Idea, Concept and Symbol in Hegel and Gadamer

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Abstract: The robust and encompassing nature of Hegel's absolute idealism is both compelling and problematic. This paper explores Hans-Georg Gadamer's critical appraisal of the Hegelian legacy through the prism of aesthetics and, in doing so, raises general questions about the status and scope of philosophical conceptualization, and, thereby, about the relationship between philosophy and art – or between Concept and symbol. Through an examination of Gadamer's articulation of the symbol and other aspects of his aesthetics, an approach is elaborated that strives to be more open, imaginative, fluid, and humble than traditional Hegelian viewpoints. However, given that Gadamer was also strongly influenced by Hegel, it is also considered how Gadamer's critique and development of Hegel's thought may provide an important opening towards engaging Hegel's thought in a contemporary context. This influence and divergence is considered in relation to Gadamer's conception of the symbol and Hegel's notions of the Concept and the Idea, offering indications of how Hegel's approach may be defended as well as discussing to what extent his thought can possibly enhance Gadamer's perspectives. The ultimate goal is to point towards a synthesis between our two thinkers, suggesting in the process that aesthetics and philosophy should be seen as complementary, and in this respect, so too should the symbol and the Idea.

Keywords: Hegel, Gadamer, idea, concept, symbol.

Introduction

The robust and encompassing nature of Hegel's absolute idealism is both compelling and problematic. This paper explores Hans-Georg Gadamer's critical appraisal of the Hegelian legacy through the prism of aesthetics and, in doing so, raises general questions about the status and scope of philosophical conceptualization, and, thereby, about the relationship between philosophy and art – or between Concept and symbol. Through an examination of Gadamer's articulation of the symbol and other aspects of his aesthetics, an approach is elaborated that strives to be more open, imaginative, fluid, and humble than traditional Hegelian viewpoints. However, given that Gadamer was also strongly influenced by Hegel, it will also be considered how Gadamer's critique and development of Hegel's thought may provide an important opening towards engaging Hegel's thought in a contemporary context. This influence and divergence will be considered in relation to Gadamer's conception of the symbol and Hegel's notions of the Concept and the Idea, offering indications of how Hegel's approach may be defended as well as discussing to what extent his thought can possibly enhance Gadamer's perspectives. The ultimate goal is to point towards a synthesis between our two thinkers, suggesting in the process that aesthetics and philosophy should be seen as complementary, and in this respect, so too should the symbol and the Idea.

1. Introducing the Speculative and the Symbolic

Gadamer and Hegel both attempt to overcome subject/object dualism and subsume that apparent opposition under a greater unity. The fact that Gadamer's hermeneutics is influenced by Hegel's thought is well known, but the ways in which the two thinkers agree and disagree have been the subject of much debate. Gadamer draws upon Hegel's dialectic, but tempers the repercussions of the latter through the lived experience of dialogue within language, and, as we shall see, the difference between Gadamer's understanding of the symbol and Hegel's central conception of the Idea can be seen as exemplary of this tempering process. In many ways, Gadamer's thought springs from a re-thinking of Hegel's thought through the consequences and limitations of human finitude.

For Hegel, the faculty of the understanding is limited in that it posits a fixed relation between subject and object by means of propositional statements, whereas the Concept breaks past these restrictions through its own self-movement in a dialectical process moving towards higher unities.[1] Gadamer's own variant of this is the lived process of dialogue, whereby following the subject matter gives rise to less robust unities within language. In this respect, Hegel's conception of truth is driven by a strong notion of teleology, implying that consciousness will successively move towards ever more clarity through dialectical processes and culminate in the transparency of the Absolute Idea. Gadamer distances himself from such teleology and its accompanying notions of the Absolute and sees understanding as an ongoing and unending process. From a contemporary viewpoint, notions such as the absolute and a fully transparent knowing may appear too metaphysically laden and too dismissive of the subjective perspective and human limitation. On the other hand, a Hegelian-inspired approach such as Gadamer's that distances itself from the Absolute and from teleology may encounter difficulties in relation to justifying its notions of truth. In order to assess this situation, we will turn to explore Gadamer's conception of the symbol and to his aesthetics more generally, as for Gadamer aesthetics is the eminent domain for experiences of truth.

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For Gadamer, the symbol serves as a point of contrast against Hegel's Idea. Although, like Hegel's speculative conceptions, the symbol points to a relation to the whole, this is not something that will ever be experienced in total clarity, given the essential limitations of our human finitude. Gadamer writes:

> In the last analysis, Goethe's statement "Everything is a symbol" is the most comprehensive formulation of the hermeneutic idea. It means that everything points to another thing. This "everything" is not an assertion about each being, indicating what it is, but an assertion as to how it encounters man's understanding. There is nothing that cannot mean something to it. But the statement implies something else as well: nothing comes forth in the one meaning that is simply offered to us. The impossibility of surveying all relations is just as much present in Goethe's concept of the symbolic as is the vicarious function of the particular for the representation of the whole. For only because the universal relatedness of being is concealed from human eyes does it need to be discovered. (Gadamer 2008, 103)

Thus emphasizing our human finitude, Gadamer draws upon Heidegger's conception of the interplay of concealing and revealing to point to an experience of truth that is never fully transparent (Gadamer 1986). Nevertheless, this (partly) concealed "universal relatedness of being," found within the symbol, which may with ample justification be called speculative, serves as a basis of truth.

Gadamer develops his notion of the symbol by drawing on the conception of a token that has been split in two. He elaborates on this notion in two ways, firstly by providing an example of a host that breaks up a token and gives half of it to his guests, the idea being that the two halves may later be brought together in an act of mutual recognition between the parties holding the halves. Secondly, he turns to Plato's *Symposium* for the well-known idea that humans were originally spherical creatures who, on account of misbehaviour, were cut in two by the gods, and now seek a sense of wholeness through rejoining their 'missing half' in the experience of love (see Gadamer 1986, 31-32). In this vein, as we shall see, Gadamer wants to uphold the idea that beyond our current experience of fragmentation there exists the possibility of greater unity, if we only could recognize our relation to a greater whole. The first aspect of Gadamer's notion of the symbol implies, as he puts it, "something in and through which we recognize someone already known to us" (Gadamer 1986, 31), whereas the second aspect seems more generally existential as well as metaphysical.

In order to better explicate Gadamer's conception of the symbol, it is helpful to discuss the difference between symbol and sign. A sign is something that points beyond itself and functions within an agreed-upon social convention. In contrast, Gadamer writes, "the symbol is not an arbitrarily chosen or created sign, but presupposes a metaphysical connection between visible and invisible" (Gadamer 2004, 64). He addresses the challenges of overcoming the tension between the world of ideas and the world of the senses, noting that the symbol, especially in its religious usage, abides in this tension.[2] Again, Gadamer draws upon Goethe's conception of the symbol and writes:

> In fact, what distinguishes the symbol even as Goethe conceives it is that in it the idea itself gives itself existence. Only because the concept of symbol implies the inner unity of symbol and what is symbolized, was it possible for the symbol to become a basic concept universal to aesthetics. A symbol is the coincidence of sensible appearance and suprasensible meaning, […] not a subsequent co-ordination, as in the use of signs, but the union of two things that belong to each other […]. (Gadamer 2004, 67)

Thus, there is a real connection of the sensible and suprasensible within the symbol. In other words, Gadamer's account of the symbol is presentational and not representational, meaning that the truth appears within the symbol itself, rather than pointing beyond itself.

It seems clear, then, that Gadamer's own conception of the symbol is inspired by the metaphysical resonances of the historical conceptions discussed above, although it may be debatable to what extent, as this is not made explicit. In this respect, in any case, the symbol brings in the notion of a real connection to a greater unity inherent in reality, one which provides a bridge between the sensible and suprasensible, or, said another way, figures as a visible placeholder of the invisible greater whole. This would seem to resonate with Gadamer's understanding of the beautiful: "The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real" (Gadamer 1986, 15). Speaking of the symbol, Gadamer writes that it is "that other fragment that has always been sought in order to complete and make whole our own fragmentary life," whereas the experience of the beautiful, or, as he puts it, "particularly the beautiful in art, is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found" (Gadamer 1986, 32). Through this holistic dimension of the symbol and of the beautiful, we encounter what may justly be called a quasi-mystical or religious aspect of Gadamer's thought,[3] one which finds affinities with a certain conception of the mystical that plays a significant, albeit often overlooked, role in Hegel's speculative dialectic. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, for example, Hegel evokes a relation between the truly rational or speculative on the one hand and the mystical on the other hand:

> As we have seen, […] the abstract thinking of the understanding is so far from being something firm and ultimate that it proves itself, on the contrary, to be a constant sublating of itself and an overturning into its opposite, whereas the rational as such is rational precisely because it contains both the opposites as ideal moments within itself. Thus, everything rational can equally be called 'mystical'; but this only amounts to saying that it transcends the understanding. It does not at all imply that what is spoken of must be considered inaccessible to thinking and incomprehensible. (Hegel 1991, 133)

Thus, what is experienced as mysterious from the point of view of the understanding can attain clarity in the heightened and more unified experience of the speculative.[4] The relation between fragment or part and whole is exemplified in Gadamer's thought through the symbol, whereas for Hegel this is achieved through the Concept, defined by Hegel as, precisely, "[the] unity of the universal and the particular" (Hegel 1991, 255).

Although we have been discussing the mystical resonances of Gadamer's and Hegel's thought, these should not be taken in an other-worldly sense. Gadamer's aesthetics is focused on the here and now and his understanding of the symbol is presentational, meaning that the truth that the symbol harbours appears within it rather than beyond it. In this respect, it should be stressed that for Hegel, the Idea, as it appears here and now, also implies an interplay of truth and concealment; for, as he writes: "When we speak of the Idea, it must not be taken to mean something far away and beyond. Instead, the Idea is what is perfectly present, and it is likewise to be found in any consciousness too, however confused and impaired it may be there" (Hegel 1991, 288). In other words, we can clearly see here that for Hegel, there is a sense of, and appreciation for, a certain irreducibility of the experience of finitude, and the possibility of the process of the dialectic resides precisely in raising thought towards greater clarity and comprehension of the whole in its totality. Thus, in practice, Hegel may not be as insistent on the immediate actualization of an absolute knowledge as is commonly assumed. In this light, we would do well to bear in mind his famous claim that any individual cannot avoid being "a child of his time" (Hegel 1967, 11), in the sense of being limited to the present situation. In this manner, then, we find in Hegel an appreciation of our perceiving our contemporary world as a confused or even mystical whole, prompting us to make one-sided propositions that sooner or later reveal themselves to be limited and off the mark. Still, in this very act of proposition-making, marked as it is by the static opposition of subject and object, the seed of the dialectic movement of the Concept can be found:

> In cognition, what has to be done is all a matter of stripping away the alien character of the objective world that confronts us. As we habitually say, it is a matter of "finding ourselves in the world," and what that amounts to is the tracing of what is objective back to the Concept, which is our innermost Self. The explanation as we have given shows how absurd it is to consider subjectivity and objectivity as a fixed and abstract antithesis. Both moments are thoroughly dialectical. The Concept, which is initially only subjective, proceeds to objectify itself by virtue of its own activity and without the help of an external material or stuff. And likewise the object is not rigid and without process; instead, its process consists in its proving itself to be that which is at the same time subjective, and this forms the advance to the *Idea*. (Hegel 1991, 273)

Here we behold the speculative approach in its contrast to propositional language and the understanding. Gadamer, for his part, draws upon Hegel´s understanding of speculative thought and transfers the experience of the speculative over into language (a move which he maintains moves beyond Hegel's dialectic, which in his opinion subordinates language to the statement), succinctly defining the speculative in terms of its deployment of "words [that] do not reflect beings, but express a relation to the whole of being" (Gadamer 2004, 465), and later goes on to remark that "all interpretation is, in fact, speculative" (Gadamer 2004, 468). For our two thinkers, then, it may be said that the speculative involves a profound relation to a greater whole, a relation that may, to some degree at least, be achieved in practice. For Hegel there certainly is a strong impetus towards a self-overcoming aiming for a greater unity; however, the question is whether and how a full transparency should be seen as possible or even attainable. For Gadamer, on the other hand, given our human finitude, we clearly can never completely overcome our prejudices or fragmented perspectives. With this in mind, we will now turn to a closer examination of the proximity between Gadamer's hermeneutics and aesthetics on the one hand and Hegel's philosophy on the other hand.

2. Gadamer's Aesthetics and its Commonalities with Hegel

In his essay "The Heritage of Hegel," Gadamer remarks that "it was the great theme of the concretization of the universal that I learned to consider as the basic experience of hermeneutics, and so I entered once again the neighborhood of the great teacher of concrete universality, Hegel" (Gadamer 2007, 334). Gadamer writes that for him "it was not a matter of becoming a disciple of Hegel, but rather of interiorizing the challenge that he represents for thinking," adding that "[u]nder this challenge, the basic experience of hermeneutics began to reveal its true universality to me inasmuch as our use of language, or better, inasmuch as the use that language finds in us whenever we think, pervades our whole experience of the world. Language is constantly achieving the concretization of the universal" (Gadamer 2007, 334). In fact, Gadamer (1976) argues that Hegel's contemporary relevance lies in linking his thought to language.[5]

For Gadamer, it is precisely through language that we can experience a relative freedom and transcendence, and this relation is crucial in his productive engagement with Hegel. When addressing the issue of freedom, Gadamer remarks that "we are moved in the space of freedom," adding that "[t]his space is not the free space of an abstract joy in construction, but a space filled with reality by prior familiarity" (Gadamer 2007, 335). For what is at stake here, Gadamer adds, "Hegel had the beautiful expression, 'making oneself at home'" (Gadamer 2007, 335). That expression, for Gadamer, is something that has to be interpreted and applied to our current circumstances, at least if we want to attend to the Hegelian legacy:

> Precisely therein does it make sense to see oneself an heir of Hegel —not by thinking his anticipation of the absolute as a knowledge that we entrust to philosophy; still less by expecting philosophy to serve the demands of the day and to legitimate any authority that pretends to know what the moment requires. It suffices to acknowledge with Hegel the dialectic of the universal and concrete as the summation of the whole of metaphysics until now, and along with this to realize that this has to be summed up ever anew. (Gadamer 2007, 335-336)

For Gadamer, this Hegelian dialectic of the universal and concrete, which has to be "summed up ever anew", now finds its place within language[6] and tradition, and he writes:

> In full awareness of our finitude, we remain exposed to questions that go beyond us. They befall us—if not the individual in his quietest moments, then all of us, from the vantage point of that in the light of which we all know ourselves. And in this way

we all confirm Hegel's doctrine of the absolute spirit. With Hegel we know about the manifoldness of the encounter with ourselves that reaches beyond every historical conditionedness. (Gadamer 2007, 336-337)

The appreciation that Gadamer finds for Hegel's position here is quite striking, given the strong emphasis that the former places in his own thought on our historical embeddedness and human finitude and speaks to the tension between human limitation and strong notions of truth. In this respect, let us consider our previous discussion about the difference between a sign based on human convention (a form of historical conditionedness) and the symbol as a real connection between the sensible and suprasensible (which presumably is beyond historical conditioning in some way, even if our entry to this experience is through our prejudices). Seemingly the experience of a symbol may take us, if not completely out of our historical conditionedness, then as least provide us with a glimpse of truth which may help us know ourselves in a different way from prevailing customs and our own inadequate prejudices that do not live up to the subject matter of the symbolic experience. Gadamer points to how, despite social utilitarianism and the prevalence of science, the experience of art and religion are still relevant to human experience, as is thinking (Gadamer 2007, 337). In this respect, for Gadamer, whether we are considering language, tradition, or the symbol, all three promote a transcendence beyond our particular conditioned points of view, much in the same way that the Idea, for Hegel, moves past the limitations inherent in the external points of view of discursive thought. Gadamer also points to how that which comes forth in a work of art has an affinity to the Absolute:

If an artwork exercises its fascination, everything that has to do with one's own meaning and one's own opining seems to disappear.

The same thing holds true when one is dealing with a poem. One does well here to recall again Hegel's concept of the Absolute. (Gadamer 2007, 214)

In this spirit, we would suggest that Hegel's Idea does not need to be seen in stark contrast with Gadamer's symbol. Rather, it can be conceived as involving a spectrum between relative indeterminacy and clarity, with each extreme providing its own type of insight that may complement the other.

For Hegel the primary need is for philosophy to move past the external way of experiencing the world, which poses a subject over and against an object. In a similar way, for Gadamer, moving past the first external experience brings out a deeper recognition with something we are already acquainted with:

Recognition means knowing something as that with which we are already acquainted. The unique process by which man "makes himself at home in the world," to use a Hegelian phrase, is constituted by the fact that every act of recognition of something has already been liberated from our first contingent apprehension of it and is then raised into ideality. […] Recognition elicits the permanent from the transient. It is the proper function of the symbol and of the symbolic content of the language of art in general to accomplish this. (Gadamer 1986, 47)

For Gadamer, thus, this act of recognition is achieved via the symbol, whereas for Hegel, the being at home in the world, at stake here, is achieved through the universality of thought: "[…] thinking's own *immediacy (that which is a priori)* is inwardly reflected and hence inwardly mediated; it is *universality*, the overall being-at-home-with-itself of thinking" (Hegel 1991, 37). For Gadamer, something akin to this is achieved through the recognition of the permanent in the symbol, art, and language more generally. With Gadamer's conception of the "inner ear," we also find a movement beyond the contingent as an active aspect of aesthetic experience:

Every reproduction, every poetic recitation, every theatrical performance – however great the performers may be – only succeeds in communicating a genuine artistic experience of the work itself if with our inner ear we hear something quite different from what actually takes place in front of us. The constituent elements with which we construct the work are not provided by the reproduction, the presentation, or the theatrical performance as such, but by the work that has been raised to ideality in our inner ear. (Gadamer 1986, 44)

One of Hegel's primary reasons for devaluing art is that it is limited by is its sensuousness; here we find Gadamer drawing upon the symbol and the inner ear to move past the contingent (an aspect of which is presumably sensuousness). Gadamer goes on to remark that "[t]he ideal creation only arises insofar as we ourselves actively transcend all contingent aspects," and later adds that "[t]he process by which we liberate ourselves from such contingency defines the cooperative part we have to play as participants in the play of art" (Gadamer 1986, 44). In this respect, although we must still consider that for Gadamer this would not be a complete detachment (although it almost sounds that way in these passages), given how he also crucially allies his symbolic conception with presentation and the role of finitude more generally in his thought, a poetic experience through the inner ear could be seen as a form of relative freedom from the sensuous form of the work, which could perhaps be characterized as a type of potential immanent experience of the invisible whole that resonates forth through language. In this respect, rather than debating and agonizing over how much or how little we may surpass our contingency, we suggest that Hegel and Gadamer find common ground in their encouragement of transformation towards more relational perspectives.[7] Perhaps it is not of capital importance whether we utilize the conception of the inner ear, the symbol, the Concept or the Idea, or place these efforts under the auspices of aesthetics or philosophy; rather, we should realize that these conceptions all entail attempts to relate and encourage holistic experience that can potentially change us.

Thus, we gain insight into the way in which the relational perspectives that pervade Gadamer's aesthetics have strong affinities to Hegel's conception of thinking as universality and being-at-home in the world. To give an example, Gadamer presents his conception of the festival as "the inclusive concept for regaining the idea of universal communication" (Gadamer 1986, 12) as well as "an experience of community [that] […] represents community in its most perfect form" – an experience, he goes on to

tell us, which "is meant for everyone" (39). Gadamer's notion of the festival should thus obviously be understood as involving an eminently encompassing and unified perspective. Similar observations can be made with regard to Gadamer's conception of play, which points to broader points of view beyond the self-conscious awareness of the players. And as we have discussed, the symbol is a type of recognition that supersedes fragmented perspectives. All three conceptions would seem to harbour affinities to Hegel's Idea in respect to promoting experiences of greater relationality. Gadamer interprets the goal of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as follows:

> In the *Phenomenology* the course and goal of the movement of thought is clear. The movement there is the experience of human consciousness as it presents itself to the thinking observer. It cannot maintain its first assumptions, e.g., that the sense certainty is the truth, and is driven from one shape to the next, from consciousness to the highest objective forms of spirit and ultimately to the forms of absolute spirit in which "you and I are the same soul." (gadamer 1976, 85)

We find strong commonalities between the conception of sharing "the same soul" and notions of participation in Gadamer's aesthetics. For example, let us consider the following passage from Gadamer:

> […] the distinctive mark of the language of art is that the individual art work gathers into itself and expresses the symbolic character that, hermeneutically regarded, belongs to all beings. […] The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the "This art thou!" disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; "Thou must alter thy life!" (Gadamer 2008, 104)

Here, again, we observe a similar movement of mutual recognition – an injunction to change one's life that speaks through the hermeneutical condition belonging "to all beings". Thus, we see that a battery of aesthetic conceptions within Gadamer's thought seem to cover many aspects of Hegel's speculative dialectic. In this respect, Gadamer points to the important role of aesthetics in a contemporary context as a way of bringing out what was previously covered by metaphysics, for example when he writes: "[…] I believe that the arts, taken as a whole, quietly govern the metaphysical heritage of our Western tradition" (Gadamer 2007, 195). Indeed, his own aesthetics seems to seriously take on this role. In this respect, Gadamer's aesthetics provides an alternative way to present aspects of Hegel's speculative dialectic in a more modest form via the symbol and otherwise, as does the lived experience of dialogue and poetic language.

3. Teleology and Truth

As we have seen, within Gadamer's aesthetics there is an affinity to the basic movements of Hegelian thought. However, one issue that would seem to separate Hegel from Gadamer is the former's adherence to teleology. For example, Hegel writes that "[i]t is the realization of purpose […] that forms the passage to the *Idea*" (Hegel 1991, 273). In contrast, Gadamer explicitly distances himself from teleology:

> […] we cannot simply follow the Greeks or the identity philosophy of German idealism: we are thinking out the consequences of language as a medium.
>
> From this viewpoint the concept of belonging is no longer regarded as the teleological relation of the mind to the ontological structure of what exists, as this relation is conceived in metaphysics. Quite a different state of affairs follows from this fact that the hermeneutical experience is linguistic in nature, that there is dialogue between tradition and its interpreter. The fundamental thing here is that something occurs (etwas geschieht). (Gadamer 2004, 457)

Here Gadamer is highlighting that the experience of belonging is something beyond our conscious control, but this event is seemingly not an instantiation of Hegel's "cunning of reason," but rather the interplay between ourselves, language, and tradition. However, removing teleology, and, for example, bringing into question stronger versions of the Absolute, raises potential problems. For example, lacking the basis of the Idea, why should any given form of tradition or use of language be better than any other? Or why should we be attempting to work towards greater wholeness or raise up reality to heightened perspectives (as Gadamer at least implicitly seems to suggest)? Language and tradition seem to take over the role of the Hegelian Spirit in Gadamer's thought, but it is not entirely clear how he can keep strong notions of truth once he drops notions such as teleology and brings into question the Absolute (to some extent).[8] One answer to how Gadamer justifies truth would seem to lie with his conception of the symbol. That is, we have argued that his notion of the symbol points to a greater unity that is of the nature of reality, and although this isn't a vision of truth in utter clarity, it obviously is clear enough that it points to the value of greater holism. In this regard we would argue that there is actually a modest type of teleology, or at least a strong normative emphasis, at work in Gadamer's thought in respect to the desirability to recognize a relation to a greater whole, pointing to a perspective of progress more in the line of a modest wisdom than self-conscious clarity. This may help provide some modest criteria in respect to self-understanding, a perspective that can work well with Gadamer's understanding of the symbol as an opaque yet true experience of heightened relationality. In this respect, then, Gadamer's seemingly hard line on perspectives of progress could be attributed to a number of factors, including his concerns with Enlightenment perspectives and scientific progress and their tendency to denigrate paradigms of thought from the past and exalt their own perspectives and methods, to concerns over the strong conceptions of progress in the Hegel's thought, or even possibly more personal experiences such as the horrors of experiencing the effects of both World War I and II and how this might bring any sense of progress into question.

Moving past the dichotomies of progress versus stagnation and symbol versus Idea also may help serve a broader vision to move past the dichotomy of aesthetics versus philosophy, towards seeing them in mutually supportive roles. The archetype and constant reference-point

in this regard is doubtless Plato's attack on the poets in Books III and X of the *Republic*. As has become notorious, Plato wanted to exclude the poets from his ideal *polis* on the grounds that poetry was twice removed from the real world of ideas and, hence, that it was prone to give rise to dangerous deviations from the course set by the philosophers, the sole possessors of divine wisdom. Thus Plato can be seen as defining the terms of the dispute between artists and philosophers that has been going on ever since, albeit with variable vigour. We want to point to the need to surpass this dichotomy, seeking aid in Gadamer and Hegel. Thus, Gadamer makes an important comparison between art, as exemplified by poetry, and philosophy:

> […] both the poetical and philosophical types of speech share a common feature: they cannot be "false." For there is no external standard against which they can be measured and to which they might correspond. Yet they are far from arbitrary. They represent a unique kind of risk, for they can fail to live up to themselves. In both cases, this happens not because they fail to correspond to the facts, but because their word proves to be "empty." In the case of poetry, this occurs when, instead of sounding right, it merely sounds like other poetry or like the rhetoric of everyday life. In the case of philosophy, this occurs when philosophical language gets caught up in purely formal argumentation or degenerates into empty sophistry. (Gadamer 1986, 139)

Gadamer's critique of the condition of art and philosophy in the present makes it clear that he thinks these unique modes of human expression are, precisely, at risk of degenerating into rhetoric and sophistry. The scientific conception of truth, in its haphazard approach to real human interests, has become the rule of the day. A corollary of this development is that the peculiar truths of art and philosophy have become marginalized and are increasingly disregarded.

In this respect, and very importantly, Gadamer and Hegel agree upon one significant but controversial point: namely, that there really *is* truth in art and philosophy. This would seem to fly in the face of the positivist or empiricist conception of truth – the conception that, of course, is the epitome of the scientific consciousness. Surely, Hegel would have joined hands with Gadamer in the struggle against this one-sided conception. The differences between Hegel and Gadamer, as brought out in this paper, are only significant to a certain degree. The contrast between symbol and Idea reflects the *relation* of art and philosophy, stemming from Hegel's more ambitious notion of the ability of human beings to uncover the whole truth – not to the role that these disciplines, could, and we argue, should, play in the world. In an important sense, of course, Hegel can be seen as more optimistic than Gadamer, thinking that the progress of philosophy, understood as the furthering of the highest ends of humankind, is literally self-propelled and unstoppable. A consequence of this belief is the opinion that we have seen Gadamer criticising, that philosophical concepts can, potentially at least, fully explain everything in the world, including the most profound and mystical works of art. To a certain extent, this perspective can be seen at work in the self-confident progression of our technology. But to associate Hegel with this deliberately non-philosophical phenomenon would be a mistake – and, of course, Gadamer does nothing of the sort. Rather, both thinkers can be seen as adhering to a modest notion of progress towards wisdom, a process which will always be on-going, and one that may avoid the problems inherent within excessive beliefs in progress.

As we have alluded to above, although Gadamer is a philosopher who emphasizes finitude, the relation to the infinite also places a significant role in his thought. Risser (2002), although acknowledging that Gadamer's thought can be read as a form of Hegelianism,[9] points to a distance that informs the proximity of Gadamer with aspects of Hegel's thought, for example as indicated by how Gadamer wants to champion Hegel's 'bad infinity,' which Risser interprets in relation to the importance of Heidegger's idea of radical finitude for Gadamer's thought.[10] These are important aspects of Gadamer's thought and, given our human finitude, understanding will always be on the way. However, Gadamer also speaks positively of Hegel's 'good infinity' when discussing the rhythm and recitation of poetry, and remarks that "[t]he verse participates in the roundness of all creations and is like a circle, that good infinity about which Hegel speaks and which he opposes to the bad infinity of an unbounded movement and of the continual self-over-reaching-of oneself. This good infinity is the whole" (Gadamer 1992, 91). Gadamer's thought seems to revolve around the tension between infinity and finitude, and in this respect, when he later continues with his description of the whole, Gadamer writes:

> We are ourselves encompassed by the whole, which we are and which is in us; but not encompassed in such a manner that the whole would be present for us as the whole. We encounter it rather as the totality and the vastness, wherein everything is, only through adhering to what has been allotted us, i.e., the *nómos*, whatever it may be. (Gadamer 1992, 91)

Thus, we have a connection to the whole, although the experience of the whole is not completely available to us at once, given our finitude. Gadamer's conception of the symbol would seem to embody this tension, and our point here is that the role of the infinite in Gadamer's thought brings him closer to Hegel.

On the other hand, perspectives of finitude are also relevant in relation to Hegel's thought, particularly in terms of its contemporary relevance, and we suggest that Gadamer's reading of Hegel's thought and how he incorporates Hegelian perspectives into his own thought via language is helpful in this regard. Thus Gadamer writes that Hegel's attempt to provide an all-encompassing philosophy "remains only an approach. Perhaps this attempt is limited in the same way that the interpretation of any poem is limited" (Gadamer 1986, 138). Gadamer's point here is an important one and can be elucidated as follows. Both philosophy and poetry are mediated by language, and as such, they are subject to the hermeneutic condition of finite human beings. Both philosophy and poetry require a receptive and understanding reader to give them life; without such a reader, they are but empty, physical signs. Of course, 'reading' can here be taken to apply to aesthetic experience in general; learning to read in this sense is the precondition of a genuine experience of art. As Gadamer writes: "We must realize that every work of

art only begins to speak when we have already learned to decipher and read it" (Gadamer 1986, 48). The same would surely apply to any work of philosophy: it only presents itself to us in the way that our condition allows. In the same way as art, philosophy needs an appreciative 'spiritual' reading for its physical signs – its 'sensuous appearance' – to come alive.[11] Whether we are considering 'reading' in respect to a text, art or in a more expansive sense as a metaphor for understanding and experience more generally, for both Hegel and Gadamer we need to move beyond strict physicality and propositional thought and representation towards more relational viewpoints, be this conceived as a type of philosophical thinking or linguistic experience. Hegel's Idea helps us envisage a type of philosophical thinking that seeks to surpass subject/object dualism in favour of a more unified type of thinking, one which emphasizes clarity; and Gadamer's symbol helps us along the same trajectory but emphasizes the relative obscurity of such an endeavour. Such an obscurity should not merely be seen as privative; rather, ambiguity itself may open up different paths to insight and truth. In fact, we could say that each approach potentially reveals truth, and, at least to some extent, covers different ground. In this respect, rather than prematurely closing on our possibility for clear philosophical thought or aesthetic insight through symbolic experience (or poetic thought and language), we would suggest that both approaches have value and may be complementary towards fostering thinking and 'reading' in more holistic and dynamic ways. But, in a society dominated by technology and end-oriented rationality, the capability for this sort of 'reading' is not highly valued. The ancient adversaries of art and philosophy, for so long competitors for the 'right to truth,' thus find themselves engaged in one and the same defensive battle – a battle that, indeed, would seem to be one of survival. Perhaps their only hope is to leave their disputes in the past and join forces in a magnificent union of the spirit, *sharing* their task: to *seek* the truth, and to point to the limitations and misconceptions of any dogmatism that claims to have appropriated the human condition once and for all.

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Notes

[1] For example, Hegel writes: "[…] the Concept is the universal which maintains itself in its particularizations, overreaches itself and its opposite, and so it is also the power and activity of cancelling again the estrangement in which it gets involved" (Hegel 1975, 13).

[2] Gadamer points out that "[t]he possibility of the instantaneous and total coincidence of the apparent with the infinite in a religious ceremony assumes that what fills the symbol with meaning is that the finite and infinite genuinely belong together. Thus the religious form of the symbol corresponds exactly to the original nature of 'symbolon,' the dividing of what is one and reuniting it again" (Gadamer 2004, 67). The symbol provides an opportunity for oneness to become present.

[3] Admittedly, this reading of Gadamer is not without tension. For example, Gadamer writes that "[l]anguage is more than the consciousness of the speaker; so also it is more than a subjective act. This is what may be described as an experience of the subject and has nothing to do with 'mythology' or 'mystification'" (Gadamer 2004, xxxiii). However, it should be noted that, in Gadamer's view, contemporary aesthetics developed a "quasi-religious function […], both in theory and practice" (Gadamer 1986, 15), and his own conception of the symbol could be seen as part of this heritage. Gadamer remarks that "we feel that the communal spirit that supports us all and transcends each of us individually represents the real power of the theater and brings us back to the ancient religious sources of the cultic festival" (Gadamer 1986, 63), which seems to be an example of the quasi-religious function that aesthetics takes on in his thought.

[4] Hegel, it should be noted, is wary of the vicissitudes of the 'non-philosophical' or 'non-speculative' usage of terms and concepts, as can be seen from the following remarks which we find in his discussion of the limits of mathematical thought: "As so often happens elsewhere, so here, too, we find that terminology is stood on its head: what is called 'rational' belongs to the *understanding*, while what is called 'irrational' is rather the beginning and a first trace of *rationality*" (Hegel 1991, 300). In this way, then, the process of moving past the dualistic and external representations of the understanding towards the Idea seems to be irrational from the perspective of the understanding.

[5] Gadamer raises the question whether, just as Hegel's *Phenomenology* points beyond itself to the *Logic*, "the logic of the self-unfolding concept necessarily point[s] beyond itself too, that is, […] to the 'natural logic' of language?" (Gadamer 1976, 99). He later writes that "the languageness of all thought continues to demand that thought, moving in the opposite direction, convert the concept back into the valid word. […] Dialectic must retrieve itself in hermeneutics" (Gadamer 1976, 99). That is, although Gadamer gives some credit to Hegel for recognizing the role of language, he sees Hegel as not going far enough, and, thus, Gadamer's own hermeneutics with its emphasis on language can be depicted as an ideal vehicle for making Hegel relevant in a contemporary context.

[6] Gadamer explains the freedom that language gives humans: "To rise above the environment has from the outset a human—i.e., a verbal—significance. Animals can leave their environment and move over the whole earth without severing their environmental dependence. For man, however, rising above the environment means *rising to 'world'* itself, to true environment. This does not mean that he leaves his habitat but that he has another posture toward it—a free, distanced orientation—that is always realized in language" (Gadamer 2004, 442). Just as for Hegel the mind gives humans freedom, so too does language for Gadamer, particularly poetic language, although this freedom will never be complete.

[7] Both Gadamer and Hegel point to the need to exert effort to bring more unified perspectives into one's experience. For Hegel, rather than following the Understanding, where an object is seen standing against a separated subject, with scientific cognition there is a need for abandoning oneself in thought, which "demands surrender to the life of the object, or, what amounts to the same thing, confronting and expressing its inner necessity" (Hegel 1977, 32). This leads to dissolution of our prior conceptions, opening the way towards more unified perspectives, which Hegel describes as the "strenuous effort of the Concept" (35; translation altered). In this respect, we should note that for Gadamer there needs to be an effort to cultivate a symbolic perspective, and this task, e.g. the "recognition of the symbolic […]," is one that "we must take upon ourselves" (Gadamer 1986, 47).

[8] For example, Pippin (2002) writes that "without Hegel's argument for the relevance of criteria of genuine *success* in such attempts (ultimately the so-called 'Absolute' viewpoint), we will end up with simply a narrative of what had been taken, as a matter of historical fact, to be failure, success, reformulation, and so forth (in so far as we, by our lights, could understand them now). And there is no reason in principle why such a narrative must be so radically distinct as a mode of knowledge; it seems compatible with a certain kind of cognitive, hermeneutically reflective, historical anthropology (which is what philosophical hermeneutics, without this normative animus, becomes)" (240). This is a good point, although we would suggest that whatever criteria for success Gadamer may provide is more easily found in his aesthetic viewpoints, which are more strongly related to the Absolute and truth more generally.

[9] Risser (2002) writes: "Despite Gadamer's desire to maintain a certain distance from Hegel, the shadow of Hegel looms large and remains problematic. Gadamer's insistence of the finite and dialogical character of thinking in opposition to a Hegelian dialectic of infinity can in fact be interpreted as a mark of distance that does not constitute a real difference at all. It can be argued that Gadamer's whole of tradition is but a variation on the Hegelian 'truth is the whole,' that dialogue remains wedded to determination not unlike Hegelian concrete universality, and that the movement of tradition is not unlike the movement of spirit that wants to make itself at home in the world" (86-87). Risser interprets Gadamer's understanding of infinite dialogue and his distance from Hegel by emphasizing how Heidegger's understanding of radical finitude influenced Gadamer's thought.

[10] Hegel famously draws a distinction between two types of infinity. At one point he elucidates this difference by way of a well-chosen example, where the 'true' or 'good infinity' can be likened to an irrational number captured by a fraction such as 1/7, whereas 'bad infinity' can be likened to writing the same number as a decimal fraction, which essentially comes down to an endless row of numbers which cannot be fully captured through signs: 0.1428571429…; see Hegel (1995, 261-262). Risser (2002) provides a nuanced reading of how Gadamer incorporates the bad infinity into his thought.

[11] It is worth noting that on our interpretation here, philosophy is itself subject to the limitation that Hegel ascribed to art: namely, that of relying for its expression on sensuous appearance. The point here is this: isn't philosophy, just as much as other kinds of writing, 'bound by the letter', as it were? From this perspective, indeed, the special status of philosophy in the scheme of things becomes suspect.