

GADAMER ON ESSENCES

I.

Does Hans-Georg Gadamer believe in essences? If so, what is his conception of essence and how does it fit with the rest of his philosophical hermeneutics? These questions are difficult. The source of difficulty lies in a tension between, on the one hand, the nature of human understanding and the language through which we come to understanding and, on the other hand, the traditional notion of essence. An essence, at least as traditionally understood, is the set of necessary, non-accidental attributes belonging to something and that make it the very thing that it is. The essence of a triangle, for example, is being a three-sided plane figure; figure, plane, and three-sided belong necessarily to the triangle and collectively make it the very thing that it is. Such essences, however, would seem to be either non-existent or unknowable if understanding and language are as Gadamer describes them. For understanding, according to Gadamer, is historical such that our understanding is always dependent upon the historical situation in which we come to understand; that is why Gadamer says that if we ever understand, we understand differently. But if we always understand differently, how can we all grasp one and the same essence? If to grasp an essence is to grasp the necessary, non-accidental features of something, then it would seem that we could never understand essences differently. A similar difficulty arises from the nature of language, which Gadamer insists is the medium through which all understanding takes place. Language, he argues, is “occasional,” and by this he means that any linguistic expression is always partly determined by the occasion in which we come to understand it. If language is occasional in this sense, then any linguistic articulation of an essence will always mean something different, since the meaning will always be partly determined by the occasion in which it is articulated. But if essences are sets of necessary, non-accidental attributes, then it would seem that we cannot articulate them differently if we are to successfully articulate them. So it seems that if Gadamer believes in essences, then he must hold that one and the same essence cannot be understood and articulated on different occasions by different people. Or perhaps Gadamer simply abandons the traditional notion of essence.

These issues concerning essences have provoked a divergence of interpretations among scholars. Some argue that Gadamer renounces essentialism. They speak of his “effort to get rid of the classical picture of man-as-essentially-knower-of-essences.”¹ They consequently see his philosophical hermeneutics “committing itself to a form of anti-essentialism.”² Others, however, argue that Gadamer does, in fact, seem committed to some sort of essentialism. After all, Gadamer clearly gives accounts of what he calls the “essences” of biography, art, decoration, rhythm, play, imitation, tragedy, authority, tradition, the festival, the image, the question, understanding, experience, language, and truth – and this is by no means a complete list. But while Gadamer speaks of such essences, it is not clear that he means “essence” in any traditional sense, and he does not ever offer a sustained treatment of essence or essentialism. Moreover,

1 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 364. See also Paul Fairfield, “Rationality, Knowledge, and Relativism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 186; Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Gadamer’s Dialectical Hermeneutics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 51.

2 Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 54.

Gadamer's view of truth as the interplay of revelation and concealment – a view which he learns from Heidegger and which, at least for Heidegger, represents a radical departure from “Western metaphysics” – suggests that Gadamer himself is also departing from a traditional notion of essence. This has led some to accuse Gadamer of a “closet essentialism”: even if he disavows traditional essentialism, his philosophical thought nevertheless presupposes it.³ Against this charge some have defended Gadamer.⁴ They are right to do so, but the defenses are nevertheless peculiar because they never explain what, according to Gadamer, essences are. This paper offers such an explanation – an explanation we very much need if we are to fairly assess his essentialism.

Coming to understand an essence, like coming to understanding anything meaningful, is an event of meaning. When Gadamer speaks of the “event of meaning” (e.g. GW1:169, 431) he means very literally that meaning is an event. It happens whenever we come to understand some being as it presents itself to us through the medium of language; in that event the being comes to mean something for us. This account of meaning cannot be elaborated or defended here. But if that much is correct, then we could say, on Gadamer's behalf, that essential meanings are events in which essences present themselves in language to our understanding. Or, to put it differently, if being for Gadamer is self-presentation (GW1:488), then essential being is the self-presentation of an essence. None of this sheds much light on the nature of essences, but it does establish that whatever structures an event of meaning must also structure any act of understanding in which we grasp the essence of something. This is why considerations of understanding and language figure importantly in Gadamer's view of essences.

Unfortunately, Gadamer never addresses head-on the nature of essences. There are a few passages – to which we will turn shortly – in which Gadamer describes some particular aspect of essences. Aside from those passages, we find scattered references to the “essence” (*Wesen*) of something, to an “essential moment” (*Wesensmoment*) or “essential determination” (*Wesensbestimmung*) of it, as well as to things that are “essential” (*wesentlich, wesenhaft*) to it. If we attend to all these ways in which Gadamer talks about essences, we see that, in typical Gadamerian fashion, he does not outright reject the traditional view. He instead modifies it in light of his philosophical hermeneutics. For Gadamer, an essence is, indeed, the set of necessary, non-accidental attributes that make something the very thing that it is. But that does not preclude essences from being understood historically and by means of language that is occasional.

II.

Consider the following sample of essences or essential determinations found across Gadamer's writings:

Question: “The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open.”⁵

3 Joseph Margolis, “Three Puzzles for Gadamer's Hermeneutics,” in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 84–95; John D. Caputo, “Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique,” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 258–64.

4 See, for example: James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), chap. 4.

Understanding: “Interpretation belongs to the essential unity of interpretation”⁶

Play: “The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the essential determination of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement.”⁷

Decoration: “The essence of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation: namely to draw the viewer’s attention to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the life context which it accompanies.”⁸

Goods: “There are two essentially very different kinds of goods. The first are those that we try to acquire in order to use them or have them in our possession so that it is possible to use them...And then there are goods of another kind, whose belonging to one person does not prevent their belonging to others.”⁹

Promising: “It is not simply the one who promises who is free in this sense, for all promising is essentially oriented toward freedom. Not only is it impossible to enforce its fulfillment by legal means, as we could in the case of a contract, it only really becomes a promise at all if and when it is accepted.”¹⁰

Modern Science: “Therefore, since Descartes’s classic formulation of the rule of certainty has been considered the authentic ethos of modern science, only that which satisfied the ideal of certainty satisfied the conditions of truth. This essence of modern science defines our whole life.”¹¹

Neo-Kantianism: “It is characteristic of the essence of Neo-Kantianism that it is constantly concerned to justify the sole legitimacy of methodical knowledge and to transfer it to philosophy in order to legitimize itself as scientific philosophy and against the so-called worldviews.”¹²

Human: “Reflection, the free process of turning in on oneself, appears as the highest form of freedom that exists at all. Here the mind properly in its own element in so far as it relates to its own content. It is undeniable that this freedom

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum Press, 2004), 298.

6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 57.

7 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 104 trans. amended.

8 Gadamer, 151 trans. amended.

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 32.

10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Aesthetic and Religious Experience,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 148.

11 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “What Is Truth?,” in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. and trans. Brice Wachterhauser (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 37.

12 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die deutsche Philosophie zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 359.

in relation to oneself, this original distance, does characterize an essential feature of the human.”¹³

In these passages we find Gadamer describing the essences of phenomena and drawing essential distinctions between them. Some of these phenomena, like play and promising, are common to all human experience, regardless of time or place. Other phenomena, like modern science and Neo-Kantianism, belong to a certain historical period. Even the human being can be grasped in its essence. All of these passages identify necessary and universal features of the phenomena whose essences are described. Questioning involves the opening up possibilities; if a question is posed that does not present alternatives, then it is not really a question at all. Play involves some sort of back and forth movement; if there is play that does not possess some such movement, then it is not really play at all. These features do not merely constitute a family resemblance that unifies each of the phenomena. The features instead make the phenomena the very phenomena that they are.

The essence of some phenomenon not only makes it what it is, but also gives it a unity across its appearances. Essences are therefore what we traditionally call universals – intelligible objects that are not themselves spatially or temporally extended but which nevertheless appear in space and time. Play is a universal that appears across many particular plays (or games). The essence of play makes each of those particular plays to be one and the same sort of thing, namely: a play. Neo-Kantianism is also a universal that appears across many particular Neo-Kantian thinkers and writings. The essence of Neo-Kantianism likewise makes each of the particular Neo-Kantian thinkers and writings to be one and the same sort of thing. Gadamer will even speak of the essence of individuals like Achilles. Achilles is a universal that can appear across many particulars – from the historical Achilles himself to all the presentations of him in performances or readings of the *Iliad*. What Achilles is, what makes him the very individual he is and distinct from others, is his essence. There is a philosophical debate – a debate that can be traced back to some suggestive remarks by Aristotle (e.g. in *Metaphysics* VII.6) – about whether such individual essences are possible. But Gadamer seems to allow for their possibility:

The best judges of a portrait are never the nearest relatives nor even the person himself. For a portrait never tries to reproduce the individual it represents as he appears in the eyes of people close to him. Of necessity, what it shows is an idealization, which can run through an infinite number of stages from the representative to the most intimate. This kind of idealization does not alter the fact that a portrait represents an individual, and not a type, however much the portrait may transform the person portrayed from the incidental and the private into the essential, the true appearance.¹⁴

Portraits are one of the many ways in which an individual person appears or comes to presentation. The being of the individual is thereby presented through a portrait with varying degrees of truth. Bad portraits misrepresent the individual. Better portraits present the person more accurately, but that need not require portraying accidental features that the person had during their sitting for the portrait. The best portraits present not those accidental features, but

13 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Problem of Intelligence,” in *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Malden: MIT Press, 1996), 50–51 trans. amended.

14 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 142.

rather the necessary features that make the person the very individual they are. The best portraits capture the essence of the person. Portraits idealize. But Gadamer makes sure to point out that the idealizations that occur in good portraiture do not present types, but rather individuals. An excellent portrait of Achilles presents the essence of Achilles the individual, not the essence of warrior or demigod.

Much of the foregoing is reiterated in another passage in which Gadamer describes how we can grasp essences through recognition of repetition:

Recognizing something means rather that I now cognize something *as* something that I have already seen. The enigma lies entirely in the “as.” I am not thinking of the miracle of memory, but of the miracle of knowledge that it implies. When I recognize someone or something, what I see is freed from the contingency of this or that moment in time. It is part of the process of recognition that we see things in terms of what is permanent and essential in them, unencumbered by the contingent circumstances in which they were seen before and are seen again. This is what constitutes recognition and contributes to the joy we take in imitation. For what imitation reveals is precisely the real essence of the thing.¹⁵

We grasp essences – whether general essences like play or individual ones like Achilles – through our recognition of the same being across its repeat appearances. We recognize the person in some particular portrait as the Achilles we have seen or heard before. When we recognize him, we are able to detach him from the contingencies of the circumstances in which he appears. We thereby come to understand something “permanent and essential” in him. And although our understanding of his essence may be inchoate and unthematic at first, we can always reflect on our initial understanding and give it clearer articulation. The very aim of philosophy is to articulate essences in conceptual terms. This is what Gadamer is referring to when he speaks of “[t]he universal, the generic [*Typische*], that can be expressed only in a philosophical inquiry dedicated to conceptual universality.”¹⁶ All true philosophizing is conceptual, and “it is only the a priori essential structures of all reality that have always and without exception formed the realm of the concept.”¹⁷

Although essences are the set of necessary features that make some phenomenon precisely what it is, this does not preclude essences from appearing differently. The essence of something can be one and the same even though it appears differently for different people on different occasions. This is the case, for example, with tragedy:

What we find reflected in thought about the tragic, from Aristotle down to the present, is certainly no unchanging essence. There is no doubt that the essence of tragedy is presented in Attic tragedy in a unique way; and differently for Aristotle, for whom Euripides was the “most tragic,” differently again for someone to whom Aeschylus reveals the true depth of the tragic phenomenon, and very differently for someone who is thinking of Shakespeare. But this variety does not simply

15 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 99 trans. slightly amended.

16 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” in *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 33.

17 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Philosophy and Poetry,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 133.

mean that the question about the unity of the tragic would be without an object, but rather, on the contrary, that the phenomenon presents itself in an outline drawn together in a historical unity.¹⁸

The essence of tragedy is not unchanging in the sense that it does not appear exactly the same across time and place. But there nevertheless is an essence of tragedy that makes the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides and Shakespeare all one and the same sort of thing: tragedies. All such tragedies share a common essence that can be grasped by considering all the historical appearances of tragedy and grasping the features that are common to them and that make them all tragedies.¹⁹ These features which we discern comprise an “outline” that gives us that basic, abstract structure of tragedy.

This does not imply that Gadamer is succumbing to a metaphysics of presence, as Derridean critics often charge. Gadamer follows Heidegger in regarding truth as involving the interplay between concealment and revealment. The truth disclosed by essences, according to Gadamer, exhibits this very interplay:

What the interconnection of concealment and revealment means and what it has to do with the new concept of “essence” can be exhibited phenomenologically in Heidegger's own essential experience of thought in a number of ways. (1) In the being of the implement that does not have its essence in its objective obstinacy, but in its being ready-to-hand, which allows us to concentrate on what is beyond the implement itself. (2) In the being of the work of art, which holds its truth within itself in such fashion that this truth is not available in any other way but in the work. For the beholder or receiver, “essence” corresponds here to his tarrying alongside the work. (3) In the thing, as the one and only reality that stands in itself, cannot be compelled to serve our purposes, and contrasts in its irreplaceability with the concept of the object of consumption, as found in industrial production. (4) And finally in the word. The “essence” of the word does not lie in being totally expressed, but rather in what is left unsaid, as we see especially in speechlessness and remaining silent. The common structure of essence that is evident in all four of these experiences of thinking is a “being-there” that encompasses being absent as well as being present.²⁰

All essences exhibit the essential structures of beings that make those beings the very beings they are. But since the revealment of any being always entails its simultaneous concealment, the essence of any being should exhibit the distinctive ways in which that particular being reveals and conceals itself. Part of what distinguishes tools from works of art, for example, are the different ways in which they reveal and conceal themselves. The essential being of the tool is such that in its successful use our attention turns away from the tool and towards the object on which it is being used. Likewise the essential being of the artwork is such that in our successful appreciation of it our attention turns away from the artwork itself to the truth disclosed by it. The tool and the artwork conceal themselves, albeit in different ways, precisely when their being is

18 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 125–26.

19 For good discussion of Gadamer's conceptual analysis of tragedy, see: Daniel L. Tate, “Transforming Mimesis: Gadamer's Retrieval of Aristotle's Poetics,” *Epoché* 13, no. 1 (2008): 185–208.

20 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Language of Metaphysics,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 234.

present to us – that is, when they are being tools and artworks. It is equally true that aspects of their being are also revealed and concealed when they are not successfully used or appreciated. When the tool does not work, our attention is turned back to the tool and in particular to the feature of it which is impeding our use of it. When the artwork is difficult to appreciate, our attention is turned to the features which distract us from the truths it may contain. Either way, there is always this interplay of revealment and concealment essential to any phenomenon. Gadamer does not always identify these modes of revealment and concealment, but that is only because those modes are not always relevant to his line of philosophical inquiry.

III.

None of this precludes our understanding of essences from being ineliminably historical. We will understand an essence differently if we understand it at all. We will understand differently even the necessary features constituting the essence. So while we can grasp the essential features of tragedy on different occasions, our understanding will not be exactly the same, but rather colored by the historical situation in which we come to understanding. Moreover, the language in which we articulate our understanding of essences remains occasional; its meaning will partly depend on the situation in which the language is expressed. But neither the historicity of understanding nor the occasionality of language require that we renounce entirely a traditional conception of essence. The traditional conception of essence receives perhaps its greatest modification in light of Gadamer's adoption of Heidegger's conception of truth. But while the interplay of revealment and concealment entail that the essence of something is never fully revealed to us, it is nevertheless possible for an essence to consist of the necessary attributes that makes something the very thing that it is.

Furthermore, even if we successfully grasp and articulate the essence of something, there is no guarantee that our description of the essence of something will endure and compel others to grasp the essence with us. This is a feature not just of investigations into essences, but of all theorizing. A theory is the result of inquirers attempting to articulate some phenomenon under investigation in a way that addresses the question motivating their inquiry. Any theory, however, as it finds articulation, will not be adequate to all inquirers for all time, since the historical context in which they find themselves, and the question that is consequently motivating them, will inevitably be different. When a theory as it first finds articulation is no longer adequate to address the questions of later inquirers, the theory falls out of favor. But this does not necessarily mean that the theory becomes false. Nor does it mean that the phenomenon theorized necessarily ceases to exist, or ceases to exist as it was theorized. It only means that the phenomenon theorized must be articulated anew, in a way adequate to the novel question of those inquiring. This holds for theorizing about essences, too. The articulation of essences in concepts will inevitably need to be articulated anew.