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Gadamer and the Tübingen School

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“Let me state out my position: I don't really see a strict alternative between the old interpretation of Plato, i.e. that of Schleiermacher, and the new one, i.e. that of the Tübingen school. In my view, the philosophy of Plato, his written as well as his oral philosophy, is always open, always in tension, and always searching; it never stops and never gives a specific solution of problems as a definitive one.”

- Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1996¹

The Milan Claim: Gadamer can be integrated into the “Esoteric” Paradigm

All Plato scholars are familiar, at least through hearsay, with the famous Tübingen school that focuses on Plato's esoteric doctrine of principles that Aristotle claims he thought at his Academy, but which some Plato specialists are seldom inclined to find in his dialogues. It is safe to say that this school came to be if not dominant, at least the focus of enormous attention in Germany in the course of the 60s and to this day.

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, in G. Girgenti (ed.), *La nuova interpretazione di Platone. Un dialogo tra Hans-Georg Gadamer e la scuola di Tubinga-Milano e altri studiosi*, Introduzione di Hans-Georg Gadamer, Milano : Rusconi, 1998, p. 31-32 (“*Dichiaro subito la mia posizione: io non vedo un'alternativa, in senso stretto, tra la vecchia interpretazione di Platone, vale a dire quella di Schleiermacher, e quella nova, vale a dire quella della scuola di Tubinga. A mio avviso, la filosofia di Platone, sia del Platone scritto, sia del Platone orale, è sempre aperta, è sempre in tensione, è sempre alla ricerca, non si arresa mai, non dà mai per definitiva una determinata soluzione dei problemi?*”). This book will be quoted from now on as Girgenti 1998. I gratefully acknowledge the help I received in writing this essay from Dr. Giuseppe Franco.

Another school of Plato scholarship that was quite important in Germany is the one one could call the “hermeneutical” school associated with the famous German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), who always saw himself as a Plato scholar (he was followed in his readings of Plato by his pupils Wolfgang Wieland and Rüdiger Bubner). He wrote a little-known and unpublished doctoral dissertation on Plato in 1922, his habilitation thesis on the *Philebus* in 1928 (it came out in print in 1931) and published various works on Plato well into his nineties, culminating in the publication of the volume “Plato in Dialogue” which appeared as volume VII of his *Complete Works* edition in 1991². Recently, it has at times been claimed that Gadamer belongs to or can be “integrated” into the Tübingen School, most notably by Giovanni Reale and his pupils in Milan³. Not only that, these pupils from Milan claimed that when he was confronted with this hypothesis, Gadamer seemed to express his agreement⁴.

This must however sound somewhat strange to anyone familiar with the work of the Tübingen School and with Gadamer. To my knowledge, no one in Tübingen had ever claimed that Gadamer was part of the “new paradigm”. Yet, there were outside reasons to claim that there indeed was a “proximity” and that might explain why Gadamer was willing to acknowledge it. First, Gadamer was a close personal friend of the mentor of the principal proponents of the Tübingen School, Wolfgang Schadewaldt. Secondly, Gadamer took active part in the debates surrounding the

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Griechische Philosophie. III. Plato im Dialog, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 7, Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1991.

³ Reale, G., *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Milano : Vita e Pensiero, 2003, p. 350: “Su questo problema H.-G. Gadamer, *il quale ha una posizione che rientra nel nuovo paradigma*, ha visto ben chiaro » (my emphasis). See also Giuseppe Girgenti, « Prefazione », in Girgenti 1998, p. 9.

⁴ Girgenti 1998, p. 11 : « *La grande sorpresa di Reale è stata que Gadamer si è dichiarato perfettamente d'accordo* ». When asked by Reale himself in the course of a public discussion in Tübingen in 1996 if he was right to claim that he could be included in the « new paradigm », Gadamer answered (Girgenti 1998, 68) : « Yes, certainly, in this sense yes ». But it should be noted that the late Gadamer says this after Reale has approvingly quoted a long page of Gadamer on Plato’s theory of numbers (66-68), but which doesn’t deal specifically with the Tübingen school. So one should not make too much out of this agreement that was pressed out of him.

Tübingen School in the 60s and 70s, even organizing a conference on the subject, despite the fact that he was already a world-famous philosopher after the publication of *Truth and Method* (1960). Thirdly, Gadamer genuinely seems to have been attracted by Plato's insistence on the *oral nature* of philosophical teaching espoused by Plato, which would seem to put him in the vicinity of the Tübingen School's stress on Plato's oral teaching. Finally, Gadamer ended his magnum opus *Truth and Method* with a strong defense of a form of Platonism, when he claimed that language was "the light of Being", a notion which seems influenced by the Neoplatonist notion of emanation. The Tübingen reading, for its part, always acknowledged its closeness to the Neoplatonist understanding of Plato⁵ (for which it was chastised by those who view it as an "overinterpretation" of Plato).

As I would like to argue in the present paper, the notion that Gadamer can be "enrolled" in the movement of the Tübingen School is however a misunderstanding which ignores the great divide between them. I will do this by recalling the context out of which the Tübingen School arose and the manner in which Gadamer took up its challenge.

In doing so, I cannot but recall (the outside reader will pardon me for indulging in this) parts of my personal experience, since I had the good fortune, during the course of my graduate studies, to come into close contact with both Gadamer and the Tübingen School. From 1978 to 1982, I did my graduate work in Tübingen and was not yet very specialized in my philosophical studies, thankfully so, so I had the good fortune to study Greek philology besides philosophy. Since I was in Tübingen, I was exposed to the "Tübingen School" and its well-known focus on Plato's alleged "unwritten doctrines". Every semester, I followed many lectures and seminars with

⁵ Compare for instance the text of T. A. Szlezák, « Gadamer und die Idee des Guten im Philebos », in the present collection. In my Gadamer studies, I have always stressed this Neoplatonist trait in Gadamer, most lately in « L'art comme présentation chez Gadamer. Portée et limites d'un concept », dans *Études Germaniques* 62 (2007), 337-349, as well as in my *Introduction à la métaphysique*, Presses de l'université de Montréal, 2004, 349-353.

Hans Krämer (that all dealt with Plato's dialogues) – with whom I have kept in contact over the years (and who happened to be working a lot on hermeneutics⁶) – and Konrad Gaiser, but also with figures like Jürgen Wippert, known for his collection of essays on the Tübingen School, but who then gave *Stilübungen* [“exercises of style”] in Greek, where we read classical authors like Demosthenes or Lysias and then had to translate a German text into a Greek that resembled that of Demosthenes and Lysias. I don't know if Greek is still taught that way, but I sure learned a lot of Greek, and German, in the process.

At the time, I was very much attracted to Plato as well as to German philosophy. So I decided to work on a dissertation on the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who was the leading figure of hermeneutics. Later on, I would come into closer contact with Gadamer and even write a biography of him at the end of the 90s. May the reader pardon the familiarity, or immodesty, but to speak of Gadamer and the Tübingen School, is for me a bit like speaking of my own family. Yet, in every family, there are differences, and on these I will also have to focus.

The debate between Gadamer and the Tübingen School has everything to do with the interpretation of Plato's ultimate intentions: is Plato's thinking to be found in the dialogues alone or is there some kind of “hidden esoteric doctrine” lurking behind them? Here, Gadamer's general position is that the Tübingen scholars are right in pointing out the *insufficiency of writings* for Plato and to insist on the superiority of the oral transmission of philosophy, but he doesn't believe that this entails that there was a hidden oral doctrine that would solve the problems left open by his writings. It is a *philosophical* point Gadamer makes, and one that can be grounded on what Plato says in his writings, especially at the end of the *Phaedrus*: the superiority of orality stems from

⁶ He has just published a book on hermeneutics, *Kritik der Hermeneutik, Interpretationsphilosophie und Realismus*, München : Beck, 2006, which offers a devastating critique of Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. In it I could recognize criticisms that he had formulated at the end of the 70s in his seminars on Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.

the fact that philosophical knowledge is then written directly in the soul. This superiority does not refer to specific oral doctrines that Plato would have held back from his writings⁷. In other words, philosophy cannot be confined to writings because it has more to do with a transformation of the soul (*metanoia tēs psychēs*). The Tübingen School would agree with Gadamer that the “writing in the soul” is paramount, but it claims that there was indeed an oral teaching with a specific content (indeed an ultimate foundation or *Letztbegründung*) that Plato withheld to a certain degree from his dialogues. This claim rests on what Plato “suggests” in his own texts, but also on the testimony of authors like Aristotle who refer quite naturally to this oral teaching when they speak of Plato’s core doctrine. So there is indeed a clear-cut alternative, in spite of what Gadamer claims in the text quoted at the beginning of this essay: does Plato refer to a specific, expressible doctrine that he withheld from his dialogues, or doesn’t he? The Tübingen scholars argue he does, Gadamer believes he doesn’t, even if he stresses the importance, indeed the superiority of orality, but for different reasons. In order to understand this difference, some background is necessary.

The Emergence of the Tübingen School

How did the Tübingen School come into existence? It all began with the publication in 1959 of Hans Krämer’s truly ground-breaking doctoral thesis of 1957 on *Arete in Platon and Aristoteles* (Heidelberg, Winter Verlag, 1959). Quite a feat for a doctoral thesis! In my life, I have never read a Ph.D. thesis that had so much influence on scholarship (nothing comes even close!). Its title was however somewhat of a misnomer since the book was less a study on the notion of “virtue” in the work of Plato and Aristotle than a reawakening of the entire debate about Plato’s unwritten

⁷ See Gadamer in Girgenti 1998, 32 : « *Tutto in Platone è, per così dire, protrettico, rimanda ad altro. La nuova interpretazione si basa soprattutto su quanto afferma Platone nel Fedro (il dialogo platonico che io amo di più), vale a dire sulla superiorità di determinate dottrine (quelle espresse oralmente) rispetto ad altre (quelle scritte nei dialoghi).* »

doctrines. To be sure, it *was* a book on the notion of *arètè* to the extent that it aimed to show that the famous Aristotelian notion of virtue as a “middle” between two extremes came straight out of Plato’s notion of the One, understood as the unifying principle behind the extremes, that allegedly formed the nucleus of Plato’s “esoteric” teaching. But, on the main, the book had little to say about the Aristotelian notion of *arètè*, or on its precise occurrences in the Platonic corpus. Its aim was to bring back to memory Plato’s – famous and infamous – “unwritten doctrines”, that tend to present Plato as the defender of a theory of principles, and thus to situate him in the organic continuity of Greek reflection on the principles of nature. This outlook, Krämer believed, could also help us understand the philosophical unity of the work of Plato and Aristotle on the *archai*⁸ (a unity, it should also be noted, that is also dear to Gadamer, but, again, for entirely different reasons). This new “image” (*das neue Platobild*, as it was called) of Plato sparked heated debates in Germany (less so elsewhere), since it challenged the dominating reading of Plato, that focused exclusively on his dialogues and neglected the “unwritten doctrines”, a conception that Krämer “blames” on Schleiermacher and his widespread influence⁹. Many Plato scholars, who had never read Schleiermacher, were quite surprised to learn that they were “closet Schleiermacherians”. But this debate did arouse curiosity for the work of Schleiermacher on Plato, which received quite a lot of justified attention in recent years¹⁰.

⁸ Compare the first lines of the first section of the *Arete*-book (*Arete in Platon and Aristoteles*, Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1959, 14) : « Die Darstellung erkennt in Platon und Aristoteles zwei Spielformen desselben Platonismus, deren Unterschiede noch immer in weiten Grenzen fließend bleiben. Insbesondere das spezifisch Aristotelische kann noch keineswegs als feste Größe gelten, sondern wird erst künftig in allmählicher Approximation einzugrenzen sein. ».

⁹ On this attempt to overcome Schleiermacher’s image of Plato, see for instance Hans Krämer, « Zum neuen Platon-Bild », in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 55 (1981), 1-18. On the philosophical background behind Schleiermacher’s conception of Plato, see H. Krämer, « Fichte, Schlegel und der Infinitismus in der Platondeutung », in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 62 (1988), 583-621.

¹⁰ Hence the interesting new edition of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Philosophie Platons* (which contains his lectures “*Geschichte der Philosophie. Vorlesungen über Sokrates und Platon*”, held in 1819

How did Krämer come up with his new interpretation? The question has always puzzled me. It is striking to note that he received very little influence – as far as I can see (and this was confirmed in the many friendly discussions I had with him) – from his immediate teachers in Tübingen. His most important teacher was the famous Wolfgang Schadewaldt, a close friend of Gadamer, and of Heidegger, but who was more of a Homer and Sophocles scholar and who worked very little on Plato¹¹. This is also true of Konrad Gaiser who dedicated his habilitation thesis of 1963 on *Plato's Unwritten Doctrines*, which was based on Krämer, to Schadewaldt “in gratitude and admiration”, in *Dankbarkeit und Verehrung*. Krämer used the very same, somewhat formal dedication in his habilitation thesis of 1964 on *The Origin of the Metaphysics of Spirit*. Some of the inspiration for Krämer came from Gaiser's somewhat earlier dissertation of 1955 on *Paranese and Protreptics in Plato's Dialogues*, which defended the now quite widely recognized view, I believe, that Plato's dialogues must be read less as doctrinal tracts than as “incitements” or “invitations” to “join”, as it were, the Academy. In the foreword to his *Arètè*-book, Krämer also evoked the ground-breaking work of Julius Stenzel, who had worked on the notion of idea and number in Plato's later dialogues, which had also been the focus of Léon Robin's older study on *La théorie platonicienne des idées et des nombres d'après Aristote* (1908). Other influences were scant, but Paul Wilpert, Jakob Klein and Philip Merlan come to mind.

An outside influence is, of course, obvious, but one wonders why it raised such a heated response in the somewhat provincial town of Tübingen: Krämer also wanted to

and 1823, and *Die Einleitungen zur Übersetzung des Platon (1804-1828)*, herausgegeben von Peter M. Steiner, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1996. On Schleiermacher's reading of the *Phaedrus*, see especially Y. Lafrance, « Schleiermacher, lecteur du *Phèdre* de Platon », in *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 8 (1990), 229-261 (hostile to Krämer).

¹¹ Yet, an important link to Schadewaldt's is alluded to in the *Arète*-book, p. 39 : Krämer states that he will leave the Greek work *arete* untranslated, but evokes the famous translation of this word by *Bestheit* (« bestity »; it sounds better in German...) that Schadewaldt presented in his lectures (in his own oral teaching, as it were) and that was diffused from there. So the title of Krämer's book is indeed inspired by a theme dear to Schadewaldt, even if it is quite a misleading title with regard to the content of the book.

respond to Harold Cherniss, the famed American Plato Scholar, who had called into question, in his essay on *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945), the reliability of Aristotle's account about Plato's esoteric doctrines. Cherniss challenged these reports by arguing that Aristotle very often distorted Plato's doctrines in those instances where we could confront them with the ones we could verify in Plato's texts. A large part of Krämer's work of 1959 was devoted to a systematic destruction of Cherniss's arguments. Most unfortunately, Cherniss, who died in 1987 (he was born in 1904), *never* openly responded to Krämer's devastating criticism in the 4th chapter of the *Arete*-book. This could give the impression that Krämer's attack was indeed shattering, but I have been told by scholars close to Cherniss (my friend and early teacher Luc Brisson, especially) that he had accumulated endless notes on Krämer in a folder and which were so numerous that he never came around to giving them a publishable form. As far as I can see, this task of a cogent, meticulous answer to Krämer's arguments was hardly taken over by the pupils of Cherniss and remains a *desideratum* of Plato scholarship.

Misunderstandings and hostile reactions

To be sure, Krämer's and Gaiser's new interpretations were widely challenged, but for a large part on an emotional basis, that rejected out of hand the entire perspective of the Tübingen School¹², but very often, it did so by relying on arguments that Krämer had already refuted or dealt with. One found it most sacrilegious that one should "ignore" Plato's so masterful dialogues (which wasn't true) in favor of an indirect tradition that did not always seem very trustworthy (some of its documents were quite late and obviously tainted by the later stream of Neo-Platonism, which can

¹² Vittorio Hösle (*Der philosophische Dialog*, München : Beck, 2006, 356) is right to say that « the opposition raised by the so-called Tübingen school of Plato interpretation was not always, indeed was very seldom founded ».

easily be seen an “overinterpretation” of Plato, but to which both Krämer and Gadamer appeared close, albeit yet again for different reasons). One mistrusted, for all sorts of reasons, the notion of an “esoteric” Platonic doctrine. The word “esoteric” already has a mysterious, initiatory and suspicious ring to it. After all, Plato had written extensively, and most superbly, on what mattered most for him, say, the “theory of ideas”.

I even remember first-rate classical philologists, whom I will have the courtesy of not naming, who told me that Krämer himself had “reneged” on his interpretation since he had published « retractations » on the subject. They were referring to Krämer’s article “Retractations on the Problem of the Esoteric Plato”¹³ of 1964. They were obviously misled by the title and the legend it sparked: *Retraktationen* in German *does not* mean that one « retracts » from an earlier position, but that one « treats it again » (*re-tractare*)! Anyone who has read the article will know that there is not a flicker of « self-criticism » in it. A lesson must be heeded here : often scholars speak of positions and articles that they have not read (especially if they are in German...). One should always read with one’s own eyes.

But the general impression remained that it was foolhardy to “disregard” the dialogues. It would be like saying that one should understand the works of Kant or Hegel without regard for their written works! A laughable contention if there ever was one. The debates were indeed very emotional. They nevertheless overshadowed Plato scholarship in Germany. The reading of the Tübingen School later garnered a lot of attention in Italy, where it was massively taken up by Giovanni Reale in Milan, so that the Tübingen School is now often called the School of Tübingen and Milan¹⁴. As far as I can judge, it received much less attention in the English-speaking world, where the let me call it (without any pejorative undertones!) “puritan” focus on the “written” and

¹³ « *Retraktationen zum Problem des esoterischen Plato* », *Museum Helveticum* 21 (1964), 137-167.

¹⁴ See the issue published on this topic by Luc Brisson (an enemy of the esoteric Plato for decades, and of course a very sound Platonist) in the *Études philosophiques* (1999).

thus verifiable letter has always been very strong. So, despite Krämer's scourging criticism, Cherniss' diligent and exclusive concentration on the dialogues did continue to dominate in America, as did the idea that the so-called Platonic doctrine of principles was an Aristotelian construction, if not invention.

The Foundation of the Tübingen Interpretation in the Dialogues

In this emotional debate, one often failed to see that Krämer's reading also *did* focus primarily on Plato's dialogues and their own reluctance regarding a written formulation of the last principles, as it is expressed mostly in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*. Krämer took good heed of the fact that Plato's dialogues are already very allusive, especially when they deal with the basic tenets of his doctrine. This is most obvious in the *Republic* where Plato, for all intents and purposes, speaks for the first and only time about the overarching principle of the Good, but where he says no less than three times (*Rep.* 504 a, 506e, 532d) that his friends have heard him speak often about the subject, about which he will only give an image in the present context.

It is thus important to see that the reading of the Tübingen School does rest on a reading of Plato's dialogues – one that is perhaps questionable, but that has some intrinsic merits. The irony is that Plato is the first, but also the *only* major philosopher of Greek Antiquity whose writings have almost all been preserved in their entirety. This is true of no other Greek philosopher, with the possible exception of Plotinus (but whose work might have been touched by the editing hand of Porphyrius). So we should be thankful for the fact that we have such an impressive compendium of Plato's works, which certainly includes his major works, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Philebus*, etc., all the more so since they also happen to be literary masterpieces of the highest order. These dialogues thus form the primary and unquestioned basis of Plato scholarship.

Yet, the interpretation of this corpus as a whole is faced with stupendous and unique challenges. The first has to do with the fact that Plato never speaks in his own name in the dialogues. He almost never mentions his own self, and in one of the two instances where he does so, in the *Phaedo*, when he speaks of the last hours that Socrates spent with his pupils, it is to say about Plato that he was not present... To what extent are the dialogues the real expression of Plato's thinking? One can always claim that Plato is putting his own doctrine in the mouth of others, like Socrates, but this is only possible out of a specific understanding of what is held to be his core doctrine. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that it is more often than not difficult to read the dialogues as the exposition of a formal doctrine. Their style is mostly dialogical, allusive and often quite ironic. For almost any doctrine that is alleged to be platonic, one can find an interpreter who believes this specific doctrine is presented *cum grano salis*. Ironists are everywhere these days.

To complicate matters further, Plato – to the extent that he is present in his dialogues – seems to suggest at times that the essence of his thinking cannot be found in his writings. He claims as much in his *Seventh Letter*, whose authenticity is often challenged, and to a lesser extent in the *Phaedrus*, where he claims that philosophical insight cannot be confined to writing since it has to be written in the soul itself (278 a). This insight rests on an important tenet of Plato's thought, as we have seen and on which Gadamer rightly insists, namely that philosophical wisdom has to do with a transformation of the soul (*a metanoia tes psychès*), which cannot be reduced to a specific doctrine which could be written down like a mathematical formula. But in the context of the *Phaedrus*, Plato's argument is more prosaic (275 e): he argues that in a writing, an author is absent and cannot account for the meaning of his doctrines¹⁵.

¹⁵ An argument that I have never found completely satisfying : an author can always specify in writing how he wants or hopes to be interpreted. To be sure, this will not stop the flow of interpretations, but it can certainly curtail it.

Hence the well-known paradox : Plato's writings themselves seem to suggest that the essence of his thinking is perhaps *not to be found* in his writings. This paradox is all the more ironic since it is true of the only major Greek thinker whose entire writings are extant!

Yet, this is how Plato's disciples also seem to have understood the main thrust of his work. When Aristotle speaks of the doctrines of Plato's in the first book of what we call his *Metaphysics*, he presents him quite naturally as one who defended a doctrine according to which the world would be constituted by two basic principles, the One and the undetermined Dyad. It should be noted that Aristotle said this to an audience that was certainly familiar with Plato's dialogues, but which also still had some knowledge of the doctrine taught at his Academy. Since the Academy was a teaching institution, it is difficult to think that Plato did not strive to give a more systematic or authoritative exposition of his doctrine than he did in the more protreptic or "enticing" context of the dialogues. That Plato had an "esoteric" doctrine is further corroborated by the famous text of Aristotle's *Physics* (209 b 11-16) that alludes to Plato's "*agrapha dogmata*", his unwritten doctrines.

Can one discount these *testimonia*? It is very hard to do so, even if one can otherwise challenge Aristotle's *readings* of Plato, all the more so since they are very critical. But why would Aristotle invent out of the blue the notion of *agrapha dogmata*, especially at a time when most of his listeners could remember these teachings? And why on Earth would he also invent the names of the two principles of the One and the undetermined Dyad? Assuredly, many Platonists don't recognize in them doctrines they can pinpoint in the dialogues. But one has to be stubborn not to see that they are also not as foreign to the dialogues as might first seem. What is Plato's basic doctrine all about if not the notion that our world, of infinite diversity, is governed by instances of regularity, i. e. by ideas, which can be seen as forms of *unity* and order? It is this unifying principle that Plato calls the idea of the Good in his *Republic* and to which

Aristotle seems to refer to when he speaks of the One. The Tübingen School follows Aristotle (and Plotinus) in identifying the principle of the One with the Good of the *Republic*: a principle of “good order” is necessarily a unifying principle¹⁶. Yet, this principle is not alone in shaping our universe and that of the ideas. Another, contrary principle is required, that of the undetermined Duality: it is the principle of diversity – one can think here of the Aristotelian *hylê* – that the One strives to bring into order. It is difficult not to recognize here the principle of division, that Plato alludes to in his *Philebus*, when he speaks of the principle of the unlimited that is opposed to the “limited”.

Following the Tübingen School, this “generative interaction” of the two principles forms the core of Plato’s alleged unwritten doctrine. As schematic as the names of the One and the undetermined Dyad might sound, one can indeed find them prefigured, in a more or less allusive manner, in the dialogues themselves: what is the One if not the epitome of the unifying principle of the *eidos*, and the Good itself, that accounts for the unity and the order in the visible world? They also attest to Plato’s fascination with mathematics that is quite evident in his later work, but also in the work of the middle period. One must also wonder on what grounds one could challenge the credibility of Aristotle, and on at least two counts: 1. Why would he create the names of the One and the Dyad if they were not Platonic? 2. Why would he invent the idea that they were “*agrapha dogmata*” in Plato? On this, it would appear to me that the Tübingen School has seen rightly that the *testimonia platonica* confirm the existence of some “doctrine”, yet one, I would insist, that can already be garnered from the dialogues, namely that our world and that of the ideas are regulated by two interrelating, yet conflicting set of principles.

¹⁶ Two classical studies of Krämer underscore this unity of the Good and the One : « Epekeina tes ousias. Zu Platon, Politeia 509 B », in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 51 (1969), 1-30 and “Die Idee des Guten , Sonnen- und Liniengleichnis (Buch VI 504a-511e)”, in O. Höffe (ed.), *Platon, Politeia*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997, 179-203. At no less than five times, Krämer recalls, Aristotle says that the Good was equaled to the One in Plato.

Gadamer's Reaction to The Tübingen School: Plato's Unwritten Dialectic

How did Gadamer react to all this? As a Plato scholar, he did take a lot of interest in this debate and was certainly instrumental in seeing to it that some of the work of Krämer and Gaiser appeared in the Carl Winter Press of Heidelberg, which is usually devoted to the publications of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, of which Gadamer was a distinguished member¹⁷. Gadamer, who was also intimately familiar with the Plato scholars Krämer and Gaiser were relying on, most notably W. Jaeger, J. Stenzel and W. Schadewaldt, even organized a conference on the ideas of the Tübingen School in September 1967, the proceeds of which he also edited in Heidelberg in 1968¹⁸. It is there that he presented his text on “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic”¹⁹, which can be seen as his main statement on this debate. Even though Gadamer did not count himself among the followers of the Tübingen School, it is striking to note that he did not directly challenge the historical existence of some kind of specific “doctrine” that Plato taught at the Academy. He bemoans, to be sure, the fact that it is often called “esoteric” or “secret”, since this notion raises some mystical

¹⁷ It might be noted that in a letter he wrote to Gadamer on September 3 1960 (recently published in the *Jahresgabe der Martin-Heidegger-Gesellschaft* 2005/2006, p. 38-39), Martin Heidegger alluded to Krämer’s book he had just received and added a little criticism : « Krämer sent me his big work. I feel that the philological controversy stifles the discussion of the issue » (*Krämer schickte mir seine große Arbeit. Mir scheint, die philologische Kontroverse erdrückt die Versuche einer Erörterung*). It is however revealing that Heidegger thought of Gadamer when he received the book (because of Plato, the publication in the Academy Press of Heidelberg, and because of Schadewaldt, their common friend). One can however find Heidegger’s comment a bit harsh, since he could have found in Krämer’s book a strong confirmation of his view of Plato as the founder of the tradition of metaphysics (a view Gadamer contested in some ways).

¹⁸ *Idee und Zahl. Studien zur platonischen Philosophie*, Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, hrsg. von H.-G. Gadamer and W. Schadewaldt, Heidelberg : Carl Winter Verlag, 1968. These proceedings include contributions by Konrad Gaiser, Hermann Gundert, Helmut Kühn, Krämer and Gadamer, but, unfortunately in this case, they did not include the oral exchanges

¹⁹ « Platos ungeschriebene Dialektik », first published in *Idee und Zahl. Studien zur platonischen Philosophie*, 9-30, now in H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Band 6 : *Griechische Philosophie*, Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1985, 129-153. Further references to this text [= PUD] will be to this edition.

and initiatory connotations he deems detrimental to the debate. In this, it must be noted, he is in full agreement with the Tübingen scholars who always believed that it was an entirely rational explanation of the world and of the genesis of the world of ideas out of the One and the Dyad that was taught at the Academy. It is thus preferable in this debate to speak about Plato's "unwritten" than of his "esoteric" doctrine.

Gadamer also concedes that there was an oral teaching (*mündliche Unterweisung*) that was limited to the scholars who belonged to the inner circle of the Academy²⁰. Yet, as the title of his contribution indicates, he believes that it was less a "doctrine" than a "dialectic" that he taught them. He suggests by this that it stood in the continuity of the "dialectic" already practiced in the dialogues and that it probably took on the form of a "learned dialogue" (*Lehrgespräch*) and not that of a lecture (*Vorlesung*)²¹. Gadamer has difficulty imagining a Plato, who always despised the *macrologos*²², as one who would himself deliver a dogmatic lecture. His Plato always remains the disciple of Socrates, one who seeks to find truth through dialogue (which also sounds more "Gadamerian"; we have no way of knowing if Plato himself was a master "dialogist").

Despite his attachment to the Socratic and dialogical Plato, Gadamer credited the Tübingen interpretation with important insights and indeed breakthroughs. First, they would have cogently demonstrated that the preference for the dialogical Plato and the downplaying of the idea of a "platonian doctrine" goes back to Schleiermacher and his romantic notion of dialogue (one that is perhaps foreign to Plato – but from which Gadamer will not really depart!). This has led, Gadamer confesses²³, to the unjust

²⁰ PUD, 130 : « *Wir sollten uns auf die Formulierung einigen können, daß Plato im allgemeinen nur solchen Leuten seine mündliche Unterweisung zuteil werden ließ und nur mit solchen Leuten seine Gedanken ausgetauscht hat, die dem Lebenskreis seiner 'Schule' angehörten* ».

²¹ But that was already the conviction of Krämer (*Arete*, p. 144 n.).

²² PUD, 131.

²³ PUD, 130.

neglect of the idea that there was such a thing as a Platonic doctrine (*Lehre*). This recognition even takes on the form of a confession since Gadamer acknowledges that his own book of 1931 on *Plato's Dialectical Ethic* focused too much on the dialogical practice of the dialogues to the detriment of their doctrinal substance. This is an honorable concession to the Tübingen school, but as we will see, Gadamer will finally side, for all means and purposes, with Schleiermacher.

The Tübingen reading successfully insisted, Gadamer argues, on the fact that writing requires the sustaining help of an oral teaching, following the doctrine of the *Phaedrus*. Thus, the Tübingen readers had good reason to stress, he believes, the “protreptic” nature of Plato’s dialogues and to thus underscore their natural “reservation”. We should be thankful, he writes, “for the insistence with which the Tübingen philologists have underlined that the dialogues are consciously reserved in their form of communication (*in ihrem Mitteilungsanspruch bewußt zurückhaltend*)”²⁴. Yet, Gadamer wonders if this limitation and reservation only holds for the dialogues. Should we not believe that Plato observed the same reticence in his oral teaching? As alluded to above, Gadamer thus differs from the Tübingen scholars in his understanding of the relation between writing and what it wants to convey. The restriction of writing was not lifted once and for all, he thinks (but on what grounds?), in an oral teaching that would have revealed once and for all what the writings would only allude to. Plato’s thinking is as such *always* allusive, he argues, which means for Gadamer that it requires a thinking effort on the part of the reader to complement what writing only indicates. In this, Gadamer depends, one could argue, on Kierkegaard’s notion of “indirect communication” (which was taken up by Jaspers and Heidegger), which goes hand in hand with his critique of systematic thinking²⁵. But can it be applied without qualification to Plato?

²⁴ PUD, 131.

²⁵ See the allusion to Kierkegaard in PUD, 129.

Like many others, even Krämer²⁶, Gadamer deplores the fact that the testimonies concerning Plato's unwritten doctrine (or "dialectic") are so meager and schematic, all the more so if one confronts them with the literary and material liveliness of the dialogues. Like many other critics, he feels that the reconstruction of this doctrine proposed by the Tübingen scholars sounds too much like the scholastic philosophy of Christian Wolff of the 18th Century, where everything is "deduced" and "generated" out of a few neat rational principles. Gadamer doesn't think there is such a thing as a "*characteristica universalis*" in Plato, that would contain the definitions of all the ideas and that would have been deduced in the Academy out of the One and the Dyad.

Yet, Gadamer does want to make something out of this doctrine of the One and the Dyad. It is, he says, like a skeleton that needs to be filled with flesh if it is to form a lively doctrine, as is the case with the doctrines of the dialogues that need to be supplemented by lively dialogue²⁷. Gadamer thus goes on to single-handedly develop an interpretation of this interaction between the One and the Dyad by linking it to what he calls the "*arithmos*-structure of the *logos*". By linking the unwritten doctrine to this *arithmos*-structure, Gadamer hopes to close the circle between the direct and indirect transmission of Plato's doctrine²⁸, which he sees as the primary task raised by the debate surrounding the *agrapha dogmata*.

What is this *arithmos*-structure all about? Gadamer recalls, rightly, that Plato was always fascinated by the manner in which numbers (*arithmoi*) could reflect the relations between ideas, which is also confirmed by the importance bestowed upon numerical relations in dialogues such as the *Timaeus*. The arithmetical connotations of the One and the Dyad fit in perfectly, he believes, with Plato's main philosophical preoccupations²⁹. Yet, the One and the Dyad are not to be understood as the two

²⁶ Krämer, in Girgenti 1998, 40 : « È anche vero, no lo nego, che la tradizione indiretta è molto povera, e che i dialoghi sono infinitamente più ricchi ».

²⁷ PUD, 132.

²⁸ PUD, 134.

²⁹ PUD, 134.

overriding “numbers” out of which all ideas could be deduced. According to Gadamer, there is no such thing as a deductive system in Plato. Plato was not a “Euclidus writ large”³⁰. Rather, the One and the Dyad reflect the problem of unity and plurality (*Einheit und Vielheit*) with which we are often confronted in the dialogues. In what does this problem consist? The unity is obviously marked by the “principle” of the One. Yet, the One never stands alone: it unfolds itself in the midst of a plurality when it takes on the form of an accord, harmony (*Einstimmigkeit, harmonia*) or “symmetry” in the many. Thus, the ideal constitution of the state or of the soul are to be understood as a form of harmony, where there is unity in plurality. So, Gadamer has no difficulty in recognizing in the One the ordering principle of the Good, that is presented as a *megiston mathema* in the *Republic*³¹. In this, he would appear close to the Tübingen reading.

But for him, this relation between the One and the Many would ultimately be grounded in the *logos* itself: it is the *logos* that is at the same time one and many. When one wants to give a definition of something, Gadamer explains, one has to give an account of all its defining elements by following the dialectical method of binary divisions. Yet, the definition that comes out is always one. The idea that seems to fascinate Gadamer (and Plato?) here is that the One is never given without the Many, so that all reality, and all the relations of ideas, must be understood as a kind of mix (*Mischung*) of the One and the Many. This would be, according to Gadamer, the overriding evidence of Plato’s thinking, the interrelatedness of the Same and the Other, of unity and plurality³². This would be reflected in the mysterious nature of the number (*arithmos*), which is at the same time a unity (one number) and a plurality of ones³³. This mix of the One and the Many also holds for the ideas: every idea forms a

³⁰ Gadamer, in Girgenti 1998, 20 : « *si tratterebbe, in effetti, di una sorta di Euclide gigantesco* ».

³¹ PUD, 135.

³² PUD, 145 : « *Es scheint mir diese Evidenz, der Plato in der Analyse des Strukturzusammenhanges von Einheit und Vielheit, von Selbigkeit und Verschiedenheit folgt und die sein ganzes Denken trägt* ». Really *this* evidence?

³³ PUD, 146.

unity, yet it does not suffice to focus on the unity of the idea to understand what it is all about. It can only be understood out of its relationship to other ideas. The ideas partake in one another – by *methexis*, *koinonia*, *synousia*, *parousia*, *mixis*, *symploke*³⁴ – just as the phenomena of the sensible world partake in the ideas.

Unity, and the unity of discourse, is only possible through a plurality and *vice versa*. Gadamer is utterly convinced that this is the meaning of the doctrine of the ideal numbers that has been handed down to us through the indirect tradition³⁵.

At this point, it may strike the reader that this is mostly an interpretation on Gadamer's part. It is perhaps a strong and suggestive one, but nevertheless an interpretation which is not entirely grounded on Plato's texts, nor for that matter on the very meager *testimonia platonica* and the discussions they have sparked. This suspicion is buttressed by the fact that Gadamer likes to insist on the essentially uncompleted nature (*Unabschliessbarkeit*) of human knowledge, one that the Platonic doctrine of the One and the Many would precisely strive to underscore. According to Gadamer's reading of Plato, human knowledge is intrinsically beholden to this dialectic of the One and the Dyad: it seeks to understand in the unity of a *logos* what can only be said in a multiplicity of words and that can never reach final completion. No one can think at the same time "*uno intuitu*"³⁶ all the relations (of ideas) that determine a thing or an idea, following the model of Leibniz's divine intellect that would grasp at once all the relations between the ideas. Hence Gadamer's very peculiar, yet characteristic insistence on the *second* of Plato's two principles, namely the "undetermined Dyad": this indeterminacy (one can think here of Quine, even if he was not present to Gadamer's mind) would indeed be constitutive of human thinking according to Gadamer's reading of Plato. This would also correspond to what Plato

³⁴ PUD, 147.

³⁵ PUD, 149 : « *Wie sich die indirekte Überlieferung über die Idealzahlenlehre mit der Modellfunktion der Zahl, die in Platons Dialogen anklingt, vereinigen läßt, scheint mir damit in großen Zügen geklärt* ».

³⁶ PUD, 152.

wanted to say, to his *mens auctoris*, Gadamer contends: “there are many indications that this is the way Plato thought”³⁷.

Gadamer’s relates this finitude of human understanding to the distance between the knowing God and the searching human out of which Plato’s thinking is to be understood³⁸. This gap between the human and the divine forms the basis of Gadamer’s entire reading of Plato that makes him out to be a philosopher of finitude and not one who would stress the “infinite knowledge” of the world of ideas that he would seem to be following the Tübingen reading. Here, the opposition between the two is striking.

Truth and Method in Plato?

It is undeniable that Plato never forgets the distinction between the divine and the human. Yet, one can wonder whether Gadamer’s reading can be accepted as a satisfying account of the meaning of Plato’s *agrapha dogmata*. One is somewhat taken aback by the fact that Gadamer’s reading never relies, for all intents and purposes, on the *testimonia platonica* themselves, except on the “meager” fact that there were two principles, the One and the Dyad, out of which he weaves his own interpretation. Furthermore, Gadamer does not really discuss extensively the arguments of Krämer or Gaiser. He criticizes them for seeing in Plato’s principles a “deductive” system that would be more akin to the *Schulphilosophie* of the 18th century. Yet, he himself reads the principles out a philosophical outlook that is perhaps foreign to the thinking of Plato himself. He understands namely the two principles as the expression of the necessarily uncompleted nature of human knowledge, that would be rooted in the tantalizing

³⁷ PUD, 153 : « *Es gibt manches Zeugnis, dass Plato so gedacht hat.* » This bears noticing, since Gadamer, in his hermeneutics, famously downplays the importance of the *mens auctoris*.

³⁸ PUD, 152.

nature of the *logos* that – like the numbers – would be at the same time one and many. Is this really Plato’s core doctrine?

I don’t know, since I did not attend his lectures. But one thing is mesmerizing: this doctrine of the “dialectical” and finite nature of our knowledge corresponds precisely to the conception of language that is developed in the last part of *Truth and Method*³⁹. Gadamer would contend that it was first platonic and then taken over by his hermeneutics, but the converse is also thinkable, namely that Gadamer reads too much Plato out of his own hermeneutics of finitude. Interpreters such as Hans Krämer have argued that this focus on the finite nature of our knowledge (“*Finitismus*”, he calls it) is typical of modern and romantic interpretations of Plato, that go back to Schleiermacher⁴⁰. There are also traces of this in Gadamer’s analysis. Among the reasons for downplaying the existence of a Platonic doctrine in the history of Plato studies, Gadamer evokes, as we have seen, Kierkegaard’s principled critique of systematic thinking⁴¹. Now, it is obvious enough that Gadamer shares this criticism, and has consistently done so ever since one of his earliest pieces, written in 1924, that was a critique of the system idea in philosophy⁴². It is thus no surprise that he would seek to downplay any hints at a systematic thinking in his dialogical image of Plato, even if it is perhaps anachronistic to do so. Echoes of Kierkegaard’s conception of indirect communication as well as of Heidegger’s philosophy of human finitude are quite evident in his readings. They might be philosophically suggestive and debatable, but one might wonder if they correspond to what Plato wanted to say.

³⁹ Compare H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in his *Gesammelte Werke*, Band I, Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1986, p. 434, 461; *Truth and Method*, translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, New York : Crossroad, 1990, p. 430 (with a telling reference to Stenzel’s article on Speusippus), 457 (on the speculative nature of language).

⁴⁰ See again H. Krämer, « Fichte, Schlegel und der Infinitismus in der Platondeutung », in *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 62 (1988), 583-621; Krämer in Girgenti 1998, 70-71.

⁴¹ PUD, 129.

⁴² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, « Zur Systemidee in der Philosophie », *Festschrift für Paul Natorp zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag*, Berlin : de Gruyter, 1924, 55-75.

Another case in point is Gadamer's often stated view that Plato wanted to *curtail* the scope of mathematics in philosophy. This is an idea he expressed most often during the encounter that took place in Tübingen in 1996 between Gadamer and members of the Tübingen School⁴³, but it was also a basic tenet of his Plato interpretation⁴⁴. It is the view that Plato was certainly interested in mathematics, and Gadamer repeatedly credits Gaiser with explaining to him to what extent this was true about the world of ideas⁴⁵, but according to his hermeneutically tinged reading, Plato knew full well that mathematics *could not* (!) be extended to the entire realm of reality⁴⁶. Mathematics would have to do with a world that is foreign to becoming and which therefore could not be applied to our reality of becoming and opinion. It is true that Plato opposes the ideal and the sensible, the spheres of *epistémé* and of *doxa*, but one can wonder whether this resistance to the extension of mathematics is not also grounded in the distance Gadamer adopts toward the universality of methodical and mathematical science in *Truth and Method*. With a view to the human sciences, it is Gadamer's (otherwise not ungrounded) conviction that we live in a world that is increasingly dominated by the methods of science and thus by mathematics. His hermeneutics understands itself as a corrective against this dominion, which would

⁴³ The purpose of this Tübingen encounter (Girgenti 1998) was to bring Gadamer and the school of Tübingen and of Reale into dialogue. As such, this dialogue is unique and priceless. But one can regret that the direct dialogue between Gadamer and the main proponents of the Tübingen school was limited because no less than ten (otherwise very worthy) Plato specialists were invited to take part in the discussions. Hence, the discussions often lack focus and go into directions suggested by the various research interests of the participants.

⁴⁴ See for instance his essay « *Dialektik und Mathematik bei Platon* », in his *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7, 290-312. I vividly remember this is a talk Gadamer gave in the huge *Festsaal* of Tübingen in 1981, which sparked a heated debate with Gaiser and Krämer.

⁴⁵ Gadamer in Girgenti 1998, 19, 88.

⁴⁶ Girgenti 1998, 65, where he recalls discussions he had with Natorp : « *Già negli anni Venti discutevo con Natorp di questo problema delle Idee-numeri : non si può però estendere la matematica all'intera realtà* ». *Ibid.*, 88 : « *Platone sostiene che le matematiche possiedono uno statuto sottratto al divenire, e quindi stabili. Allora è possibile, in un certo senso, un sistema della matematica, con i principi che conosciamo. E la ricostruzione di queste dottrine è molto utile e feconda : ci sono passi del Politico e del Filebo che si possono comprendere solo alla luce delle dottrine orali, e che altrimenti sarebbero incomprensibili. Ma non possiamo estendere l'ambito della matematica alla realtà, soggetta al divenire* ». Who says this, Gadamer or Plato?

limit the free spaces that should be left open to the judgment of the individual. A precious corrective in this day and age, to be sure, but one has the feeling that Gadamer is inclined to project his distinction of “truth and method” into Plato when he states: “The world does not reduce itself to mathematics! I don’t believe that anyone can resolve the problems of ethics on the basis of the opposition between the unlimited and the limited. Number is one thing, but our life is much more than that. Otherwise one risks transforming Plato into something that is akin to the system of Hegel”⁴⁷. Here one might ask: isn’t Gadamer himself transforming Plato into something that is akin to the (always “open”) system of Gadamer? In light of the importance bestowed upon mathematics in the late dialogues, can one claim that Plato’s main preoccupation was to *limit* their scope? It could here very well be that Plato is read out of the main preoccupation of “Truth and method”.

Conclusion

What should one conclude from this debate, and, one could also contend, *non-debate*, between the Tübingen School and Gadamer? Both seek to “close the circle” between the dialogues and the indirect tradition, but they do so – and this is especially obvious in the case of Gadamer – on grounds that go well beyond the scanty *testimonia* on Plato’s alleged doctrine. The indirect tradition obviously needs to be supplemented by the dialogues, and in both cases they are, but one can wonder whether this does not bring into play a philosophical understanding of Plato’s basic doctrine, that is in both cases questionable or at least in need of clarification. But what is said here is true of any interpretation of Plato, whether it deals with the unwritten doctrines or not. When Plato speaks to us, he does so in a language, or through a “doctrine”, that we unfold in

⁴⁷ Girgenti 1998, 118: “*Il mondo non si riduce alla matematica! Io non credo che qualcuno potrebbe risolvere l’etica solo sulla base della contrapposizione tra l’illimitato e il limite. Il ‘numero’ è qualcosa, ma la nostra vita è di più! Altrimenti si corre il rischio di fare di Platone qualcosa di analogo al sistema di Hegel*”.

the language of the present. What takes place here is what Gadamer otherwise calls a “fusion” of horizons, in which the past and the present coalesce⁴⁸. Gadamer rightfully insists here on the need to *control* this fusion, so that we can discern, to a certain extent, what is from Plato and what stems from our reading of Plato, even if this marks an infinite task. But it can certainly be applied to Gadamer’s readings of Plato as well. It can also be applied, for that matter, to the Tübingen School, and much of contemporary Plato scholarship, but, *eis autis*, as Plato would write, this would be the task of another dialogue.

⁴⁸ See my critical essay on « La fusion des horizons. La version gadamérienne de l’*adaequatio rei et intellectus?* », in *Archives de philosophie* 68 (2005), 401-418.