

Διάλεξη του Καθηγητή φιλοσοφίας κ. Richard Palmer, προσκεκλημένου του Εργαστηρίου

"Βιοφυσικό Περιβάλλον: Νευροεπιστήμες & Μάθηση"

Αμφιθέατρο «Ιωάννης Δρακόπουλος» (κεντρικό κτήριο, Πανεπιστημίου 30)

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## **Hans-Georg Gadamer's Debt to Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek Treasurehouse of Western Civilization**

It is an honor to be invited to speak here by Professor Maria Tzani, of the University of Athens. My topic is the debt of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy to Plato, Aristotle and the whole Greek Treasurehouse of Western Civilization. Just to write about Gadamer's debt to Plato would be a topic so vast I could not possibly do justice to it. So I am reshaping/reducing my paper to a series of seven key philosophical questions for which Gadamer found his answer in going back to the Greeks.

### **I**

Let me say a few introductory words about Professor Gadamer's life. During his lifetime he became world-famous as a philosopher, and in his work he nearly always brought a fresh intuition and appreciation of Greek culture and philosophy. He received about a dozen honorary degrees, including doctorates from Thessaloniki and Athens. He was born in 1900 and died in 2002 at the age of 102. His life spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in a recent book (2004) he discussed *A Century of Philosophy* in conversation with Riccardo Dottori. He was recognized as a major follower and interpreter of Heidegger during the century. But also of Plato. His first three writings of any length were on Plato:

1) his doctoral dissertation of 1922, "Das Wesen der Lust nach dem platonischen Dialogen," 2) his habilitation at Marburg and first published book, *Platos dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos* (1931), and 3) *Plato und die Dichter* (1934). Plato remained one of his areas of expertise throughout his life, although he is best known internationally for "philosophical hermeneutics." In fact, his last lecture-course in Heidelberg 1985 was: "Philosophical Hermeneutics: Its Problem and its Problems."

1900 was not a fortunate time to be born, although other times could have been worse for him in this dangerous century. He lived through two World Wars without being killed. The Hitler Era (1933-1945) was a disaster for his career as a young philosopher looking for a job. During that era, his distinguished teacher in Marburg from 1923-1928, Martin Heidegger, was back in Freiburg and 1928 was chosen for Husserl's chair. Heidegger joined the Party and publically supported goals of National Socialism in his famous inaugural address ["Rectoratsrede"] at the University of Freiburg in 1933, full of hope for the Germany of the future. But after a few months he resigned his post as *Rektor*—in part he was disappointed at his lack of power and influence on the Party—to return to the obscurity of the classroom. Also, there had been some disagreeable duties, such as signing a decree forbidding his famous teacher, Husserl, access to the library because he was a Jew. The ingratitude

and unfairness of that must have bothered him. In any case, after the war he was forbidden to teach until 1951, and he bitterly lamented this punishment to me in 1965, in Heidelberg, at a dinner/ He felt that this was an undeserved punishment for a mere teacher of philosophy whose classes had had nothing to do with National Socialism.

Before the Hitler era began in 1933, Gadamer initially assumed that "that idiot had no chance of ever being elected!"—but he was wrong. When Hitler was in fact elected, Gadamer quietly did only the minimum that was necessary to get a job [a two-week NS orientation camp for educators] to support his family (wife and daughter) and he finally got a job on the recommendation of the leader of the camp, but he did his best to stay out of politics. His specialization in Ancient Philosophy at Leipzig University enabled him to maintain a low cover. After the war was over, he was elected by the Leipzig faculty as their Rektor precisely because he clearly had had no political association with the Nazis. Although some supporters of Hitler liked to trace the idea of a Third Reich back to Plato's *Republic*, Gadamer's article of 1942, "Platos Staat der Erziehung" which he contributed to a book titled *Das neue Bild der Antike*, emphasized the basically "protreptic" function of that famous utopian work: to awaken and to educate.

In the rebuilding era after the war, which was more challenging because Leipzig was in the East Zone, controlled by the Communists, Gadamer focused on practical tasks, like publishing a textbook for students in his classes when books were in short supply, and publishing tributes to his friends and teachers. Always ingratiating and diplomatic, he got along with his Communist bosses. When invited to a chair in Frankfurt in 1947, his diplomatic appeal to these bosses for permission to return to his homeland was successful. In 1948 he was invited to replace Karl Jaspers at Heidelberg, which he accepted. During the 1950s, as chair of the philosophy department at the University of Heidelberg, his lectures often served as supporting parts of his masterwork, *Truth and Method*, published in 1960. This 500-page writing provoked a wide discussion between opponents and supporters, and Gadamer was suddenly a controversial person. This fame was somewhat belated, however, since he was already 60 and scheduled to retire in 1968. But in contrast to most American universities, he was able to keep his faculty office in the department and along with this he also retained his secretary, who was able to type his many tape-recorded and handwritten lectures [he did not type], and he even continued to teach courses at the university when he was not out of town. He was invited to lecture and teach in America from 1968 through the seventies and eighties, and he became a world traveler, lecturing abroad on philosophical hermeneutics.

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## II

My first contact with Gadamer came in 1965 on a study grant about hermeneutics, and again in 1971-72 in Heidelberg on another grant. When different colloquia were held in America to celebrate Gadamer's presence there, I was often asked to respond to his paper. Then, with his recommendation, I was able to get two Fulbright grants to study with him in Heidelberg in 1991-92 and 1995-1996. I thought his recommendation was mostly because of my recent co-translation of the essays involved in his encounter with Derrida [*Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989)], but when I got there in 1991 he told me it was actually because he was grateful for my 1969 book! He explained that when he came to America in the 1970s, my book on philosophical hermeneutics served to introduce his philosophy to American students. It was one of the few texts on his philosophy in English available at that time. Since my retirement (at 65) from full-time teaching in 1999, I have devoted myself to translating his writings from German to English, most recently, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and forthcoming a collection of 19 writings, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming January? 2007).

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I would like to address the question of why I do not speak Greek. First, I did not start out as a philosophy professor but as professor of comparative literature whose whole life was changed by an encounter with Professor Gadamer in December of 1964. Since that time, my career has been built around interpreting and translating Gadamer's philosophy, although in order to make a living as a college professor, I have taught English composition, English Romantic Literature, World Literature [beginning with Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in translation], and other courses listed on my webpage: [www.mac.edu/faculty/richardpalmer](http://www.mac.edu/faculty/richardpalmer) ; and from 1980 to my retirement in 1999, except for research leaves, I have taught philosophy courses full time in the philosophy and religion department at MacMurray College, a small private college of about 650 students. One other excuse. My background was not promising: my father taught business courses and office machines in Mesa and Phoenix, Arizona, although my grandfather taught Latin and Greek in grade schools in Arizona in addition to being sent there as a water agent to the Indians in 1893 to a reservation near Phoenix, Arizona. My first foreign language in Arizona, was Spanish. Then came German and later French. And in graduate school, I even audited a semester of New Testament Greek, beginning with the gospel of John. Study of the Greek classics in Greek was left to Harvard and Yale.

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## III

Turning now to my general topic, Gadamer's debt to Greece, I must repeat what I said in my opening paragraph: that the number of texts that Gadamer wrote which show a debt just to Plato is so large, I could not do justice to them. Here are six of his books whose titles mention Plato: *Platos Dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos* (1931, reprinted 1968), *Dialektik und Sophistik im siebenten Platonischen Brief* (1964), *Idee und Wirklichkeit in Platos >Timaios<* (1974), *Die Aktualität des Schönen* (1977), *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* (1978), and *Plato als Porträtist* (1988). In fact, three volumes in his ten-volume *Gesammelte Werke* (1985-1995) are dedicated to Greek philosophy: volumes V and VI: both titled *Griechische Philosophie* (1985; 386pp., 336pp.) and VII: *Plato im Dialog*, (1991, 472pp.). Like other volumes of his collected works in ten volumes, these three contain around two dozen essays each rather than each being a single unified treatise. In fact, most of the volumes contain previously published books as well as many articles. But these are just the beginning, for Greek philosophy is the place Gadamer turns to sharpen his philosophical reflection. So searching titles is misleading. I have decided on another approach: I have sorted out seven key questions he posed in his thinking and will show that in answering them, he turned to Greek philosophy.

So I would like to organize my remarks around the following general thesis: "*When Gadamer had a philosophical problem, he usually searched ancient Greek philosophy for its solution.*" My talk will list a series of problems in his life and how in each case he ultimately turned to the Greek treasure house of Western civilization for their answers. I will proceed chronologically.

But first I would like to recall a personal Gadamer story: In 1972 I was driving Gadamer to his home in Ziegelhausen, a comfortable suburb of Heidelberg, about five to eight miles from the Philosophy Seminar. His home address is 56 Am Buchsenackerhang, a street circling near the top of the mountain top he lived on. As we were crossing over the old Heidelberg bridge over the Neckar River, I asked about structuralism in contrast to hermeneutics, and he replied that structuralism was based on a very simple mathematical principle but he himself always found special pleasure in the complex richness of the Greek language and the ancient writings in it. This linguistic richness was the foundation and stimulus for much of his thinking.

*Now to the list of seven problems that Gadamer faced:*



## IV

1. 1919, Problem: *What vocation shall I pursue in Marburg University?:*

*Choice:* Study philosophy under Professor Natorp, an expert in Plato. *Result:*

Ph.D. in 1922 on Plato's concept of pleasure in the dialogues of Plato.

2. 1922, Problem: *How is one to avoid in philosophy the contemporary currents of Neo-Kantianism and Empiricism?* Answer: Follow Heidegger. A text of Heidegger that Natorp had received in 1921 was about the

"hermeneutical situation" for Aristotle. It seemed promising. Gadamer moved to Freiburg to study with Heidegger. But Heidegger moved to Marburg from 1923 to 1928, and Gadamer became his graduate assistant for five years during which *Being and Time* was written. But Heidegger was not getting his ideas only from Husserl but from Aristotle in order to overcome Husserl. Like Gadamer afterwards, he mined the treasure house of Greek philosophy.

3. 1925, Problem: *How could he avoid becoming a mindless clone of Heidegger's originality?* Gadamer's answer: By studying Classical Philology with the famous Plato scholar Paul Friedländer, under whom he gained certification in Classical Philology in 1927. For both of them it was, to cite a chapter title, "Zuflucht zu den Griechen"/ "Flight to the Greeks," in Grondin's *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Eine Biographie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

But the question is in this his return to the Greeks how to avoid becoming a mindless Heidegger imitator. The answer he chose was to become more Greek. He studied to acquire skills in Classical Philology from Friedländer and others professors at Marburg. This became his defense against having to accept without recourse the daring and imaginative interpretations of the Greeks offered by Heidegger. But he became ever more dedicated to the general Heideggerian project.

4. 1928, Problem: *How to keep together his teacher Heidegger and Plato?* Answer: Accept Heidegger's offer after he passed the philology exam to supervise his habilitation (university teaching doctorate) on what he called "Phenomenological Interpretations of the *Philebus*," later *Platos Dialektische Ethik* (1931)/*Plato's Dialectical Ethics* (1991), translated and introduced by Robert M. Wallace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

4. 1935-1960, Problem: *How to restore respect for art and the humanities in the context of a tendency of both to be studied scientifically?* Answer: Accept the Heideggerian concept of *aletheia* in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (lectures 1935/36) first published in *Holzwege* (1950), as the basis of a philosophical hermeneutics, published as *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960.

5. 1975, Problem: *How to defend artworks as still relevant today?* Answer: Return today not only to the concept of the beautiful found in Plato, in

which through the word *kalon* there is a close connection between the good, the true, and the beautiful (Cf. Diotima and the ladder of vision in the *Symposium*) notes in *WM*, but he also goes back to Greek anthropological roots in early rites: "Die Aktualität des Schönen als Spiel, Symbol, and Fest" (1975), translated in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. and introduced by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). In the latter case, Gadamer returns to the concepts of play, symbol, and festival in the context of Greek practices. In doing this, he was seeking to establish his thinking about art on something more fundamental and universal than Heidegger's ontology of the artwork in his "Urpung des Kunstwerkes."

6. 1993, Problem: *What does the special experience of artworks in both word and in image—sculpture, paintings, architecture—have in common?*

Here, in his last major essay on the experience of the artwork, he turns the concept of the beautiful—*το καλον*—in Plato. He notes that in ancient Greek usage, the word for constructing a work, *τεχνη*, used the same word whether for non-art works or for artworks. He also did not here turn to the concept of art as imitation of things, of copying, found in Book X of *The Republic*, but to the concept in Plato that identifies the work of art with the good and the true that we find in the ladder of vision in the speech of Diotima at the end of the *Symposium*. Here, ascending the ladder of vision is moving from fair bodies to

fair actions to fair ideas to the idea of the good, the idea of the true, and ultimately the unity of the good, the true, and the beautiful in the vision at the top of the ladder. The idea of the beautiful unites our experience of the artwork, whether in words or in images. It is the idea of the beautiful that points to the inner unity of the good and the beautiful in the emergence of the true, *αλήθεια*. Instead of seeing the experience of the artwork in terms of disinterested contemplative pleasure, as Kant did, Gadamer found in the Plato the concept of an emerging truth that is also beautiful and good. *το καλον* in Greek means the fine, as in a fine body, a fine practice, a fine law, a fine statue, a fine line of poetry. In his last great essay on art, "Wort und Bild" (1992) Gadamer brings together Heideggerian insights into Greek thinking with his own for a culminating statement on the experience of art. And he uses the concept of experience he had in *Truth and Method* drawn from participating in the experience of the action of Greek tragedy: experience as transformative, changing your life and your view of the world. Gadamer uses a word drawn from Aristotle, *ενεργεια*, livingness, to describe this experience, an experience which remains as vivid and true as when it was brought into being by the artist. In hermeneutical terms, it speaks; and when one hears the speaking, one utters the affirmation of truth: "So ist es!" The inner recognition of the true.

7. 1922-2002: *How can modern philosophical thinking escape the limits of science and calculative thinking?* [How can it go beyond the subject-object schema implicit in modern thinking? How can philosophy move "beyond metaphysics"]

This final question does not concern art, or even hermeneutics. It is not time-lined here to a certain writing but spans Gadamer's philosophical life. It is not limited to his debt to Plato. It starts in 1922 when his teacher, the great Plato scholar, Paul Natorp, shows him an essay on Aristotle sent to him by Heidegger and Gadamer, on reading it, makes a decision to move to Freiburg to study with Heidegger, to join him in a "Rückgang zum Griechen," a return that shed a new light on the interpretation of Aristotle and a whole new direction for 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking. This document was long lost and unpublished until Gadamer discovered it among his papers as he gathered his own writings to publish them in his *Gesammelte Werke* and found Heidegger's essay. He hastened to publish Heidegger's early essay at long last in 1989 in the *Dilthey Jahrbuch*. This is a writing that would repay further concentrated and more specialized reading, both in terms of Heidegger studies of Aristotle but also in terms of Gadamer's relationship to Heidegger.

In all my many meetings with Gadamer from 1964 to 2000, Heidegger and his effort to transform the basis of Western philosophy remained the

modern mainstay of his thinking. He endeavored to understand and follow this transformation in thinking all his life, even when he at first resisted Heidegger's more radical interpretations of Greek texts, and later when he felt that during and after the war Heidegger lost his way in country paths (*Holzwege*, 1950). But still the lead essay in *Holzwege* on the "Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," (1935-1936) with its conception of truth as *αλεθεια*, became the conceptual basis for Gadamer's controversial defense of and refashioning of the philosophical basis for human studies and the science and history of art: *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (1960). Gadamer never denied his links to Heidegger and cordially invited him to speak in Heidelberg shortly after Gadamer had moved there from Frankfurt to be chair of the department in 1949; and they remained close friends right up to Heidegger's death in May, 1976, at the age of 86.

It would make an interesting scholarly dissertation to compare Heidegger's tendentious interpretations of Aristotle with those more moderate readings by Gadamer, but there can be little doubt that Heidegger's masterwork, *Being and Time*, grows out of his interpretation of Aristotle, especially the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with relationship is another possible dissertation. And Gadamer was at his elbow in Marburg during the period 1923-1928. For documentation of my point, I cite Theodore Kisiel's

monumental study, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]), especially two chapters: first, "What did Heidegger find in Aristotle," where he asserts that Heidegger "never recovered from his Summer Semester 1921 encounter with Aristotle," (p. 227) and in the chapter following it, "Aristotle Again: From Unconcealment to Presence (1923-1924)," which Heidegger's deconstruction of Western "substance metaphysics" starts to take place, and Kisiel's two chapters comprise 88 pages in a 600-page book. In simplest terms, the Latinists of the Middle Ages redefined *ousia* into static presence, and Heidegger wanted to redefine it in vital terms of life, happening, time, for the purposes of a new ontology. The consequences of this new Heideggerian ontology and new definition of truth as unconcealment continue to be present in Gadamer's later philosophical hermeneutics. In addition, Gadamer accepts and follows Heidegger's critical attitude towards the dominance of Western calculative (scientific) thinking (1938) throughout his life. These apocalyptic warnings re-echo ominously today in an era of trying to control globalization, global warming and the proliferation of atomic weapons.

It is enough to say about Heidegger's revolution in ontology—at first "Fundamentalontology"—that its move was toward a definition of being in terms of life and movement and time and these are based on a re-reading of Aristotle. For this, he goes not only back to the *Metaphysics*, but to the *Physics*

and to the *Ethics*. Gadamer, very able to follow his master in Greek philosophy, shapes his thinking on the basis of this Heideggerian reinterpretation of Aristotle, even while continuing to find great inspiration for his philosophical hermeneutics from Plato in terms of dialogue, which is very important in his hermeneutics, and in his aesthetics in Plato's unity of the beautiful with the good and the true. I regret that I do not have time to go more deeply here into the topic of Gadamer's debt to Greek philosophy.

The certification in philology in 1927, the competitiveness with Heidegger, study with Paul Friedländer and Martin Heidegger to balance each other..... the hermeneutical situation, the aim of Gadamer's thinking, the function of Plato and Aristotle in his dialogue with Heidegger

The chapter in Grondin, on "Flight to the Greeks"

Practical knowledge

Dialogue

Truth



Beautiful, good, and true

*Energeia*

*Nichomachean Ethics*

Hermeneutics

Two streams of the Greek heritage: science and philosophy

Substance metaphysics, and going beyond metaphysics, scholasticism,  
etc.

Learning to listen deeply to the Greeks, their way of thinking, to fertilize  
modern thinking in philosophy, like Heidegger

The third thing in the *Philebus*.