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PLATO AND GADAMER. ON THE CONCEPT OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

One of the most remarkable aspects of Plato's philosophy is its form of representation, i.e. his dialogues. From what Plato says in some of his texts (especially in *Phaedrus* and in the Seventh Letter) but also from the openness and ambiguity of his own thinking, as reflected in many of his writings, it seems evident that their dialogic structure is not only an external attribute. I shall argue that doing philosophy and doing it by means of dialogues are the same thing for Plato. Moreover, many aspects of modern hermeneutics can be recognised in the way Plato's dialogues are written. If we study the oeuvre of Hans-Georg Gadamer, this fact can be revealed particularly well. Gadamer, who called himself a "Platonist", was not only one of the most influential representatives of philosophical hermeneutics, but also an outstanding scholar of ancient philosophy. He often refers to Plato in his writings on hermeneutics, and his own conception of hermeneutics can be read in many aspects as a commentary on how Plato described "dialogic" thinking and reasoning. Both his explicit references and his own theory of hermeneutics may show Plato's influence on Gadamer's work. And, on the other hand, Gadamer's ideas can be made fruitful tools for interpreting the structure and scope of Plato's dialogues. Refs 16.

Keywords: Plato, Plato's dialogues, the Seventh Letter, Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics.

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ПЛАТОН И ГАДАМЕР О ПОНЯТИИ ФИЛОСОФСКОГО ДИАЛОГА

Одним из наиболее примечательных аспектов философии Платона является способ ее представления, ее диалогическая форма. На это указывает сам Платон в некоторых своих текстах (особенно в *Федре* и в *Седьмом письме*). Степень их открытости к обсуждению, связанная с отсутствием окончательной завершенности платоновской мысли, делает очевидным то обстоятельство, что диалогическая структура для философа — это не только внешний атрибут. Автор аргументированно доказывает, что философствование и философствование посредством диалогов для Платона тождественны. Более того, в платоновском искусстве диалога можно распознать многие аспекты современной герменевтики. Для подтверждения этого тезиса автор обращается к наследию Г.-Г. Гадамера, который сам называл себя «платоником». Выдающийся знаток античной философии, Гадамер считал платоновскую диалектику идеальной моделью герменевтической теории, а искусство вопросов и ответов — логической структурой, открывающей герменевтическое сознание. Автор демонстрирует, каким образом герменевтика Гадамера во многих ее аспектах может быть понята как комментарий к «диалогическому» и аргументативному способу мышления Платона. С другой стороны, идеи самого Гадамера могут служить богатым материалом для интерпретации структуры и наследия диалогов Платона. Библиогр. 16 назв.

Ключевые слова: Платон, диалоги Платона, Седьмое письмо, Г.Г. Гадамер, философская герменевтика.

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What is “understanding”? When Hans-Georg Gadamer tried to give an answer to this question, he published a treatise of several hundred pages in 1960, a book entitled “*Wahrheit und Methode*” (engl. “*Truth and Method*”) [1]. But even if this was a common and in a certain way “natural” procedure for an European academic in order to deal with a scientific problem, Gadamer himself was not entirely convinced whether it was the right and appropriate manner to deal with *such* a question. Trained not only in philosophy, but also in classics, Gadamer was a devoted reader of ancient philosophy from the very beginning of his academic life. In Plato he found an author who generally refused to write treatises or essays but who discussed all the questions he was interested in only in the literary form of philosophical dialogues. Plato went even further in declaring that he had never published any piece of his own thinking since writing down philosophical ideas, since, letting others read them could not be the right way of discussing those ideas and of establishing their truth. So the greatest philosopher of all times seemed to have never written a so-called “scientific text”! To Gadamer Plato’s position, uttered in his famous *Seventh Letter* which Gadamer always considered to be authentic¹, was not only an astonishing position but it was an especially provocative one. Therefore, Gadamer tried to understand the philosophical reasoning behind Plato’s attitude towards publishing and writing in philosophy. He tried to understand why particularly *truth* should be bound to real communication and should or could not be discussed with written texts. A key role in the study of this problem had to have the dialogic form of Plato’s published texts. If the words of the *Seventh Letter* (342 e seq.) and a similar position held in the *Phaedrus* (274 e seqq.) were to be taken seriously, then the dialogic form had to be understood as means of dealing with the “communicative” problem those words entail. The obvious difficulty behind it all was the following: How to address a reader with whom it was impossible to discuss? How to have a philosophical conversation with someone without being able to talk to each other?²

In his interpretation of Plato’s dialogues Gadamer was led to a deeper notion not only of philosophical communication, but of communication in a broader meaning. This notion of communication, later embedded in the notions of language and of human practice, was one of the pillars of Gadamer’s so-called *philosophical hermeneutics*. But Gadamer’s study of Plato did not only teach him to understand communication and its meaning for human beings, it also provided him with better instruments of interpreting Plato’s writings themselves. Plato was thus the first example of the potential “hermeneutics” as a philosophical attitude has. Yet in Gadamer’s first book of 1931 (dedicated to Plato’s dialogue *Philebus*) [3] the results of this new approach can already be recognised even though it took another 30 years until Gadamer had elaborated his *theory* of hermeneutics.

In the following thoughts I shall take Gadamer’s early study on the *Philebus* as a starting point of the analysis of the interconnectedness of his interpretation of Plato and his own ideas about philosophical hermeneutics. An interpretation of Gadamer’s view on Plato’s *Seventh Letter* and its consequences for Gadamer’s understanding of Plato’s dialectic will continue my argument. I shall conclude my paper by summarizing the most

¹ On another view cf. [2].

² Gadamer’s answer to this question can’t be fully discussed in this contribution. It will be dealt with in another paper.

important results of Gadamer's study of Plato for his own hermeneutical theory in *Truth and Method*.

II

In his early book *Plato's dialectical ethics: phenomenological interpretations relating to the "Philebos"* [3] Gadamer begins his considerations not with the *Philebus*, but with a long chapter on Plato's dialectics [4, p. 3 seqq.³]. In this chapter he discusses several important aspects of the dialogic form found in Plato. His main points are the following:

(1) The philosophical dialogue, as Plato created it, is an artificial but controlled and intended interplay of different positions and their refutations, of arguments and counter-arguments, whose purpose is nothing else than to unfold the *inherent* issues and aspects of the matter or the topic treated in those texts. The dialogic form therefore is not only a *literary* form, i.e. a kind of drama, and it is definitely not the depiction of real discussions, e.g. inside the Platonic academy. On the contrary, Gadamer emphasizes the objectivity (the "*Sachaufweisung*" [4, p. 17]) of all the dialogues' elements. Those elements show how the matter is to be regarded and how an understanding of it can be achieved. Hence it does not only give certain *results* of such an understanding, it presents the way and the development that leads to it mentioning also the different points of view that are necessary for an adequate knowledge of the matter being discussed.

(2) According to Gadamer "logos" in Greek means more than only language and its relation to thought and reasoning. It means an understanding of what is (exists) in relation to man and his efforts of selfunderstanding. So "logos" is in a certain way the vehicle of man's selfinterpretation. But "logos" is possible only as research. (Gadamer does not contemplate poetry or religion in this context.) "Research" means getting to the bottom or to the "grounds" of the things ("*Suchen des Grundes*" [4, p. 26]). And those grounds cannot be represented and conveyed other than as elements of thought-language, i.e. as "logoi". All research is a getting to and a revealing of the fundamental "logoi". And the philosophical dialogue, as language in action, is the appropriate means to realize the research for the "logoi".

(3) Even disagreements may be fruitful for the discussion's purpose as long as they occur in the spirit of research. If an objection is correct, it represents a progress in the understanding of the matter and also in the understanding and selfunderstanding of those who participate in the discussion. Even if an objection is wrong, an agreement about the matter is achievable — but only as long as this agreement is based on *reasons* [4, p. 31, 33]. The participants in a scientific or philosophical discussion and their attitudes are decisive for any progress in the understanding of what is discussed — but only as long as they are giving and taking reasons! Gadamer is far from taking up a relativist position⁴. He points out that reasons are generally uttered and considered as elements of man's interest in the understanding of a certain thing or a certain matter; and the understanding of this thing or matter is only relevant to man if it is an aspect of his selfunderstanding. Gadamer sees this complex relationship truly embodied in Plato's dialogues, in their scenery and in their dramatic development.

³ References according to [4].

⁴ Cf. Robert Sokolowski, *Gadamer's Theory of Hermeneutics* [5, p. 228 seqq.], and Brice Wachterhauser, *Getting it right: relativism, realism and truth* [6, p. 52 seqq.].

(4) All discussion and all agreement about a certain matter presupposes the fact that the participants are fully aware of what the discussion and the examination is about. The answer to this question (what it is about) leads to a primary form of selfunderstanding (on the side of the participants) since it reveals their different or similar approaches to this matter. And even if the discussion ends up in an aporia, this fact still shows that the participants are of such a kind that they could and that they should have true knowledge about the matter being discussed [4, p. 44]. Hence, the participants may be said to be the “organon” of truth.

It is obvious that Gadamer considers the dialogic form of Plato’s texts to be far more than only a “form”. According to Gadamer it is the Platonic expression of a deep relationship between language, specifically communication, knowledge of a certain thing or matter, and selfunderstanding of man. And only if the discussion is conducted in the awareness of this relationship, it can be conducted in a proper, truth-orientated manner.

III

Gadamer later enhanced his ideas on the dialogic form in Plato referring especially to Plato’s *Seventh Letter*. Thereby he also gave a hint at how to unravel the famous riddle of Plato’s criticism of language and particularly of all written language in philosophy.

Gadamer’s most important study on this topic is a paper entitled “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s Seventh Letter” [7, p. 90 seqq.] and presented to the *Heidelberg Academy of Sciences* in 1963, shortly after the publication of *Truth and Method*⁵. In this paper Gadamer discusses Plato’s view on spoken and written language by examining the different aspects of knowledge Plato differentiates “for everything that exists” (342 a seqq.)⁶. Plato says that there are three things by means of which knowledge of something is to be presented: the name (“onoma”), the definition (“logos”), and the picture or illustration (“eidolon”). In addition to these aspects one has to distinguish the knowledge itself (“episteme”) as the fourth aspect and the thing itself as the fifth aspect. But by none of those aspects of knowledge certainty about the thing can be achieved. Even knowledge itself is in a way unstable because of its connection to the name, the definition, and the image, which are the thing’s representations in our soul. According to Gadamer, it is this connection that affects knowledge since knowledge cannot always exist as pure intuition. The necessary connection of all of our knowledge to “onoma”, “logos”, and “eidolon” weakens what we say about the things known, i.e. it weakens our “logoi” and therefore compromises our knowledge [7, p. 96 seqq.].

At the end of his epistemological excursus in the *Seventh Letter* Plato talks about the right knowledge of *justice* and there he utters some famous words (344 b seq.) which can be read as his quintessential opinion on this problem:

“For both [sc. virtue and vice] must be learnt together; and together also must be learnt, by complete and long continued study, as I said at the beginning, the true and the false about all that has real being. After much effort, as names, definitions, sights, and other data of sense, are brought into contact and friction one with another, in the course of scrutiny and kindly testing by men who proceed by question and answer without ill will,

⁵ Cf. also “*Logos und Ergon im platonischen Lysis*” (“Logos and Ergon in Plato’s Lysis”) [8, p. 171 seqq.].

⁶ English translation according to [9].

with a sudden flash there shines forth understanding about every problem, and an intelligence whose efforts reach the furthest limits of human powers.”

The conclusion Gadamer draws from these Platonic words is a twofold one [7, p. 110 seqq.; p. 114 seqq.]: On the one hand it is obvious to Gadamer that (according to Plato) true knowledge of a thing or a matter cannot be achieved by isolated reflection or study of this thing. True knowledge is possible only as knowledge of the *whole* the thing is only a part of. The “together” (“*hama*”) which Plato emphasizes in the text quoted above, indicates this issue. On the other hand, Plato gives a clear reference to his opinion that such knowledge can only be obtained as the result of a philosophical dialogue, “in the course of scrutiny and kindly testing by men who proceed by question and answer without ill will”, as Plato says. “*Elenchus*” and “*dihairesis*” and all that is necessary for them are means to get an appropriate knowledge of all the things which exist. Plato is perhaps not entirely against written treatises and textbook definitions, but he is convinced that true knowledge cannot be fixed by those means.

This does not say that Plato’s criticism of writing should be read as an allusion to the “unwritten doctrines”⁷ as is strongly advocated for by the members of the Tübingen school of the interpretation of Plato⁸. Neither should it be interpreted as the idea that philosophical dialogues are mere literary texts whose purpose is to *introduce* the reader into philosophy and to lead him to philosophical thinking but not to present specific doctrines as such. This position is held by some followers of Leo Strauss⁹. Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato’s dialogues considered against the background of what Plato says in the *Seventh Letter* is much different to that. If asked, Gadamer would not deny the necessity of establishing scientific or philosophical doctrines, but he would deny that those doctrines are a sufficient form of knowledge. Only as elements of an ongoing process of discussion, of the eternal “hermeneutical movement”, “doctrines” as such may be justified and fruitful. On the other hand “doctrines” about certain things have to be put into the broader context of all those things and structures they depend on, and of the conditions of their understanding. Only “contextualized” in this way our understanding of specific things or matters may claim to aim at the truth. Otherwise it is likely to fail and is even in danger of turning people away from the search for truth. Thus Gadamer is showing in his interpretation of Plato’s dialogic form and his criticism of writing what he has learnt from Plato, more than e.g. from Heidegger (his teacher at Marburg university), from Hegel¹⁰ or from any other philosopher he dealt with in his own writings.

IV

In *Truth and Method* [1, p. 368 seqq.] Hans-Georg Gadamer declares that the Platonic dialectic has to be considered as the ideal or model (“*Vorbild*”) of what hermeneutical theory is about. Gadamer says that the Platonic dialectic shows the logical structure of the “openness of the hermeneutical consciousness” [1, p. 368]. This structure is characterized by what Gadamer calls the “dialectic of question and response” (“*Dialektik des Fragens und Antwortens*”). According to this all our knowledge is only possible as a response to

⁷ Cf. [10].

⁸ Cf. [11–13].

⁹ Cf. [14]. About the history of the interpretation of Plato informs [15].

¹⁰ Cf. [16].

specific questions. It is thus *determined* by the questions and dependent from them. But on the other side questioning is an open process. It is the *response* that determines how the question has been conceived; therefore, one might say that the answer also determines the question. And both are dependent from the contexts of comprehension, prejudice, and interest. Those contexts are Gadamer's famous "horizons" all questioning and answering is rooted in [1, p. 305]. If those horizons are not elucidated and reflected upon, if they are fixed, than they will suppress the process of response and answer. The Platonic dialectic does exactly this: elucidating and reflecting on the horizons which are underlying the question and the response.

In Gadamer's view the Platonic dialectic realizes this aim not by carrying out an irresponsible game or a mere formal treatment. This would not be possible. There is no such thing as a *method* of truth finding, an *ars inveniendi*. On the contrary, the Platonic dialectic is strictly centered on the thing or the matter itself. Consequently, there isn't either a "dialectic form" or "dialectic method" by means of which Plato had organized his dialogues. It is the dialectic of the thing or the matter itself put as topic of a dialogue between those who ask and those who give the answers which is responsible for the dialectical structure of Plato's texts. Hermeneutics is the way of acknowledging this inherent dialectical structure of things as far as they are made objects of knowledge, of discussion, of understanding, and of communication. And this is why in the *Seventh Letter* Plato militates against scientific treatises and fixed definitions. Those forms of knowledge would exclude the dialectic of things and communications; using them would be in a certain way rather an obstacle than an instrument of true and full understanding [1, p. 374].

The "divine Plato", as the Ancients called him, was insofar one of the most important philosophical inspirers of Hans-Georg Gadamer, but interestingly enough especially by those features of his philosophy which often create the biggest difficulties of understanding the Platonic ideas for so many other interpreters. Gadamer's view on Plato was deeply influenced by his early hermeneutical approach to the Platonic dialogues. From the very beginning Gadamer did not study them only as single texts with specific problems but also as a whole. To Gadamer the *corpus platonicum* was *as a whole* the manifestation of a fundamental attitude towards philosophical questions. And this did not only apply to its content, but also and particularly to its form. Gadamer was proud of not only having understood Plato in this respect but having been able to build up an entire philosophy of his own on the key elements of Plato's dialectic. This is the reason why Gadamer even as an old man called himself a true "Platonist".

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For citation: Gutschmidt Holger. Plato and Gadamer. On the concept of the philosophical dialogue. *Vestnik SPbSU. Philosophy and Conflict studies*, 2017, vol.33, issue 3, pp. 282–288. DOI: 10.21638/11701/spbu17.2017.303.

Received 07.02.2017

Accepted 16.03.2017