This paper elaborates the concepts of unity and multiplicity as ontological preconditions for the interpretation of meaning in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, and sources Gadamer’s understanding of these concepts in Platonic dialectic. Contemporary scholarship on theories of interpretation tends to develop from within an epistemological orientation, favoring either a monistic or pluralistic definition of meaning. The dogmatic adherence to a principle of unity or multiplicity entails the following dilemma: if meaning is essentially monistic—that is, identical to the author’s intention—one must sacrifice interpretive pluralism; yet if meaning is pluralistic—that is, not identical with authorial intention—the text can support many different interpretations but only at the expense of a non-relative ground on which public agreement about its essential structure can be established. Thus monism remains disinterested in the situational character of understanding and its value-laden contingencies, and pluralism takes no notice of the essential properties which an array of interpretations has in common. As Mark Taylor points out, neither side of this dilemma appropriately attends to “the dialectical relationship between unity and plurality in which identity and difference come to be through each other” (Taylor 1978, 45). Neither a monistic nor a pluralistic theory of meaning by itself properly establishes the necessary conditions for a productive theory of the interpretation and articulation of meaning. This paper traces a middle path through this dilemma and advances the claim that the ontological content of hermeneutic consciousness maintains both a monistic and pluralistic existence.

1. The ontological orientation toward the articulation of meaning

Gadamer often uses the metaphor of play to describe the relationship between reader and text. The game encompasses the subjective attitudes of both players, and to play the game they must willfully subordinate themselves to its broader structure. In his essay “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” Gadamer describes this activity as follows:

Just as the relation between the speaker and what is spoken points to a dynamic process that does not have a firm basis in either member of the relation, so the relation between the understanding and what is understood has a priority over its relational terms. (1976, 50)

And:

The game is not so much the subjective attitude of the [interlocutors] confronting each other as it is the formation of the movement as such, which, as in an unconscious teleology, subordinates the attitude of the individuals to itself. (ibid., 54)

Thus “neither partner alone constitutes the real determining factor; rather, it is the unified form of movement as a whole that unifies the fluid activity of both” (ibid.). The substantive content of
the game is a whole to which the players are related as parts, and within which they are, as parts, related to each other.

Following Paul Armstrong, this paper favours a heteronomous definition of meaning. “A heteronomous conception of the text,” Armstrong writes, “acknowledges the paradox that interpretation is neither a total imposition of meaning nor a purely passive reception of it. Understanding both fixes a text's meaning and lets it emerge” (Armstrong 1986, 321). He recognizes that the monistic attempt to locate the intrinsic properties of a text which can verify an interpretation is itself an interpretive endeavor. Armstrong argues that this structure is only determined when one’s presupposition about what counts as an intrinsic property is confirmed through one’s interpretation of the text. It is therefore entirely possible that a radically different presupposition will entail a contradictory, yet no less valid, interpretation (ibid., 325). Insofar as these differing interpretations reasonably elaborate the content of the same text, there must then be some properties of the work that they have in common whose truth becomes indisputable. Thus despite the variance between interpretations, each interpretation can be measured at least by its coherence with these properties (ibid., 327).

The salient feature of Armstrong’s approach is that it moves past the epistemological orientation toward the text to the ontological question of its existence. E. D. Hirsch Jr., for example, claims that there is no meaning of an entity beyond our apprehension of it. He criticizes what is, in his view, Gadamer’s commitment to an ontological determination of meaning not bound by human consciousness, which therefore lacks any objective measure. On Hirsch’s account, meaning for Gadamer becomes indeterminate at best, and nihilistic at worst.

Hirsch’s point does not escape Gadamer’s notice. Gadamer recognizes that judgment cannot be allowed to proceed in any way whatsoever, as every judgment about being would then be equally valid. This relativity would entail, in his words, “an untenable hermeneutic nihilism” (Gadamer 2006, 82). It is important here to point out the relevance of Heidegger’s definition of truth as unconcealment or disclosure to Gadamer’s work. In his essay “What is Truth?” Gadamer writes simply, “Truth is unconcealment [Wahrheit ist Unverborgenheit]” (1994, 36). Truth has the character of an event of unconcealment when it is revealed in and through language. “The meaning of speech [die Rede],” Gadamer explains, “is to put forward the unconcealed, to make manifest. One presents something and in this manner something is known, communicated to the other just as it is known to oneself” (ibid.). Like Heidegger, Gadamer is interested in determining the depth of the relationship between being and understanding. In particular, they have a shared need to determine a notion of truth which is operative in understanding prior to the declaration of truth in the natural sciences, and which therefore can manifest the nature of beings on a level which scientific rationalism merely presupposes. Yet the hermeneutic presupposition of an original unity between language and being (ibid.) does not permit an objective standpoint outside of the relation between subject and object by which one could distinguish between true and false judgments. Part of Dasein’s self-understanding is the awareness of its essential finitude, and so naturally this excludes an outside perspective of its own limitations (Gadamer 2006, 83). The scientific objectification of being that characterizes Hirsch’s approach to the text makes this kind of distinction necessary, but without being able to assume an awareness of the totality of its subject matter.
Extending from the phenomenological presupposition of original connection between being and truth, Gadamer maintains that truth as unconcealment is discovered in assertions or judgments (apophansis). The scientific development of a correspondence model of truth, however, has usurped the priority of apophantic judgment, replacing it with the proposition as that which expresses the nature of beings. Like Heidegger, Gadamer finds that the truth of apophantic judgment has been overcome by the correspondence between speech and thing, and likewise that it was primarily Aristotle’s logical investigations which established this correspondence as the primary definition of truth (Gadamer 1994, 36). Heidegger’s criticism of the Greek origins of logic thereby amounts to the claim that the scientific proposition reduces truth to an ontic relation between subject and object (Gonzalez 2009, 262).

Again following Heidegger, Gadamer prioritizes the apophantic mode of judgment due to its unique capacity to measure itself. He writes, “Judgment is determined, in distinction from all other forms of speech, by wanting only to be true; it measures itself exclusively by whether it reveals a being as it is” (Gadamer 1994, 36). By taking such a “theoretical stance” (die Lehre) toward the things themselves (die Sache), judgments reflect the content of the original unity between language and being. That is, in making this kind of judgment Dasein does not make a claim about only an external state of affairs but also its self-understanding in relation to this state of affairs. The proposition, by contrast, cannot measure itself the way judgment can because it presupposes the separation between subject and object rather than their conceptual unity. Therefore a proposition must be measured according to an external methodology: it obtains truth only after its content has been verified. “When verification—regardless of what form—primarily defines truth (veritas),” Gadamer writes, “then the standard with which knowledge is measured is no longer its truth but its certainty” (ibid, 37).

Gadamer’s concept of tradition, and with it the notion of the authoritative or classical text, shows that he is not unaware of the need for some kind of normativity in understanding. Tradition broadly establishes a measure of the validity of interpretation within human consciousness. What is traditional in this sense is nothing more than what is communicated through the act of handing something down, whether through speech or writing (Gadamer 2006, 391). Tradition, then, constitutes the presuppositions of the reader, without which both the reader and the text are left in a kind of interpretive limbo. According to Gadamer, without any preconception of the meaning of the text, the reader has no basis on which to begin his interpretation, which in turn makes the text vulnerable to misinterpretation (ibid., 271).

Some critics argue that by prioritizing the authority of tradition Gadamer maintains an uneasy conservatism in thought. It is one thing to argue that understanding always takes place within and in response to an historical situation. It is quite another to argue that understanding must always cohere with an established position. Contrary to the charge that hermeneutics entails total indeterminacy in meaning, deferring to the authority of tradition as the sole arbiter between legitimate and illegitimate interpretations arguably constrains thought within the boundaries of an established social or political institution. This confinement makes it difficult to see how hermeneutic consciousness allows for novel interpretations, especially if it does not allow one to bring into question the reasons for accepting the nature of the institution itself.
Significantly, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer assigns an ontological priority to the “probable” (*wahrscheinliche*) and “evident” (*einleuchtend*) over the “truth and certainty of what is proved and known” (2006, 479). “The idea,” he continues, “is always that what is evident has not been proven and is not absolutely certain, but it asserts itself by reason of its own merit within the realm of the possible and probable.” For this reason Gadamer is consistently critical of any attempt to systematize language as an effort to do away with this ambiguity. A conventional system of linguistic signs which admits of no ambiguity in the relation of words to objects is not language in his view. “The whole basis of language and speaking, the very thing which makes it possible,” he writes, “is ambiguity or ‘metaphor’” (Gadamer 1980, 111). The very possibility of a correspondence between thought and being presupposes that being can be spoken about at all. That is, prior to the scientific determination of the truth of any proposition is a relationship between truth and “effability” (*Sagbarkeit*) that “cannot be measured in terms of the verifiability of propositions” (Gadamer 1994, 40). However, the possibility of speaking about things in no way guarantees that one speaks correctly. Locating the content of hermeneutic judgment in the ontological disclosure of the probable couches this judgment in *Dasein*’s perceptive activity; yet because what is articulated is merely a possible mode of being, this judgment must be justified beyond the purely subjective scope of one’s own self-understanding.

Dostal’s (1994, 56-57) congenial approach to Gadamer’s theory of meaning argues that the conversational model of hermeneutics implies only that the development of thought beyond any traditional institution simply takes time. In this way, the act of interpretation can remain responsive to the merit of authority without excluding the possibility of novel interpretations of meaning. For Gadamer things are judged primarily according to their “evidentness,” and only in a secondary sense are judgments measured against something like the objectified certainty of authorial intent. Gadamer’s hermeneutics defends the ontological claim that the possibility for a dialogue about meaning presupposes not only a tacit agreement about what the subject matter is, but also the possibility that what the other person says about this subject is true. To demand a principle by which a plurality of judgments can be measured against each other on the basis of their evidentness, rather than their certainty, is therefore misleading.

This orientation toward the possibility of speaking about being thereby liberates hermeneutical inquiry from the “ontological obstructions” of scientific objectivity (Gadamer 2006, 268). Paradoxically, this liberation occurs by prioritizing the independent existence of beings over the will of the subject which creates meaning for these things. That is, the hermeneutical encounter with beings is liberating precisely because it allows the things themselves (*die Sache*) to speak for themselves, rather than confining their meaning to the scope of scientific utility or functionality. Gadamer argues that the “language of things” has been vanishing with the growing force of scientific rationality and its fixation on function and utility—that is, science’s prioritization of methodological control over what are otherwise independent beings. He writes, “Its own being in itself is disregarded by the imperious human will to manipulate, and it is like a language it is vital for us to hear” (Gadamer 1976, 72). The disclosure of truth (*alētheuein*) is essentially a reflexive activity one undertakes in “reaching back” behind an established position. It is liberating precisely because it attends to the fundamental uncertainty which constitutes thought, thereby revealing other ontological possibilities that an entity has of being known.
In this light, Robert Shusterman suggests that interpretation is guided by a kind of shared social reality. He argues that monism is essentially short-sighted by failing to take into account the practical dimension of interpretation. While understanding the need for a normative principle, Shusterman illustrates that the monistic approach nonetheless fails to appreciate the essential productivity involved in interpretation. He writes, “We must be careful not to confuse the seemingly incontrovertible assertion that all linguistic or textual meaning is intentional with the very challengeable assertion that the meaning of a text is identical with the author's intention or intended meaning” (Shusterman 1988, 399). Properly attending to the practical nature of interpretation supports a pluralistic existence of the text that can maintain the historical or social contingencies of both the author and the reader. As he puts it, “We should expect, for example, different responses of understanding to figure in the ordinary, the literary, and the psychoanalytic understandings of an utterance” (ibid., 405). This pluralism, however, does not exclude the text from enjoying a singular existence as the common ground of each orientation.

Prioritizing an ontological orientation toward the articulation of meaning allows Gadamer to mediate effectively between monism and pluralism. The text or its analogue is understood in this way as a singular thing whose nature is constituted by, but not reducible to, the manifold interpretations of its content. Jean Grondin writes that “truth is always that which seems to us to be such, if we mean by this what successfully asserts itself as being within our horizon” (Grondin 1990, 51; emphasis his). Human understanding is finite and so never without some degree of uncertainty. Still, interpretation inescapably requires a minimal condition of objectivity. It cannot proceed in any way whatsoever, but must have some coherence with the nature of what is being talked about. Grounding truth within ontological possibility rather than epistemological certainty avoids the reduction of this nature, and therefore its meaning, either to a static objectivity adherent to tradition or ameaningless relativity couched wholly in the subject. The scope of one’s horizon develops through the dialogical encounter with other possibilities of meaning whose measure is ultimately the “things themselves.” Gadamer’s ontological approach thus orients the interlocutors within the broader framework of being that establishes their relation to each other, the whole to which they are related as parts.

2. **Plato’s dialectic of the One and Many**

Gadamer approaches unity and multiplicity as ontological preconditions for the interpretation of meaning in parallel with his approach to Platonic dialectic. In Gadamer’s view, Plato’s description of the dialectical mediation between the One and the Many provides a ground for judgment by connecting judgment to the necessary, ontological structure of the entity being judged. In what follows, we will see how the hermeneutical model of understanding develops in Platonic terms from the dialectical relationship between the singular, unitary idea and the multiplicity of judgments about this idea.

Historically, Plato located the measure of truth and meaning in stable, unchanging ideas in order to combat the threat that sophistry posed to the Athenian polis. By disrupting the connection between being and language, the sophists were able to change the meaning of words indiscriminately. They could argue that the just life is in fact unjust, or that courageous actions are cowardly. By situating the measure of truth in an entity which exists beyond its appearances in the sensible world, Plato introduced a kind of necessity in how things are talked about. If it
turns out that a statement and its opposite can be reasonably predicated of an idea—for example, that courage is (at one time) both standing one’s ground and (at another time) retreating (Lach. 190e ff.)—one is made to recognize that the essence of the idea encompasses both of these things within itself.

The developmentalist thesis argues that, following the introduction of moral ideals as a solution to the ethical dilemma inherent in sophistry, Plato found that he was unable to account for the relation between these ideals and their manifestations in the sensible world. The developmentalist thesis proposes that the Parmenides illustrates Plato’s dissatisfaction with his own theory of ideas, after which he focuses on non-moral problems of dialectic (Fuyarchuk 2010, 45). For his part, Gadamer remains dissatisfied with the developmentalist thesis over the course of his own career. He finds that the concepts of unity and multiplicity remain at the center of Plato’s thought, and that because Plato does not undermine the dialectical relationship between the One and the Many, he does not forego the theory of participation which presupposes this relationship.

Specifically, Gadamer sustains his focus on what he calls the arithmos structure of language. In his view, Plato uses the arithmos model to elaborate the dialectical relationship of the One and the Many. On this approach, the Parmenides illustrates rather the inherent dogmatism in defining being as either a unity or a multiplicity. Plato’s point is rather that unity and multiplicity are inseparable properties of being. The Parmenides, then, does not demonstrate that the one is just the principle of unity of the many. Rather, this dialogue expresses the negative insight that ideas cannot be defined in isolation from other ideas: the One cannot be apart from the Many, nor the Many from the One (Gadamer 1980, 110). “The idea of unity,” Gadamer writes, “does not exclude, but posits together with itself, the idea of multiplicity” (Gadamer 1991a, 97).

Gadamer’s significant insight is that for Plato the Many is meant to be understood as a plurality of indivisible unities which constitute the nature of the One, which in turn is the principle of unity that the Many have in common. In this way, he claims that the problem of participation, which is originally formulated as the participation of a manifold, sensible reality in a unitary idea, is reformulated into another problem and solved that way. Gadamer writes in Plato’s Dialectical Ethics:

> It is shown [...] that the unity of an Idea can include a multiplicity of Ideas under it. Just this is the basis of the “solution” to the problem of the one and the many which takes place in the Philebus of a solution to the insoluble problem (which is formulated there, too) of methexis [participation]. The one is shown to be many, but not as the undefined manifold of things that are coming to be but as a definite—which means a comprehensible—multiplicity of unities. ([1931] 1991a, 97-98)

Thirty years later Gadamer adds that this solution—that the unity of an idea is constituted by a multiplicity of ideas—implies the structure of the arithmos model. Thus the dialectical relationship between the One and the Many no longer refers to the participation of sensible things in a common, intelligible idea. The dialectic of the One and Many refers instead to the
possibility that a multitude of ideas have to exist in a substantive relation to each other based on their grounding within a single, unifying eidos.

As its name implies, the arithmos model uses the concept of number as its paradigm. In ancient Greek mathematics, a number (arithmos) is specifically a countable number. That is, numbers exist in a series and each subsequent number is arrived at through the addition of the unit, the “one,” to the previous number. The smallest number, then, is actually two. One is not a number, but rather the principle of unity that numbers have. As a sum, then, each number is the unity of the ones that are counted to reach that number. Five is nothing other than the five ones which, unified, constitute the number five.

Importantly, the participation thesis actually describes two different levels of interaction between the One and the Many. On the surface, this concept of participation indicates just that a set of particular entities has one idea in common, by virtue of which that idea can be predicated of the entities within this set. One of the key aspects of the arithmos model that Gadamer emphasizes is that it attends to a level of insight beyond the division of a genus into its species. On a deeper level, then, there is also a relation between the unity of these things and the figure that contains this unity:

Now that which a certain number of sum or things may be said to have in common, that in which their unity consists, is quite distinct from that which unifies the members of a genus. For there are remarkable attributes which may be predicated of the sums of things but precisely not of the units, the things themselves of which the sum number is made up. (Gadamer 1980, 132)

A sum can be odd or even, but its units cannot. Odd and even are properties of a sum and so can be predicated “of the unity of a number of things but not, in contrast, of the units which constitute that number” (ibid.). Each unit, on its own, is just a singular thing. The Theaetetus, for example, goes over the possibility that elemental entities can be knowable but utterly inexplicable. Thus the arithmos is essentially paradoxical: a sum is constituted by nothing other than its parts; yet the essential nature of the sum is also something wholly other than its parts and cannot be identified exclusively with them.

3. Gadamer’s hermeneutical orientation of the One and Many within language

Gadamer argues that in particular the second part of the Parmenides shows that the One and the Many can be seen to necessarily co-inhere (Gadamer 1991a, 96). He writes, “What is proved dialectically in the Parmenides is not that the one is the many of the things that come into being—which would mean that the undefinable manifold of what comes to be had been comprehended and ‘pinned down’ as such” (ibid., 97). In his view, being able to discern the participation of particular entities in a stable, unchanging idea does not constitute legitimate insight or knowledge of either those particulars or that idea. Rather, “[s]omeone understands what cognition, knowing, insight, is only when he also understands how it can be that one and one are two and how ‘the two’ is one” (Gadamer 1980, 135). Comprehending the mathematical structure of the arithmos is thus part of the initiation into the deeper mysteries of true, dialectical knowledge. That is, while numbers are countable, beings are not. Understanding involves an “ongoing process of concept formation” that reaches beyond the scope of any genus-species
relation (Gadamer 2006, 404). This does not mean that we are constantly coming up with new words, but neither does it imply that the use of language is nothing more than the particular application of a universal. The “undefinable manifold” is always indeterminate to some degree, necessitating a constant, reciprocal movement from the one to the many and the many back to the one. It is therefore always questionable if any given collection and interrelatedness among a manifold truly constitutes the nature of a being.

In Gadamer’s view, the linguistic manifestation of being reflects the structure of the arithmos model and its paradigm, number. He writes, “Every logos contains the unity of an opinion which results from the multiplicity of words and concepts bound together in it … [T]he power of the logos to reveal the being of what is derives from the intrinsic interwovenness in it of Being and Not-being … [which] implies the structure of number” (Gadamer 1980, 148-150). He continues, perhaps most directly, “Plato’s concern is not with achieving a unified system of dihairestical generation but only with the fact that the principles of the One and the Two are able to generate the series of all numbers—just as they make all discourse possible” (ibid., 152). Being is “in the soul” for Plato, and so this deeper unity that belongs to being is necessarily presupposed in the dialectical mediation between the unity of a concept and the manifold aspects that can manifest and constitute the essential nature of this concept.

The arithmos model, we recall, contains the deeper, ontological insight that the eidetic identity of the aspects that constitute the essential nature of an entity (that is, an idea) are “actually inseparable from each other and belong together” (Gadamer 1980, 136). This deeper unity is just what is reflected in the concept of number as a sum greater than its parts. The logic of this unity naturally applies even more broadly to the dialogues as a whole. This becomes especially clear when Socrates and his interlocutor discover that mutually incoherent or exclusive properties can be attributed to one and the same concept. The theory of recollection in the *Meno* is developed from the insight that people both have and do not have knowledge. Socrates and Protagoras discover that virtue both is and is not teachable. Theaetetus and the Stranger uncover no fewer than seven definitions of the sophist, and while none of them on their own captures the true essence of the sophist each is still true in some sense. The logic of this model also captures the essential reason why Socrates is never satisfied when someone identifies the essence of an idea with a particular manifestation of that idea. While the sum is constituted by nothing other than its parts, it is also a whole greater than its parts. The essential nature of the sum cannot be identified with just its parts, just as the essence of courage, temperance, or knowledge cannot be identified with any particular manifestation of them. With respect to Plato’s theory of language, Gadamer asks rhetorically, “Does not the unity of discourse also have a certain determinate property not found in any of its component parts (letters, syllables, words) and is this not exactly the point?” (Gadamer 1980, 132). His point about Plato’s theory of language and being is therefore just as relevant to his own hermeneutics.

Significantly, the paradigmatic example of the dialectical relationship between the One and the Many is conceptualized linguistically. Gadamer locates this paradigm in the dilemma that Socrates and Theaetetus encounter near the end of the *Theaetetus*. He claims that “the true relationship of the One and the Many, which gives the logos its structure, is made evident in the analogy of the meaninglessness of the syllable and the dilemma with which it confronts us” (Gadamer 1980, 133). This dilemma emerges within the context of Theaetetus’s third and final
definition of knowledge, namely that knowledge is true opinion coupled with a rational account (meta logou alēthes doxa). Under this definition, being able to give an account of something is a necessary condition for having knowledge of it. According to a theory Socrates heard at one time, primary elements (stoicheia) have no logos and are therefore unknowable, whereas the complex entities (syllabai) that the elements form admit a rational explanation and are objects of knowledge (Theaet. 201e-202c). Accepting this theory for the sake of their argument, Socrates and Theaetetus create an analogy to language, namely with respect to the ability of letters to form syllables and words. The dilemma that Gadamer refers to is that the nature of the syllable must be explained either through its constituent letters, which are indivisible, or as a unique, indivisible entity whose meaning is not reducible to its parts. In either case, it becomes impossible to provide a rational explanation of any simple or complex entity, threatening one’s capacity to know anything (ibid., 205d-e).

It becomes evident fairly quickly that Plato does not want the reader to take this theory seriously. After recounting it, Socrates indicates his suspicion with the claim that the primary elements are unknowable (ibid., 202d). Then, having led the theory into the above dilemma, he claims that it is based on a false premise. As children, he says, we naturally learn complex things by first learning the elements. One learns spelling and grammar, for instance, by learning the individual letters and music by learning the individual notes (ibid., 206a-b). He suggests to Theaetetus, then, that “the class of elements provides a much clearer manifestation of knowledge than the compounds and is better suited for obtaining a mastery of each subject” (ibid., 206b). The claim that only compound entities admit knowledge and the elements are unknowable is even considered a joke (paizein) in light of what common experience dictates.14

While it is clear that Socrates is rejecting the claim that the primary elements are unknowable, it is not made explicit if he is also rejecting the claim that there cannot be a rational explanation of an element. He says to Theaetetus, “We should not accept it if someone should say that a syllable is knowable and expressible [rheton], but a letter is not” (ibid., 205e). Although he demonstrates that there is symmetry between knowledge of elements and compounds, it remains unclear if he also believes that there is symmetry between accounts of these entities or if the elements still admit a name only. The letters of the alphabet suffer from an inherent boundlessness. As Theaetetus explains, most letters are mere noises, such as the hissing sound of the letter S, and some letters, such as B, do not even have a noise (ibid., 203b). The most substantial letters in this respect are the vowels (phōnēenta), which have a “voice” (phōnē), but this is hardly sufficient for admitting a logos.15 Nowhere here does Socrates claim that the knowability of the primary elements also suggests, guarantees, or necessitates their description or their accountability in a rational explanation prior to their formation of a complex entity.

In his Posterior Analytics, Aristotle argues that in order to avoid either a circular or infinite regress with respect to the knowability of primary elements there must be some kind of non-discursive insight into the nature of these things (Post. An. I.3; cf. Fine 1979, 369). Aristotle is referring here to the originary premises governing any scientific demonstration, but his argument applies equally to the distinction in the Theaetetus between elemental and complex entities. Gonzalez points out correctly that the function of a name can be identified with its form “just as the form of a shuttle, as opposed to its matter, is defined in terms of its function” (Gonzalez 1998, 66). On this view, the function of a name is to refer to or distinguish “one
specific, stable nature” (ibid.), which in and of itself does not necessarily admit any description or explanation. This is not to say, however, that letters or musical notes are understood in isolation. In his appeal to the experience of learning the alphabet, Socrates says that one distinguishes between the individual letters “through sight and sound” so that their arrangement together in speech (legomenōn) and writing does not cause confusion (Theaet. 206a). The nature of each letter can and must be known discretely on some level, but the function of each letter is nothing other than its capacity to combine with other letters in order to form syllables and words.\(^\text{16}\)

The implicit solution to the dilemma concerning the possibility of knowing letters and syllables is an extension of the logic of the arithmos model. This identifies the more substantial meaning behind Gadamer’s assertion that the relationship between letters and syllables captures the true relationship between the One and the Many. Theaetetus and Socrates discover that syllables and words have properties that cannot be attributed to their constituent parts, namely their capacity to mean something. However, as complex linguistic objects syllables and words are constituted by nothing other than the letters of the alphabet according to the inherent capacity that letters have to combine with one another. Thus the “clearer manifestation of knowledge” that the class of elements enjoys consists in the fact that the apprehension of this capacity permits advance insight into the potential that the elements have to exist in common with each other.

Similarly, Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic truth narrows in on the claim that interpretation (Auslegung) draws upon a tacit awareness of the possible ways that entities have of being understood. As we have seen, hermeneutic truth can be characterized as extending primarily from the evident (Einsichtig) structures of being. As Kisiel relates, “Even before they become a problem of knowledge, our ‘prejudices’ are an ontological fact, the facticity of historically transmitted contents, on the basis of which we understand anything at all” (Kisiel 1985, 7). Just as the primary elements provide a “much clearer manifestation of knowledge” than the compounds they form, so too “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being” (Gadamer 2006, 278).

The space in which hermeneutics operates and in which hermeneutic consciousness develops necessarily presupposes a common affinity between reader and text, namely, the “things themselves.” In Gadamer’s view, the presupposition of this common ground belongs to an insight that develops from common experience, and not specialized knowledge. In his essay “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” he characterizes this insight as follows:

We say, for instance, that understanding and misunderstanding take place between I and thou. But the formulation “I and thou” already betrays an enormous alienation. There is nothing like an “I and thou” at all—there is neither the I nor the thou as isolated, substantial realities. I may say “thou” and I may refer to myself over against a thou, but a common understanding always precedes these situations. We all know that to say “thou” to someone presupposes a deep common accord. Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken. (1976, 7)
This common ground establishes the nature and scope of any particular dialogue such that particular judgments are ultimately tested against the substantive content of the thing itself. These judgments, however, do not constitute its essential nature. This nature is “something that asserts itself, something we have to respect” (ibid., 71). As we saw, the interlocutors must subordinate themselves to the greater universality of the thing itself, a whole to which they are related as parts (ibid., 50). The scope of its meaning thereby determines the nature of the interlocutor’s dialogical relationship to each other, unifying the back-and-forth activity of questioning and answering (ibid., 54), just as the meaning of a word determines the order of its letters.

Because they are based fundamentally on evidentness rather than certainty, the conditions under which Gadamer’s hermeneutics operates do not necessarily imply any distinction between valid and invalid interpretations. The circularity that describes the back-and-forth movement from interpretation to application to reinterpretation, such that one can distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices, is productive in the sense that it reveals new possibilities of meaning (Gadamer 2006, 298). The concept of meaning, Gadamer states, “represent[s] a fluid multiplicity of possibilities … but within this multiplicity of what can be thought—i.e., of what a reader can find meaningful and hence expect to find—not everything is possible” (ibid., 271). This ambiguity, however, is essential for the development of hermeneutic consciousness. The interaction between reader and text is a constant process of working out an inexhaustible array of possibilities, yet it is precisely because the text can speak to the reader in an unexpected way that the reader brings his own prejudices toward meaning into question. The “true locus of hermeneutics” is the space between the reader and the text, created by the simultaneous strangeness and familiarity of the text (ibid., 295).

The reader is therefore always navigating dialectically between knowledge and ignorance of the subject he is interpreting. This activity is essentially finite as it never obtains a complete knowledge of its object. The nature of hermeneutic experience is a constant opening to further experience and other possible meanings. Yet the correspondence, if we may call it that, between consciousness and being as mediated through language is inexhaustible. Drawing an analogy between hermeneutic experience and the Christian doctrine of incarnation, Gadamer expresses that the human word is necessarily many because it is essentially incomplete, whereas the divine word, which contains the actualization of every human possibility, is one (Gadamer 2006, 423-424). “The object of understanding,” Gadamer writes, “is not the verbal means of understanding as such but rather the world that presents itself to us in common life and that embraces everything about which understanding can be reached” (ibid., 444). Thus “every language has a direct relationship to the infinite of beings” (ibid., 449). The “way of language” grounds the “infinite correspondence of soul and being” (Gadamer 1976, 75), such that human consciousness can effectively mediate between the unity and multiplicity of the word.

Importantly, the identity of understanding as participation (Teilhabe; Gadamer 2006, 121) resonates with Gadamer’s approach to the problem of methexis in Plato. The problem of the participation of a manifold within their unifying eidos, Gadamer writes, inevitably brings into question the possibility of the participation of the ideas in each other (Gadamer 1980, 136-138). The event of understanding in hermeneutics reflects Gadamer’s view that for Plato knowledge depends on correctly apprehending the nature of the One and the Many (ibid., 135). The essential
indeterminacy and partiality that characterizes human knowledge necessitates that the Platonic logos posits ideas in combination with each other (ibid., 152). Similarly, understanding in hermeneutics is always coming to a shared understanding, and so always involves the dialogical interplay between self and other. Insofar as this dialogical activity is a reflection of the things themselves, what become manifested are the subject matter’s own possibilities of being (Seinsmöglichkeiten).

In just its logical formulation, however, this relational structure does not sufficiently attend to the historical indeterminacy of thought that the hermeneutical phenomenon describes. That is, it is not enough for the self and other merely to participate with each other. They must do so in a way that they can overcome the differences in their historical situations and become contemporaneous. In Gadamer’s view, Plato’s discovery that the human word is both a unity and a multiplicity was therefore only the first step toward uncovering language as the universal medium of hermeneutic consciousness (Gadamer 2006, 454). By grounding the hermeneutical phenomenon in the essential finitude of historical experience, Gadamer thus claims to establish the true, fundamental ground of the One and the Many.

Nonetheless, Gadamer’s speculative dialectic remains couched within the logic of participation, namely the participation of an image in its original. In Gadamer’s view, the principle of the indeterminate Dyad is for Plato “the principle of all differentiation and all differing, which is to say that it codetermines reality” (Gadamer 1980, 155). Grounding the hermeneutic phenomenon within the finitude of historical experience thus reinterprets the Dyad as the principle of historical differentiation and the codetermination of historical reality within hermeneutic experience, and the One as the principle of the unity of being whose self-presentation is revealed in a multiplicity of historical horizons. The self-presentation of being and its mediation in language is always determined “by situation and context,” but what is determined pertains “not to the speaker but to what is spoken” (Gadamer 2006, 483). In this way, the ontological gap between essence and appearance does not appear to be a problem for hermeneutics, any more than it is a problem, in Gadamer’s view, for Plato to claim that being is an “original image” that becomes imitated in appearances of it (Gadamer 1986b, 17). If anything, the apparent difficulty concerning participation is precisely the point that Gadamer wants to emphasize, as this concept so closely reflects what the hermeneutic phenomenon and hermeneutic experience has in common with Plato’s theory of participation and the dialectic of the One and the Many.

Notes

1. Gary Madison, for example, wants to defend Gadamer’s position against charges of conservatism by conceptualizing a tradition of metaphysics and a tradition of human finitude. He argues that Gadamer prioritizes a tradition of finitude in order to emancipate human thought from the prevailing metaphysical tradition and its demand for secure, cognitive foundations (Madison 1989, 172). Holly Wilson illustrates correctly, however, that this argument only creates a false dichotomy. While Gadamer’s thought is not without certain emancipatory elements, in her view Madison’s claim that Gadamer liberates the tradition of human finitude from its metaphysical foundations entails the complete relativizing of human knowledge. This relativity in turn demands
just the kind of cognitive security from which Madison sees that the tradition of human finitude has liberated itself, entailing a vicious circularity (Wilson 1996, 149).

2. Hirsch maintains the view that the meaning of a text is only what the author intends it to mean (Hirsch 1984, 209-210). This view extends from his thesis that “there is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness” (Hirsch 1969, 4). All interpretations of the text other than just what the author intends indicate differences, he argues, in the significance that it can have for a plurality of readers, whereas the meaning of the text remains an objectively determinable truth. Similarly, Dieter Misgeld criticizes Gadamer’s concept of language as a universal medium of understanding insofar as Gadamer “seems to intimate that truth is somewhere beyond utterances” (Misgeld 1985, 156). He finds that there is an uneasy ambiguity in Gadamer’s thought between the particularity of human speech and the concept of a totality of meaning. Misgeld, however, misquotes Gadamer as saying only that “being is language” (ibid.). What Gadamer actually says is that being that can be understood is language (Gadamer 2006, 470). The inherent productivity in Gadamer’s hermeneutics contradicts claims that his concept of tradition is inherently conservative, a claim which Misgeld correctly rejects. But the fact that interpretation is essentially open-ended implies that it is also oriented toward things which are not yet understood, at least not explicitly.

3. In Plato’s Dialectical Ethics, Gadamer describes speech in nearly the same way. Speech, he writes, “has the character of making the entity available by exhibiting it to oneself and to others, and in such a way that the thing thus exhibited is held fast in its discovered state” (1991a, 28).

4. In Being and Time, Heidegger identifies the “traditional” characterization of the concept of truth which he claims has dominated Western thought since its inception. Truth, he claims, is located in the assertion or judgment (apophansis). Truth has however become determined by the agreement or correspondence between subject and object; and as the “father of logic” Aristotle was the one who established the definition of truth as correspondence. It is important to note that apophansis does not have immediately the negative connotation that Heidegger assigns to it here. For Heidegger, apophansis means primarily and originally a “pointing out” or “letting an entity be seen from itself” (Heidegger 1962, 196). The claim being made here is that the kind of correspondence involved in this primary meaning is the historical origin of the more traditional theory of correspondence. That is, in Heidegger’s view modern scientific rationalism has replaced the original meaning of the truth of this correspondence, i.e. what follows from letting the thing show itself, with the certainty or verification which follows from scientific methodology (ibid, 198).

5. In his lectures on Plato’s Sophist, Heidegger distinguishes between apophansis and semainein as modes of linguistic expression. To use the latter mode, he says, is simply to mean something, in virtue of which language as such becomes meaningful or comprehensible. The former mode is distinct because in addition to having meaning it “[lets] the thing meant show itself in this meaning” (1997, 124). Thus it is specifically the apophantic judgment which properly attends to the meaning of truth as unceasealment. Speech “becomes” apophantic, Heidegger says, “only if there is present in it either a disclosing, alétheuein, or a distorting, pseudethai. For not only to disclose but also to distort is to let be seen, even if disclosing is the proper letting be seen” (ibid., 124).

6. Michael Gibbons, while he is ultimately supportive of the openness and productivity he finds inherent in Gadamer’s theory of interpretation, argues that understanding inescapably contains elements of conservativism as even the most radical interpretation is still a response to some
preexisting historical situation (Gibbons 1985, 790-791). More strongly, Brice Wachtenerhauser argues that, lacking a measure beyond the concept of tradition, Gadamer’s theory of interpretation “will always create a presumption in favour of the status quo. … In the absence of some kind of criteria of what counts as a rational legitimation for such institutions, the presumption will always be in favour of the well-trying” (Wachtenerhauser 1988, 246).

7. Similarly, in “What is Truth?” Gadamer takes umbrage with the 20th nominalist movement to produce just this kind of system. Nominalism, he writes, “believes that the whole secret and sole task of all philosophy consists in forming the proposition so exactly that it really is in a position to state what is meant univocally. Philosophy should develop a system of signs that is not dependent on the metaphorical ambiguity of natural language, and also not dependent in general on the linguistic multiplicity of modern cultures out of which flow misleading and erroneous claims, but rather one what attains the univocity and precision of mathematics” (1994, 39).

8. Gibbons makes the same point in his essay (1985, 786-787).

9. In Plato’s Dialectical Ethics, Gadamer states that the central claim of Plato’s participation thesis is that “the idea of unity does not exclude, but posits together with itself, the idea of multiplicity” ([1931] 1991a, 97). The unity of the idea itself is taken to include a multiplicity “in regard to which there is unity” (ibid). In Truth and Method Gadamer contends that Plato’s ontology of the Beautiful and the Good suggests a way to overcome the ontological separation between sensible and intelligible reality ([1960] 2006, 476). He repeats this claim in “The Relevance of the Beautiful” ([1977] 1986b, 15). In Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy Gadamer argues that, far from critiquing the ontological problem of participation, Plato is reinforcing the “logical connection of the many to the one” (Gadamer [1978] 1986a, 11). Against the developmentalist approach, he maintains that Plato had always intended to problematize the participation of appearances in ideas. It is not the case, Gadamer claims, that this problem went unnoticed for so long that Plato admitted to its potentially unsolvable logical difficulties only in his later works. In “Mathematics and Dialect in Plato” Gadamer states that the essential meaning of the logos is its ability to mediate between unity and multiplicity (Gadamer [1982] 1991b, 291).

10. Generally, proponents of the developmentalist thesis claim that Plato’s method of collection (synagogē) under a genus and division (dihairesis) into species replaces the theory of ideas in the later dialogues. Gadamer argues by contrast that these activities operate within the dialectic of the one and many (Gadamer 1991a, 93 n. 18).

11. “Opposite this scheme of ‘development’ stands the thesis which I have been advocating for more than 30 years now and which I should like to put forward here although only as a hypothesis. It is the thesis that from very early on in the dialogues there are references to what in a word might be called the arithmos structure of the logos” (Gadamer 1980, 129). Gadamer continues to say that this structure is present also in the Philebus as well as Aristotle’s articulation of the one and indeterminate two as the first principles in Plato’s philosophy (ibid., 138). Gadamer’s unitary reading of Plato and Aristotle’s theory of the good, as developed in “Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas” and Idea of the Good, is based upon this structure as well (c.f. Gadamer 1986, 31-32, 88, 120). His claim that Plato and Aristotle are answering the same question from different starting points (the universal good and singular goods respectively) is another way of expressing the Platonic-hermeneutical insight that their discrete points of view are ultimately inseparable with respect to their unifying phenomenon.
12. More specifically, each number is a unity of many, such that its ontological identity is constituted by unity and multiplicity. Logically, then, ‘one’ cannot be a number because it would not be the collection of many, but only one.

13. Socrates’ shift toward hypothesizing the eidos is initiated, after all, once he encounters the difficulty in determining the cause of two ones becoming two by their addition, or two becoming one by its division (Phaed. 96e-97b). Consider also Def. 1 and 2 of Euclid’s Elements VII: “A unit is that by virtue of which each of the things that exist is called one” (μονάς ἔστιν, καθ᾽ ἕκαστον τῶν ἄντων ἐν λέγεται); “A number is a multitude composed of units” (ὅρθημός δὲ τὸ ἐκ μονάδων συγκείμενον πλήθος).

14. The question at hand in the dialogue, however, concerns primarily the veracity of the definition of knowledge as true opinion with a logos. Socrates and Theaetetus therefore leave behind the previous theory about the knowability and accountability of simple and complex entities as they continue to investigate the content of this definition.

15. While it may be questionable as to what meaning a syllable can express beyond the voicing of mere letters, at the very least the formation of a syllable establishes some kind of limit to the noise that letters make.

16. “An unequivocal, precise coordination of the sign world with the world of facts,” Gadamer writes, “is not language” (Gadamer 1980, 111). Similarly, Gonzalez refutes the argument that in the Cratylus there is evidence that Plato wants to develop this kind of one-to-one coordination between language and reality (Gonzalez 1998, 79). Moreover, the definition of being as dynamis in the Sophist is eventually reformulated as the capacity that things have to exist in common with each other, with the qualification that not every combination or mixture is possible (Soph. 254b-c). The extended implication, which cannot be treated fully here, is that this relational structure is a universal characteristic of all being. The specialized nature of the other is just its being other pros heteron. “What is other is always in relation to other,” the Stranger says (ibid., 255d). No kind of absolute (kath’auto) existence can be attributed to the other, as then there would be something in the set of things that are other than being an “other” that does not exist in relation to any other (ou pros heteron). Both absolute sameness and relative difference describe a relation, as “all being is relation, whether to itself or to something other” (Gonzalez 2009, 92).

17. It is not at all surprising, then, that Socratic elenchus is clearly in the background of Gadamer’s concept of experience (Erfahrung; Gadamer 2006, 347-348).

Bibliography


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