

# The Centrality of Plato's Work in Gadamer's Hermeneutics

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**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Gadamer's Re-reading of Plato's Theory of Ideas. 1.a. The Genesis of Plato's Theory of Ideas and Aristotle's Critique. 1.b. Gadamer's Response to the Aristotelian Critique. 2. The Gadamerian reading of the Platonic Idea of the Good. 2.a. The Transcendental Aspect of the Idea of the Good. 2.b. The Ontological Aspect of Practical Philosophy. 2.c. The Idea of the Good in the *Philebus*. 3. Plato in Gadamer's Hermeneutics. 3.a. Key Concepts in Gadamer's Hermeneutics. 3.b. Plato in Gadamer's Hermeneutics. Conclusions.

**Abstract:** This article explores Gadamer's exegesis of Plato's Theory of Ideas and argues that, in spite of its proximity to Aristotle's philosophy of *praxis*, (which led many critics to label him an "Aristotelian") the foundations of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are to be found in Plato's work. The first section of this article will focus on Gadamer's anti-dualistic re-reading of Plato's theory of Ideas and on his critique of the Aristotelian interpretation of Plato. The second part of the article explores the Gadamerian exegesis of the Platonic Idea of the Good and stresses both its practical nature and consistency with Aristotelian *phronesis*. The third section describes the fundamental aspects of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and traces its origin back to Platonic dialectic. Finally, I argue that more generally, the Aristotelian scientific approach, which resulted in an apodictic reading of Plato, was inconsistent with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and more specifically with his attack against the limitations of the scientific method.

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## Introduction

Gadamer was a fervid admirer of Ancient Greek philosophy. More specifically, his writings mostly rotated around the figures of Aristotle and Plato in the belief that, in order to understand Ancient Greek philosophy, one must begin with the thinkers whose complete works have reached our times<sup>2</sup>. Gadamer's formation in Marburg meant that very early in his academic career he was exposed to the Neokantians' re-reading of Plato<sup>3</sup>, to Heidegger's phenomenological lectures on Aristotle<sup>4</sup>

2 H.G. Gadamer, *The Beginning of Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, 2016; pp. 15-18.

3 Cohen, Natorp and Hartmann attempted a "return to Plato" in a Neokantian key. Natorp's argument against the existence of platonic dualism played a fundamental role in Gadamer's reading of Plato. Suggested reading: P. Natorp, *Platons Ideenlehre. Eine Einführung in den Idealismus*, Leipzig, 1903. P. Pecere, *Il "platonismo" e il problema della conoscenza scientifica da Cohen a Cassirer*, in: R. Chiaradonna, *Il platonismo e le scienze*, Carocci, Roma, 2012. A. Laks, *Avant Natorp. L'interprétation des idées platoniciennes chez H. Cohen*, in A. Neschke-Hentschke, *Images de Platon et lectures de ses œuvres. Les interprétations de Platon à travers les siècles*, Louvain Paris, 1997 ; pp. 339-61.

4 Gadamer was particularly influenced by Heidegger's phenomenological approach to Ancient Greek Philosophy, to the extent that this new approach distanced him from the Neokantian reading of Plato at the time supported by Cohen and Natorp. More specifically Gadamer was attracted by Heidegger's phenomenological lectures on Aristotle and came into contact with his work, famously known as the *Natorp-Bericht, Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*. He was so fascinated by this approach that he decided to contact Heidegger in order to study with him in Fribourg and then again in Marburg. (J. Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer. Eine Biographie*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen; 1999) However, if on the one hand Heidegger drew him away from the Neokantian tradition, on the other he also temporarily pushed him away from philosophy. Gadamer describes his years with Heidegger as very difficult; he hardly ever published anymore and he seriously doubted his own scientific capabilities due to Heidegger's harsh judgements on his work. He therefore decided to dedicate himself to philology which also represented a more economically secure path. It was then that he started to work with Friedlander (J. Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer. Eine Biographie*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen; 1999) It is worth mentioning that Heidegger's reading of Plato was quite contradictory. Critics such as Petropoulos (who are in favour of a continuity in Heidegger's thought) believe that his metaphysical reading of Plato was consistent with Heidegger's idea that Plato was mostly a transitional philosopher who had to deal with two different conceptions of

and also to Friedländer's philological influence<sup>5</sup>. Gadamer has in many cases been considered an "Aristotelian" just as much as a "practical philosopher" due to his active contribution to the 1960s renovation of practical philosophy<sup>6</sup>. He also dedicated a section of his main work *Truth and Method* to the Stagirite philosopher entitled "*The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle*" where he considers Aristotle as "the founder of ethics" seen "as a discipline independent of metaphysics."<sup>7</sup>

Although one cannot deny the influence Aristotelian ethics had on Gadamer's practical hermeneutics, a thorough analysis of his work and more specifically of his re-reading of Plato would suggest that the roots of his philosophical hermeneutics lie, in fact, within Platonic dialectic.

Some might wonder how Gadamer's hermeneutics could be proximate to both Aristotle's philosophy of *praxis* and Plato's Theory of Ideas, without fear of contradiction. The answer to this reasonable question lies within Gadamer's rather original exegesis of Plato, which will be explored in this article. Since his earliest work, (his 1922 PhD thesis, *Das Wesen der Lust nach den platonischen Dialogen*, and his habilitation thesis, *Plato's Dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische*

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truth: of ontological and gnoseological natures. (Heidegger's Reading of Plato: On Truth and Ideas p. 118). We cannot however negate that what surfaced from Heidegger's 1942 only essay on Plato, *Plato's Doctrine on Truth*, was a clear attack against Plato's metaphysics and against Plato himself being accused of having initiated a new ontology, aimed at perceiving truth no longer as revelation but rather as correctness. Such a shift in the meaning of truth marked the beginning of metaphysics and of a dualism between the thing in itself and the perception of things. Gadamer disagreed with Heidegger's interpretation of Plato, and perhaps his life dedication to the rehabilitation of Plato, in my opinion, could also be seen as an attempt to prove his master wrong, to prove Heidegger that, after all, Plato's doctrine of Ideas was not inconsistent with the Aristotelian concept of *Phronesis* and, more generally, with his practical philosophy (J. Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer. Eine Biographie*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen; 1999). For further information please consult the following sources: G. Xiropaidis, M. Michalski, *L'Idée platonicienne du Bien entre Heidegger et Gadamer*, in *Gadamer et les Grecs* édité par J. C. Gens, P. Kontos, P. Rodrigo, Vrin, Paris 2004; pp.139-165.

5 The philologist Friedländer had a significant influence on Gadamer's understanding of Plato. In particular he focused on the stylistic importance of dialogue. Suggested reading on Friedländer's interpretation of Plato: P. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015. G. Reale, *Il «Platone» Di Paul Friedländer: La sua importanza e la sua Portata Storico-Ermeneutica* in P. Friedländer, *Platone*, Bompiani, Milano, 2004. C. Natali, *Gadamer e Davidson sul Filebo di Platone* in «Méthexis», Vol.20, 2007; pp. 113-143.

6 F. Renaud, *Il Platone Socratico di Gadamer*, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia» n° 4, 2008; p. 609.

7 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 310.

*Interpretationen zum “Philebos”*) Gadamer aimed at restoring Plato from the reductive and in many ways erroneous label of “theoretical philosopher”, arguing against the Aristotelian critique of Plato, which had confined him to the realm of Ideas. Although a long time stretches between his PhD thesis and his later work (including *Truth and Method* and *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*) one can see how his original exegesis of Plato remains mostly coherent and consistent.<sup>8,9</sup>

The first section of this article is dedicated to the exploration of Gadamer’s re-reading of Plato’s Theory of Ideas, which was significantly influenced by both his philosophical and his philological formation at Marburg.<sup>10</sup> Gadamer argued that Aristotle’s reading of Plato had given birth to a net dualism (between the intelligible and the sensorial realms) which was never intended. By contrast, according to Gadamer, the heart of Plato’s work lies within the importance of dialogue, which favours a dialectic relation between Ideas and sensorial things, and not their separation.

8 P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell’interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014; p. 6.

9 Guided by Hartmann, Gadamer initially explored Plato’s Philebus; the Idea of the Good was the focus of Gadamer’s analysis and became the link between Aristotelian and Platonic Ethics. This idea was reaffirmed and developed further in his 1931 work: H. G. Gadamer, *Platos Dialectical Ethics; Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus* translated and with an introduction by R. M. Wallace, Yale University Press, 1991.

In this work we can note both Heidegger’s influence (in Gadamer’s phenomenological approach), and Friedlander’s influence (in Gadamer’s attention to the stylistic role of dialogue as well as his attempt to discard the traditional Aristotelian reading of the Athenian philosopher). *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, written later in 1978, with a more thorough and exhaustive approach, stresses once again the importance of understanding dialectical ethics as an actual practical philosophy where both the Idea of the Good and aretè play a fundamental role. (H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986.)

10 Gadamer himself acknowledged how his formation at Marburg was mostly influenced by the Neokantian Paul Natorp, Martin Heidegger and the philologist Paul Friedländer. H. G. Gadamer, *Philosophische Begegnungen*, in *Gesammelte Werke* GW, 10, Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999. For further details on the School of Marburg and its influence on Gadamer: J. Grondin, *Hans Georg Gadamer. Eine Biographie*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen; 1999 C. Esposito, *Il Periodo di Marburgo (1923-28) ed «Essere e tempo»: dalla fenomenologia all’ontologia fondamentale*, in F. Volpi (Ed), *Guida a Heidegger*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1997, pp. 107- 157.

P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell’interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014. D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007.

The second section of this article will explore Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's Idea of the Good in support of the fact that Plato's Ideas were not abstracted from sensorial things; the Idea of the Good, including in itself the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*, derived from the *mixis* of knowledge and pleasure, thus bridging the gap between theory and *praxis*.

The third section will present the key aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics and will proceed to draw parallels between the structure of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and that of Platonic dialectic. It will also show how the practical aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics, while maintaining proximity to Aristotle's moral knowledge, also shared similar traits with the Gadamerian interpretation of the Platonic Idea of the Good. It will then become clear how Gadamer's hermeneutics finds its roots in Platonic dialectic and inherits the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* without falling into any form of contradiction. According to Gadamer's exegesis, Platonic and Socratic ethics were both proximate to the Aristotelian practical philosophy. In fact, Gadamer's interpretation not only managed to free Plato from the erroneous label of idealist; it also brought him back to the sensorial world, tracing a line of continuity between Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian practical philosophies.

Finally, I will strengthen the argument according to which Gadamer's work was fundamentally rooted in the Platonic *logos*, by showing how, in spite of Gadamer's proximity to Aristotle's moral (practical) knowledge, Aristotle's scientific approach, which resulted in an apodictic reading of Plato, was inconsistent with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and more specifically with his clear attack against the limitations of the scientific method.

## **1. Gadamer's re-reading of Plato's Theory of Ideas**

### *a) The Genesis of Plato's Theory of Ideas and Aristotle's Critique*

According to Gadamer, our traditional interpretation of Plato's Theory of Ideas derives from Aristotle's erroneous critique of its limitations. Before proceeding to explore what Gadamer proposed as an alternative exegesis, I will briefly<sup>11</sup> explain

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11 I would like to acknowledge the fact that the question of Plato's Theory of Ideas, in its relation

what led scholars to label Plato a “theoretical philosopher”, especially when compared to Aristotle’s practical philosophy.

The genesis of the Theory of Ideas can be traced back to the *Phaedo*, where Socrates feels the need to “*turn to the logos*”. In this dialogue Socrates tells Cebes about his search for a primary cause, able to explain the true reason of things, as opposed to a mechanistic cause proposed by the Atomists. According to Anaxagoras, the cause of an action was simply the materialistic and mechanistic condition which enabled it. For instance, the cause of talk would lie merely within the anatomic structure of the human body, which mechanically made the action of talk possible. Unsatisfied with this reductive understanding of cause, Socrates embarked upon a much deeper kind of research. He understood that he should have to metaphorically set off for a “*second sailing*”<sup>12</sup>.

As Di Cesare explains, a “second sailing” is the kind of navigation sailors would undertake in case of a wind drop, being thus forced to row<sup>13</sup>. Zuckert describes the *second sailing* as “an idiomatic phrase for ‘second best’ derived from the need to use oars to move a ship when there is no wind”<sup>14</sup>. The first navigation, which made the most of wind force, metaphorically corresponded to the sailing of the Atomists, whilst Socrates would have consciously chosen the hardest type of navigation. As Reale explains, the sails blown by the wind symbolised the senses, whilst the oars corresponded to forms of reasoning and postulates.<sup>15</sup> Due to the unreliability

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to the Aristotelian interpretation described here, would deserve to be much broader and richer in detail. However, since an overly charged section would become inadequate in this context and no longer relevant to the purpose of my argument, I have decided to remain concise in the hope that those readers who wish to learn more on the topic may find what they are seeking for in the following resources: Pezzolato M., *La funzione e la portata della critica alle idee nel ‘Parmenide’ di Platone: dalla Teoria delle Idee alla Teoria dei Principi*, «Rivista Di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica», 84, n. 2/3, 1992, pp. 383–409. G. Reale, «*Paideia*» o *Metafisica delle Idee a proposito del “Platone” di Werner Jaeger*, «Rivista Di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica», n. 1, 1956, pp. 42–67. G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1997. G. Reale, *Storia della Filosofia Antica. Platone e Aristotele*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1988.

12 Plato, *Phaedo*, (99 b-d.) in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.

13 D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007; p. 174.

14 C. Zuckert, *Hermeneutics in Practice; Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy*, in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 194.

15 G. Reale, *Storia della Filosofia Antica II; Platone e Aristotele*, seconda Edizione, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica, 1988. p. 64.

of the senses, Socrates turned to the *logoi*.<sup>16</sup> Translated mostly as a turn to *forms of reasoning*,<sup>17</sup> and hence as a turn away from the limited senses, this extract of the dialogue contributed to Platonic dualism, implying the existence of both an intelligible realm and a separate sensorial realm. In this context the senses appeared as a hindrance to knowledge while the *logoi* could lead towards truth. According to this interpretation, Socrates believed he could seize the essential or true cause of things in a purely intelligible way. As we can read in the *Phaedo*, for example, the Ideas of Beauty, Greatness and Smallness are essential to defining things as respectively beautiful, great or small, whereas the mere comparison between the physical characteristics of the objects, in itself, would never be sufficient to judge things as beautiful, great or small without holding the Ideas of their respective essences.<sup>18</sup>

This interpretation contributed to the shaping of Plato's metaphysical Doctrine of Ideas. As Reale explains, Plato's Idea was defined as something Intelligible, Essential, Immutable, Incorporeal, and as Unity in itself<sup>19</sup>, and what derived from this conception of the Platonic Idea was a clear dualism between sensorial things (being corporeal, mutable and multiple) and intelligible things.

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle points out the limits of Plato's Theory of Ideas arguing against the *chorismos* (separation) between Ideas and things in the world; for Aristotle, the *ousia* (the Aristotelian substance or essence of things) could not belong in a separate realm, and thus be detached from what it should be constituted of.<sup>20</sup> He argued, rather, that the *logos* could have only been capable of revealing the essence of things if directly and concretely applied to nature. Aristotle argued that Plato's *arithmos*, involving a *mimesis*<sup>21</sup> between Idea and being, was incapable of

16 Plato, *Phaedo*, (99 e) in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.

17 Reale's translation reads: "[...] *ritenni di dovermi rifugiare in ragionamenti*" (*I reckoned I had to find shelter in forms of reasoning [...]*) (My translation), in *Platone tutti gli Scritti*; Harold North Fowler translates the "turn to the *logoi*" as a "recourse to conceptions".

18 Plato, *Phaedo*, (100 c-e) in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.

19 G. Reale, *Storia della Filosofia Antica II; Platone e Aristotele*, seconda Edizione, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica, 1988; p. 78.

20 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, (A, 9, 991 b, 1-9.) tr. By C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, 2016.

21 The following section will explain how the mimetic relationship between Ideas and sensorial things derived from the Pythagorean conception of number.



capturing the transitional nature of being.<sup>22</sup>

The living thing which emerges from the seed does not simply assume another eidetic determination and it is not simply something “different”. It is defined, rather, in terms of its transition from the immature to the ripe. As that which is immanent in the thing as its potential, the *eidos* exists nowhere else. There is no separate “world” of the *eide* existing apart from or in addition to the things or beings they define something defined by essentially different determinations, though if viewed mathematically it would be”<sup>23</sup>.

It is for this reason that Aristotle felt the need to introduce two additional elements in order to resolve the question: that of *dunamis* (potentiality) and of *energeia* (actuality) thus juxtaposing a “biological” explanation of things to a “mathematical” one (understood in its logical-deductive sense).

#### *b) Gadamer's Response to the Aristotelian Critique*

Gadamer's Socratic<sup>24</sup> and unitary<sup>25</sup> reading of Plato was able to overcome the Aristotelian concerns; he argued that Plato's Theory of Ideas did not in fact

22 C. Zuckert, *Hermeneutics in Practice; Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy*, in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; p. 209.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 210.

24 By Socratic (or Modern) reading of Plato I refer to the model which refutes the traditional reading of Plato. The latter, as clearly explained by Reale, was based on the belief that Plato's thought is entirely contained in his written work, and since we own the complete written work of Plato, we can learn about his thought through his writings. According to the Socratic reading of Plato, by contrast, Plato's thought was only partly contained in his written work. Part of it was never written and, in order to gain a holistic understanding of Plato's philosophy, one must take into account what is referred to as the “indirect tradition”. This includes secondary sources which tell us about the contents of Plato's oral lessons which, according to this interpretation, he preferred not to write. G. Reale, *Storia della Filosofia Antica II; Platone e Aristotele*, seconda Edizione, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica, 1988; p. 11.

25 As opposed to the evolutionary model of Plato, which ordered Plato's dialogues, (stylistically and thematically) into early, middle and late dialogues, the unitary model of Plato's interpretation does not believe in an evolution of Plato's thought. Such a model goes hand in hand with the Socratic reading of Plato. By focusing mostly on the indirect tradition, the Socratic interpretation is able to find a continuation between dialogues which would otherwise seem contradictory and thus to imply a change of thought within Plato himself.



involve a *chorismos*, (separation) between sensorial things and intelligible Ideas. Aristotle's reading of a Platonic dualism derived primarily from: *i*) his erroneous interpretation of the *turn to the logoi* and *ii*) from the identification of Plato's conception of number, with that of the Pythagoreans' which generated a relation of *mimesis* between Ideas and sensorial things.

### *c) Gadamer's Interpretation of the Socratic Turn to the Logoi*

According to Gadamer, the Socratic *turn to the logoi* was not a turn to pure forms of reasoning but, rather, the *logoi* ought to have been intended as "dialectic discourse". Plato, as interpreted by Gadamer, would not have turned to a form of intelligible reasoning as much as to the power of dialogue. Interpreting the *Phaedo* as a turn to *dialogue, dialectic discourse or relation*<sup>26</sup> rather than as *pure forms of reasoning*, would overcome the chorismic implications of dualism. In other words, Plato's aim in the *Phaedo* was not to underline the net separation between sensorial things and Ideas (as Aristotle understood it) but rather to stress the importance of Socratic dialogue in order to indirectly criticise Sophistic practice, in a time when the Sophists taught future leaders and judges the art of rhetoric, ignoring the relevance of truth<sup>27</sup>.

Gadamer's interpretation of the *Phaedo* as a eulogy to Socrates is consistent with his interpretation of the *Excursus* of the *Seventh Letter*, which is seen as another evident attack against the emptiness of Sophistic discourse. As Gadamer writes in *Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's Seventh Letter*,

It is to be viewed as a prefatory appeal to give oneself over to philosophic instruction

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26 *Logos* also acquires the mathematical meaning of "relation" (*Verhältnis*) which I will explore in the next section. H. G. Gadamer, *Platos ungeschriebene Dialektik in Gesammelte Werke* GW, 6, *Griechische Philosophie II*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999; p.149.

27 As transmitted by Sextus Empiricus in *Against the Logicians*, Gorgias' work *On Non Existence* argues that there was no absolute truth. The thing in itself did not exist, and if it did exist it could not have been known, and if it could have been known, it could not have been expressed through language. B. Mc Comiskey, "Gorgias, 'On Non-Existence': Sextus Empiricus, 'Against the Logicians' (1.65-87) translated from the Greek Text in Hermann Diels's 'Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker.' «*Philosophy & Rhetoric*» 30, no. 1, 1997, pp. 45–49. The sophists were also strongly criticised by Xenophon for teaching the art of persuasion in change of money. Both Plato and Aristotle labelled it as a pseudo-philosophy specifically because it did not involve a true quest for knowledge, but it was merely a technique to persuade and often even deceive the other.

and didactic discussion with the proper attitude and, in particular, as a warning not to let oneself be confused by those empty techniques of arguing being proffered in the fashionable instruction of the Sophists and in obvious opposition to the philosophic community cultivated by the academy<sup>28</sup>.

According to Gadamer, the message in the *Excursus* was to underline the limits of the Sophistic *logoi*, deprived of the prefix *dia*-<sup>29</sup> (meaning “between”). The fundamental aim of their argumentative speeches was to persuade the other, without believing in the existence of truth. Moreover, their art would occur through a “*mono*-logue”, rather than through a “*dia*-logue”. Socratic dialogue, by contrast, would have led towards truth thanks to the dialectic exchange of perspectives with other individuals. According to Gadamer, the accent, in Plato’s Theory of Ideas, should have been placed on the existing relations between ideas rather than on the separation between ideas and sensorial things.<sup>30</sup> The *Excursus* would argue that truth could not be identified within the mere means of communication themselves;<sup>31</sup> the four elements of knowledge (*onoma*, *logos*, *eidolon* and *episteme*, respectively meaning word, definition, image and knowledge), according to Plato, would be insufficient to reveal the true essence of being.

The four means of communicating the thing [...] provide no certainty that in them the thing itself (*die sache selbst*) will come to be known as it truly is.<sup>32</sup>

The essence of things did not lie within the instruments of communication; it

28 H.G. Gadamer, *Dialectic and Sophism* p. 98; in *Plato’s Seventh Letter*, in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983.

29 D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007; p.177.

30 F. Renaud, *Il Platone Socratico di Gadamer*, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia» n° 4 2008, p. 606.

31 The example of the representation of the circle (*Kreis*) in Plato’s *Seventh Letter* shows that its figurative representation does not coincide with the essence of circle. Similarly, the single elements of speech cannot embed essences in themselves; truth can only be found in their relation to other tools of communication. Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.

32 H.G. Gadamer, *Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s Seventh Letter*, in *H. G. Gadamer, Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983 p. 100.

did not reside “within” the *logoi* themselves but “between” them.<sup>33</sup> According to Gadamer, the ultimate message of the *Excursus* was that only through a dialectic exchange with the other, and hence through dialogue, could the true essence of being, or primary cause, be sought. Therefore, for Gadamer, Socrates’ *turn to the logoi*, was not a refuge within the intellect, but was first and foremost a reference to the importance of the power of dialogue.

Some might argue, however, that Plato’s message concerning the centrality of dialogue in his quest for the essence of being does not rule out the existence of an intelligible realm of Ideas, which could easily continue to be interpreted as being detached from the sensorial world. Indeed, Gadamer’s position on the Theory of Ideas may at times appear unclear and contradictory in that, while claiming the inexistence of a *chorismos*, he does not deny the existence of a Theory of Ideas. In fact, his goal was precisely to allow the coexistence of both intelligible Ideas and sensorial things while negating a dualistic *chorismos* between the two. On the one hand, Gadamer acknowledges Plato’s need to establish the existence of dialogic exchange between intelligible Ideas, (in order to elevate his philosophy from the mere rhetorical speculation of Sophism) while on the other, Gadamer also confines its metaphysical implications by allowing a connection between sensorial things and intelligible Ideas through language.

Let us now analyse in what way Platonic dialectics can overcome the limits of the sophistic *logoi* through dialogue. It is important to underline that the meaning of the word “dialectics” refers more generally to the exchange of opinions between two or more individuals involved in conversation, and more specifically to the process of *diáiresis*, through which the true essence of things can be sought.<sup>34</sup>

I will hereby provide a more detailed explanation of the latter. The dialectical method advances through the so-called *diáiresis*. As Di Cesare explains, according to the description in the *Phaedrus*<sup>35</sup>, the art of dialectics consists in dismembering an Idea, which presents itself in its Unity, and in distinguishing each member from other members.<sup>36</sup> Such a procedure allows the division of each concept until they are

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33 *ibidem*.

34 C. Smith, *Comments*, in H. G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic, Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983p.1.

35 Plato, *Phaedrus* (265 d 6) in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.

36 D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007; p. 179.

no longer divisible. *Diaíresis* (division) allows the activation of either a dynamic of inclusion within a given category, or that of exclusion, revealing the characteristics Ideas have in common. This concept can be understood more easily if we take the example of a horse and a donkey. Through the process of *sinagogé* (synthesis) and of *diaíresis* (analysis), a horse and a donkey would be on the one hand included and hence unified under the category of ungulate animals, and on the other they would separate, as donkeys have two nails as opposed to horses, which only have one.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, language would allow the subsumption of the multiple examples of things and opinions under the Unity of *logos*, and also involve their division. Although horses and donkeys are subsumed through *sinagogé*, they are also drawn apart by the process of *diaíresis*, thanks to which we can negate that they are the same animal as they are distinguished on the basis of their unshared elements. According to Gadamer such a process, (which derived from the mathematical model of the number where the Multiplicity of opinions is unified under the Unity, or One, of the *logos*) would allow us to distinguish what is true from what is false. Gadamer takes the example given in the Sophist, *Theaetetus flies*:

The universal idea of “man” is implied in the name “Theaetetus” and that idea excludes the idea of flying. Thus, the putative oneness in the relationship of things asserted here, the oneness constituted grammatically by the interweaving of noun and verb, must be false. These two ideas cannot be combined with each other. A correct assertion, on the other hand, presupposes that the ideas expressed in it are indeed compatible with each other and that they can be combined.<sup>38</sup>

Since Theaetetus is a man, and men cannot fly, then it is not the case that Theaetetus can fly. According to Gadamer the determination of truth depends on both the *eidos* (the Idea of Theaetetus) and the position of the Idea of Theaetetus compared to those of flight, man, bird and so on. Therefore, the truth concerning Theaetetus’ inability to fly surfaces thanks to a dialectic movement of exchange between ideas.

Through *diaíresis*, Plato found an escape from Sophistic speculation, by

37 P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell'interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014; p.47.

38 H.G. Gadamer, *Plato's Unwritten Dialectic in Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983; p. 148.

pursuing truth through rational dialogue and hence through the exchange of perspectives with the other<sup>39</sup>. What we must understand, however, is that although the methodological process was aimed at seizing truth, such a process could never really be considered completed as answers are never absolute; the heart of Plato's philosophy lay within the "question" more than within the "answer". Consistent with the Socratic belief that a philosopher is *he who knows not to know*, Plato's doctrine focused on dialogue and on the openness of questioning, heading towards a truth which was always open to reconsiderations.

*d) Gadamer's Interpretation of Plato's Arithmos*

According to Gadamer, Aristotle's dualistic interpretation of Plato's Theory of Ideas also derived from the misinterpretation of what Plato meant by "mathematical". Aristotle had identified Plato's conception of number with that of the Pythagoreans, whereas, according to Gadamer, Plato's mathematics did not involve the process of logical deduction characterising Pythagorean mathematics.<sup>40</sup> It rather referred to the abovementioned process of division (*diairesis*) through which truth could be sought.

The Pythagoreans identified the One with reality, and believed that the nature and the geometric order of the world could be expressed in numbers. Aristotle believed that "Plato's understanding of the intelligible order of the world was essentially mathematical in the Pythagorean sense"<sup>41</sup>. One must admit that Plato did implement mathematical concepts in many of his dialogues, such as that of "equality, as prime example of supersensible, purely intelligible being (or ideas [*eide*]) that nevertheless help illuminate the order of the sensible world."<sup>42</sup> He also pointed out that certain mathematical concepts had an intelligible order or relation with each other. The example of the sequential order of number, line, plane and solid shows the order of natural sciences". "Number, line, plane, and solid, each of

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39 *Ibidem*, p.48.

40 H. G. Gadamer, *Idee und Wirklichkeit in Platos Timaios in Gesammelte Werke*, GW, 6, *Griechische Philosophie II*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999; p. 242.

41 H.G. Gadamer, *Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas*, in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983; p. 202.

42 *Ibidem*.

which depends upon the previous one, have a natural order which gives a sequential structure to the mathematical sciences”<sup>43</sup>.

However, Gadamer did not believe that Plato meant a pyramidal or sequential mathematical structure when referring to his Theory of Ideas. As he continues to explain,

[...] that sequence remains primarily a mere model of systematic deduction in general, just as the number serves only as a model for the task of ascertaining the *logos ousias*, i.e., in defining the essence of something <sup>44</sup>.

By “mathematical” Plato meant the process of *diatresis* through which we can discover the essential meaning of something, by separating it from what is not. “Mathematical” is therefore the process of division where each part, as already mentioned, is dismembered until it can no longer be divided. “Mathematical” refers to the dialectical exchange between the Unity of the One and the Multiplicity of the Many: once the Idea has been discerned and has come to its Unity, the latter does not remain immobile and eternally itself. As opposed to the traditional view of the Platonic Idea, Gadamer’s re-reading of Plato rehabilitates a type of Idea which is never finite. Truth can never be ultimately found, as every true Idea that is encountered in its Unity is soon confronted with the Many, which represents what the idea is not: its opposite.

As Di Cesare explains, the structure of *logos* lies precisely within the intertwining of Unity and Multiplicity; Multiplicity and Unity<sup>45</sup>. The fact that the Unity of the One can find itself in Multiplicity and, in turn, Multiplicity can find itself in the Unity of the One may appear contradictory. In fact, these relations never entail complete identifications; that is to say, they will share only some common traits which permit the continuity of the dialectic process. As Gadamer points out,

[...] the whole procedure is not intended to arrive at a rigid systematization, a pyramid of ideas. What is revealed is that the number as the unity of many is the ontological paradigm. These dihairetical classifications point to a whole of explications, as it

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007; p.180.

were, a whole which is incapable of ever being completed<sup>46</sup>.

In addition, if the One were completely identical to itself and had no relation with the Many, the whole purpose of Socratic and Platonic philosophy would collapse. The function of philosophy is to always keep the Unity open to the multiplicity of opinions which in turn will come to a unitary conclusion and eventually be confronted with Multiplicity again.

Moreover, Gadamer explains how the Aristotelian erroneous application of the Pythagorean model of number to the Platonic Theory of Ideas involved a *mimesis* between the phenomenal world and a mathematically determined world<sup>47</sup>, which in turn generated a net separation between things and Ideas. By contrast, in Gadamer's reading of the Platonic model, (suggested in the *Parmenides*<sup>48</sup>) what characterised the relationship between Ideas and things was a form of *methexis*,<sup>49</sup> that is to say a form of "participation" of each single part of the sensorial Multiplicity, in the Unity of the Idea thanks to the uniting and dividing dialectic process of *synagogé* and *diaíresis*. According to Gadamer, sensorial elements (incapable of completely seizing their Unity but capturing only a part of it) could only be part of a Unified totality.

Therefore, Gadamer argued that a mimetic relation, compared to a participative one, would have impeded the dialogical exchange and dialectical participation between Ideas and things, and would have thus confined Ideas and sensorial things to two separate realms.

[...] where the Pythagoreans spoke of the *mimesis* of the things in relationship to

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46 H.G. Gadamer, *Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas*, in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983; p. 203.

47 P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell'interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014; p. 52.

48 H.G. Gadamer, *Platos dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos in Gesammelte Werke* (GW) 5; *Griechische Philosophie I*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999; p.105.

49 Gadamer notes that the relationship between Idea and sensorial things is expressed with several terms such as *mixis*, *koinonia*, *sumplokè*, *methexis* etc. The latter, according to Gadamer, would be used more frequently than others. As Gadamer points out, "both the *Parmenides* and Aristotle's critique finally single out *methexis* from these expressions. *Plato coins this new word... for the participation of the particular in the universal*. H.G. Gadamer, *Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas* in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, 1983; 209.



numbers—that is, of the visible exemplification of pure numerical relationships in the order of the heavens and in the theory of musical harmony—Plato, he says, merely uses another word, namely, *methexis* [...] <sup>50</sup>.

## 2. The Gadamerian reading of the Platonic idea of the good

This section highlights the practical character of the Platonic Idea of the Good showing its proximity to the Aristotelian conception of moral or practical knowledge. Gadamer argued that, while maintaining its transcendental feature, the Idea of the Good keeps a continuous relation with the sensorial world.

### a) *The Transcendental Aspect of the Idea of the Good*

According to Gadamer, compared to the other Platonic Ideas, the Idea of the Good cannot be known as a result of a gnoseological process. As Della Pelle points out, Plato uses the term *eidos*<sup>51</sup> when referring to general Ideas, while he utilises the term *idéa* when referring to the Idea of the Good, implying a substantial difference between the two<sup>52</sup>. He never speaks of *eidos* of the Good.

Gadamer souligne que Platon n'utilise jamais les termes *eidos*, mais toujours *idéa* pour désigner l'idée du Bien. En termes husserliennes, on pourrait affirmer que l'interprétation Gadamerienne fait de l'idée du Bien le corrélatif noématique d'une noèse nécessaire de la pensée qui cherche à s'orienter dans le monde sensible<sup>53</sup>.

Della Pelle moves on to explain how Gadamer distinguishes their respective meaning by reflecting on the distinction between knowing and comprehending; the

50 H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986; p.10.

51 Plato, *Phaedo*, (100 a – c) in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.

52 P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell'interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014; p. 87.

53 J. Grondin, *Compte rendu de: Hans Georg Gadamer; Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* in «*Archives de Philosophie*» 45; 1982; pp. 302-303.

*eidos* can only be known while Ideas can be comprehended. Knowing is intended as a result of a gnoseological process, which is insufficient to reach the Idea of the Good as the latter cannot be known but can be “comprehended”.<sup>54</sup> While the *eidos* can be an object of knowledge and therefore the point of arrival of a gnoseological process, the Idea of the Good transcends the gnoseological level, as the Good can neither be reached deductively nor inductively. The Idea of the Good benefits from an ontological dimension (without including in itself an intelligible concept, which is typical of the *eidos*). Such a transcendental aspect of the Idea of the Good may appear as another element in support of the dualistic *chorismos* between Ideas and sensorial things. On the contrary, according to Gadamer, the Idea of the Good lives far from an intelligible realm reached through logical instruments; it is rather more proximate to the practical reality of the world.

Gadamer draws upon dialogues such as the *Republic*, the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* where the Idea of the Good is associated with the concept of *Aretè* (virtue)<sup>55</sup>. Compared to other dialogues, the *Republic* includes Socrates’ view of what makes a just state, and explores the path the Philosopher King ought to undertake in order to acquire virtue. Virtue could not simply be known through a series of logical explanations but it ought to be “comprehended”, that is to say, it had to be assimilated through a long, enduring education. The kind of knowledge virtue may be built upon is not merely theoretical but involves a level of practical experience. As Gadamer explains in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*,

If one brings Aristotle’s illuminating analyses of the modes of knowing [...] and in particular his differentiation between technical and practical knowledge, the end result is not surprising: we see how close the knowledge of the Good sought by Socrates is to Aristotle’s *phronesis*. In treating *phronesis* Aristotle explicitly distinguishes practical knowledge from both theoretical and technical knowledge<sup>56</sup>.

In this sense, Plato’s conception of virtue integrates the Aristotelian concept of

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54 P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell’interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2014; p. 69.

55 M. D. Jordan, “Plato, Aristotle and Gadamer - Hans-Georg Gadamer: *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* in «The Review of Politics» 49, no. 4 Yale; p. 580.

56 H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986; p. 33.

*phronesis* <sup>57</sup>. Nevertheless, Gadamer also acknowledges a fundamental difference between Plato's concept of *Aretè* and the Aristotelian *phronesis*: while the latter remains purely a practical form of knowledge, the Platonic *Aretè* is more complex:

Plato widened the customary usage, whose proximity to practice must have always been sensed to include dialectical knowledge, and he did so in order to ceremoniously exalt dialectics. In other words, he took what was called practical reasonableness and expanded it to include the theoretical disposition of the dialectician.<sup>58</sup>

For Gadamer, Plato's *Phronesis*, which was initially intended to be mostly practical also included theoretical knowledge in order to underline the relation between theory and practice. For example, in the *Republic*, teachings received by future leaders did not have the purpose of either making them theoreticians or providing instruction which could be useful to immediate application. Rather, the education philosopher-Kings underwent had the function of enabling them to become "reasonable". This would have allowed them to distinguish between true and false deceiving judgements. Virtue could not be communicated or explained through direct logical forms of reasoning but could be identified within good sense and reasonable thought.

[...] the preparatory curriculum through the mathematical disciplines is designed to lead what is best in the soul (*to beltiston en psychei*) to a vision of what is best in reality (*pros ten tou aristou en tois oust thean*) (532c).<sup>59</sup>

### *b) The Ontological Aspect of Practical Philosophy*

In the *Protagoras*, just like in the *Republic*, Plato insists on the fact that virtue could not simply be "taught". In order to acquire virtue, one must have had a "comprehension" of the Good, which just like virtue could not be explained through logical discourse, thus being reduced to a technical and instrumental

57 C. Zuckert, *Hermeneutics in Practice; Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy*, in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; p. 214.

58 H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986; p. 38.

59 *Ibidem*, p. 83.

form of knowledge.<sup>60</sup> Virtue involved the understanding of a finalistic Idea of the Good which could dialectically be seized through a deep understanding of the self<sup>61</sup>. Gadamer also underlines how, similarly, Socratic/Platonic dialectic should not be confused with Sophistic dialectic; while the latter may be reduced to mere rhetorical instruments, aimed at persuading and convincing interlocutors, the former philosophy involved an understanding of the self. In *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Gadamer explains how Socratic dialectic could lead towards a practical Good, bridging between theory and *praxis*<sup>62</sup>.

The Meno, while reinforcing the argument that virtue could not be taught, also underlined how Platonic dialectic was more than a mere *technè*<sup>63</sup>; it represented a path towards the ontological understanding of the self. Socrates explains how the acquisition of virtue involved the act of remembrance<sup>64</sup>. He explains how through the process of questioning ourselves, by reflecting on our own thoughts and convictions, we remind ourselves of who we are. In other words, by dialectically examining the reasons behind our choices we also simultaneously reflect on what has led us to make such decisions. This process of recognition does not only happen at an abstract level but happens in reference to the practical choices we make in our concrete life.<sup>65</sup>

Knowledge of the good is always with us in our practical life. Whenever we choose one thing in preference to another, we believe ourselves capable of justifying our choice, and hence knowledge of the good is always already involved<sup>66</sup>.

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60 H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik I*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (GW) 1, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999; pp. 322-323.

61 Here we mean the ontological understanding of the essence of being.

62 H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986. p. 57.

63 H. G. Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, in *Gesammelte Werke* GW, 7. Winter Verlag, Heidelberg 1978; pp.148-149.

64 The concept of recognition refers to the fact that in our souls there is a form of knowledge that needs revealing. This probably alludes to the renowned Chariot Allegory in which the human soul, before reaching the world, has already seen the Ideas. Therefore, seizing the essence of things in human life is in fact an act of remembrance of the soul.

65 C. Zuckert, *Hermeneutics in Practice; Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy*, in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.201-224. p. 213.

66 H. G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* Eng. tr. by Christopher Smith; Yale University Press, 1986; p. 57.

c) *The Idea of the Good in the Philebus*

As Gadamer underlines, both the *Republic* and the *Philebus* address whether the Idea of the Good should be identified within knowledge or pleasure.

The *Republic* [...] opens with the very same question as the *Philebus* namely, whether the good is *hedone* (pleasure), as the mass of people {hoi polloi} believe, or *phronesis* (reason), that is, whether it consists in satisfaction of one's vital drives or insight into the good {*Republic* 505b).<sup>67</sup>

Gadamer explains how in the *Republic*, Socrates associates the Idea of the Good with the sun<sup>68</sup>, metaphorically representing the necessary condition to the existence of both knowledge and being. Such a metaphor has been the object of numerous interpretations. Aristotle had identified the Good in all “good things” although such an interpretation was considered rather reductive by Gadamer. Led by his phenomenological approach, Gadamer believed he could find the key to understanding Plato's Idea of the Good by taking into account his oral doctrine, the descriptions of which are included in indirect sources such as those of Aristoxenus of Tarentum.<sup>69</sup> As Della Pelle explains, Aristoxenus' writings described how Plato's lectures on the Good were not characterised by direct references to “good things” but rather, they made constant reference to mathematical concepts, to the disappointment of many of his scholars.<sup>70</sup> This confirms that the Idea of the Good could not be directly communicated, but rather it could be indirectly understood through the construction of a mind nourished by abstract forms of reasoning. Aristoxenus' source also led Gadamer to convey particular importance to the Doctrine of the Four Genera, explored in the *Philebus*, and to the mathematical relationship between One and Many explored above. Gadamer explains how,

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* pp. 28, 84, 86, 100.

<sup>69</sup> Aristosseno, *Elementa Harmonica*, Typis Publicae officinae polygraphicae, Roma 1954; pp.16-31. Gadamer explicitly refers to Aristoxenus in *H. G. Gadamer, Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (GW) 7 C. Winter Verlag, Heidelberg 1978 pp.128-227.

<sup>70</sup> P. Della Pelle, *La filosofia di Platone nell'interpretazione di Hans Georg Gadamer*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2014; p. 9.

according to Plato, the Doctrine of the four Genera<sup>71</sup>, the *apeiron* (the unlimited) the *peras* (the limited and the definite), the *mixis* (mixture of both limited and unlimited which is present in all things) and the *aitia* (its cause) could demonstrate the nature of the bridging feature of the Idea of the Good.

These [*apeiron* and *peras* (boundless and bound)] are joined by a third, which is mixture of both; and this too links up with Pythagorean tradition [...]. But a fourth item still remains to be added; [...] The fourth item is the *aitia* (cause) of the mixture<sup>72</sup>.

It is within the *mixis* itself that the dialectic exchange between One and Many takes place and it is within such a *mixis* of limited and unlimited elements that the Platonic Idea of the Good resides. Gadamer points out that the first two elements (limited and unlimited) were already present in the Pythagorean structure of the universe and it is the addition of the third and fourth genera that marked the difference between Pythagoreanism and Platonism<sup>73</sup>. *Apeiron* (unlimited) and *peras* (limited) do not exist but combined within the *mixis*.

A mixture has to be one thing; that is, all its parts must be homogeneous with the whole. But on the other hand, the constituent parts of a mixture must not fully cease to be what they were, either. Otherwise, the whole would not be a mixture, but a coming into being of a new thing, together with a disappearance of what had existed previously<sup>74</sup>.

Gadamer points out that the concept of number, being a determined entity, cannot exist in sensorial things, but it can only exist within the *mixis*. However, this does not imply that it cannot be noetically understood in an abstract sense. Similarly, the Idea of the Good cannot be identified exhaustively in good things.

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71 H.G. Gadamer, *Platos dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos* in *Gesammelte Werke* (GW) 5; *Griechische Philosophie I*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999; pp. 94-103.

72 *Ivi*, 129-130.

73 C. Zuckert, *Hermeneutics in Practice; Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy*, in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; p. 217.

74 H. G. Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics; Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus* translated and with an introduction by R. M. Wallace, Yale University Press, 1991; pp. 133-134.

Although it resides within the *mixis* and hence in all things known as good, it can also be thought separately from things as its ontological nature can be understood noetically.

It is in this way that Gadamer resolves the question of whether the Good should be identified either in pleasure or in knowledge: it resides in the combination of the two; in the *mixis* of pleasure and knowledge.

If one applies the four Genera of being to the conflict between *hedone* and *phronesis* [...], then it is clear that the sought-for “good” of life belongs to the third class, the mixed [...] <sup>75</sup>.

The Good maintains a noetic dimension while manifesting itself in concrete things. Pleasure and knowledge do not exist separate from one another. Pleasure cannot be perceived without knowledge, that is to say without the awareness of it, and in the same way, one cannot acquire knowledge without feeling pleasure. The Idea of the Good manifests itself in Beauty, considered by Plato as the highest and closest Idea to the Good <sup>76</sup>. According to Socrates, the *dunamis* of Good found shelter within the *phusis* of Beauty <sup>77</sup>. The Good hides within the nature of Beauty as, without the concreteness of Beauty, the Good would be invisible. Therefore, through Beauty the Good both hides and makes itself manifest (although one should clarify that what can be perceived through Beauty is not the Idea of Good in itself but its power).

We can thus see how the Idea of the Good both transcends the gnoseological process and can be reached immanently through practical experience such as the perception of Beauty. The Good is in continuous relation with the practical aspect of life and includes in itself the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. The Aristotelian practical knowledge (*phronesis*) can be partly found in Plato’s Idea of the Good as the latter only manifest itself in practical reality. The example of the Idea of Beauty can ably show how the Idea of the Good requires sensorial means in order to be able to make itself manifest, and although it can be thought as an abstract essence,

<sup>75</sup> *Ivi*, p.144.

<sup>76</sup> Socrates also explains how the Idea of the Good manifests itself also through *summetria* (proportion) and *aletheia* (truth).

<sup>77</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, (64 e) in, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Eng. tr. by H. N. Fowler); Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; 1966.



it can only be visible through concrete things.

The Gadamerian re-reading of Plato's ethics is not only consistent with his argument against the possibility of a dualism, it also shows how Plato's philosophy was extremely proximate to both Socratic and Aristotelian practical theories. Aristotle's practical philosophy was thus not in opposition to a "theoretical"<sup>78</sup> Plato but was in fact consistent with it.

It is now possible to move on to our final section where I will explore the similarities between Gadamer's Plato and his philosophical hermeneutics.

### 3. Plato in Gadamer's hermeneutics

#### *a) Key Concepts in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*

Unlike traditional hermeneutics, Gadamer's was not a mere technical instrument aimed at outlining the different modes of understanding;<sup>79</sup> it was rather an actual philosophical theory of interpretation which aimed at exploring the meaning of human experience. Gadamer believed that hermeneutics was more than just a technique of interpretation but could seize the ontological essence of human existence<sup>80</sup>, thus acquiring a universal value<sup>81</sup>. The conditions of possibility of understanding depend on the Heideggerian idea of *thrownness*<sup>82</sup>, that is to say the human state of finding oneself "thrown" in a specific time and place in the world.

Heidegger's temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense that the term "hermeneutics"

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78 The concept of *theoria* will be explored in section III b.

79 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 268.

80 G. Vattimo, *Prefazione* (prefazione alla 2<sup>a</sup> Edizione tedesca), in H.G. Gadamer, *Verità e Metodo*, tr. It. di G. Vattimo, Bompiani, Milano 1983; p. 8.

81 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 468.

82 M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 2001, (First Ed. 1962); p. 174.

has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world. Not caprice, or even an elaboration of a single aspect, but the nature of the thing itself makes the movement of understanding comprehensive and universal.<sup>83</sup>

The universality of Gadamer's hermeneutics derives from the fact that understanding is not just a mode of human behaviour towards experience, such as an attempt at interpreting a literary text. Understanding the world is an intrinsic characteristic of *Dasein* (of *Being in the world*). This means that, for Gadamer, hermeneutics has neither the aim of proposing a specific method, nor expects to understand the object of knowledge in an absolute sense.<sup>84</sup> In *Truth and Method*, he shows how the understanding of any particular situation in our life cannot be the result of a scientific method which considers the object of understanding as something detached from the observer. Understanding is rather the result of an exchange of meaning between subject and object.<sup>85</sup> It is not always possible to distinguish between a comprehending subject and a comprehended object, as this form of objectivization solely belongs to the scientific approach. Truth is not just quantifiably and scientifically understood; there are other forms of truths existing beyond science which cannot be grasped through the application of a scientific method. The title of the book itself alludes to an alternative type of truth; a truth that does not involve the separation between observer and observed. Gadamer believes that philosophy can acquire a true perspective on the world without being constrained to the scientific method.

According to Gadamer, the moment we try to understand the past, we cannot see beyond the limits of our point of view, which depends on our cultural background. Our mind will have been inhabited by a series of schemes of meaning and expectations which will orient us towards certain hypotheses, which in turn will be implemented to decode the meaning of the object in question. Whilst during the Enlightenment the elimination of subjective viewpoints was

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83 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>o</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. XXVII.

84 R. J. Dostal, *Introduction*, in R. J. Dostal (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002; pp. 2-3.

85 C. Taylor, *Gadamer on the Human Sciences* in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press; p. 126.

fundamental in order to reach objectivity<sup>86</sup>, according to Gadamer one can never truly rid oneself of his preconceptions, as these are a constitutive part of one's historicity. He also points out, in agreement with Heidegger, that the hermeneutic circle is in fact a fundamental part of hermeneutics. Only through the awareness of our preconceptions can we understand the "*interpretandum*". It is important to understand where our preconceptions derive from, and ultimately be ready to question them, as it is mainly through clashes with differences that we are obliged to reconsider our certainties.

Methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves.<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, coming to terms with our preconceptions allows us to overcome the limits of understanding. Preconceptions and traditions are fundamental to the building of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (*History of Effect*) the accumulation of traditions that bridge the distance between our present and historical events. It is thanks to a series of interpretations, which have been passed on through history, that we can understand a distant object in time. Through time, preconceptions and traditions have bridged the gap that would otherwise divide the interpretant from the interpreted. The concept of History of Effect is also associated with that of "Effective Historical Consciousness" (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*)<sup>88</sup> that is to say the awareness of being subject to our own historicity. It is this awareness that impedes us to evaluate history objectively and neutrally. However, the aim of hermeneutics is not to suffocate one's subjective point of view in order to obtain an objective view; what hermeneutics aims to achieve is the renowned "Fusion of Horizons" where our tradition, rather than being eliminated, is fused and included within a different one. The interpreter's horizon<sup>89</sup> (a perspective

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86 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 337.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

88 R. J. Dostal, *Introduction*, in R. J. Dostal (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002; p. 3.

89 Here Gadamer implements Edmund Husserl's phenomenological concept of the "horizon" to explain how comprehending is fundamentally dialogical.

determined by his own historical tradition) fuses with the horizon of his object of interpretation. This fusion is possible thanks to a bridge of traditions and not to an artificial methodology. The concepts of Fusion of Horizons and of “Effective Historical Consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) are fundamental in Gadamer’s hermeneutics as they both exclude the possibility of an absolute and objective truth. Man cannot transcend his limits as our hermeneutical knowledge is and remains partial as well as open and infinite.<sup>90</sup>

The third section of *Truth and Method* is dedicated to language seen as the heart of hermeneutic experience.<sup>91</sup> Through his philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer contributed indirectly to the renowned XX century “linguistic turn”, rejecting the prevailing instrumental view of language.<sup>92</sup> Gadamer did not believe that language

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90 It is worth mentioning that Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics was broadly appreciated perhaps thanks to its flexible character. However, at the same time it became the object of several critiques. One of these was moved by the Italian philosopher Betti (in his 1955 work *Teoria dell’Interpretazione e Critica Letteraria*) subsequently supported by the American Philosopher Hirsch (in *Validity in Interpretation*). Betti argued against a lack of objectivity in Gadamer’s conception of interpretation. To this Gadamer responds in the preface of the second edition of *Truth and Method* (1965) claiming that his philosophical hermeneutics never intended to be a method or any form of reflection in methodologies of interpretation. Hermeneutics also play a protagonist role in the School of Constance. There, Jauss, while recuperating several elements of Gadamer’s *Wirkungsgeschichte*, questions his conception of “classical” and accused him of moving away from his hermeneutics in his work *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. A much harsher critique came from the critical rationalist Hans Albert, who blamed Philosophical Hermeneutics for having extended textual analysis to the complete knowledge of reality drawing philosophy close to theology. Habermas too expressed his opinion on Gadamer’s Hermeneutics in his 1970 work: *The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality* which accused Gadamer of three mistakes: the first consisted in having privileged the concept of tradition over critical reflection, favouring prejudice and discrediting the enlightenment. The second accused hermeneutics for not acknowledging the limits of language which was seen by Habermas as a means to power. Thirdly, Habermas pointed out the dichotomy between truth and method. Gadamer responded to this third criticism defending the distinction between truth and method by arguing that there can be no truth outside method. For further information on the debate between Habermas and Gadamer I suggest the following sources: T. Negru, Gadamer-Habermas Debate and Universality of Hermeneutics, Piatra Neamt Romania. A.T. Nuyen, *Critique of ideology: Hermeneutics or critical theory?* Hum Stud 17, (1994). 419-432. For further readings on the history of Hermeneutics and its critics: J. Bleicher, *L’ermeneutica contemporanea*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1986.

91 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2° Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 383.

92 D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007; p. 191.

was merely a tool of communication; for Gadamer language was a significant element of our hermeneutic experience. It is in this sense that we can speak of “ontological hermeneutics” according to which the “being that can be understood is language.”<sup>93</sup> This does not simply mean that beings can be understood through the means of language, but it contains a deeper message; it ontologically means that the essence of being lies within language. The ontological character of language implies the manifestation and self-revelation of being, occurring through a hermeneutic dialogue between interpreter and interpreted. The self-revelation of the essence of being within language also implies that such an essence is not immutable, immobile or finite; it is rather a form of truth which is in continuous mutation and interminable transformation.

#### *b) Plato in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*

By now a plurality of common traits between Gadamer and Plato will have been intuited by the reader. This section will aim at highlighting common elements between Plato and Gadamer, starting from the exploration of the fundamental role played by Platonic dialogue in Gadamer's hermeneutics. I will hereby focus on the importance played by the other, on the ontological dimension of dialectics, on the infinity of philosophical inquiry and openness of truth, on the role of question and answer, and finally on the pragmatic character of dialogue.

The other plays a fundamental role in both Gadamer and Plato; without the confrontation of another's perspective there would be no dialogue and the path toward truth would not be disclosed. Moreover, without the other, the ontological process of self-revelation, (characterising both Platonic and Gadamerian practical philosophies) could not occur. Just as Platonic dialectic was not a mere *technè*, (as it led to the understanding of what lies behind our choices in the world) Gadamer's hermeneutics maintained the same ontological trait; through the extension of one's horizon, one has to come to terms with oneself, reflecting on one's choices and preconceptions, hence gaining awareness of who one is. A horizon should not be intended as an insurmountable obstacle which traps man in his own

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93 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p. 383.

perspectives; on the contrary, it should be understood as the starting point of a path towards understanding. The encounter with the other (intended either as a literary text, artwork, or any other element that requires interpretation) involves the questioning of our initial “points of view”. Let us metaphorically think of a person contemplating his horizon, seen as the limit of his visible capability of what surrounds him. In order to better understand what appears unclear, he must move away from his initial viewpoint and shift towards the object of his observation, thus resetting a new horizon by changing the initial point of view.<sup>94</sup> His new position sets a new perspective which in turn is never definitive but will continue renewing itself every time he wants to comprehend a different aspect of reality. Just like in Socratic dialogues, Gadamer’s Horizons are never actual limitations, they are not seen as immovable obstacles but are rather viewed as mutable perspectives.

Let us now consider the similarities between Plato’s conception of truth (seen in its continuous becoming, and hence able to adjust to the mutability of the world and the self) and Gadamer’s hermeneutical infinite path towards knowledge. The hermeneutical dialogue between perspectives finds its foundation in the Platonic dialectic exchange between One and Many (the One or Unity representing the limit of our view, and the Many, symbolising the negation of our limited view and hence the possibility for a plurality of alternative perspectives). The Fusion of Horizons occurs when the limit or Unity of our horizon discloses in order to encounter something other than itself. Just as in the Socratic reading of Plato, where the role of philosophy is not focused on the answer, but rather on the awareness of not knowing and on the path towards truth, the ontological value of Gadamer’s hermeneutics resides within the awareness of our limit and thus on the experience of research.

In response to the accusations of relativism<sup>95</sup>, the presence of a non-absolute answer does not imply that all answers are possible. As Reale points out, for Gadamer, questioning represents the starting point of hermeneutic experience because in its structure, each question indicates the direction through which the answer can be found. A question sets the object of discussion within a precise perspective, anticipating the meaning the answer should entail. Similarly, the role of the Socratic question in Platonic dialogues embodies a guiding role. Plato

94 D. Vessey, *Gadamer and the Fusion of Horizons*. «International Journal of Philosophical Studies» 17, no. 4; 2009; p. 534.

95 B. Wachterhauser, *Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth* in R.J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; pp. 167-170.

himself explains through his dialogues how asking a question is more challenging than answering it, specifically because he who asks the questions should also be able to anticipate the answer.<sup>96</sup> According to Gadamer, however, a question should not merely have a direction, it should also have a certain extent of openness. If on the one hand it should guide towards the answer, on the other it does not restrict it; the answer remains thus free to move within the horizon the question sets.

As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further-i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Platonic dialogues are not led by Socrates unilaterally; they take into account the insights and considerations of those who participate in the dialogue. In the *Philebus* Socrates is not merely a master who guides his pupils towards the correct answer, but he who works together with his partners towards truth. Platonic dialogues constitute a model of hermeneutic technique, which is put into practice and precisely unfolds in the same way.<sup>98</sup>

Influenced by the philologist Friedländer<sup>99</sup>, Gadamer reflects on the Platonic stylistic choice of the dialogue. As opposed to the Aristotelian treatise which was seen as the result of a unilateral research, the Socratic dialogue carries a pragmatic dimension. As Renaud points out, each dialogue is generally set in a specific time and place and includes real characters with their thoughts and beliefs, and brings out the spontaneous human trait of argument.<sup>100</sup> Dialogues include deviations and contradictions typical of real conversations. Such a pragmatic aspect of the Socratic dialogue is consistent with the ethical and practical dimensions of Gadamer's

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96 G. Reale, *La Presenza di Platone in «Verità e Metodo»*, in H.G. Gadamer, *Verità e Metodo 2* Studi Bompiani, II Edizione, Milano 2001; pp. XII.

97 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London; p. 360.

98 *Ibidem*.

99 C. Natali, *Gadamer e Davidson sul Filebo di Platone*, «Méthexis», Vol.20, 2007; pp. 118-119.

100 F. Renaud, *Il Platone Socratico di Gadamer*, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia» n° 4 2008; p.599.



hermeneutics; for Gadamer dialogue constitutes the *logos* of *sensus communis*<sup>101</sup>. Dialoguing is the living mediation between what has been deposited as tradition with historical reality and what constitutes the innovative spur of transformation. It is in this sense that Gadamer's hermeneutics holds an important ethical meaning. After all, *Truth and Method* never had the aim of providing a methodological technique of interpretation, but rather involved the entire question of being not merely in itself but in its relation with reality, others, and history.<sup>102</sup> Such a relation is mediated through dialogue, by the relationships established amongst people who are the outcome of their specific environment and social contexts. Gadamer's hermeneutics does not only involve a mere reflection on how the understanding of an object should occur; it always involves the active role of the object of exploration, which is never detached from the observer but is in constant dialogue with it. Understanding does not happen by abstracting oneself from reality; it occurs thanks to the awareness of one's historical condition which is constituted by the concrete aspects of reality. As Martini stresses, Gadamer's "theory" must not be intended as a methodology which is then applied to a concrete situation. Gadamer's philological formation allowed him to recover the Ancient Greek idea of *theoría*, which meant the practical participation in a sacred ritual. The *théoros*, was the *polis* delegate who participated in the celebration of a ritual.

Here we can recall the concept of sacral communion that lies behind the original Greek concept of *theoria*. *Theoros* means someone who takes part in a delegation to a festival. Such a person has no other distinction or function than to be there. Thus, the *theoros* is a spectator in the proper sense of the word, since he participates in the solemn act through his presence at it and thus sacred law accords him a distinction: for example, inviolability [...] *Theoría* is a true participation, not something active but something passive (*pathos*), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.<sup>103</sup>

101 A. Volpi, *Gadamer e Vico: il sensus communis nell'ermeneutica filosofica*, «Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy» 10; 2018; p.124.

102 M. L. Martini, *L'Ermeneutica come Prassi*, in *Verità e Metodo di Gadamer e il dibattito ermeneutico contemporaneo*, Torino Paravia 1992; p. 48.

103 H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Continuum Publishing Group, London 2004; p.122.

Therefore, by recovering its etymological meaning, we can more clearly understand that, for the Ancient Greeks, the word *theoría* did not involve a distance from the sensorial world, but rather underlined a sense of belonging between man and his community.<sup>104</sup> It is this new meaning of “theory” and of “theoretical” that plays a fundamental role in Gadamer’s exegesis of Plato. The essence of thought is embodied within the concept of *theoría*, mainly because it should never be thought of as something abstracted from the practical world, but as something in constant relation with it. It is on the basis of the recovery of the Ancient Greek meaning of *theoría* that Gadamer re-read and re-interpreted Plato’s Idea of the Good and more broadly, his entire thinking in a “practical” sense.

As we have seen, Gadamer’s hermeneutics was built upon the same structure as that of Platonic dialectics, maintaining the practical and realistic elements of the Socratic dialogue. This does not contradict the fact that, from an ethical point of view, Gadamer’s hermeneutics and re-reading of Plato did not stand in opposition to his admiration of Aristotle’s practical philosophy. We can also understand why, from certain perspectives, Gadamer may be considered an Aristotelian. As already mentioned, Gadamer did dedicate a chapter of *Truth and Method* to the relevance of practical philosophy in hermeneutics. Here, in relation to the importance of moral (practical) knowledge he pointed out how “knowledge that cannot be applied to the concrete situation remains meaningless and even risks obscuring what the situation calls for.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, Gadamer highlights how, for Aristotle, ethics could not expect to “achieve the extreme exactitude of mathematics”<sup>106</sup>. Remaining “Socratic” from an ethical point of view, Aristotle, according to Gadamer, did not believe in the achievement of a pure form of knowledge, but rather he considered knowledge to be “an essential component of moral being”<sup>107</sup>. As Gadamer himself stressed, his return to the example of the Aristotelian ethics was to help avoid the alienation between interpreter and the interpreted which concerned the objectifying methods of modern science<sup>108</sup>.

Whilst one cannot deny the Aristotelian influence on Gadamer’s practical hermeneutics, the former is not in a contradictory position compared to either

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104 *Ibidem*.

105 *Ivi*, p. 311.

106 *Ibidem*.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 312.

108 *Ibidem*.

Socratic Ethics, or the Gadamerian reading of Plato's Idea of the Good. As already explained, the conception of *phronesis* was included in Plato's Idea of the Good, the Gadamerian interpretation of which brought Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to the same pragmatic level.

Nevertheless, as stressed by Di Cesare, apart from the important role played by the Aristotelian *phronesis* in Gadamer's hermeneutics, Aristotle's scientific approach could never be consistent with the type of undefined truth characterising Gadamer's hermeneutics. The undetermined aspect of Platonic dialectic was considered insufficient by Aristotle, as too imprecise to be considered scientific.<sup>109</sup> The Aristotelian shift from the Platonic dialogical form of philosophy to that of a written treatise demonstrates his belief in the importance of overcoming Platonic dialectic in the name of more scientifically based concepts, which only included the universal necessary features of objects. By contrast, according to Gadamer, the adoption of a selected number of technical terms, while leading to clarity, fails to include the multiple facets of everyday language<sup>110</sup>. For example, whilst concepts such as *episteme*, *sophia*, *phronesis*, *nous*, etc. might on the one hand be clearly outlined, on the other, what will fade is the connection they hold with their context. As opposed to the dialectic relation of exchange between One and Many, his apodictic approach unified the multiple aspects of the world under fixed concepts.<sup>111</sup> This led him to read Plato's Ideas as metaphysical entities which, as pointed out by Aristotle himself, failed to capture the transformations of natural beings. It was with the suppression of Socratic dialogue that Aristotle gave birth to "Platonism". Finally, the apodictic approach also excluded another fundamental aspect of Platonic dialectics: the importance of the approval of the other<sup>112</sup>; the objectivity of definitions left no space for perspectives. If definitions could only include the common traits of reality, perspectives were useless to such a process. Whilst Platonism searched for the particular interpretations of the world, scientific rules only included universal elements, thus removing the role of the other.

109 Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, translated by Robin Smith, Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, 1989; (a 31b 19).

110 D. Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007; p. 189.

111 *Ibidem*.

112 *Ibidem*.

## Conclusions

This article has explored Gadamer's exegesis of the Platonic theory of Ideas in its opposition to the Aristotelian reading of Plato, which had interpreted the "*turn to the logoi*" as a turn to pure forms of reasoning, and the concept of *arithmos* as the Pythagorean One. The Pythagorean understanding of the Platonic *arithmos* implied a mimetic relation between the phenomenal and intelligible worlds, giving rise to dualism. It interpreted Ideas as fixed and immutable entities of truth which were incapable of capturing the transformation of things in the world. By contrast, Gadamer's reading of Plato shows that, in fact, the existence of Ideas did not necessarily imply a separation and thus a relation of mimesis between things and Ideas, as these were rather in constant relation with each other thanks to the bridging power of language. The dialectic exchange between the Multiplicity of things and Unity of Ideas happened thanks to the maieutic process of dialogue. The Idea of the Good, while being different from the other Ideas, represented the culminating example of the relation of the existing participation between Ideas and things in the world.

Gadamer's exegesis of Plato helps us understand how, in spite of the influence hermeneutics received from Aristotelian practical philosophy, where the scientific approach was not applied, the essence of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics lies within the dialogic structure of Platonic dialectics, which was able to maintain a concrete relation with the practical reality of the Athenian times. Whilst the Aristotelian general scientific approach limited the role of the other thus favouring the written treatise to the oral dialogic exchange of perspectives, the Platonic dialectic exchange, based on the dialogic form, proceeded towards truth thanks to the active contribution of the other. The heart of Gadamer's hermeneutics lies thus within the path towards understanding, just like the maieutic role of Socrates' teachings. The essence of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics resides within the continuous experience of questioning and pursuing rather than in the identification of a fixed answer, as the latter, for Gadamer, is never definite but always open to new horizons.

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