

Beauty, Emergent Order, and Truth: Gadamer's Aesthetics and Its Platonic Resonances

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Introduction

In this article I present a brief overview of Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetics and consider the importance of Plato's notion of the beautiful and Platonic and Pythagorean conceptions of order that he draws upon. I examine the role of beauty, truth, harmony, and order that we find in Gadamer's aesthetics and consider his account of aesthetic truth and how this relates to self-understanding. Gadamer's hermeneutics and aesthetics have an important practical impetus that informs our being in the world. I explore the role that the beautiful plays in Gadamer's presentational approach to his aesthetics and briefly consider its connection to the good. I conclude that Gadamer provides a dynamic and practical way of applying Platonic and classical Greek perspectives in a contemporary context.

The Transition from Plato's Metaphysical Views to Aesthetics

In "The Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer considers the background of the understanding of the beautiful in Greek thought. He explains that we should recall that "for the Greeks it was the heavenly order of the cosmos that presented the true

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vision of the beautiful,” which he relates to the Pythagorean element in the Greek concept of the beautiful.² According to Gadamer, in the regular movements of the cosmos, in the periodic cycles of the year, and in the oscillation between day and night, there is a reliable experience of order that stands in contrast to the uncertainty and instability of human matters. Gadamer maintains from this point of view, especially in relation to Plato’s thought, the beautiful can shed significant light on the aesthetic issues that Gadamer is considering. He then goes on to recount Plato’s mythological account of the chariot race found in the *Phaedrus*, which involves a vision of true reality that is revealed at the vault of the heavens. As Gadamer explains, in contrast to our disorderly and changing world on earth, this is an experience through which “we perceive the true constants and unchanging patterns of being.”³ Whereas the gods totally surrender to this sight of the true and eternal world, human souls become sidetracked because of their disorderly nature. Humans are only able to have a brief glimpse of this true reality due to sensuous desires clouding their vision and they then fall back to earth and have only a vague recollection of it. Gadamer goes on to highlight the point that these souls have figuratively lost their wings, as they are burdened by earthly concerns and so they are unable to ascend to the heights of truth. It is only the experience “of love and the beautiful, the love of the beautiful,” that will cause their wings to regrow so that they may ascend again.⁴ Gadamer writes: “It is by virtue of the beautiful that we are able to acquire a lasting remembrance of the true world. This is the way of philosophy. Plato describes the beautiful as that which shines forth most clearly and draws us to itself, as the very visibility of the ideal. In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience this convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: ‘This is true.’”⁵ Here we can see an example of the importance of Plato’s conceptions for Gadamer’s aesthetic thought. In this case the experience of an intensified experience of reality, which for Plato takes the form of a mythological metaphysical vision, now finds its way into aesthetic experience for Gadamer. In Gadamer’s view, aesthetics has taken over the role of metaphysics in contemporary thought, and this is an example of this transition within his own aesthetics.⁶ I understand this to mean that art replaces metaphysics as an eminent form

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14.

³ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

⁴ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

⁵ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

⁶ Gadamer writes, “I believe that the arts, taken as a whole, quietly govern the metaphysical heritage of our Western tradition” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, ed.

of truth, so that, for example, rather than relating to an ideal and eternal truth that is found in another world,⁷ the work of art or an eminent text in the humanities has a type of temporal permanency that is maintained through time and supports the intensified experience of truth in the here and now. This fosters the emergence of truth that is experienced more dynamically through the experience of art than through how metaphysics is traditionally understood. We could say that amid the everyday, works of art can potentially be beacons of truth and insight. According to Gadamer, the point of Plato's account is not that the essence of the beautiful lies somewhere other than in our reality, but rather that truth can be experienced within the midst of our disorderly reality with all of its imperfections and confusions. As Gadamer puts it: "The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real."⁸ Gadamer's point is that the beautiful appears within its presentations and is an experience of order and harmony in the here and now.⁹ A work of art does not point beyond itself, but rather is a presentation of truth in its sensual abundance. Similar to his conception of a symbol, which for Gadamer is a fragment that provides a relation to a greater whole, the experience of the beautiful, especially in art, "is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found."¹⁰ According to Gadamer, the beautiful has its own light and radiance. What distinguishes it from the intangible good is that the beautiful is visible. The experience of the beautiful can expand our horizons, which Gadamer likens to a new light that is turned on.¹¹ Gadamer draws upon metaphysical understandings of the beautiful but

Richard E. Palmer [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007], 195). Gadamer remarks that his interest in the humanities was based on how they engaged with art and their openness and sensitivity to it.

⁷ This is a view often associated with Plato, but for Gadamer Plato is not a two-world Platonist.

⁸ Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 15.

⁹ Aryeh Kosman maintains that for Plato appearances are not separate from being, but rather present what is to subjects ("Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 [2010]: 354). Thus, appearances are not inherently deceptive for Plato, but rather only if there is "a failure in uptake" (354). Kosman also points to the connection between beauty and appearances, and that beauty relates to what appears well. Note that "beautiful" is the translation of the Greek term *kalon*. Kosman provides an account of the differences between our modern notion of beauty and the Greek word *kalon* and the challenges of translating *kalon* and capturing the subtleties of it. *Kalon* has also been translated, for example, as "noble" and "fine," and has connections to the moral, the good, and the appearance of being. Of note, for Gadamer too, the beautiful reveals what is, and is not a mere appearance, both in his interpretation of Plato and how he applies the beautiful to his hermeneutics and aesthetics. The connection between being and appearances that Kosman and Gadamer find in Plato through the beautiful differs from traditional views of Plato as a disparager of appearances that are separated from reality.

¹⁰ Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 32.

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 480.

distances his views from them to support a probabilistic notion of truth applicable to hermeneutical experience, one that is different from scientific notions of truth.¹²

Order, Mimesis, and Tarrying

Let us further consider how Gadamer makes use of Greek conceptions of the orderly nature of the cosmos and Plato's mythological metaphysical vision of the true world and relates this to his own aesthetic views. In "Art and Imitation," Gadamer draws upon the Pythagorean conception of order, which involves the order of the cosmos, music, and soul. This imitation is based on the imitation of number, which Gadamer understands not as these things striving for numerical exactness, but rather as "simply the fact that there is a numerical order at work in all of them. For upon this depends every other kind of order. So it was that Plato made the correct observance and unadulterated preservation of musical order the basis for the order of human life in the polis."¹³ When Gadamer turns to apply the ancient approach of order to his own aesthetic views, he asks "whether we do not in fact experience order in art of every kind, however extravagant its manifestations."¹⁴ This is quite a striking contention, particularly given that Gadamer is considering modern non-objective art. Gadamer reflects on the difficulties of relating traditional aesthetic conceptions such as mimesis to modern non-objective art in which many of its outstanding representatives reject the expectations with which we approach art. Gadamer considers, for example, that whereas traditional art involves the imitation and idealization of nature, modern art moves beyond this.¹⁵ Given the groundbreaking and experimental nature of modern art, this makes it challenging to understand it using traditional aesthetic notions. Nevertheless, despite such issues, Gadamer finds a role for mimesis and order in modern art. However, Gadamer disassociates this experience of order in modern art from the order of nature and the cosmos that previously served as exemplars, the mythological interpretation of our experience, and the familiar things of our world. In Gadamer's account, these are vanishing in our modern world, and he discusses the

¹² Gadamer makes connections between the evidentness of the beautiful and the tradition of rhetoric to develop a conception in which "what is evident has not been proved and is not absolutely certain, but it asserts itself by reason of its own merit within the realm of the possible and probable" (*Truth and Method*, 479).

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 102.

¹⁴ Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," 102.

¹⁵ Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," 94–95.

impact of industrialization in relation to this. Nevertheless, Gadamer still finds that a notion of order is applicable to art: “Every work of art still resembles a thing as it once was insofar as its existence illuminates and testifies to order as a whole. Perhaps this order is not one that we can harmonize with our own conceptions of order, but that which once united the familiar things of a familiar world. Nevertheless, there is in every work of art an ever new and powerful testimony to a spiritual energy that generates order.”¹⁶ In Gadamer’s view, it is not relevant whether art is objective or non-objective, but rather that “we encounter a spiritual and ordering energy in the work.”¹⁷ For Gadamer, a work of art brings forth a new order and he understands mimesis as the presentation of order. Although Gadamer utilizes a conception of mimesis, this is not of the manner of an imperfect copy of an original, but rather is a dynamic presentation of truth that involves transformation.¹⁸ As Gadamer understands mimesis, it “has nothing to do with the mere imitation of something that is already familiar to us,” but rather is represented in a manner “that it is actually present in sensuous abundance”¹⁹ and brings out possibilities never seen previously.²⁰ Through mimesis we experience what is true and essential and understand ourselves in new ways. Mimesis involves the recognition of whomever is represented, and also involves self-recognition.²¹ Although Aristotle is important for Gadamer’s account of recognition,²² Gadamer associates recognition with grasping something in its essence, which he says is “the central motif of Platonism. In his theory of anamnesis Plato combined the mythical idea of remembrance with his dialectic, which sought the truth of being in the *logoi*—i.e., the ideality of language.”²³ Through recognition we experience the essential, leaving aside what is unessential.²⁴

¹⁶ Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 103.

¹⁷ Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 103.

¹⁸ See Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful”; Daniel L. Tate, “Transforming *Mimesis*: Gadamer’s Retrieval of Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 no. 1 (2008): 185–208; Robert J. Dostal, “Gadamer’s Platonism: His Recovery of Mimesis and Anamnesis,” in *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years after “Truth and Method”*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 45–65; William Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 36.

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Festive Character of Theater,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113.

²² Aristotle is important for Gadamer’s account of mimesis and recognition (see Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 97–101; Tate, “Transforming Mimesis”).

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113. Gadamer references *Phaedo* 73ff.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

For Gadamer, the experience of art is an intensified experience that is more real than our ordinary understanding and involves an “increase of being.”²⁵ However, the insight gained from such experience is still related back to our everyday experience and can transform us. This can be contrasted with aesthetic perspectives that understand the work of art as abstracted from the ordinary world and reality, which Gadamer criticizes. Gadamer is concerned about viewpoints that limit aesthetics to subjective and merely momentary experience, leaving the experience of art unrelated to the experiential flow of one’s life. For Gadamer, there is truth in the experience of art. It is not just a matter of subjective feeling or opinion. As we tarry with or contemplate a work of art, we may enter into a different sense of time than our ordinary practical and calculative notion of time based on having time to do something, time that is at our disposal and needs to be filled. Gadamer calls this empty time and explains that we can move between the extremes of boredom and frantic efforts to fill such time. Gadamer contrasts this with what he calls “fulfilled” or “autonomous” time, such as we experience at a festival, in which time becomes festive when the festival arrives. In such experiences our ordinary purposes are curtailed for a time and time passes differently. According to Gadamer, festivals arrest time and allow time to tarry, and our ordinary manner of disposing time comes to a standstill.²⁶ Gadamer transfers this understanding of time over to art more generally and each work of art has its own temporality that it imposes upon us. When we tarry with a work of art, new insights can arise, and Gadamer describes how tarrying in this manner is possibly the only way that we as finite beings have “to relate to what we call

²⁵ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer distinguishes between a mere copy that points back to an original and a picture or image through which an original appears and involves an “increase of being” (135, emphasis in original). The point here is that there is something productive and creative that occurs as new possibilities are elicited from the work of art through its presentations. Gadamer connects Plato’s views with a copy and the difference between a copy and the original and criticizes him for this, and so does not associate Plato’s views with an increase of being. Gadamer also criticizes Plato regarding notions of a copy that he finds in relation to Plato’s dialogue the *Cratylus* and language as well (406–17). However, this changes in his later thought. For example, according to Robert J. Dostal, Gadamer “implicitly aligns Plato with his own treatment of image (*Bild*) in *Truth and Method*, in which the presentation of mimesis is always at the same time a transformation” (“Gadamer’s Platonism,” 55). Dostal explains that Gadamer modulates the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, such as how mimesis is not merely reproductive but productive and involves a transformation, temporalizing Plato and Aristotle, prioritizing practice, and embracing Martin Heidegger’s notion of truth as revealing or unconcealing (58). See Dostal, “Gadamer’s Platonism,” for an account of Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato in relation to his notions of copy, image, mimesis, anamnesis, art, and tensions in Gadamer’s positions. See Tate, “Transforming Mimesis,” for an account of Gadamer’s notion of mimesis and the importance of Aristotle for it.

²⁶ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 42.

eternity.”²⁷ However, for Gadamer this is an intensified form of temporal experience rather than an atemporal one, giving a modern take on the “eternal.” The experience of art is something we are absorbed in, and Gadamer explains: “It is more like a tarrying that waits and preserves in such a way that the work of art is allowed to come forth than it is like something we have done.”²⁸ In my view, although tarrying is not something we have done or a willful accomplishment, we still need to attune ourselves to tarry with an artwork, rather than, for example, being lost in our purposeful thoughts or inattentiveness. We need to work at being open to a work of art so that we can be receptive to what it has to say to us. According to Gadamer: “To tarry is not to lose time. Being in the mode of tarrying is like an intensive back-and-forth conversation that is not cut off but lasts until it is ended.”²⁹ Dialogue and language are two crucial aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and he has a broad conception of language that includes what is not literally spoken. Meanings arise dynamically within language as we engage and attend to a work of art, and new implications emerge as we contemplate and participate with a work of art and unfold some of its latent possibilities. Through this, we recognize ourselves in new ways. By becoming open to the otherness of a work of art and in the play between ourselves and the work, possibilities for meanings are opened up and we may transcend ourselves.

Transformation into Structure, Play, and the Dynamic Emergence of New Orders

The experience of a work of art brings into focus something that is ordinarily hidden from view. As Gadamer explains his notion of transformation into structure, it is “transformation back into true being. In being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn.”³⁰ An intensified truth is experienced through the work of art and stands within the work of art, and which may positively inform our everyday reality. This is an experience of truth that is not limited to conceptuality, and a work of art is not something we stand back from and view objectively, but rather participate in.

²⁷ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 45.

²⁸ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 211.

²⁹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 211.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

Let us briefly turn to consider Gadamer's notion of play.³¹ The experience of play is at one time serious and yet playful. We are immersed in a game that takes us beyond ourselves. When we encounter a work of art there is a play between us and the artwork, an experience that moves beyond the dichotomy of a detached subject facing an abstract aesthetic object. Rather, we are taken up in the play and game of the experience of a work of art. Play is undertaken for its own sake rather than for an outside purpose. For Gadamer, the experience of truth, which also applies to his aesthetics, is something that happens to us rather than being something that we consciously control; it is a dynamic event of being.

The reception of a work of art is a participatory experience of truth. Gadamer, drawing upon Plato's *Phaedrus*, remarks on the ecstatic state of being outside of oneself, which is not a form of madness, and which he relates to being completely with something else.³² We step out of our ordinary experience and transcend ourselves. We experience other possibilities and come back to ourselves more authentically. The experience of art is a potentially transformative experience that involves self-recognition, through which we can expand our horizons. An artwork has an essential aspect that is removed from its contingent origins and persists through time and can inform different contexts. For example, Gadamer says that the play of art "has a claim to permanence and the permanence of a claim."³³ Art has a lasting claim to contemporaneity that can be concretized as needed. Gadamer also maintains that there is an "absolute presentness of art to all times and places," and that art has a "superiority over time, a superiority that defies all restrictions."³⁴ There is an ideal element in art to which we can orient ourselves. This can potentially inform our way of being in the world, and through artistic presentations and our interpretations we participate in and bring about the work's realization. Art helps us recognize something we know with fresh eyes, and through this we achieve insight and greater continuity with ourselves. However, for Gadamer, and in this he is following Martin Heidegger, the truth we experience in art will always involve a revealing and concealing.³⁵ The work of art will continue to shelter additional insights and mysteries, which may be brought out by subsequent interpretation, although understanding will never be complete. In Gadamer's view, we are finite beings and there are limits to our understanding, but through art we experience truth.

³¹ See Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful"; *Truth and Method*.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 122.

³³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123.

³⁴ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 199, 200.

³⁵ Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 34.

Although Gadamer is inspired by ancient Greek conceptions of order, his emphasis is on the dynamic emergence of new orders, which stresses the productive aspect of this process. Rather than merely approximating or copying an existing order, measured and harmonious orders dynamically appear and emerge through the beautiful. Given the lack of common cultural mythology and symbols in the contemporary world, a work of art can potentially introduce new orders and meanings. According to Gadamer: “The artist no longer speaks for the community, but forms his own community insofar as he expresses himself. Nevertheless, he does create a community, and in principle, this truly universal community (*oikoumene*) extends to the whole world. In fact, all artistic creation challenges each of us to listen to the language in which the work of art speaks and to make it our own.”³⁶ Here we can see that not only does the artist form a new type of community through their artwork, but that an important aspect of Gadamer’s aesthetics lies in how we each experience the work of art and apply it to ourselves. Given that, as we have seen, the essence of a work of art lies in its testifying to order, such an order is taken up and creatively extended in its reception. This can be seen as a variation of the overall importance of dialogue and the relation to a greater whole in Gadamer’s thought. According to John Arthos, for Gadamer, art manifests “the fullest realization of the reciprocity of self, world, being, and history.”³⁷ The experience of art is a dynamic experience of relationality that informs our being in the world. We will now turn to further explore Gadamer’s account of the creation of a work of art and its reception.

The Creation of the Work of Art and Its Reception

Let us start by briefly considering how Gadamer understands the creation of a work of art. Gadamer highlights that the artist is a discoverer rather than a creator, yet also emphasizes the newness of the work of art: “The modern artist is less a creator than a discoverer of the as yet unseen, the inventor of the previously unimagined that only emerges into reality through him.”³⁸ Gadamer draws attention to the Greek word *poesis*, which he explains has a double meaning. The first sense is that it is to make or produce something that did not exist previously, which covers the realm of handicraft and industrial production. The work of art is different from being the product of a *techné*

³⁶ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 39.

³⁷ John Arthos, *Gadamer’s Poetics: A Critique of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), ix.

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Speechless Image,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 91.

such as this, and Gadamer points to a second sense of *poesis* that relates to the art of composing poetry, which he connects with what he calls the “making of a ‘text.’ In this making whole worlds are able to rise out of nothingness, and nonbeing comes to be being. This is almost more than making.”³⁹ Gadamer explains that making generally involves the use of concrete materials, which the craftsman uses. However, Gadamer says that “Mnemosyne [goddess of memory, mother of the nine Muses], however, does not need these.”⁴⁰ Whereas the pictorial arts need concrete material to make a picture, “poetry appears to exist only in the airy breath of language and in the miracle of memory.”⁴¹ Gadamer explains that poetry and music are like they are not made from matter, and it is only secondary when poetry is fixed in writing and music becomes a score. It is necessary that the written texts come to be spoken and heard, and Gadamer notes that the German word *schöpferisch* (creative) signifies this, explaining that this word “retains an echo of the religious concept of the Creation, which was not making in the sense of making an object by hand. In the beginning was the word, the *verbum creans*—the creating word.”⁴² Here we can see resonances of the religious and divine in relation to memory and the creative word that Gadamer associates with poetic creation, which almost seems to be a type of creation out of nothingness. For Gadamer, art takes on a quasi-religious role,⁴³ and he remarks that through artistic performance “we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in the religious rite.”⁴⁴

In contrast to handiwork (which is made for some purpose), the work of art is made by the artist “for itself and is there only to be contemplated.”⁴⁵ An artistic creation is not something that one makes per se, but rather something that comes through one, and what comes forth in a work of art cannot be captured by words. As Gadamer puts it, “‘it comes forth,’” which one has never experienced in exactly the same way before; for example, a portrait illuminates something new as if one had never

³⁹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201.

⁴⁰ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201, bracketed material in original.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201.

⁴² Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 202.

⁴³ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

⁴⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115. According to Donatella Di Cesare, “Gadamer evokes religious overtones when he describes the majesty or solemnity of art, the way in which art ‘emerges’ like the divine, the event that resembles that of worship, the contemporaneity that distinguishes it and the ecstatic immersion of those who are swept away by it, as well as the sacred communion that art founds” (*Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013], 62-63).

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 202.

seen the person in this way.⁴⁶ In art there is the presentation of something essential; this is not merely an imitation, but revelatory, a process in which aspects are left out and others heightened.⁴⁷

Both the performance of a work of art and how viewers participate in it are important for Gadamer. The work of art reaches its fulfillment through its appearance or performance,⁴⁸ and participation in the experience of art. Gadamer resists approaches that objectify art and seek to excessively use scientific methodology, which in his view should remain secondary as it takes away from the encounter with a work of art.⁴⁹ According to Gadamer, the work remains the same work, even if we encounter it in new and different ways. He maintains that the work of art has a center akin to a living organism in that some things may be added or removed and changed, but a central aspect must be left intact and is an “internally structured unity” and has an “autonomous temporality.”⁵⁰ Gadamer points to what he calls the “hermeneutic identity” of an artwork and says that a work of art is something to be understood and that it “issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer—an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge.”⁵¹ According to Gadamer, this is an answer that one must supply on one’s own and be taken up actively, so we become a participant in the play of art. Gadamer explains that we must learn how to see a work of art and hear music,⁵² and that there is a type of leeway in the experience of art that each person needs to fill in themselves.⁵³ However, the possibilities that emerge are not merely subjective conceptions, but relate to the being of the work.⁵⁴ An example of the cooperative role we play in the experience of art is found in what Gadamer calls the “inner ear,” which is an experience of moving past the contingency of what takes place before us through a type of intellectual and spiritual effort that leads to an experience of an ideal creation.⁵⁵ Gadamer also gives an example of how the viewer of a painting seeks the correct distance from it, and the viewer of sculpture or architecture must go around it and view it from many different distances and viewpoints, to find where “it” comes forth, which is not one’s own

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 216.

⁴⁷ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

⁴⁸ According to Gadamer: “Art has its ‘being’ in the *Vollzug*—the vital, living event of its appearing, or its performance” (*The Gadamer Reader*, 215).

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 219.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 43.

⁵¹ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 26.

⁵² Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 217.

⁵³ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 26.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 117.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 44.

standpoint.⁵⁶ Here we can see that we need to attune ourselves to the work of art. He also relates learning to listen to art to the need to move beyond what he calls the “universal levelling process,” which in his view is encouraged by our culture, which sends forth progressively powerful stimuli that inhibit us from noticing anything.⁵⁷ New and unique insights and possibilities may arise when we listen to and experience a work of art. The work of art has the potential to be a vehicle for truth and self-transformation.

Beauty, Order, and Harmony

As we have seen, the beautiful plays a role of bringing forth reality and the ideal into appearance, and in the *Phaedrus* myth, Plato mentions the difficulty of remembering the true world.⁵⁸ According to Plato, justice and self-control and other admirable objects are obscured to the senses, and it is only the beautiful that is radiant. In the material world, beauty is unique in that it can be grasped through the clearest of our senses, with vision being the sharpest (250b–d). In a similar manner, the beauty of the work of art can shine forth and lead us to transformative insight. According to Daniel L. Tate, the harmonious proportion and symmetry that is associated with beauty within ancient Greek metaphysics are in Gadamer’s view true of all beauty so that “even if we can no longer ground the concept of beauty in the teleological order of being, he [Gadamer] nonetheless maintains that measure, proportion, and harmony are integral to the phenomenon of beauty.”⁵⁹ Gadamer explains that it is “the unique shining-forth of the beautiful that is the magic of art, whether it be in our seeing or our hearing, in our experiencing of the sculpture, poetry, or music.”⁶⁰ Gadamer associates the beautiful and the experience of art as involving a suspension of purposefulness.⁶¹

According to Gadamer, in the late dialogues of Plato the beautiful, truth, and the good come to the forefront and are sought within seeking the good life rather than through mathematical exactness, and he notes that in the *Philebus* the good is found

⁵⁶ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 214.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 36.

⁵⁸ Plato, “*Phaedrus*,” trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 506–56.

⁵⁹ Daniel L. Tate, “Renewing the Question of Beauty: Gadamer on Plato’s Idea of the Beautiful,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2015): 32.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 215.

⁶¹ See Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 223.

within a right mixture of being and through the beautiful.⁶² Gadamer also remarks on how in Plato's *Statesman* there are two kinds of measure, the first related to quantity and mathematics, the second related to doing what is appropriate.⁶³ In Gadamer's reading, this second form of measure and the mixture of being can be understood as a process of emergent becoming in which new harmonies arise. For example, the appropriate measure can be related to finding the "right" word in a conversation, which involves going beyond what is pre-given,⁶⁴ and dynamic harmonious and proportional structures that emerge through aesthetic experience and more generally in our lives.⁶⁵

A work of art has a connection with its culture and is a pledge of order, and in its reception new potentials can arise from the experience of the depths of the work in new ways, as different aspects and harmonious possibilities are brought forth that relate to the measure of the work of art. However, harmony does not necessarily mean easy, and it involves both radical change and sameness.⁶⁶ There is a creative and dynamic element to bringing forth such harmonies in our lives. Gadamer explains that a single wrong note in music or in human relations disturbs the harmony and agreement, and although we cannot know what would have been appropriate, we do know that what is inappropriate has caused a disruption in the harmony.⁶⁷ Different harmonious possibilities may be brought forth creatively, beautiful harmonies that are in some sense good and true.

As we have seen, Gadamer explains that for the Greeks the orderliness of the cosmos was an exemplar for the type of order that stood above the disorderly sphere of human affairs. Gadamer remarks: "One hears again and again in the narrative of the *Timaeus* that human beings should learn to order the motions of their own soul

⁶² Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 204–205. In relation to this, Gadamer mentions how in the *Philebus* the good takes refuge in the beautiful, and that the good is grasped through beauty, truth, and proportion, which he maintains shows the importance for Plato that the good is beyond being and both one and many. He also draws attention to "the important point that it is in the 'measured' character of appearances that beauty presents itself" (*The Gadamer Reader*, 205).

⁶³ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 114, 205.

⁶⁴ See James Risser, "Gadamer's Plato and the Task of Philosophy," in *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, ed. Mirko Wischke and Michael Hofer (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), 98-99.

⁶⁵ See Jessica Frazier, "Beautiful Structures: Gadamer on Beauty, Love, Faith, and the Nature of Value," *Transpositions: Theology, Imagination and the Arts*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/beautiful-structures-gadamer-on-beauty-love-faith-and-the-nature-of-value/>.

⁶⁶ See Frazier, "Beautiful Structures."

⁶⁷ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 205–206.

while regarding the order of the cosmos.”⁶⁸ Gadamer is clearly inspired by a cosmological conception of order, as it appears in numerous of his works, and in relation to artworks he emphasizes the dynamic emergence of order. As has been discussed, art takes on the role of metaphysics in contemporary thought. An artist can potentially help improve our common lifeworld by bringing forth an insightful work of art that may encourage order and beauty in the world. In this process, how we understand the world may be challenged and disrupted when it does not live up to the truth and the possibilities that are presented through a work of art. For Gadamer, self-understanding is an adventure and there is a risk, as we do not know beforehand what may be transformed.

Architecture, Harmony, and Order

Let us further consider how beauty, order, and harmony can be manifested in artistic practice. For example, in *Gadamer for Architects*, Paul Kidder points to the powerful feelings that Gadamer had as a child in relation to the experience of a special wooden floor in the family home to show “how profoundly the qualities of designed space can educate one’s sensibilities regarding order and value in the whole of life.”⁶⁹ Moments of inspiration may inspire for years to come.⁷⁰ Kidder draws upon the writing of Bill Hubbard Jr. to point to the role of important experiences of inspiration and epiphanies for architects. Kidder explains:

A person who has made a life in the world of architecture is someone in whose imagination such experiences loom large. He or she has been moved—perhaps early in life—by the power of design to bring order, or peace, or fascination to life. In design the world that ordinarily seems so random and scattered, so fleeting and derelict, is brought into an exact unity that heightens the vibrancy of its sensuous presence. Such epiphanies have inspired this person to take the steps necessary to be one who produces things with that kind of power, steps that mean entering communities—first

⁶⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 192–93.

⁶⁹ Paul Kidder, *Gadamer for Architects* (London: Routledge, 2013), 89; see 24–25 for further information about Gadamer’s experience of the floor as a child.

⁷⁰ Kidder refers to Stephen Holl’s descriptions of “archetypal experience” in relation to moments of inspiration that may last for many years and serve as points of reference for design possibilities (*Gadamer for Architects*, 89).

of fellow students, then of colleagues—formed around similar experiences and inspirations.⁷¹

With their designs, architects have the potential to bring order into the world to uplift. These are inspirations that inform the greater community, both through the power of architectural design and the architects' interactions with others. And presumably artists more generally may potentially inspire others with their works of art, as do critics and viewers of works of art as they engage with and interpret artworks. For Gadamer, artworks manifest truth and order, and help encourage us to see the world anew. And actually, it is quite possible that with Gadamer's overall approach of cultivating ourselves (*Bildung*) and learning to listen and enter into respectful and genuine dialogue with goodwill, we may not only cultivate self-understanding, but potentially inspire greater harmony and order in ourselves and the community at large.

Let us briefly consider Gadamer's account of architecture, as I think it provides a helpful bridge between aesthetic experience and the more tangible and purposeful experience of the everyday world. Gadamer explains that architecture is not pure art, as buildings serve purposes and are in the midst of our daily activities. However, Gadamer also says that buildings such as a church, city hall, or sometimes even a department store or railroad station can be called "architectural monuments."⁷² According to Gadamer, architecture is different from other forms of art in that its purposefulness is built into it; as Gadamer explains: "A building has a pre-given connection with its surroundings with which it has to harmonize. The effect that will be caused by the space is co-intended."⁷³ I think buildings are interesting examples due to their "in-between" state between purposefulness and art, and their harmonization with the world around them. Gadamer explains how a building "emerges as an artwork only when, in the middle of its use, something wonderful shines forth, as with everything that is beautiful. This experience causes us to pause in the midst of our purposeful doing, for example in a room of a church, or in a stairwell, when suddenly we stand there and remain entranced."⁷⁴ In the middle of our everyday activities, we experience a sudden aesthetic insight. In Gadamer's account, this does not necessarily mean that our purposefulness is forgotten, but rather that such "an aesthetically significant staircase can play an enhancing role in the fulfillment of one's life."⁷⁵ Here

⁷¹ Kidder, *Gadamer for Architects*, 90, referencing Bill Hubbard Jr., *A Theory for Practice: Architecture in Three Discourses* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

⁷² Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

⁷³ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 222.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

we can see that when our ordinary purposefulness is diminished, at least for a time, this can give way to a sense of intensified aesthetic experience that is potentially transformative and life-enhancing. An experience of the beautiful and aesthetic insight may suddenly come forth. We are moved beyond our ordinary purposefulness and sense of time and tarry with an artwork and its autonomous time. Whether this happens through going to an art museum or a festival, or even spontaneously appears through an experience of an aesthetically significant aspect of a building, there is a transition to a more contemplative and participatory state that transforms our self-understanding. Such experiences not only affect us, but presumably may inform our interactions with others. Art has the potential to emanate its influence into the everyday world. Art is not separate from the world but is a pledge of order that can inform the world, and through the experience of works of art we can bring new meanings and possibilities into the community.

The Beautiful, the Good, and Continuity with Ourselves

Although the experience of art is a dynamic event of understanding that happens to us, we play a constructive role in such experiences. As we have seen in respect to cultivating our “inner ear,” we can move beyond the contingent towards the ideal aspects of a work of art. We have also considered how the beautiful relates to the good. The beautiful manifests itself aesthetically, but Gadamer’s understanding of beauty is not restricted to aesthetic considerations in a limited sense. Gadamer’s aesthetics involves a relation to the social world, and beauty is connected with truth and the good. Artworks have the possibility of opening up beautiful and good possibilities, which has practical and ethical implications. Artworks educate us and play an important role in forming our community.⁷⁶

In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, he encourages listening to the other, mutual respect, and solidarity, and in his aesthetics relationality and the connection to a greater whole are important. Through recognizing our commonality with others, we learn something about ourselves. For example, Gadamer explains that the spectator’s experience of a Greek tragedy involves a recognition of themselves and their “own finiteness in the face of the power of fate.”⁷⁷ According to Gadamer, tragic pensiveness relates to the recognition of truth that is a type of self-knowledge, and such insights

⁷⁶ For example, Catherine Homan explores the educative role of aesthetics in *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

⁷⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 128.

lead one away from collective illusions that everyone lives with.⁷⁸ For Gadamer, the experience of the theatre is not one of distantiation, but of participation. Here, in the experience of the tragic suffering, we recognize ourselves and our commonality with others, which has practical implications. In Gadamer's account such insight is not a mere adventure or intoxication, but rather this leads to more continuity with oneself.⁷⁹

Let us relate this notion of continuity with ourselves to Gadamer's understanding of the close connection between measure, truth, the beautiful, and the good. We could say, for instance, that through the insight awakened by the experience of the tragic and the truth it engenders, we now have a different measure for ourselves, which is reflected in our self-understanding. Rather than basing our actions as we previously did (in common with others) on something illusory, we can now conduct ourselves in accordance with something true about ourselves. As we have considered above, with Gadamer's notion of transformation into structure, aesthetic experience involves insight into true being. According to Gadamer: "The being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its telos within itself. The world of a work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognizes that that is how things are."⁸⁰ Here, as with Greek tragedy, there is an insightful recognition of truth. Gadamer places priority on what is revealed in transformed structures, which he characterizes as a "superior mode of being."⁸¹ He explains: "From this viewpoint 'reality' is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aufhebung*) of this reality into its truth. The classical theory of art too, which bases all art on the idea of *mimesis*, *imitation*, obviously starts from play in the form of dancing, which is the representation of the divine."⁸² Key for Gadamer is that such imitations are there in their presentations; the work of art or artistic performance does not point to another meaning outside of itself but presents its truth within itself. Truth emerges through

⁷⁸ According to Gadamer, this is a recognition of "a metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that 'this is how it is' is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives" (*Truth and Method*, 128).

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 128. Such continuities should be understood dynamically. As Nicholas Davey explains: "For Gadamer, the meaningfulness of existence resides in its relationality, in how different aspects of being illuminate and inform others in ever-shifting patterns. It is not so much a particular symmetry that is significant but how changing relations establish and transform emergent continuities of significance" (*Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013], 73–74).

⁸⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

⁸² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112–13, emphasis in original. Gadamer provides the following reference in a footnote: "Cf. Koller, *Mimesis* (1954), which proves the original connection between *mimesis* and dance" (*Truth and Method*, 163, fn. 17).

the experience of a work of art and informs the ordinary world. By experiencing art, we may recognize ourselves and our own possibilities. For Gadamer, aesthetic experience is one of participation, taking us outside of ourselves and potentially bringing us back to ourselves more authentically.⁸³

Given the importance of finitude for Gadamer, aesthetic insight will never be perfect, and understanding is always a work in progress. Nevertheless, such insight involves truth and is better than the self-understanding one had previously. Through such insight we experience more continuity with ourselves, and I think we could also say more honesty with ourselves. And given the connections between truth and goodness, we arguably unlock our potential to be more beautiful and good to ourselves and to those around us. Rather than being distorted by illusions and having to sustain them and interpret the world and interact with others on this basis, we are freed to understand ourselves in more authentic ways. This arguably has important ethical implications. For example, Gadamer, considering the Greek notion of friendship, writes: “Someone who is not friends with himself, but at odds with himself, is just not fit for any devotion to anyone else, or for any solidarity.”⁸⁴ According to Gadamer, the ancient conception of friendship is a broad notion that covers the whole life of the community.⁸⁵ Gadamer says that someone “who does not *know* what friendship is obviously lacks both a constant supportive relationship to himself as well as the capacity to be constant and supportive in his relationship to others.”⁸⁶ If this is so, and friendship is a broad notion related to all our interactions with others in the community, then transformations in self-understanding have broader social implications. Friendship with oneself is the basis for solidarity with others, and being friends with oneself, others, and the community at large go hand and hand. As we have discussed, aesthetic experience can help foster a greater sense of continuity with oneself, which presumably could positively contribute to our possibilities for friendship and solidarity with others. When we have a greater continuity with ourselves, we may be better able to engender more mutual respect, friendliness, and perhaps even beauty and goodness in our dialogues and interactions with others.

Gadamer’s approach is suggestive rather than prescriptive. For instance, his notion of play is dynamic and fluid, and his understanding of harmony, beauty, and

⁸³ For connections between the Greek conception of *theoria* and aesthetic participation in Gadamer’s thought, see William Konchak, “Gadamer’s ‘Practice’ of *Theoria*,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2020): 453–65.

⁸⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 113.

⁸⁵ Gadamer, *Praise of Theory*, 110–11.

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, 10, emphasis in original.

goodness should be understood in a similar light. Despite the importance of order and harmony in Gadamer's thought, aesthetic insights are also unsettling; they disturb our complacency, and as we have seen above, collective distortions we hold together with others.⁸⁷ However, Gadamer's emphasis is on the possibility for harmony and beauty and working through such disruptions to find more authentic continuities with oneself and solidarity with others. This emphasis is important as it highlights the constructive possibilities for harmony, order, beauty, and goodness—themes from Plato's and ancient thought that Gadamer has drawn upon and dynamically developed in his aesthetics.

Gadamer associates Plato's notion of the good taking refuge in the beautiful with entities as they are in their own nature, and the beautiful with how an entity finds harmony and completeness with itself, which he also relates to the good.⁸⁸ In my view, this is suggestive of how the experience of the beautiful and good can bring us back to ourselves. According to Gadamer, "the good of human life. . . does not confront us as a norm located in the beyond, but as the beauty, measuredness, and truth of human being and conduct."⁸⁹ Beauty and goodness are manifested through appropriate actions and fostering harmonies in everyday life. For Gadamer, aesthetic and hermeneutic insights more generally are not merely in the abstract, but rather

⁸⁷ Arthos maintains that Gadamer's poetics (Arthos's term for Gadamer's theory of artworks) is "tied too closely to a Platonic/Kantian conception of order and beauty, and does not take sufficient account of the artistic engagement with degeneration, disease, and disorder, leaving undeveloped the nihilistic dimensions of art that are present even within its own Heideggerian foundation" (*Gadamer's Poetics*, x-xi). This emphasis on beauty and order is a key part of Gadamer's thought, but I would maintain that Gadamer provides an important contemporary position that encourages the positive and dynamic possibilities of beauty, order, and goodness in a non-dogmatic manner. It should also be noted that Gadamer has been criticized for not sufficiently considering difference and otherness; see John D. Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 258–64; Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Laurence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 178–94. Others have defended Gadamer against such criticisms; see James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Homan, *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education*; Brice R. Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutical Ontology*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). The impetus in Gadamer's thought to listen to the other, follow the subject matter, and revise our self-understanding (which may disrupt false senses of order we may have) would ideally promote mutually respectful harmonies that respect differences. Nevertheless, these concerns point to the need for vigilance to ensure respect for the other.

⁸⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the "Philebus"*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 208–209.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 209.

should be integrated into our self-understanding. Encouraging harmony within the soul and in the state are both important for Plato, and I think something similar can be said for Gadamer with respect to self-understanding and solidarity with others.

Conclusion

In closing, Gadamer draws upon Plato's notion of the beautiful to support his conception of presencing truth. He also is inspired by Platonic and Pythagorean notions of order and develops a dynamic and emergent approach that has connections to his understanding of Plato's later dialogues. In my view, the way Gadamer incorporates the experience of beauty and harmony through his aesthetics to support his conception of emergent truth and order is a compelling way of applying Plato's thought in a manner suitable for our contemporary times. Key to this is that he presents the case that the beautiful matters, as does its connection to the good, and that while art has a different type of truth from that of science, it nevertheless reveals truth. The insights that are experienced through the work of art can inform our self-understanding and being in the world, potentially prompting change for the better. The creation and reception of the work of art is a dynamic interplay between artist, viewer, and world, a process through which new insights may arise and foster self-understanding and solidarity. This reminds us of the inherent possibilities of art for truth, and how both artists and interpreters play important roles in actualizing the potential of art to positively inform the greater community.