

# PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS IN GADAMER'S INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at showing how Gadamer understood the impossibility of any properly unpolitical stance for philosophy by examining the relation of philosophy and politics in his interpretation of Plato's *Republic*. I argue that Gadamer's rejection of the possibility of the *ἄπολις* (as presented by Aristotle) was prompted by the thoughts of his friend and interlocutor Leo Strauss on the question of the relation of the theoretical life and political life in Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy. I then turn to Gadamer's reading of the *Republic* and focus on three aspects of his interpretation: philosophical education in the context of utopian thinking, the Forms and the Idea of the Good, and philosophical knowledge. Tied together, these three elements convene a picture of philosophy that is by no means above or against politics, but rather exists in a harmonious and mutually influencing relation with the political community. I finally suggest that the interpretive conditions of this harmony are not without consequence on how we conceive of philosophy itself, its nature and its task.

## **KEYWORDS**

Philosophy, politics, hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Plato, Aristotle.

«There is no city in the world in which the ideal city is not present in some ultimate sense» (Hans-Georg Gadamer, in Fortin, 1989, p. 10)

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) can hardly be considered as a political philosopher. Although philosophical hermeneutics is, in his view, eminently practical, Gadamer never claims that its object of inquiry are political matters or that the political realm is or should be the proper locus of its practice or self-understanding, to say nothing of

his timidity with regards to political prescriptions.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Gadamerian hermeneutics emerged from a long reflection on practical rationality and Gadamer understood it to be a form of *praktische Philosophie*.<sup>2</sup> At one point, he even draws an analogy between hermeneutics and *Politik* in Aristotle's sense (*GW 2*, 317-318), but this remains just an analogy, meant to emphasize the non-technical character of hermeneutics as a praxis. All in all, Gadamer prefers the category of the "practical," which is mediated by and encompasses for him ethics, history and language – dimensions of the practical that have a decisive preeminence over the "political" in his philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this can be at least partly explained by the historical context in which he developed his hermeneutics. As Jean Grondin has shown in his biography of Gadamer, the philosopher preferred, especially in the first half of the last century, to stay prudently at distance from a "self-discredited political world," that is, to remain essentially "apolitical."<sup>4</sup> Yet, this does not mean that Gadamer's work never dealt with political themes, for his

1 For instance, Gadamer preferred Aristotelian practical wisdom against political or international orders prescriptively inspired by modern technical science, and did not argue for any more specific political *change or status quo* (*GW 2*, 155-173). He also insisted on the idea that solidarity (in the sense of Ancient Greek  $\varphi\lambda\lambda\alpha$ ) is the basis of political praxis, but one wonders to what extent the identification of a condition politics is politically normative, and to what extent something like solidarity can be prescribed at all (*GW 4*, 218-228, cf. *GW 6*, 6). Similarly, Gadamer sided with the Aristotelian "phronetic" approach to moral philosophy against prescriptive or imperative ethics – see e.g. "Aristoteles und die imperativische Ethik" in *GW 7*, 381-395. All references to the complete works of Gadamer are from the *Gesammelte Werke* (*GW*, followed by volume and page numbers). Unless otherwise stated, English translations are mine.

2 Specifically, Gadamer's first impulse was his reading of Heidegger's *Natorp-Bericht*, which he first read as a wonderful rediscovery of Aristotle's *Ethics* through the prism of Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity (before discerning, later, a completely different intent in Heidegger's early work on Aristotle). For Gadamer's testimony of this influence, see his "Heideggers 'theologische' Jugendschrift" (1989), and on the irony of this "misreading", see Taminioux's (2004) excellent piece. On hermeneutics as practical philosophy, see especially "Hermeneutik als theoretische und praktische Aufgabe" (*GW 2*, 301-318). This latter theme, however, is literally everywhere throughout Gadamer's works. For a good study of this theme, see Foster (1991). I doubt that this label of *praktische Philosophie* instead of *politische Philosophie* is just a matter of German linguistic customs, for Gadamer *does* use the word "politische Philosophie" at times, and notably ascribes the label to the work of his friend Leo Strauss (see e.g. *GW 2*, 414; *GW 10*, 250).

3 Gadamer often uses the words "politisch" and "praktisch" or "politisch" and "gesellschaftlich" or "praktisch", "sozial" and "politisch" as nearly synonymous (e.g. *GW 1*, 15n2, 32, 38, *GW 2*, 23, 39, 146, 156, 163, 184, 252, 269, 314, 316, 423, 455, 459, 468, 477, 499; *GW 4*, 50, 261; *GW 6*, 270; *GW 7*, 102; *GW 10*, 7, 30, 50, 54, 96-97, 235-236, 257, 319-320, 390, 427), elsewhere he equates the realm of *Sprache* with that of all *Lebenspraxis* (*GW 10*, 316). I have not found in his work an attempt to define the "political", to isolate the word or use it in any systematic way.

4 See Grondin (2011, p. 182-183, 200, 209).

“apolitical” turn to Greek philosophy in the 1930s<sup>5</sup> nevertheless forced him to work to a considerable extent on the relationship between philosophy, poetry and politics – especially in Plato but also with regards to Aristotle. According to Grondin, Gadamer’s essays on Greek philosophy under National Socialism testify to his political prudence: pieces such as “Plato und die Dichter” (1934) and “Platos Staat der Erziehung” (1942) subtly indicate through rigorous scholarship a critique of the regime in which he was living.<sup>6</sup>

Carrying this idea much further, Robert Sullivan has argued that, far from staying apolitical at that time, Gadamer’s early work is best characterized as “political hermeneutics.” By this, he means not only that Gadamer was reacting to his political context, but that he was in fact trying to recover in his own hermeneutics an ancient culture of rhetoric, one that implies that the structure of understanding is deeply tied to the political world. Sullivan also thinks that Gadamer’s political hermeneutics makes a case for “dialectical politics,” which he relates to the “Aristotelian *polis*.”<sup>7</sup> Against the view that Gadamer’s philosophy is essentially apolitical but also diverging from this association of hermeneutics to classical political models like the Greek *polis*, Catherine Zuckert has argued that it was indeed profoundly in tune with a liberal conception of history and freedom.<sup>8</sup> Ronald Beiner, on the other hand, thinks that Gadamer’s philosophy could only with great difficulty be called political, for its modesty and emphasis on the importance of prudence and awareness of human limits is somewhat beneath the radicality that is needed for political philosophy as he understands it.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Darren Wallhof has tried to show that an actual contribution to “democratic theory” is embedded in Gadamer’s work.<sup>10</sup> Such competing views on the extent to which Gadamer’s

5 According to Gadamer’s own autobiographical comments (Fortin 1984, p. 2): “Strauss sent me his books. The one on Hobbes I found to be of particular interest since it was related to my own research on the *political thought* of the Sophists. That happened to be *one of my great concerns at the time*, although I was forced to abandon it when it became too dangerous to discuss political matters in Germany. One could not talk about the Sophists without alluding to Carl Schmitt, one of the leading theorists of the Nazi party. So I turned to more neutral subjects, such as Aristotle’s physics.” (my emphasis)

6 Grondin (2011, p. 209-210). Cf. Gadamer’s *Selbstdarstellung* in *GW* 2, 489.

7 Sullivan (1989, p. 169 ff.)

8 Zuckert (1996, p. 102-103): “Gadamer is fundamentally a liberal.”

9 Beiner (2014, p. 122-134). It seems to be that Beiner’s presentation of the issue is on the right track for it avoids any reductive answer (for in Gadamer’s case, one-sided answers are often reductive) and rather affirms that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is neither political (properly speaking), nor *apolitical*. I believe that the view I am defending in this paper is in general agreement with Beiner’s.

10 Wallhof (2016) was preceded in some sense by Warnke (2002), who attempted to interpret Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the direction of political pluralism and democratic deliberation. It should be noted, though, that Warnke’s attempt is an *elaboration from* Gadamer’s writings, not an elucidation of Gadamer’s own political thought – on this point see P. St-Hilaire (2016, p. 17n1-19).

philosophy could be called political raise questions. Is Gadamer simply an apolitical thinker? Is he an apolitical thinker whose philosophical positions have political implications or implications for political theory? Is he a political hermeneuticist, or even a political thinker?

The fact that we are confronted with such perplexities should not be surprising, since Gadamer's own position on this question of philosophy's relation to the political and the unpolitical is precisely *not* a clear-cut answer. While Gadamer never clearly elaborates either a political theory or a theory of the political, he never explicitly discusses the theme of the "unpolitical"<sup>11</sup>. Most of Gadamer's discussions of praxis or politics are either inspired by or consists of a discussion of Platonic or Aristotelian ethical and political thought. I think we find an implicit discussion of the "unpolitical" in Gadamer's comments on Aristotle's thoughts on the city-less, the ἄπολις. In a famous interview with Father Ernest Fortin, Gadamer says:

We are mortals and not gods. If we were gods, the question could be posed as an alternative [between the practical and the theoretical life]. Unfortunately, we do not have that choice. When we speak of *eudaimonia*, the ultimate achievement of human life, we have to take both lives into account. The characterization of the practical life as the second best life in the Aristotelian scheme means only that the theoretical life would be fine if we were gods; but we are not.<sup>12</sup>

These comments immediately bring two passages from the *corpus aristotelicum* to mind. The first one is at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X 7 1177b ff.), where Aristotle argues that a *purely* theoretical life is only accessible to gods, but that this should not be a reason to only think human things (ἄνθρώπινα ὄντα φρονεῖν, X 7 1177b32) and, that we should rather try to immortalize ourselves (ἀθανατίζειν, 1177b33). The second one is at the beginning of the *Politics*, where he writes that man is by nature a political animal, and that one that is apolitical by nature and not merely by chance is either inferior or superior to the human (ὁ ἄπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἤτοι φαῦλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος, I 2 1253a3-4). Gadamer's thought here is that human beings cannot live a solely or purely theoretical life, and therefore cannot be apolitical or unpolitical. He further explains our political condition as one in which we must take *both* the practical and the theoretical into account. In other words, our access to the theoretical is bounded or limited, such that philosophy cannot become unpolitical.

<sup>11</sup> He does, however, confess that Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* made a great impression on him (*GW* 2, 480).

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer in Fortin (1984, p. 12-13)

In this essay, I attempt to explain this boundedness in order to shed light on the way in which Gadamer understood the impossibility of the unpolitical. In order to do so, I go back to the origin of his reflections on this theme. As I will argue, Gadamer's rejection of Aristotle's ἄπολις was prompted by the thoughts on the question of θεωρία and πρᾶξις in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy elaborated by his friend Leo Strauss, who conceived of the unpolitical as a defining feature of the genuine theoretical life, the life of the philosopher. In the first section, I show that Gadamer's strategy of reconciling the theoretical and the practical is a response to Strauss's understanding of that relation. I argue that the question of the possibility or the impossibility of the unpolitical life is inseparable from the question of the relationship between Plato and Aristotle on the issue of the theoretical and the practical lives. Since both Strauss and Gadamer agree that there is more harmony than disagreement between the two philosophers, I propose to turn to Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* in order to clarify Gadamer's position against the unpolitical stance. The next three sections are devoted to an analysis of his interpretation, which, it will become clear, shows decisive signs of his broader view concerning the Platonic-Aristotelian unity.

## 1. PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN THE POLITICAL AND THE UNPOLITICAL: STRAUSS'S CHALLENGE TO GADAMER

In a response to a short essay written in 1997 by Stanley Rosen, Hans-Georg Gadamer confessed that at the time he was preparing the edition of the seventh volume of his *Gesammelte Werke* – the last of three volumes exclusively devoted to the interpretation of Greek philosophy – the thought of one of Rosen's former teachers and his own old friend, Leo Strauss, was especially vivid for him.<sup>13</sup> This comment appears somewhat surprising if we turn to the said volume of Gadamer's work and find only three mentions of Strauss's name. Once we look at it a little closer, we may begin,

13 Gadamer (1997, p. 219): "When I published *Plato im Dialog* as the seventh volume of my works, the thought of Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein was especially vivid for me. For I believe that in my recent work I give a new validation of the dominating presence of Socrates within the Greek philosophical tradition. As can be gleaned from our well-known letters, this was also the primary concern of Leo Strauss." Rosen's essay is an attempt both to criticize and appropriate Gadamer's concept of "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Rosen (1997) makes no mention of Strauss but underscores the importance of *physis* (versus history) as being the adequate ontological grounding of interpretation, which could have prompted Gadamer's comment on Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein. It is precisely this dominating presence of Socrates, or of the *sokratische Frage* regarding the Good that unites, according to Gadamer, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy (see especially *GW* 7, 373-380).

however, to see why Gadamer would have put so much emphasis on Strauss in this context.

The last of these mentions of Strauss is found in an essay of 1990 that was first published in the seventh volume of the collected works, and most likely written for the publication of the volume.<sup>14</sup> In this essay entitled “Die sokratische Frage und Aristoteles”, Gadamer attempts to provide an answer to a question that, he says, he was particularly confronted with upon reading Strauss’s work (*GW* 7, 374): “What is at stake is the presence of the Socratic question in Aristotle. I have often asked myself about that, particularly with regards to Leo Strauss’s work and I attempt here an answer.”<sup>15</sup> While the second mention of Strauss is not relevant to this question<sup>16</sup>, the first one is very important, since it occurs in a book entitled *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, which precisely examines the relation between Plato and Aristotle on the Socratic question or problem of the Good. There, in a decisive step in his interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, Gadamer poses a series of important questions on the relation between the theoretical life – which in its most radical form implies a legitimation of the refuge in the private life (*eine indirekte Legitimation für den Rückzug ins Private*)<sup>17</sup> – and the political life (*GW* 7, 166): “Should, through this work [the *Republic*], which certainly represents an explicit affront to and rejection of Athens, the irreconcilability of philosophy and politics be brought to an expression? Did Plato want to characterize the tension between theoretical and political existence as insoluble? [...] Does Plato want nothing more than to show that the conflict between *theōria* and politics as insoluble?” In a footnote to the last of these pressing questions, Gadamer adds: “Such is the approach of Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom.”<sup>18</sup>

14 Not only is it the only essay of this volume that was not *at all* published before, but it is the latest essay we find in it (see *GW* 7, 443-445).

15 “Es geht um die Gegenwart der sokratischen Frage in Aristoteles. Danach habe ich mich insbesondere im Blick auf die Arbeiten von Leo Strauss oft gefragt und versuche hier eine Antwort.”

16 In “Mathematik und Dialektik bei Plato” (1982), Gadamer mentions Strauss among other thinkers (Paul Friedländer, Kurt Hildebrandt and Jacob Klein), who, like himself, have recognized “die dorische Harmonie von λόγος and ἔργον im platonischen Dialogwerk als einen wesentlichen Schlüssel für das Verständnis des Dialoggeschehens zu gebrauchen und damit auch den Problemgehalt des platonischen Denkens in neuem Lich zu sehen” (*GW* 7, 295).

17 See also, a few lines above: “Die Entscheidung für ein *apolitisches, theoretisches Leben* erscheint Plato durchaus als gerechtfertigt” (my emphasis).

18 “Soll durch diese Schrift [die *Politeia*], die gewiß eine äußerste Herausforderung und Absage an Athen darstellte, die Unvereinbarkeit von Philosophie und Politik überhaupt zur Aussage gelangen? Wollte Plato die Spannung von theoretische und politischer Existenz als unauflösbar bezeichnen? [...] Will Plato nun nichts weiter, als den Konflikt von >Theoria< und Politik als unlösbar hinstellen? [...] So die Auffassung von Leo Strauss und Allan Bloom.”

Gadamer's enterprise in *Die Idee des Guten* could thus be understood as an attempt to answer a problem that is in fact an intertwining of two questions posed by Strauss and that can be formulated in this way: how did Plato and Aristotle understand the proper articulation of the theoretical and the political? This question is twofold insofar as it raises both the issues of the relationship between θεωρία and politics from the point of view of the philosopher, and of the unity or disunity of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy concerning this problem. Already in Strauss's review essay of John Wild's *Plato's Theory of Man* entitled "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy", we find that this is indeed how he thought of the problem: "It would seem that in order to prove a basic agreement between Plato and Aristotle the *most important thing* to do would be to show that both admitted *either* the supremacy of theory *or* that of practice or morality".<sup>19</sup> Strauss's own position on this question is less straightforward, but his discussion of Wild's answer is nonetheless informative:

Wild, however, believes that there cannot be an unqualified supremacy of either: 'the practical is the richer and more inclusive order' (25). *This is neither the Platonic nor the Aristotelian view. If it is assumed* that according to Plato wisdom is essentially practical (*phronesis*), or the idea of the good ("the highest object of learning") is essentially practical (30), it is necessary to say that according to Plato the practical order is the highest order. As concerns Aristotle, *he leaves not the slightest doubt* that theory, to him is *absolutely superior in dignity to practice*, or that he regards the practical or moral order (25 ff.) as very far from including the theoretical order.<sup>20</sup>

Strauss makes clear that the refusal of an unqualified hierarchy of θεωρία and πράξις is foreign to both Platonic and Aristotelian thinking. He also seems to agree with Wild about the primacy of the theoretical in Aristotle, whereas he says that the alleged Platonic primacy of the practical rests on two assumptions, which, as such, are not proven. Later in the essay, Strauss asserts that Plato deems the philosopher's descent into the cave (which is the question of the "natural harmony between philosophy and politics" "stated in Platonic terms") to be legitimate only in the context of a perfect society, but, he adds, "the end of the seventh book of the *Republic* leaves hardly any doubt as to Plato's denial of that possibility."<sup>21</sup> In short, according to Strauss, there is a Platonic-Aristotelian harmony or unity to be found in their common view that the theoretical life is superior to the practical life.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Strauss (1946, p. 34); my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Strauss (1946, p. 347); my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Strauss (1946, p. 361)

<sup>22</sup> Strauss (1946, p. 361) adds that the Platonic position implies that the philosopher ought to live a private life. Earlier in the review essay, he writes that Plato's texts cannot be used "for any purpose other than philosophizing" (Strauss 1946, p. 351). On this latter point, see also this important proposition from

It is on this basis and on this basis only that we can understand the sense in which Strauss's figure of the Platonic-Aristotelian philosopher lives an unpolitical life. Already in *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935), he emphasized that Aristotle's version of the theoretical life is one that is *freed* from politics, in contradistinction to what Plato apparently argues for in the *Republic*<sup>23</sup>. Yet, Plato's philosopher, according to Strauss, is also unpolitical in an important sense. The Platonic philosopher transcends the city insofar as his very activity consists of attempting to replace the opinions by knowledge: philosophy is *leaving* the cave, that is, *escaping* the city. To be sure, Strauss recognizes that the political situation of the philosopher is necessary to trigger the philosophical inquiry, and even to sustain the philosopher's constant need to reassert the legitimacy of his way of life, which is part of the philosophic striving for self-knowledge: he thinks that true philosophy is political philosophy.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that the philosophic activity consists of replacing opinions by knowledge, and therefore to cast doubt on the truth of the opinions that constitute the very cement of the political life, entails for Strauss an *essential* antagonism between the philosopher and the *πόλις*.<sup>25</sup> Thence, according to Strauss, philosophy as Plato and Aristotle conceived of it, is in its most the decisive respects both *beyond* and *against* the political community: it is unpolitical. This paradoxical unpolitical character of political philosophy is grounded on the essential difference between the practical and the theoretical, the alleged superiority of the latter, and the characterization of philosophy as a radically theoretical endeavor, which he sees at work both in Plato and in Aristotle.

*The City and Man* (Strauss 1964, p. 65): "Certain it is that the *Republic* supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for *any form* of political ambition" (my emphasis). Gadamer also stresses in *Wahrheit und Methode* the impossibility of any dogmatic use of Plato's writings (*GW I*, 374): "Wir sehen in Platons Dialogen [...] wie Plato die Schwäche der Logoi, und insbesondere die der geschriebenen, durch seine eigene Dialogdichtung zu überwinden sucht. Die literarische Form des Dialogs stellt Sprache und Begriff in die ursprüngliche Bewegung des Gesprächs zurück. Das Wort wird dadurch gegen allen dogmatischen Mißbrauch geschützt."

23 *GS 2*, 122: "Der grundsätzliche Unterschied zwischen Platon und Aristoteles zeigt sich allein in der Art, wie sie sich zu der Theorie als der höchsten Vollkommenheit des Menschen *verhalten*. Aristoteles gibt sie völlig frei; vielmehr: er beläßt sie in ihrer natürlichen Freiheit. Platon hingegen *gestattet* den Philosophen *nicht*, »was ihnen jetzt gestattet wird«, nämlich das Leben im Philosophieren als Verharren im Anschauen der Wahrheit. Er »*zwingt*« sie, für die anderen zu sorgen und sie zu bewachen, damit der Staat in Wirklichkeit Staat, wahrhafter Staat sei (Rep. 519 D–520 C)."

24 On these dimensions of the *political* character of philosophy in Strauss and in Strauss-inspired thought, see Heinrich Meier's chapter entitled "Warum Politische Philosophie?" in Meier (2013, p. 13–37). One must also add that philosophy is political for Strauss in that it needs to adopt a political mode (especially a politically apt rhetoric) in order to find new potential philosophers in the political community – on this point see "On Classical Political Philosophy" in Strauss (1959, esp. p. 93–94.)

25 Cf. e.g. Strauss (1959, p. 11–12; 1964, p. 125.)



This interpretation always remained problematic to Gadamer, albeit in different ways at different times. In the first supplement to *Wahrheit und Methode*, “Hermeneutik und Historismus”, Gadamer addresses his difficulty with many aspects of Strauss’s thought, one of which is this foreseen unity of Plato and Aristotle:

What surprises me most about Strauss’s defense of classical philosophy is the degree to which he tries to understand it as a unity (*Einheit*), so that the extreme contrast that exists between Plato and Aristotle with regard to the manner and the meaning of the question of the good (*der extreme Gegensatz, der zwischen Plato und Aristoteles durch die Art und den Sinn der Frage nach dem Guten besteht*) does not seem to cause him any trouble.<sup>26</sup>

In a footnote added in a later edition of this essay for the second volume of the *Gesammelte Werke* (1986), Gadamer writes: “In my last big work on Plato, ‘Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles’, [...] I have tried to resolve this alleged opposition (*diesen vermeintlichen Gegensatz*) – [a book] with which Leo Strauss would presumably have been quite satisfied (*womit L. Strauss vermutlich recht zufrieden gewesen wäre*).”<sup>27</sup>

Hence, in 1965, Gadamer was unsatisfied with the *intensity* of Strauss’s unifying reading of Plato and Aristotle, whereas with the publication of *Die Idee des Guten*, he tried to overcome what was now for him nothing but an *alleged or supposed opposition* (*vermeintlichen Gegensatz*) between the two philosophers. It should now have been made clear that the impulse of Gadamer’s re-reading<sup>28</sup> of Plato’s *Republic* was very

<sup>26</sup> *GW* 2, 422; *TM*, 559 (Winsheimer and Marshall’s translation modified).

<sup>27</sup> Contra Winsheimer and Marshall’s translation (*TM* 567n65), which renders the conditional as a simple past (this is purely impossible since Strauss was already dead when Gadamer wrote the book) and makes it seem as if Strauss was content with a “contradiction”, whereas the word *Gegensatz* in the footnote refers to the contrast or opposition between Plato and Aristotle in the text, and the adverb *womit* must refer to Gadamer’s book and not to the word *Gegensatz*. On Gadamer’s wish of an agreement with Strauss, see also Fortin (1984, p. 13).

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer’s first texts involving interpretations of Plato’s *Republic* were his *Habilitationschrift* written under Martin Heidegger’s supervision and entitled *Platos dialektische Ethik. Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos* (1931), “Plato und die Dichter” (1934) and “Platos Staat der Erziehung” (1942). Some of the texts I refer to by the term “re-reading” are *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* (1978), “Platos Denken in Utopien. Ein Vortrag vor Philologen” (1983), and “Die sokratische Frage und Aristoteles” (1991). I do not mean to deny an important continuity in Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato (see *GW* 7, 275 and Renaud [1999, p. 97n68]) and I think that there always was, most probably due to Heidegger’s seminal influence, an Aristotelian twist to most of Gadamer’s readings of Plato – on this point, see P. St-Hilaire (2016). Nevertheless, it seems to me that Gadamer’s confrontation with the *Republic* after the 1965 edition of *Wahrheit und Methode* (in which he discussed for the first time Leo Strauss’ question) brings much more explicitly to the fore the question of philosophy and politics as a Platonic-Aristotelian issue.

much the Straussian question of the harmony or disharmony between the political life and the philosophical or theoretical life as understood by Plato and Aristotle. Working anew on those issues, Gadamer came closer to Strauss's position than he was in 1965, but his remaining reluctance *vis-à-vis* Strauss's reading was responsible for the decisive orientation of his own interpretation. In fact, he attempted to read Plato's political philosophy in order to *disprove* any kind of unilateral superiority or primacy of the theoretical life and to *show* that θεωρία and politics can be bridged within "Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy".<sup>29</sup> In the light of this harmony, Gadamer neither thinks that Platonic philosophy truly transcends the city (for it is not an entirely theoretical endeavor), nor does he see the Platonic philosopher as being necessarily in an antagonistic relation with the city. Gadamer's interpretation of the *Republic* undermines the conditions of the unpolitical character of philosophy as Strauss understands it.

In what follows, I discuss Gadamer's interpretation with respect to three important issues: 1) the meaning of the utopian character of the καλλίπολις, especially of the rule of philosopher-kings (section II); 2) the "theory" of Forms and the Idea of the Good (section III); 3) the nature of philosophical knowledge (section IV).<sup>30</sup> Given that Gadamer treats those themes through the prism of a Platonic-Aristotelian harmony, some insights or concepts that are properly Aristotelian play a determining role in his interpretation. This is explicit in his use of Aristotle's critique of the Forms through the "unwritten doctrine" of the One and indefinite Dyad in order to make sense of Plato's metaphysics. It can also be observed in his inclination to see Aristotelian φρόνησις as the wisdom of the Platonic philosopher. The general spirit of this method is best captured in Gadamer's following insight: "After all, it could be that the Aristotelian critique [of Plato] – like many a critique – is right indeed in what it says, but not as to who against whom it says it. (*Es könnte immerhin sein, daß die aristotelische Kritik – wie so manche Kritik – zwar recht hat in dem, was sie sagt, aber nicht gegen den, gegen den sie es sagt, GW 2, 424*). Reading thus Plato with Aristotle rather than one against the other, Gadamer develops an understanding of philosophy that precludes any properly unpolitical possibility. But it might also entail a radical transformation of the meaning and tasks of the philosophic activity in general.

<sup>29</sup> For a helpful case-study of the reciprocity of theory and practice in Gadamer's interpretation of Aristotle, see Brogan (2002).

<sup>30</sup> I therefore leave aside the theme of philosophy and poetry, which, it should be said, is very important in Gadamer's interpretation of the *Republic*.

## 2. THE MEANING OF UTOPIA: THE ΚΑΛΛΙΠΟΛΙΣ AS *STAAT DER ERZIEHUNG*

The charge against the radical political propositions Plato apparently makes in the *Republic* is perhaps the most common of all critiques of Plato's political philosophy. After the Second World War, worried defenders of the liberal democratic order such as Karl Popper blamed classical political philosophy – and chiefly Plato – for being the source of modern totalitarian regimes.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, such reading requires that we take Plato's Socrates at his words when he proposes – and gets his interlocutors to agree with – extreme constitutional principles such as the communism of property and of children and women among the guardians, and the government of philosopher-kings (see esp. *Rep.* III. 416d ff.; V.475c ff.; V.473c ff.). But the critique of such propositions is by no means an innovation that we owe to modern liberal thinking, for we find already in Aristotle's *Politics* a very sharp critique of the apparent program of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that the Aristotelian critique runs even deeper than the modern condemnation of “Platonic politics”: Socrates's measures are not only undesirable or problematic; they are *impossible* (ἀδύνατον, *Pol.* II.2. 1261a14).<sup>33</sup> This impossibility is fundamental, for it concerns the nature (φύσις) of the city itself: if these propositions were to be somehow possibly actualized, the *polis* would be destroyed (ἀναιρήσει, 1216a18-22), that is, it would not be a *polis* anymore. Such emphasis on the impossibility of the καλλίπολις has, it seems, always been for Gadamer nothing but a very sound observation. Although Aristotle's critique apparently treats the radicalism of the *Republic* as a serious political view on Plato's part, Gadamer treats this criticism as if it was already implied in Plato's dialogue. On this decisive feature of Gadamer's approach – unlike others –, however, no perceptible Aristotelian *influence* can be proven. But since Gadamer's interpretation of the meaning of the ideal city is very much in tune with Aristotelian politics, I shall nonetheless bring to our attention some significant parallels between the two.<sup>34</sup>

31 Popper (1947 [1945]).

32 This criticism runs through the first five chapters of Book II of Aristotle's *Politics*. All translations of the *Politics* in quotation marks are from Carnes Lord's translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

33 If we dare to read in this ἀδύνατον Aristotle's metaphysics of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, the sense of impossibility that Aristotle refers to here appears quite robust: the καλλίπολις is not a mere possibility that will never get actualized (say, because the conditions of its realization are very unlikely), but rather something that *is not* and *cannot be* (recall that whereas some δυνάμεις do not necessarily entail ἐνέργεια, the only being that consist of ἐνέργεια without δύναμις is the prime unmoved mover, cf. *Met.* Λ.6.1071b18-25 and Λ.7.1072a25).

34 This resemblance was suggested without much explanation by Sullivan (1989).

Not only is Gadamer eager to recognize the unrealistic character of the ideal city, but he also takes it as a quasi-evidence: “that this ideal city cannot be actualized is certainly clear (*daß diese ideale Stadt nicht verwirklicht werden kann, ist allerdings klar*)”. (*GW* 7, 166) Gadamer even holds the communism of women and children and the rule of philosophers as propositions that *prove* (*zeigen*) the impossibility of the καλλίπολις, and he further qualifies this impossibility (*Unmöglichkeit*) as an absurdity (*Absurdität*). But he asks whether we should simply read this utopia of the state negatively (*diese Staatsutopie nur negativ lesen*).

As we learn from a subsequent text from Gadamer on Plato’s political philosophy, he deems essential to read the *Republic* under the literary genre of utopia (*Gattung der Utopie, GW* 7, 275 ff.). But whereas we moderns tend to see in utopias some ideals whose realization we deeply wish for and perhaps even work for, he makes clear that this is not the original meaning of the style, which assumes from the outset that the possibility or the eventual actualization of what is proposed is *not* the issue.<sup>35</sup> Hence the reader should change his apprehensions (or, as *Wahrheit und Methode* would put it, the *Vor-Struktur* of its understanding) when facing a text crafted according to the utopian genre: “the reader must not only, as in a naïve approach, merely take into account those utopian contents and develop an approval or disapproval regarding them. What is important is rather to learn to think in such forms of rational plays.”<sup>36</sup> Gadamer’s own approach to Plato’s utopian genre aims at avoiding two potential pitfalls when dealing with utopias. On the one hand, one must not think that a utopia is an ideal that one must try to accomplish; on the other hand, one must not yield to the temptation of conceiving the truth of utopia merely as the opposite of the utopian contents, that is – to read it only *negatively*. Gadamer’s rejection of such negative reading is crucial, for it anticipates and precludes the view according to which philosophy cannot do anything for the city, a view that could easily develop into an unpolitical account of the philosophers’s task. Gadamer does not think that Plato’s philosopher can be purely and simply identified with the political ruler, but he does not think that the utopian genre is just meant to gesture towards the unpolitical.

But what kind of *Vernunftspielen* stand in between naïve and negative readings of a utopia like the *Republic*? In *Die Idee des Guten*, Gadamer opposes *negativ lesen* to *dialektisch lesen* (*GW* 7, 167). He explains that the task of the latter is “*certainly not as*

<sup>35</sup> Following the Greek etymology, a utopia means precisely the negation (οὐ) of the place (τόπος) in which it could be realized – a utopia is a “no-place”.

<sup>36</sup> In “Platos Denken in Utopien”, *GW* 7, 288: “der Leser nicht, wie das im naiven Zugang geschieht, gegenüber den utopischen Inhalten dieser Schriften bloße Zustimmung oder Abwehr registrieren und entwickeln darf. Es kommt vielmehr darauf an, in solchen Formen von Vernunftspielen denken zu lernen.”

*simple* as reading the opposite as the true meaning,” but rather consists in “relating the utopian claims case by case to their opposites in order to find, in between, what is really meant.”<sup>37</sup> We must therefore understand that if the realization of the ideal city hangs upon the government of philosopher-kings – and thereby with a fusion of the political and the philosophical, a dialectical reading of this proposition should *not* lead us to the mere opposite, that is, to the thesis of a radical incompatibility between philosophy and politics (as Strauss would have it, according to Gadamer). The true meaning of utopia should be sought somewhere *in between* the identity and the separation of philosophy and politics. Gadamer indeed thinks that the opposition (*Gegensatz*) between theoretical knowledge and political action is “to be transcended in the end (*um am Ende überschritten zu werden*).” (*GW* 7, 171) In *Die Idee des Guten*, the path of this overcoming is the interpretation of the Idea of the Good in relation to the cave, the world of the city (a feature of his interpretation to which we turn in the next section). Yet, we find in Gadamer’s earlier reading of the *Republic* and of the problem of the impossibility of the *καλλίπολις* some reflections that help us make the transition between the structure of the ideal society and the realm of the Forms.

In fact, Gadamer asserts in his 1942 piece entitled “Plato’s State of Education” that the concern in the *Republic* is “not even with the right laws for the state but solely with the right education for it (*es nicht einmal um die rechten Gesetze geht, sondern allein um die rechte Erziehung zum Staat*).”<sup>38</sup> (*GW* 5, 249; *DD* 73) We observe that in this interpretive essay, the relation between political power and philosophy is not bridged through the rule of philosopher-kings, but through education: “Here again, Plato tries no other way to power than that of philosophical education (*Plato versucht keinen anderen Weg zur Macht auch hier als den über die philosophische Erziehung, GW* 5, 251).” In Gadamer’s view, this is not supposed to mean, as one would have it from a literal reading of the *Republic*, that only those trained in philosophy should rule the city, but rather that one should try to provide a philosophical education to those who are likely to rule. Gadamer supports this idea by referring to the well-known autobiographical passage of the *Seventh Letter* (325b ff.) where Plato says that philosophers should rule *or* that rulers should begin to philosophize genuinely (*ὄντως φιλοσοφῆση*, 326b). That such proposition need not be tied to an actual city like the one we find in *speech* in the *Republic* is made evident for Gadamer by the *deed* that

37 *GW* 7, 167: “freilich nicht einfach: das Gegenteil als die wahre Meinung herauslesen [...] diese utopischen Forderungen von Fall zu Fall auf ihr Gegenteil beziehen, um mitteninne das wirklich >Gemeinte< zu finden”. This should importantly nuance Smith’s (1986, p. xii) claim to the effect that to read something dialectically means to read it «as the contrary of what is meant.”

38 Smith’s translation. See also “Platos Denken in Utopien” (*GW* 7, 284, 286, 288-289) for later, persistent emphasis on the “Staat der Erziehung”.

the dialogue consists in: it is as writer (*als Schriftsteller*) that Plato acts politically by calling people to philosophy and insisting on the importance of the philosophical education of the leaders responsible for the state (*mit dem Ruf zur Philosophie und mit der Forderung der philosophischen Erziehung der staatstragenden Führer*). (*GW 5*, 250) At the end of his essay, the philosopher reasserts the education that the *Republic*, as a dialogue, *is*, but also seems to extend the number of students of such an education to citizens in general. There, Gadamer writes that the requirement of rulers educated through philosophy can only mean one thing (*das aber heißt: es gibt hier überhaupt nur eines*): “the grounding of a state in words is just the educational cultivation that in each state makes the state possible: the just disposition of its citizens towards the state (*Gründung eines Staates in Worten ist nur der erziehende Aufbau des in jedem Staat den Staat Ermöglichenden: der rechten Staatsgesinnung seiner Bürger*).”<sup>39</sup> (*GW 5*, 262)

The significance of this shift – from the need to educate rulers through philosophy to the need to educate all the citizens through philosophy – transforms, it seems to me, the face of the *καλλίπολις*.<sup>40</sup> According to Gadamer’s understanding of the *Republic*, Plato’s intention is not so much an aristocratic society in which an elite is properly educated for the sake of ruling the majority, but a city in which all citizens are philosophically educated, presumably because all citizens may, somehow, be called to rule. What type of regime Gadamer has in mind is difficult to tell, but it clearly involves a greater political participation than what we actually observe in the *Republic*.<sup>41</sup> We must recall here that Gadamer thinks that we should *not* take Socrates at his word: read dialectically, the *καλλίπολις* becomes a city in which there is a mixture of philosophy and politics and this seems possible in a state where education plays an important role in the life of its citizens. In so far, philosophy plays a politically decisive role and can by no means be understood as an unpolitical activity.

Although Gadamer does not explicitly acknowledge an Aristotelian inspiration on these specific points – at least as far as I know – some parallels with Aristotle are striking enough to be paid attention to. In his *Politics*, not only does Aristotle deny the

39 In “Plato und die Dichter”, the *Republic* is also interpreted as aiming at education, that is, to an “Erziehung des staatlichen Menschen”, an “Erziehung zum Staat” (*GW 5* 197).

40 This inclusivity or at least the claim to be inclusive is a feature of Gadamer’s reading of the *Republic* that has been rightly underlined by Fuyarchuk (2010, p. 188-190). In fact, Gadamer even includes Cephalus’ understanding of justice as hinting towards the association of justice with knowledge (*GW 7*, 253; *DD 78*), making a place for him in the *καλλίπολις* whereas he is in fact the only character that Plato makes disappear from the dramatic setting.

41 Sullivan (1989, 169) explains Gadamer’s view in terms of an “Aristotelian image” of the *polis*, though he does not refer to a specific regime. Recently, Wallhof (2016) has argued that Gadamer’s position is more specifically a democratic one.

possibility of Plato's ideal city, but advocates for a mixed regime (τῆς συνθέσεως καὶ μίξεως, μεμεῖχθαι or ταῖς εὖ κεκραμέναις πολιτείαις), the so-called polity (ἡ καλουμένη πολιτεία), in which there is a larger political participation than in aristocracies such as the καλλίπολις (*Pol.* IV.9.1294a31-35, 1294b14 ff.; V.8.1307b30).<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, Aristotelian politics emphasize *above all* (μάλιστα) the importance of education for any proper legislation (*Pol.* VIII.1337a12). Aristotle argues that such education, albeit relative to each regime,<sup>43</sup> should sustain affection (φιλία) for the established regime, great capacity for the works or rule (δύναμιν μεγίστην τῶν ἔργων τῆς ἀρχῆς) as well as virtue and justice (ἀρετὴν καὶ δικαιοσύνην, *Pol.* V.9.1309a34-36). This appears quite close to what Gadamer means by *der rechten Staatsgesinnung* of the citizens. As for the extension of such an education to the general body of citizens, Aristotle appears again quite relevant to the Gadamerian approach: "Since there is a single end for the city as a whole, it is evident that education must necessarily be one and the same for all (φανερὸν ὅτι καὶ τὴν παιδεῖαν μίαν καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι πάντων), and that the superintendence (ἐπιμέλεια) of it should be common and not on a private basis (κοινὴν καὶ μὴ κατ' ἰδίαν)" (*Pol.* VIII.1.1337a21-24).<sup>44</sup> The remaining question therefore concerns the nature of such a common education to virtuous citizenship. Specifically, what should be determined is whether philosophy plays a role in Aristotle's political reflections on education. This question is a very difficult one and cannot be settled here.<sup>45</sup> At any rate, if we read the *Republic* straightforwardly, it is

42 Given that in the mixed regime, there are elections (like in an oligarchy), but these are not based on assessment (like in a democracy) – see *Pol.* IV.9.1294b11-13. The fact that, in a mixed regime, no office is selected by lot makes it more likely for education to influence the selection of the leaders.

43 This does not mean that education should serve to flatter the inner tendencies of each regime: "But to be educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but rather the things by which the former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a regime that is run democratically (ἔστι δὲ τὸ πεπαιδεῦσθαι πρὸς τὴν πολιτείαν οὐ τοῦτο, τὸ ποιεῖν οἷς χαίρουσιν οἱ ὀλιγαρχοῦντες ἢ οἱ δημοκρατίαν βουλόμενοι, ἀλλ' οἷς δυνήσονται οἱ μὲν ὀλιγαρχεῖν οἱ δὲ δημοκρατεῖσθαι)." (*Pol.* V.9.1310a219-22)

44 How we should understand this oneness and sameness is not immediately clear. As I understand it, Aristotle simply indicates that education should be homogenous enough among the citizens so as to foster a true sense of *community* and avoid great disparities among the political body. To achieve this, a greater accessibility than what we see in the education of the guardians in the *Republic*, and a certain leveling of the content of education seems necessary.

45 Aristotle raises the problem subtly by saying that it is unclear whether (δῆλον οὐδὲν πότερον) one should be trained in "extraordinary [or superfluous] things (τὰ περιττά)" (*Pol.* VIII.2.1337a40-42). He also claims that it is "not unfree to share in some of the liberal sciences *up to a certain point* (ἔστι δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐλευθερίων ἐπιστημῶν μέχρι μὲν τινὸς ἐνίων μετέχειν οὐκ ἀνελεύθερον, 1337b15-16; my emphasis)" without indicating what would be the proper limits (or what would be too much precision [ἀκρίβεια]). When stating that a well-educated citizen should be able to "be occupied in correct fashion

difficult to argue that Plato promotes a philosophical education for everyone, for the path of dialectic may not be accessible to the citizens who do not have a philosophical nature. Gadamer may be aware of this difficulty, since, at the end of “Platos Staat der Erziehung,” he explicitly brackets the issue of the philosophical education to dialectic (*GW* 5, 262). By putting this crucial issue in parentheses, our philosopher does not mean to avoid it simply. As he recognizes that a treatment of the properly philosophical education would “lead [us] beyond the Idea of Justice and towards the Idea of the Good and hence beyond each individual Idea”, he says: “it [the philosophical education to dialectic] is not the doctrine of Ideas, but rather presupposes it.”<sup>46</sup>

Gadamer’s interpretation of the *καλλίπολις* as a utopia conveys the image of a state of education that is much less aristocratic than the explicit model and that resembles that developed by Aristotle in his *Politics*. By loosening the elitism that one finds in Plato’s ideal regime understood *à la lettre*, Gadamer enables an indirect rule of philosophy through civic education and thereby confers to philosophy an eminently political role. Moreover, by asserting that the philosophical education in this mixed form of political community *presupposes* the doctrine of the Ideas, Gadamer directs our sight towards his own interpretation of the Platonic theory of Forms, an interpretation that, in this case, *explicitly* acknowledges a debt to Aristotle’s critique of Plato. Since Gadamer’s approach to the *Republic* is coherent, its account of dialectic and the Ideas is compatible with his views on the education that takes place in a utopian educational state.

### 3. DOWNPLAYING THE FORMS

Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato’s famous “doctrine” of the Ideas is strongly inspired by Aristotle’s critique of the “friends of the Forms,” yet in quite a peculiar way. In fact, it draws both on the critique of a “separation” (*χωρισμός*) of the Ideas from material beings and on the rejection of a mathematical structured ontology, but, contrary to the Aristotelian charges against Platonism, it claims that the *χωρισμός* of the

but also to be capable of being at leisure in noble fashion (*μη̄ μόνον ἀσχολεῖν ὀρθῶς ἀλλὰ καὶ σχολάζειν δύνασθαι καλῶς*, VIII.3.1337b32),” he does not point towards philosophy as much as towards noble music. In the *Republic*, those who will be guardians go through an important process of poetic education that aims at instilling in their soul a longing for the *καλόν* (395c ff.), only the rulers have a philosophical education and the craftsmen, we gather, are excluded from both of these. In Aristotle’s polity, there are no *citizen* is excluded from the common education: it is a much less elitist model.

<sup>46</sup> *GW* 5, 262: “Sie führt über die Idee der Gerechtigkeit hinaus zur Idee des Guten und so über jede einzelne Idee hinaus. Sie ist nicht Ideenlehre, sondern setzt diese voraus”.



Ideas is *not* Plato's view and that it is precisely the arithmetic structure of the Ideas that helps us overcome the χωρισμός problem. This will lead Gadamer to conclude that Plato's understanding of the Good is in the end closer than one might think to Aristotle's view.

Gadamer emphatically states: "Plato war kein Platoniker der zwei Welten lehrte" (*GW* 7, 331). He sees much evidence of this throughout the *corpus platonicum*, starting with the fact that the *Parmenides* anticipates most of the arguments we find in Aristotle's discussion of the problem of the χωρισμός (e.g. *GW* 7, 344). Plato did not mean to separate the Ideas from the world but to think through their relation with the world, a relation that he coined with the puzzling term of "participation" (μέθεξις). Μέθεξις was always for Gadamer the fundamental path to understanding Plato's ontology, and, in fact, his whole philosophy. Discussing Aristotle's problematic identification of μέθεξις and μίμησις, Gadamer clarifies a little further the meaning of the former:

When the stars bring the numbers to representation through their paths, we call this representation "mimesis" and take it to be an approximation of the actual being [*Annäherung an das eigentlich Seiende*]. In contrast to this, "methexis" is a wholly formal relationship of participation, based on mutuality [*Gegenseitigkeit*]. "Mimesis" always points in the direction of that which one approaches, or towards which one is oriented, when one represents something. "Methexis", however, as the Greek μετά already signifies, implies that one thing is there together with something else [*daß es mit dem anderen zusammen da ist*]. Participation, μεταλαμβάνειν, completes itself only in genuine being-together and belonging together [*Zusammensein und Zusammengehören*], μετέχειν.<sup>47</sup> (*GW* 7, 246; *PP*, 262)

The reciprocity implied in μέθεξις precludes in fact any two-world χωρισμός. Gadamer goes as far as saying that "the *chorismos* is on the contrary a doctrine of Aristotle and not of Plato."<sup>48</sup> (*GW* 7, 281) Here is not the proper place to discuss Gadamer's understanding of Aristotle's unmoved mover as a being that is *actually separated* from the physical world and thus as the exemplary foundation of onto-theology. Suffice it to say that Aristotle's critique of an ontological separation in Plato is, on a Gadamerian view, seriously misguided. Aristotle's χωρισμός "goes beyond Plato's mathematizing

47 Translation by Findling and Gabova. In his commentary on the *Sophist*, "Dialektik ist nicht Sophistik - Theätet lernt das im >Sophistes", Gadamer translates μέθεξις as *Mitdasein* and explains: ">Teilhabe< und >Teilnahme< bedeutet hier nicht ein Haben ode rein Nehmen, sondern ein Sein" (*GW* 7, 362).

48 See also *GW* 7, 380: "Es ist also nicht Plato, sondern Aristoteles der Urheber der Zweiweltenlehre".

interpretation of the transcendence of the Good.”<sup>49</sup> (*GW* 7, 216) The key point, here, is precisely the mathematical orientation of Plato.<sup>50</sup> Of course, Aristotle knew that Platonic ontology is to be understood according to the model of mathematics, to which he preferred the model of natural beings.<sup>51</sup> But by critiquing a Platonic mathematizing of the world, Aristotle in fact provides us with great insights on the Ideas. Paradoxically, it is in light of these insights that Gadamer provides an interpretation that resists the χωρισμός accusation: Aristotle’s critique of the mathematical orientation of Plato’s ontology gives us weapons against his critique of the separation of the Ideas.

An important part of Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s mathematical model is the critique of the ideal numbers (εἰδητικοὶ ἀριθμοί) that one finds in Book A, M and N of his *Metaphysics*. According to this theory of eidetic numbers, all numbers – and eventually all Forms – proceed from the encounter between two eidetic numbers: the One and the indefinite Dyad. Instead of defending Plato against that theory by stipulating that such theory has no textual basis in the *corpus*, Gadamer reads Plato’s ontology in the light of it. By doing so, he is following rather closely the work of his old friend Jacob Klein on Greek mathematics.<sup>52</sup> In *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, Klein projects the theory of the ideal numbers as found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* M6-8 on Plato’s *Sophist*. According to Klein, eidetic numbers do not have per se a mathematical aim in Platonic philosophy:

*For Plato, however, it is precisely this unmathematical use of the arithmos structure which is essential. For the arithmoi eidetikoi are intended to make intelligible not only the inner articulation of the realm of ideas but every possible articulation, every possible division and conjunction – in short, all counting.*<sup>53</sup>

Klein argues that the “primal character of being” is “the effect of the ‘twofold in general,’ the ‘indeterminate dyad’ (ἀόριστος δυάς)”: “through the dyad, being is originally ‘alienated’ from itself.”<sup>54</sup> This original self-alienation of being can be seen in the *Sophist* in the fact that “being” (ὄν) is both rest (στάσις) and change (κίνησις), both same to itself (ταύτον) and other than itself (θάτερον). Among these μέγιστα γένη

49 “über Platos mathematisierende Deutung der Jenseitigkeit des Guten hinausgeht”.

50 This orientation is so important for Gadamer that he prefers to speak of Plato’s *Metamathematik* than of “metaphysics” (e.g. *GW* 7, 280). Boutet (2014, p. 476n26) also calls this fact to our attention.

51 See esp. *GW* 6, 82 ff.

52 Gadamer insisted on the fact that his thoughts on the doctrine of the One and the Dyad and Plato’s Forms preceded the birth of the Tübingen School and that it was not influenced by it. For an attestation of Klein’s influence, see *GW* 5, 159. See also Dostal 2010, 27n16, Renaud (2019, p. 356-357). On Gadamer and the Tübingen School, see Grondin (2010) and Renaud (2019, p. 362-364).

53 Klein (1992, p. 92)

54 Klein (1992, p. 82)

introduced by the Eleatic Stranger, Klein says, “the other’ is *the ‘ultimate source’ of all articulation whatsoever.*”<sup>55</sup> This is so because “otherness turns out to be the ontological aspect of ‘non-being,’ which can never be separated from ‘being.’”<sup>56</sup> Gadamer, it seems, does not think otherwise. At the end of an essay entitled “Mathematik und Dialektik bei Plato,” he writes: “Discerning is differentiating. And further: differentiating is never merely knowing the one. It is also, necessarily, knowing the other that it is not. Being is also non-being.”<sup>57</sup> (*GW* 7, 311) And, commenting directly on the five γένη in his essay on the *Sophist*, he stresses that sameness (*Selbigkeit*) and differentness (*Verschiedenheit*) are always there together with every being (*mit jedem Seienden mit da sind*). (*GW* 7, 361) The theory of ideal numbers therefore reveals for Gadamer, as it does for Klein, the twofoldness of being – being is both one and many, same and different.<sup>58</sup>

But, according to Gadamer, this arithmetic structure of the being echoes more directly another ontological pairing that one finds in the *Philebus* – the limit (πέρας) and the unlimited (ἄπειρον): “It is not only the Aristotelian report in *Metaphysics* A 6 on the two principles of the One and the indefinite Two from which all numbers, just like all being generally, is derived. The doctrine of the *peras* and the *apeiron*, that the *Philebus* brings, says the same.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, as Klein’s study shows<sup>60</sup> and as Aristotle testifies multiple times (*e.g.* *Met.* II.1035a30; I6.1056b23-24; N1.1088a5), a number is, in Greek thinking, a definite or limited plurality. Plurality is not the same as definite plurality; to say that there are horses in the field is not the same as saying that there are ten horses in the field<sup>61</sup>. The plurality is definite insofar as it is filtered through a unit: we can only say that there are ten horses in the field because we have the unit “horse” and apply it to a plurality of horses. Forms or Ideas have the structure of number insofar as they, too, delimit a plurality. Πέρας and ἄπειρον constitute, together, the “mixture” of

<sup>55</sup> Klein (1992, p. 95)

<sup>56</sup> Klein (1992, p. 96)

<sup>57</sup> “Erkennen ist Unterscheiden. Und weiter: Unterscheiden ist niemals nur Kennen des einen. Es ist notwendig auch das Kennen des anderen, das es nicht ist. Sein ist auch Nicht-Sein.”

<sup>58</sup> For discussions of the importance of the doctrine of the One and the indefinite Dyad in Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato, see Renaud (1999, p. 71-75; 2019, p. 356-357, 362-364, 366), Risser (2002, p. 223-226), Dostal (2010, p. 30-33), Boutet (2014, p. 475-476), Gibson (2016, p. 21-23).

<sup>59</sup> *GW* 7, 215: “Es is ja nicht nur der aristotelische Bericht in *Met.* A 6 über die Zwei Prinzipien der Eins und der unbestimmten Zwei aus denen wie alle Zahlen, so auch alles Seiende überhaupt abgeleitet wird. Das Gleiche sagt die Lehre von >Peras< und >Apeiron<, die der >Philebos< bringt”. See also *GW* 7, 192: “Man is im ganzen platonischen Dialogwerk nirgends so nahe wie hier an der aristotelischen Nebenüberlieferung von den beiden Prinzipien des Einen und der unbestimmten Zweierheit”. Although he prefers treating the question through the γένη of the *Sophist*, Klein (1992, p. 92) too refers to the πέρας-ἄπειρον couple of the *Philebus* when discussing eidetic numbers.

<sup>60</sup> Klein (1992, p. 46-60, esp. p. 51.)

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *GW* 7, 195: “Es ist ein Vieles, aber nicht ein unbestimmtes Vieles, sondern so und so viel.”

being. Just as there is no *πέρας* without *ἄπειρον*, and just as there cannot be any *ἄπειρον* that is intelligible without a certain *πέρας*, *Ideas cannot be separated from the actual beings that they delimit*. Gadamer calls this the “self-evidence of the participation of the particular to the general [*die Selbstverständlichkeit der Teilhabe des Einzelnen am Allgemeinen*].” (*GW* 7, 192) It is interesting to note at this point that, thus presented, the Platonic Forms do not seem to differ much from Aristotle’s *εἰδή*, and the mixture of *πέρας* and *ἄπειρον* from Aristotelian hylomorphism.<sup>62</sup> Following the path of *μέθεξις*, we are, it seems, radically downplaying the transcendence of the Ideas.<sup>63</sup>

This downplaying becomes even more evident when we follow Gadamer a step further and turn to the Idea of the Good. For, as we know, the Good is said by Plato’s Socrates to be “beyond being (*ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*, *Rep.* VI 509b)”. The way Gadamer reads this heavy transcendence of the Good is decisive for his whole interpretation of Plato’s metaphysics. According to him, the *ἐπέκεινα* should be understood as a *withdrawal* or a *flight*: “It itself, *αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθόν*, withdraws itself (*entzieht sich*).” (*GW* 7, 198). One might want to pause here and ask what does it mean for the Good to withdraw itself. Gadamer’s answer to this question is to be found most explicitly in *Wahrheit und Methode*: the Good is absolutely ungraspable (*schlechthin ungreifbar*, *GW* 1, 284). The other question that immediately comes to mind is: *where* does the Good escape? And this is the crucial point. Gadamer thinks that we must read the *ἐπέκεινα* of the Good in the *Republic* as the *mythical* counterpart<sup>64</sup> of the flight of the Good in the Beautiful that is described in the *Philebus*: “I hope to have made credible that this is the mythical form in which Plato essentially expresses what he makes explicit in the *Philebus* when he says that the Good ‘appears’ in the Beautiful (*das Gute im Schönen >erscheint<*) [...] That is the meaning of the statement that the Good takes refuge in the Beautiful (*daß das Gute in dem Schönen seine Zuflucht nehme*)”. (*GW* 7, 198) Unlike the completely ungraspable Good, the Beautiful is the one among all of Plato’s Ideas that must always, by its most shining and disclosing (*ἐκφανέστατον*) essence, *appear to our senses*, as Gadamer recalls from the *Phaedrus* (250d; *GW* 7194). Connecting the *ἐπέκεινα* of the Good to its flight in the Beautiful is the interpretive move that allows Gadamer to transform the alleged transcendence of the Good into

62 On this point, see Lynch (2013, p. 61).

63 *Contra* Fruchon (1994, p. 363), who argues that Gadamer urges us to understand “differently” the transcendence of the Good. This is a euphemism: what Gadamer calls the “mathematizing” interpretation of the transcendence of the Good is, according to his reading at least, very close to a suppression of this transcendence. Renaud (1999, p. 76-81; 2019, p. 364) is right to say that there is rather an immanence of the Good, just as there is a priority of the Dyad over the One.

64 On this reduction of the *ἐπέκεινα* to a mythical expression, see Gonzalez (2017, p. 624-626).

immanent appearance.<sup>65</sup> But what does it mean to say that the Good appears through the Beautiful? In *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer explains himself as follows:

Plato defines the Beautiful through measure, adequateness and proportionality; Aristotle states as the moments (*eidē*) of the Beautiful order (*taxis*), good proportionality (*symmetria*) and definition (*hōrismenon*), and finds these given in an exemplary manner in mathematics [...] Conformity to measure, symmetry is the decisive condition of all beauty.<sup>66</sup> (*GW I*, 482-483)

Gadamer's implicit references here are Plato's *Philebus* (64e5) and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (M3.1078a31-b5).<sup>67</sup> Let us note that the reference to Aristotle here is somewhat problematic. In this passage, Aristotle is in fact critiquing the Platonists for conflating the ἀγαθόν and the καλόν and suggests that whereas the καλόν can be found both in in immovable things (ἀκινήτοις) and actions (πράξει), the good only exists in actions. Therefore, Gadamer is once again interpreting an Aristotelian critique of Plato as part of Plato's own thinking. The appearing of the Good through the Beautiful is recognizable through order, proportion and symmetry. In the *Philebus*, this appearing takes the form of the good life, which is itself the proper mixture of pleasure and thought, respectively determined ontologically by the ἄπειρον and the πέρρας. Gadamer takes this one step further by claiming that the proper ordering of this mixture reflects the good statesman's art of measuring as it is presented in Plato's *Statesman*.<sup>68</sup> These criteria of the *Statesman* are very much immanent: the measure, the fitting, the right moment or occasion and what is required (τὸ μέτριον καὶ τὸ πρέπον καὶ τὸ καιρὸν καὶ τὸ δέον, 284e5). This connection adds something decisive to Gadamer's interpretation of the Good: temporality. In fact, if the Good orders the proper mixture of limitedness and unlimitedness according to the καιρός, this means that the Good is *relative* to temporally determined circumstances: the proper ordering is a timely, transient good ordering and not a good ordering *simpliciter*. Needless to say, this strongly

65 I think it is right to say with Failla (2009, p. 82) that there is a primacy (*Vorzug*) of the Beautiful over the Good in Gadamer's interpretation.

66 "Plato bestimmt das Schöne durch Maß, Angemessenheit und Proportioniertheit, Aristoteles nennt als die Momente (*eidē*) des Schönen Ordnung (*taxis*), Wohlproportioniertheit (*symmetria*) und Bestimmtheit (*hōrismenon*) und findet dieselben in der Mathematik in exemplarischer Weise gegeben [...] Maßangemessenheit, Symmetrie ist die entscheidende Bedingung alles Schönen."

67 This line of the *Philebus* is explicitly quoted, however, in *Die Idee des Guten* (*GW 7*, 193) to underline the importance of measure (μετρίότης) and symmetry (συμμετρία) in the appearing of the Beautiful.

68 *GW 7*, 197: "In etwas anderer Perspektive scheint sich mir diese der aristotelischen Kritik so entschieden zuvorkommende Lehre auch im >Politikos< zu spiegeln."

echoes Aristotelian ethics and its insistence on the kairological and relative character of the human good.<sup>69</sup>

By reading the Platonic problem of the Good through Aristotle's critiques and insights – concerning the χωρισμός, the doctrine of ideal numbers and the relation between the good and the beautiful – Gadamer performs an interpretation that seriously downplays the transcendence of the Ideas, or rather, that transforms this transcendence into the immanence that he sees as the Platonic insight into human finitude.<sup>70</sup> With Gadamer's understanding of Plato's ontology in the direction of immanent criteria for human action, we begin to see in what sense a philosophical education could be relevant to citizenship and the political community as a whole. The inquiry into being directs us not *outside* the cave, but rather *inside*, that is, to politically relevant categories. The characteristics of the being whose understanding is the task of philosophy correspond to immanent criteria that ground the philosopher's activity in concrete practical circumstances and make it possible to actually grasp the Ideas *while* accomplishing the political task of educating the citizens. Such transfiguration of Plato's ontological reflections leads us towards an understanding of philosophical wisdom that is in tune with the political task of philosophy. We may now turn to this last step of Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's *Republic*.

#### 4. HERMENEUTICS: PHILOSOPHY AS ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ

According to Aristotle, the kind of wisdom that the philosopher seeks, σοφία, is the knowledge of the highest or most divine things (τὰ περιττά, τὰ θαυμαστά, τὰ δαμόνια), which are by nature the most difficult to know (τὰ χαλεπά, *NE VI 7 1141b4-5*). Most importantly, σοφία is knowledge of the universal (τὸ καθόλου), of what is always true (*cf. NE VI 6 1140b30; VI 7 1141a19 and VI 7 1141b14-15*). Such objects of knowledge are foreign to the moral and political realm: the good is not

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer in fact claims radically: "Man findet hier geradezu die Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Ethik." (*GW 7*, 197)

<sup>70</sup> See *GW 1*, 489: "Der >Vorschein< des Schönen scheint der menschlich-endlichen Erfahrung vorbehalten." Gadamer could have interpreted in this direction the fact that the flight of the Good in the Beautiful in the *Philebus* is what happens *for us* (ἡμῶν, 64e4). He could have argued, for instance, that the "us" does not refer only to the interlocutors in the specific discussion of the dialogue (as does Thomas A. Szlezák, cited in Gonzalez [2017, p. 624n23]), but rather to "us, human beings". I think that by eclipsing this implicit distinction in Plato as what is *for us* and what is *in itself*, Gadamer transforms the Platonic recognition of human finitude into the temporality and historicity of being (*cf. Renaud [1999, p. 71]*), as it will appear more clearly in section IV of this paper.

universal, for good actions are good according to specific contexts and times (*NEI* 6 1096a11-29). The mutability of moral and political affairs is the reason why Aristotle thinks that the good is not the object of σοφία and why he therefore sharply contrasts theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom or prudence (φρόνησις): “nobody deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise” (*NEVI* 5 1140a33).<sup>71</sup> Plato did not develop conceptual distinctions such as Aristotle’s with regards to wisdom: it is well known that his use of φρόνησις is much broader and includes instances of both practical and theoretical knowledge. He did, however, conceptualize the Idea of the Good, a principle that is said to be unchangeable and eternal, and that is, in *this respect* at least, to be grasped by the kind of wisdom that Aristotle would call σοφία rather than deliberated about through what Aristotle calls φρόνησις. Admittedly, Aristotle’s new insights on φρόνησις are a response to the Platonic problem of the Good: the same type of wisdom cannot grasp both the changing beings that one encounters within practical life *and* an eternal and immutable being. Yet, according to Gadamer’s interpretation of this problem, Plato’s Idea of the Good is deeply related to the kind of rationality that Aristotelian φρόνησις just is. Of course, he is eager to see this type of practical rationality at work in Plato’s φρόνησις, and especially in the Socratic art of dialogue and dialectic.<sup>72</sup> It is, at any rate, hardly deniable that there is a practical moment or aspect involved in the Platonic knowledge of the Good; but there is also a deeply theoretical moment, an aspect of this wisdom that must transcend the temporality and situatedness of action

71 Gadamer insists on the idea that wisdom in its full sense should encompass *both* types of knowledge – see *GW* 10, 240: “Und wenn Aristoteles um der Klarheit der Begriffe willen beides, Sophia und Phronesis, als Tugenden der Theorie und der Praxis voneinander geschieden hat, so werden wir der verborgenen Einheit beider erst recht nachdenken dürfen, die der Genius der griechischen Sprache für uns verwahrt hat. Die »Weisheit« zeigt sich im theoretischen wie im praktischen Bereich und besteht am Ende in der Einheit von Theorie und Praxis. Das Wort »Sophia« sagt das.” Yet, throughout his work, Gadamer repeats relentlessly that only *philosophy*, and not σοφία or *Weisheit*, is accessible to us.

72 For instance, in the introduction to his translation of the Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*ANE*, 12, 15), Gadamer argues that since φρόνησις allows an understanding of the other (*Verstehen des Anderen*), it is a fundamental hermeneutic virtue (*hermeneutische Grundtugend*) such that Aristotle has pursued further the intention of the socratic dialogue and Platonic dialectic (*hat in Wahrheit die Intention des sokratischen Dialogs und der platonischen Dialektik weitergeführt*). Fruchon (1994) has also spoken of a “socratisme de la *phronêsis*” in Gadamer’s Platonism. Cf. Renaud (2019, p. 352): “Gadamer will seek in his first major publication (1931), and especially after 1960, to fuse Aristotle’s *phronêsis* and Platonic dialectic.” Conversely, Gadamer – although he emphasizes most of the time the importance of the Aristotelian difference between practical and theoretical knowledge (e.g. *GW* 7, 217-218) – tries at times to minimize the extent to which σοφία is only theoretical and φρόνησις only practical. See on the latter point *GW* 6, 240: “Die begriffliche Unterscheidung von »Sophia« als nur theoretischer und »Phronesis« als nur praktischer Tugend ist künstlich und wird von Aristoteles nur um der begrifflichen Klärung willen getroffen.”

if it is to grasp what is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας<sup>73</sup> – and this latter moment or aspect is just what Gadamer is eager to deny. Therefore, in interpreting the wisdom that grasps the Idea of the Good through the Beautiful as φρόνησις, he is not simply playing on the ambiguity of Platonic φρόνησις: he is transforming the Platonic philosopher into an Aristotelian φρόνιμος. This interpretation is the peak of Gadamer’s thought, as the title of his eponymous book announces, that the Idea of the Good lies “between Plato and Aristotle”.

Plato’s discovery of the Ideas owes to his famous second-sailing, his turn to the λόγοι. As early as his *Habilitationschrift*, Gadamer translates the turn to the λόγοι as a turn to language, to *Sprache* (e.g. *GW 5*, 52).<sup>74</sup> It is therefore not a coincidence that we also find a discussion of the withdrawal of the Good in the Beautiful in the last section of *Wahrheit und Methode* devoted to language and truth. As this constitutes admittedly the culmination of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, we find there the ultimate articulation of truth and being as well as an insight on the type of knowledge that can grasp such truth. In this last section of *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer famously asserts that all “being that can be understood is language (*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*).” (*GW 1*, 478) This is so because every understandable being must bear some meaning, and there is no meaning that does not come to be in language. Gadamer calls this phenomenon the “speculative structure” of language, where the word “speculative” should not be understood as highly theoretical or as pointing towards something transcendent, but must rather be understood according to its Latin origin, *speculum*: language *reflects, mirrors* what is meant. In his commentary on Plato’s texts on the *Ideenlehre*, Gadamer defines the Idea with the very same terms that he uses in *Wahrheit und Methode* to speak of *Sprache*: “the ideality of the meaning of the word” (*die Idealität der Bedeutung im Worte/des Wortes*, cf. *GW 1*, 421; *PTI*, 82). But interpreting the transcendence of the Idea as the ideality of the meaning of words in language is precisely downplaying transcendence, diluting it into immanence. For Gadamer does not think that every word is ontologically tied to a fixed

<sup>73</sup> Gadamer himself acknowledges that, grasped theoretically, as opposed to practically, the good is an *immutable being*, – *GW 7*, 217-28: “das, was so in theoretischer Hinsicht als ‘gut’ begegnet und die *Unveränderlichkeit des Seins* meint, etwas anderes ist als das Tunliche, auf das die praktische Vernünftigkeit des Menschen ausgerichtet ist” (my emphasis).

<sup>74</sup> See also Renaud (1999, p. 145). This translation continues in *Wahrheit und Methode* (*GW 1*, 119). In the later translation we find in *Plato. Texte zur Ideenlehre* (1978), the turn to the λόγοι becomes a turn to *Rede*. I agree with Renaud (2019, p. 360) that this translation does not represent a break but rather a continuity with the turn to *Sprache* and *Sprachlichkeit*.



meaning that it always reflects.<sup>75</sup> The speculative work of language is a much more complex and circumstantially structured phenomenon. Rather, what happens is that when we express ourselves, we intend a certain meaning by using specific words that are likely to disclose this meaning considering the whole context and situatedness of this expression.

The experience of truth in language therefore requires that we chose the *right* words to bring our meaning into light. These words must be *measured* and *proportionate* to the thing or the experience that they are meant to describe, but they therefore must be measured and proportionate to the circumstances in which they are used. Now, let us recall the Gadamerian affinity between language, λόγος and Idea. By putting words on a multiform and equivocal experience, language, just as the Ideas and numbers, *limits some unlimitedness*. But since the Idea of the Good has to take refuge in the appearing of the Beautiful, it only appears to us as the fitting, the opportune, as what is proportionate to the moment and place in which it shines forth. Similarly, *words are not always the right words*: the expression of meaning through this unification of experience in language is always transient and must therefore always be resumed over and over again.<sup>76</sup> This is why the kairological aspect of the Good hinted at in Gadamer's interpretation of its withdrawal in the Beautiful is given in *Wahrheit und Methode* the radical meaning of an *event (Geschehen)*.<sup>77</sup> If what gives truth to any being is the Good (*Rep.* 508e2-3) and if the Good only appears to us in the shining-forth of the Beautiful that one finds in λόγοι, in *Sprache*, then truth itself has the character of an event (*Ereignischarakter*; *GW 1*, 488).<sup>78</sup> If being and truth are so strongly determined by the

75 Such a conclusion could arise from a literal reading of Plato's *Cratylus*. Gadamer rather thinks that Socrates is ironic in the *Cratylus*, so ironic in fact that he dissociates language and ontology (*GW 1*, 411).

76 Following Risser's (2002, p. 228-229) analysis: "The task of hermeneutics is to find the right word. [...] The right word as the event of truth that appears from within human speaking is accordingly the very coming to language to help language. This seemingly awkward expression makes perfect sense when we realize that language, as *Logos*, is that multiplicity that follows the order of being that is one and two. And when the right word appears, it is also a word for its time, as we now from the attempt to speak against the silence of death where no word is able to find its time. When the right word does appear, i.e. removes itself from silence or its solidity, becoming in effect in a living world, we also know that it is not the last word, at least not for the living-with-one-another. In our incarnate living-with-one-another there is always the future of the word." See also Boutet (2014, p. 480) on the right word.

77 See Risser (2002, p. 229) and Boutet (2014, p. 481-482). That this *Geschehen* and *Ereignis* must be understood in terms of *Zeitlichkeit* and *Geschichtlichkeit* is confirmed in Gadamer's essay entitled "Was ist Wahrheit?" (*GW 2*, 56).

78 Smith (1991, p. 33, 41) is right to underline the event-character of Gadamer's conception of language but by opposing this conception to Plato's theory of the Ideas, he neglects to see how immanentist Gadamer's interpretation of the Ideas is. One should also avoid Smith's opposition between a dialogical

temporal situation in which they are disclosed, they are not transcendent and there cannot be any theoretical knowledge of them, at least not in the Aristotelian sense sketched above. But, given this very situatedness, neither can there be any technical knowledge of them. This is why Gadamer emphasizes practical reason, and indeed Aristotle's *φρόνησις*, as the model of rationality that befits philosophical hermeneutics (*GW I*, 317-329). That philosophy must become hermeneutics means that philosophizing must be limited in its scope and ambitions by the resources of *φρόνησις*. What it discloses is never a universal truth but truths that are temporally, historically situated, that are attuned to the finitude of human existence (*GW I*, 489). And, as we see in a passage already quoted above, the political boundedness that we find ourselves in is due to the fact that we are finite beings: "*We are mortals and not gods. [...] The characterization of the practical life as the second best life in the Aristotelian scheme means only that the theoretical life would be fine if we were gods; but we are not.*"<sup>79</sup>

This transformation of Platonic philosophy into Aristotelian *φρόνησις* in Gadamer's hermeneutics has a significant impact on his understanding of the *Republic*. If the Good is downplayed to the criteria of measure, proportions, and appropriateness to circumstances, the philosopher who attempts to seek it is in fact no one else than the *φρόνιμος*. And, of course, the *φρόνιμος* is the one who navigates the political world best (e.g. *ANE*, 10; *GW 10*, 239). In the context of the *Republic*, this means that the *καλλίπολις* is not a city governed by the few wise ones, but by *prudent citizens*. Whether any citizen can truly become prudent in the full sense is not a question that Gadamer raises. But, in all likelihood, the route to prudence in its Aristotelian meaning is more accessible than the theoretical ascent to the immutable and eternal.<sup>80</sup> Not only does this explain how philosophical education can be spread out more broadly throughout the political community; it also supports the view that philosophical education accomplishes a political function.<sup>81</sup> According to Gadamer's reading of the *Republic*, even the person who dedicates his existence to the pursuit of the highest wisdom – knowledge of the Forms – cannot escape his political situation in any significant sense, for this wisdom turns out to be nothing else than *φρόνησις*: the philosopher cannot live an unpolitical life.

and a metaphysical Platonism, an irrelevant and inoperative opposition when it comes to Gadamer's reading of Plato.

79 Gadamer in Fortin (1984, p. 12-13); my emphasis.

80 Gadamer never doubts that *φρόνησις* is accessible to human beings (not to each one of us, to be sure), but he repeatedly casts doubt on our capacity to be *σοφοί*.

81 Fuyarchuk (2010, p. 153) claims that in Gadamer's interpretation of the *Republic*, "justice is realized when the citizens become philosophers." This is true if we add this important qualification: philosophy, on Gadamer's account, has more to do with *φρόνησις* than *σοφία* (in Aristotle's sense).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that Gadmerian hermeneutics may not represent a full-blown political philosophy, Gadamer's reading of Plato's *Republic* shows that he does not conceive of philosophy as an unpolitical activity or way of life. Extremely unorthodox, sometimes strange but yet staggeringly brilliant in its own way, his understanding of the Good as a Platonic-Aristotelian problem leads him instead to a harmonious articulation of philosophy and politics. Theoretical philosophizing cannot be properly understood as unpolitical because it is both limited and informed by the political world of human facticity. There is *no* unpolitical existence and if one would act as if there was, he would blind himself to the situatedness of all possible understanding:

We remain embedded in the social structures and the normative perspectives in which we were reared and must recognize that we are part of a development that always proceeds on the basis of some preshaped view. Ours is a fundamentally and inescapably hermeneutical situation with which we have to come to terms via a mediation of the practical problems of politics and society with the theoretical life.<sup>82</sup>

Conversely, the political is shaped by philosophy insofar as it deals with the contingent and temporal dimensions of truth that structure the human good. The philosopher therefore can (and ought to) play a fundamental political role through civic education. Whereas his friend and interlocutor Leo Strauss argued that the Platonic-Aristotelian philosopher transcends his city by the very act of philosophizing, and becomes from that moment a stranger to his political community, Gadamer thought that such unpolitical stance for philosophy was absolutely impossible. Whereas the former thought that the rule of philosopher-kings is essentially impossible and that philosophy and politics “tend away from one another in opposite directions”,<sup>83</sup> the latter believed that what Plato truly aims at is an indirect influence of philosophy on politics through the education of prudent citizens. In light of this “minimalist Platonism”, we are in a better position to understand why Gadamer thought that the ideal city is always somehow present in every existing city.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Gadamer in Fortin (1984, p. 13). In *Vernunft in Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*, Gadamer speaks of a primacy (*Vorrang*) of both θεωρία and πράξις in Aristotle (*VZW*, 108). Despite this Gadamerian harmonious view of the relation of the theoretical and the practical, it must be recalled that what grounds this harmony is a transformation of theoretical knowledge into practical knowledge (as shown especially in section IV). I must therefore agree with Renaud (2019, p. 351) when he writes that “the unity and reciprocity of practice and theory implied in this conception ultimately means the primacy of the practical”.

<sup>83</sup> Strauss (1964, p. 125).

<sup>84</sup> I borrow this expression from Beiner (2014); Gadamer's phrase is quoted as an epigraph to this essay.

However, Gadamer's harmonizing interpretation of philosophy and politics in the *Republic* does not go without raising a certain number of important questions. First, one can wonder whether Gadamer is being honest with Plato and Aristotle in this mixture of his. For example, it is dubious that the ἐπέκεινα of the Good is just a mythical expression of the flight of the Good in the Beautiful that we find in the *Philebus*. But even if it was, Gadamer does not even mention the fact that the Good does not take refuge in the Beautiful *simpliciter*, but rather *for us* (ἡμῶν, *Phil.* 64e4). The fact that the Good appears *to us* through the Beautiful does not necessarily mean that the Good *really has* the appearing structure of the Beautiful. They are, after all, two distinct notions both according to Plato's "doctrine" of the Ideas and Aristotle's critical view. Could not Plato intend to signal the human *failure* to grasp the Good – even through philosophy – rather than to downplay the criteria of moral and political action? What such failure could mean with regards to the political relevance of philosophers? Is not downplaying the Ideas and reducing the aims of philosophy to the discerning activity of φρόνησις a way of eclipsing both Plato and Aristotle's picture of the philosophic life, of its nature and its theoretical ambitions?<sup>85</sup>

This worry is closely related to another, perhaps more fundamental issue. Gadamer's enterprise of engaging philosophy in a radical hermeneutic turn at once broadens the traditional objects of philosophical inquiry and lowers its aspiration to discover some stable truths about reality. Through hermeneutics, philosophy no longer aims at *explaining* reality by means of demonstrations, but only at *understanding* it, that is, of disclosing its *temporal, historical* meanings.<sup>86</sup> Yet, Gadamer's transcendental account of the structure of understanding does arguably more than providing an interpretation of interpretation: it provides an argumentative *explanation* of this structure by reflecting on its conditions of possibility, an explanation that, as such, should perhaps not put an end to the philosopher's attempt to explain what and how things are.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, Gadamer's transformation of philosophy into the hermeneutic disclosure of

85 In this sense, Beiner (2014, p. 132) legitimately asks: "*Is there something "post-philosophical" about Gadamer's philosophy?*"

86 Gonzalez (2012, p. 190-191) is right to say that there is no explicit distinction between explanation and understanding in Gadamer's hermeneutics. One could say that there is rather an absorption of *Erklären* into the historicity of *Verstehen*. There remains, in other words, an implicit primacy of understanding over explanation, a primacy that indicates that both tasks are understood differently. When Gonzalez (2006, p. 438) asserts the existence of a difference between hermeneutic understanding and proof, he is just getting at the distinction I wish to bring to attention. Paul Ricoeur (1986) deemed the disparity between *expliquer* and *comprendre* as an *alternative ruineuse* that – even though it originated in Dilthey more than in any other thinker – *remained to be overcome even after Gadamer*.

87 Renaud (2019, p. 369) also thinks that Gadamer's inquiry is transcendental in the Kantian sense, for it raises the question of the conditions of possibility of understanding.

truth-events owes a lot to his project of articulating harmoniously philosophy and politics. But if this transformation is the price that philosophy has to pay, maybe we should think twice before embracing the project of lowering our most theoretical endeavors to the limited realm of the political. By doing so, Gadamer was certainly attempting to attune philosophy to human finitude. Yet Plato and Aristotle knew how to acknowledge our finitude without reducing philosophy to practical rationality. And Gadamer's own highly theoretical work still testifies to the worth of a philosophizing that does not limit itself to prudential judgment.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> I am tempted to suggest that Gadamer's own philosophical work *on* hermeneutics is to Aristotle's practical philosophy what hermeneutic activity is to prudent moral and political action. Gadamer emphasizes the fact that practical philosophy *cannot* be called φρόνησις (e.g. *GW* 7, 218). It goes without saying that verifying this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this paper.

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