generality versus the truth of specificity, that is, truth at the level of abstract principles versus truth embedded in immediate circumstances. ... What is intended is not an attenuation of moral reason, but its confrontation with an alternative account of moral reason—its 'localization,' one might say. ... To use Gadamer's terms, the choice is between judging 'from a distance' and judging from within 'the demands of the situation,' so it is not a question of whether moral truths exist but of whether one gains access to these truths 'from the inside,' or whether they are imposed from 'outside' shared moral experience." Ronald Beiner, "Do We Need a Philosophical Ethics? Theory, Prudence, and the Primacy of *Ethos*," *The Philosophical Forum* 20 no. 3 (Spring 1989), 236-7.

Much of what has been said thus far pertains to Gadamer's concern regarding the status of truth at the hands of the modern human sciences. But it does not begin to address Gadamer's relationship to Heidegger and the nature of his influence, which may now seem particularly puzzling in light of the radical historicism and moral relativism often associated with Heidegger's thinking. What is essential to reconciling this central concern of Gadamer with the experience of truth and the importance of Heidegger to his philosophy is understanding the difference between the early Heidegger, under whom Gadamer had studied, and the later Heidegger, from whom Gadamer distanced himself after the so-called "turn" (*Kehre*) and radicalization of his thinking about metaphysics. For it is the later Heidegger alone who sees the history of metaphysics as inevitably leading to nihilism and thus needing to be overcome or moved beyond, a view which is explicitly rejected by Gadamer, as will be discussed below. However, as Brice Wachterhauser notes, the early lectures of Heidegger, prior to the 1930s, reflect "an open[ness] to metaphysics and its potential for 'fundamental ontology,'" which Gadamer finds helpful in beginning to address some of his own concerns about modernity and how it undermines the experience of truth.<sup>15</sup> At this early point in his career, therefore, one sees a Heidegger who "understood himself as a philosopher who sought a better way to do metaphysics," and it is this Heidegger whose insights into the nature of human knowing inform much of philosophical hermeneutics and serve Gadamer's purpose of reorienting us toward a more dynamic conception of truth.<sup>16</sup>

It is impossible in a short essay to identify all of the ways in which Gadamer is indebted to Heidegger, but two of the most prominent features of Gadamer's thought that are appropriated from Heidegger are worth discussing here.<sup>17</sup> First, Gadamer is in certain respects amenable to one

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<sup>15</sup> Brice R. Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutical Ontology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 168.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> A more comprehensive account of Gadamer's indebtedness to Heidegger would, at a minimum, need to include the concept of the hermeneutic circle, for which Gadamer is so well-known. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-278. Another prominent feature for which he is clearly indebted to Heidegger is the idea that "language is the house of

of the principal aims of the pre-*Kehre* Heidegger, which is to “dismantle and reconstitute the metaphysical tradition in order to infuse it with new life,”<sup>18</sup> by recovering an ancient understanding of truth that avoids what Frederick Lawrence describes as “picture thinking,”<sup>19</sup> i.e. the model of human understanding according to which truth is known in a manner resembling vision of objects in the world.<sup>20</sup> Heidegger’s *Destruktion* (destructuring)<sup>21</sup> of metaphysics – the purpose of which is to disentangle or recover original meanings from their present ones, in order to creatively see new possibilities or directions for them – leads him to identify an alternative view of truth (*aletheia*) held by some of the ancients, which conceives of the latter as a process of unconcealment and concealment through which we come to know reality. On this view, truth is understood in terms of movement or motion, in which what is known is never seen before one in its entirety, as from an Archimedean standpoint, but is characterized by a process of emergence and withdrawal, advancing and receding, of what is known. Gadamer’s questioning of the subject-object divide mentioned above is therefore facilitated by Heidegger’s retrieval of this alternative conception of truth as in-motion and under way, since it is better suited to human life which is always historically situated. It is to Aristotle, therefore, that Heidegger turns in order to resuscitate this view, since his critique of

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being,” which is strongly echoed in Gadamer’s close identification of language and reality. See Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 167 and, in general, Part 3 of *Truth and Method*. The features discussed in the section above are selected based on their helpfulness in illuminating Gadamer’s relationship to the metaphysical tradition and the nature of his convergence with Heidegger in that regard.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Lawrence, “Ontology of and as Horizon: Gadamer’s Rehabilitation of the Metaphysics of Light,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 56, Fasc. 3/4 (Jul – Dec, 2000), 396.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger’s term for this is “presence” or the idea of “making present.” He explains, “λέγειν itself, or νοεῖν—the simple apprehension of something objectively present in its sheer objective presence [Vorhandenheit], which Parmenides already used as a guide for interpreting being—has the temporal structure of a pure ‘making present’ of something. Beings, which show themselves in and for this making present and which are understood as genuine beings, are accordingly interpreted with regard to the present; that is to say, they are conceived as presence (οὐσία).” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 24-5.

<sup>21</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger is clear that he does not mean a “pernicious relativizing” or “negative ... disburdening” of acquired meanings by this term, but that he aims “to stake out the positive possibilities” in our tradition. Ibid., 22. The negative sense of “*Destruktion*,” therefore, should not be overemphasized. Gadamer, himself, interprets the meaning of “*Destruktion*” as “dismantling to discover” (“*Abbau zur Freilegung*”). See Concill-Sancho, “The Experiential Hermeneutic Nature of Practical Reason,” in *Hermeneutic Rationality*, 285 n. 3.



the Platonic *eidos* is based precisely on this neglect of development or emergence in time regarding what is known. According to Gadamer, “Aristotelian philosophy was at that time much more than a mere countermodel for Heidegger; it was a real vindicator of his own philosophical purposes,” even, as Gadamer notes, if Aristotle later “became suspect” for Heidegger.<sup>22</sup>

A second important feature of Heidegger’s thinking for Gadamer – obviously related to the first, but worth mentioning in its own right – is his “hermeneutics of facticity” or insight into “the existential structure of understanding,” which again elevates the significance of Aristotle for both thinkers, albeit for different reasons.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger’s aim of recovering “the effective reality of the existential factum” is related to his overarching concerns about the question of being. However, Gadamer’s interest in Aristotle and Heidegger’s reading of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* takes a different direction, one which endures until late in Gadamer’s life.<sup>24</sup> The significance of this investigation for Gadamer is related to Aristotle’s account of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which serves purposes related to both Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and his incipient moral philosophy, whose early intimations can be seen in his *Habilitationsschrift*.<sup>25</sup> In *Truth and Method*, the principal purpose of *phronesis* is to provide an illustration or analogy to elucidate the nature of genuine interpretation, which Gadamer sees as sharing in the same fundamental structure as practical wisdom. One’s approach to the meaning of a text, according to Gadamer, must always entail anticipations of meaning based on the application of prior experience to present

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 536.

<sup>23</sup> Jesús Concell-Sancho, “The Experiential Hermeneutic Nature of Practical Reason,” 286.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer is known to have attended the seminar given by Heidegger in 1924, whose particular focus was Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Not only has Gadamer written about this subject in a number of places throughout his career, but he was working on an annotated translation of the *Ethics* until late in his life. See *Ibid.*, 77 n. 10, 83 n. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer’s habilitation dissertation was later published as *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009 [1983]). Although principally a study of Plato’s *Philebus*, Gadamer produces a highly Aristotelian account of Plato’s thinking about the ethical life. In this regard, it is worth noting that Gadamer’s initial inclination for this project was to foreground a study of Aristotelian ethics. Richard Palmer brings this insight of Jean Grondin’s to bear in his prefatory remarks to Gadamer’s essay, “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 274. Furthermore, Gadamer’s later work develops a synthesis that interprets each thinker substantially in the light of the other, as is indicated in the title of his later work, which refers to “Platonic-Aristotelian” philosophy.

circumstances, i.e. it is never abstract reflection for the sake of theoretical or scientific knowledge, but an inquiry by a concrete knower whose ultimate concern is with human *praxis*. In the *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Gadamer employs *phronesis* in a more straightforward manner for the purposes of an account of ethical decision-making. What guides the search for the good in the situation of choice (*prohairesis*), Gadamer argues, is not a general principle which must be applied to particular circumstances, but *ethos* or *Sittlichkeit* – the concrete ethical life and customary norms that have shaped the person one already is and one’s predispositions (*hexeis*) for acting in the world.

However, in spite of this deep indebtedness to Heidegger, which Gadamer never denies, there is nonetheless an explicit rejection by Gadamer of Heidegger’s attitude toward the metaphysical tradition after the *Kehre*.<sup>26</sup> Increasingly, one witnesses the disappearance in Heidegger’s thinking of the concept of *Destruktion* and its attempt to recover resources from within the metaphysical tradition itself. Instead, one sees an attempt to “overcome” metaphysics, which is now seen as a regrettable error that must simply be moved beyond.<sup>27</sup> The problem, for Heidegger, is what he sees as an almost inevitable tendency toward forgetting the “ontological difference,” which is the obliviousness and subordination of our concrete “being” to the idea of our being “human beings,” i.e. autonomous agents with goals or projects, culminating in the radical subjectivity of Nietzsche and nihilism with respect to ultimate ends.<sup>28</sup> However, Gadamer has serious concerns about Heidegger’s reading of the metaphysical tradition, and he questions not only the inevitability of such a *complete* forgetfulness of being, but the threat that Heidegger’s philosophy of history poses to all normative inquiry and ethical discourse.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Gadamer’s emphasis on language and his belief in the implicitness of metaphysical questions in all speech is designed partly to confront

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer rejects Heidegger’s post-*Kehre* position in his correspondence with Strauss when he denies Strauss’ imputation to him of belief in Heidegger’s “world-night,” the alleged condition of modernity in which Western metaphysics has come to an end. See Strauss and Gadamer, “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” 10.

<sup>27</sup> Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 168-9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 172.

and reject such claims about the end of metaphysics by Heidegger. Furthermore, Gadamer's remark near the end of *Truth and Method* that hermeneutics "leads us back into the problems of classical metaphysics" indicates his belief that it is possible to circumvent the dead end of modern subjectivity,<sup>30</sup> and it points forward to the complexities that he sorts through in dialogue with the ancients in his later work.

### ***The Historicity of the Good***

When Gadamer refers to a return to "classical metaphysics," he specifically has in mind "the Platonic tradition that saw in the transcendental predicates of the One, the Beautiful, the True, and the Good first and foremost traits of Being and not only of the thinking that stands in front of being."<sup>31</sup> In other words, these "transcendental predicates" are not simply conceived as the framework given by language to capture the essence of an independent "reality," but are features of reality itself, since the modern division between speaker and thing, subject and object, has been called into question by philosophical hermeneutics. It will not do, then, to conceive of these transcendental predicates as the articulation of forms (*eidos*), knowable to a rational subject, since this would merely repeat the mistake of objectifying their being. Rather, Gadamer must find alternative resources within classical metaphysics for repairing the severance of the noetic from the sensory, which had objectified transcendence, and then working through the "problem" of the One and the Many, which is to say, he must, without resorting to a reified division, explain how reality possesses both of these seemingly antithetical qualities.

For the purposes of this essay, it is worth noting that when Gadamer works his way through this problem at length in *The Idea of the Good*, he is clearly dealing with an ontological relationship that

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<sup>30</sup> Grondin, "The Metaphysical Dimensions of Hermeneutics," 125-6. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 456.

<sup>31</sup> Grondin, "The Metaphysical Dimensions of Hermeneutics," 134.

pertains as much to the True and the Beautiful as it does to the Good. In other words, Gadamer's account of the Good in this work speaks to the broader question of transcendence within the immanent reality or flux of human life, which arises for all three of the ideals in this classical trinity. Consequently, the question of the One and the Many is – for Gadamer as it was for Plato – about the meaning of the unity within the diversity of all things, or how transcendence ought to be conceived in light of the apparent temporality of our existence. Once the early Heidegger's insights into our historicity and facticity have been adopted by Gadamer, it becomes necessary to revisit this question and, Gadamer believes, to look for alternative resources or insights for confronting it among the ancients. Otherwise, one risks the same radicalization that befalls the late Heidegger's thinking toward the entire metaphysical tradition.

One of Gadamer's main tasks in *The Idea of the Good*, therefore, is to refute the post-*Kehre* Heidegger's distortion of Plato,<sup>32</sup> which Gadamer believes overemphasized the metaphysics of “presence,” and resulted in the exaggerated conclusions at which Heidegger had arrived with respect to the fate of metaphysics. According to Gadamer, Plato's various metaphors and locutions regarding the separation (*chorismos*) of the Good from the world of experience (*emperia*) gave rise to a misinterpretation – for which Aristotle, himself, was partly responsible – that comprehends Plato as asserting the forms in the most literal terms as independent entities, a part of reality that is severed from the material world, resulting in the metaphysical dualism for which Plato has become so widely known. However, Gadamer argues, while there is undeniably something “separate” or distinct about good, right, or just behavior, Plato does not – notwithstanding the tendencies of his Neoplatonist progeny – subscribe to an objectified understanding of the Good: “The complete separation of a world of the ideas from the world of appearances would be a crass absurdity.”<sup>33</sup> On

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<sup>32</sup> I am indebted to Ronald Beiner for this insight.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 16.

Gadamer's reading, Plato is in fact much more concrete or "Aristotelian" in his thinking than most of his interpreters recognize, a misconception fueled by Aristotle's deliberate construal of his mentor in intellectualist terms for the purposes of his critique and to present a contrast with his own thinking. In fact, says Gadamer, Plato never actually speaks of the "*eidōs tou agathon* (form of the good)" but always the "*idea tou agathon* (idea of the good)," and while *eidōs* and *idea* are interchangeable in the Greek, Gadamer interprets this as Plato's avoidance of objectification, since the latter implies "looking *to* the good" rather than a "view *of* the good."<sup>34</sup> In contrast to Plotinus' subsequent separation of the Good from all being, Gadamer argues that in Plato, the Good is presented as the unifying Oneness *within* the Many.<sup>35</sup> It is with this in mind, he argues, that Plato coins the term "*methexis*," in order to evoke the idea that the One actually "participates" in the Many. The Good is the power (*dynamis*) that unifies all that is Good in the concrete world of experience and consists only of all of the Good things in that world.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, our knowledge of the Good is indirect and analogical, since the Good is copresent in particular things that we distinguish in context, not an object or entity that may be directly perceived in-itself.<sup>37</sup>

Although its manifestations are therefore diverse or plural, Gadamer reads Plato as pointing to the unity, integrity, or coherence that characterizes all of these particular instances of the Good in context, which makes them, in a sense, One with each other. It is, Gadamer tells us, the harmony that defines this way of being in the world for both persons and societies, a harmony that is first lived concretely in deed (*ergon*) but then capable of being justified to one another with the reason (*logos*) that takes place in dialogue.<sup>38</sup> And, though these particular instances of the Good are not

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 27-8. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 10-11, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> P. Christopher Smith explains that on Gadamer's view, "Ethical understanding is ... a function not just of mind but also of who we *are*. There is no *logos* without *ergon*, which is to say, no reason and reasoning without deed; that we have already learned from Plato's *characters*, Socrates and Callicles, whom he uses to present his argument for the choice (*prohairesis*) of the philosophical life over the life of pleasure and the pursuit of power." Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human*

defined by their conformity with an abstract principle, all have this quality of adhering or holding fast to an enduring unity or constancy in the face of impulses that serve momentary desires, which literally dis-integrate both individual and community.<sup>39</sup> Although we may never have a clear, stable grasp of the Good without it being contingent vis-à-vis a particular context, there is nothing relative or arbitrary about such an encounter. For Gadamer, “reality is not an anarchy without principles, but a principled structure. ... Reality is an internally differentiated whole that allows us [to] discern its own internal order.”<sup>40</sup>

The contours of this internal order are not found in a set of a priori principles, but in the development over time of the character of the *Spoudaios*. In other words, as is the case with the Truth that is demonstrated in classical texts over time, what Gadamer calls the “work of history” or “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is the process by which experience (*Erfahrung*) is built up and proves what is in conformity with the order of reality concretely over time. Only here, in the case of the Good, it is not the message of a text, but a kind of person or character type, constituted by certain ways of living, whose value is proven through the work of history. The norms that are capable of transcending history are exemplified by the very persons themselves, these *Spoudaioi*, who become concrete instantiations of human virtue, elucidating the characteristics or qualities that ground judgments of rightness and wrongness.<sup>41</sup> Such characteristics, varying as they do over a life

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*Finitude*, 230-1. Emphasis in the original. The reason (*logos*) of the soul that would seek the common good, in other words, must be preformed by a certain way of living, i.e. concrete norms that point toward civilized life as opposed to the fulfillment of individual appetites. Living within and having been formed by such norms of an ethical community thus precedes *logos*, and it is no mere coincidence that the sophists, who live as itinerants outside of any community, are portrayed by Plato as incapable of such cooperative dialogue with Socrates.

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer draws on Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthete and the ethical person here and the idea that the former’s impulse and pursuit of momentary pleasure is incapable of such integrity, while the latter’s steadfastness demonstrates a consistency and unity of the self over time. See *ibid.*, 202-3; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 82-3.

<sup>40</sup> Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, 192. This same internal order is what characterizes the Beautiful, which is not merely a superficial symmetry in an appearance of something, but a harmony and proportion that parallels that of the concrete instantiations of the Good. In his reading of Plato’s *Philebus*, Gadamer echoes what is indicated above with respect to the Good when he says that the Beautiful is defined by a “unity and integration,” and that it exists only within what is concretely Beautiful, but not anywhere in-itself. Also, similar to the Good, Gadamer sees this relationship as one of participation (*methexis*) not separation (*chorismos*). See Tate, “Renewing the Question of Beauty,” 32-4.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence, “Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and Aristotle’s Practical Philosophy,” 210.

and diverse circumstances, are often imprecise, giving at best a “schemata” of the Good.<sup>42</sup>

However, as such experiences build up in a number of lives over time, their criteria become “more determinate”<sup>43</sup> and, when shared within a community, they are embedded in an *ethos*, which precedes and makes less essential such reflective precision for choosing rightly.

## ***Conclusion***

Certainly, Gadamer’s thinking may be characterized as “anti-rationalist,” but it is of a variety that opposes the distinctively modern “rationalism” manifested in the methodologism of the modern human sciences. His principal concern is the threat that this poses to our dialogue with the past and the truth or insight that once constituted the purpose of the humanities. The early Heidegger’s retrieval of *aletheia* helped Gadamer to articulate anew a more dynamic conception of truth, and his recovery of Aristotle’s sensitivity to the facticity of human life pointed Gadamer to the prominent role of *phronesis* in our coming to know anything. These philosophical insights, particularly the recognition of our embeddedness within a concrete *ethos*, raised for Gadamer the ancient problem of the One and the Many, which he confronts in his text, *The Idea of the Good*. It is in this work that one sees his most extensive treatment of the transcendence of the Good and his suggestion that in Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, there are insightful resources for re-thinking old metaphysical problems. Such resources, Gadamer believes, are truer to the experience of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, which are never encountered “in-themselves” in human life but only through their participation (*methexis*) in our concrete reality.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence, “Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and Aristotle’s Practical Philosophy,” 210.