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A COMPARISON OF THE AESTHETIC APPROACH OF HANS-GEORG
GADAMER AND HANS URS VON BALTHASAR
Jason Bourgeois

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Hans-Georg Gadamer (1901-2002), the German philosopher of hermeneutics, has exercised a powerful influence on post-Vatican II Roman Catholic fundamental theology, especially regarding questions of the development of doctrine and the appropriation of tradition. There is a tension in interpreting Gadamer's thought between his concept of "fusion of horizons," in which the horizon of the past is fused with the horizon of the present to yield new interpretations of past texts, and his defense of "prejudice, authority, classics, and tradition," in which Gadamer upholds the enduring truth-value of received wisdom from the past.

Some Catholic theologians have employed Gadamer's concept of "fusion of horizons" to argue that our interpretation of revelation must constantly be revised in light of contemporary experience, with an understanding that the horizon of the "present" exercises a decisive influence over the horizon of the "past."¹ This reading of Gadamer seems to rely almost exclusively on Part Two of his famous work, Truth and Method,

¹ For example, see David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology (New York: Seabury, 1975) and Edward Schillebeeckx, Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord, trans. by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981). It should be noted that Tracy, in his later works The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1981) and Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) has begun to see the aesthetic categories in Gadamer's thought that favor the enduring truth-value of the past, and Tracy's work has enlightened me in developing my own analysis of Gadamer.

which deals directly with hermeneutics, and seems to neglect his treatment of aesthetics in Part One and some of his metaphysical reflections in Part Three of the same work.²

This article will broadly point out the remarkable similarities between Gadamer's aesthetics and the theology of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). This reading of Gadamer can be used to ground an alternate approach to post-Vatican II fundamental theology, emphasizing the dialogical nature of the interpretation of revelation and its transformative effect on human beings who are receptive to it. In this reading, the horizon of the "past," which comes to us through tradition, can also have a decisive and transforming influence upon the horizon of the "present."

The first two sections of this article will focus on trajectories of thought that are rejected by both Gadamer and Balthasar, especially the post-Kantian and Enlightenment emphasis on autonomous subjectivity as the starting point for understanding truth and beauty. Both thinkers reject the ideal of the subject being "distanced" or detached from the "object" (such as a text or work of art) in the encounter with beauty and the search for truth. Likewise, they both reject a separation of content and form, and instead emphasize that only in the concrete and particular can truth be revealed.

The next three sections focus on how both Gadamer and Balthasar correct this over-emphasis on the autonomous subject by showing that in a true aesthetic experience, the subject is integrated into a larger dialogical structure in which alone truth may be revealed. Within this structure, the subject allows himself to be enraptured and transformed by the revelation of truth in the perception of the beautiful. Thus, aesthetics

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd rev. ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989). Hereafter referred to as TM. This article is distilled from a larger work by Jason Paul Bourgeois, The Aesthetic Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Comparative Analysis (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2001; UMI #3049926), which provides a deeper textual analysis of the themes discussed here.

becomes a model for the search for truth. This model is further elucidated by both thinkers using the category of drama, understood as existential participation.

Gadamer and Balthasar both provide a foundation for this dialogical structure of the search for truth by employing a "radiance metaphysics" which links being, truth, goodness, and beauty, which is discussed in the sixth section of this article. In particular, beauty "radiates" the truth of being. In this way, the giftedness of being, described as beautiful, becomes evident to the interpreter and attracts him to it in the mode of wonder and gratitude. Thus, the interpreter is drawn to participate in the gift which is truth itself. The conclusion will discuss some implications of this metaphysics for the question of interpreting revelation, and the differences between Gadamer and Balthasar in this regard.

I. Rejection of Subjectivism as Starting Point for Aesthetics

Both Gadamer and Balthasar have difficulty with the notion of an autonomous human subject as the starting point for aesthetics (the revelation of truth through the category of the beautiful). For Gadamer, this autonomous starting point results in an approach of "aesthetic consciousness," in which the experience of a work of art (Erlebniskunst) is a detached experience that does not connect with the truth about being. In Truth and Method, he blames this approach loosely on Kant, but more definitively on certain German romantics in the post-Kantian period. In this way of thinking, the "subject" becomes the solitary determiner of the meaning of the work of art, which is in turn reduced to the status of an "object" that can be analyzed in a formal and abstract fashion.³

Balthasar also rejects the autonomous subject as starting point for aesthetics, in his rejection of an anthropocentric approach to theology. In his characterization of an

³ See TM 59-60, 69-70, 82.

anthropocentric approach, religious truth is reduced to the dynamic religious experience of the subject. Balthasar also loosely blames this trend on Kant, who began the removal of religious truth from the sphere of pure reason and reduced it to the status of practical reason (ethics), resulting in a de-emphasis on God's revelation and instead emphasizing the effect of religious truths on the consciousness and actions of the subject. This eventually resulted, according to Balthasar, in a virtual reduction of religious truths to the immanence of religious experience, as evidenced in trends such as Feuerbach's atheism, liberal Protestantism, Modernism and (to a degree) Catholic dynamist thought (such as Blondel and Maréchal). In the case of Balthasar's critique, then, the "object" (religious revelation) is collapsed into the subject in an anthropocentric approach to theology. Thus this approach is monological and not dialogical: there is no encounter with a revelation originating "outside" the self.⁴

In both cases, the concern is that the subject is not engaging the truth that is revealed by the perception of beauty (in the work of art or in the revelation of God). Instead, the subject is deliberately "distanced" from the beautiful and regards it as something that must be analyzed in terms of its correspondence to pre-existing structures of consciousness (for Gadamer, aesthetic consciousness; for Balthasar, the general a priori of religious consciousness). Thus, there is no encounter with the unique truth that is revealed in a work of beauty, and no resulting transformation. In other words, there is no dialogue between the subject and the truth of the beautiful.

For Gadamer, this dialogue can be entered into only when one adapts the attitude of aesthetics as play and as non-differentiation; for Balthasar, this dialogue can be entered into only when one allows oneself to be attuned to God (through the receptivity of faith),

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, Love Alone, trans. and edited by Alexander Dru (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 25-42. Hereafter cited as LA.

to perceive the form and to be enraptured by it. These parallels will be explored below, but first it is necessary to discuss the fact that both thinkers reject the separation of content and form in the aesthetic experience.

II. Rejection of the Separation of Content and Form

Lying behind this concern about the separation of content and form is the idea that truth is revealed in the beautiful only in its concreteness, uniqueness, and particularity. Both thinkers reject the analysis of aesthetic truth solely in terms of abstract universals. For Gadamer this is shown in his rejection of aesthetic differentiation, in which the work of art is analyzed not in terms of its content, but in terms of the formal qualities that appeal to a detached "aesthetic consciousness." In such an approach, a work of art might be analyzed, for example, in terms of technical performance, but not on the basis of the truth that it reveals, which could potentially have a transformative effect on the person experiencing it.⁵

In Balthasar's thought, this concern about the separation of content and form is explicitly shown in his insistence that the form of revelation is inseparable from its particular (namely Christian) content. The form has the quality of radiating its truth from within, and is not merely a sign that points to a deeper, more basic content (as is the case, for him, in certain uses of a transcendental style of apologetics). Thus an abstract theory of religious experience that did not take into account the specific content revealed through the form of revelation would miss the unique aesthetic truth that the religion bears. In the case of Christianity, this truth centers on the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ,

⁵ See TM 84-87, 95-96.

which reveals that God loves humanity and sacrifices himself in order to restore us to full communion with him.⁶

In summary, then, for both thinkers the overly autonomous subject-centered approach to aesthetics (loosely blamed on Kant) results in a failure to perceive the transformative and unique truth that the content of the work of art or divine revelation can bring to the human being. Both thinkers correct this failure by emphasizing the dialogical nature of the encounter with aesthetic truth, which requires an attitude of receptivity on the part of the interpreter.

III. The Dialogical Approach to Aesthetic Truth

A dialogical approach to aesthetic truth depends upon the notion that something beautiful contains a truth within itself that is more than the subject or interpreter can fully understand. That is, this truth is not reducible to a strict correspondence with an a priori structure that is contained within the subject. Rather, what is beautiful contains an "excess" of being which renders it mysterious.⁷ Therefore, in order for the subject to have a genuine encounter with it, he must "go out" of himself (ecstasis) and enter into the mysterious truth which is made known to him in the object of beauty.

Both Gadamer and Balthasar, in their own way, operate with this model of dialogical encounter with aesthetic truth. For Gadamer, this is perhaps best illustrated in his concept of play. Play is an analogue for the aesthetic experience, and in play it is necessary for the subject to "lose" himself and become part of a larger "to and fro"

⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, vol. 1, Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), foreword, 148-155, 498-500. Hereafter cited as GL I.

⁷ The ontology underlying this notion calls to mind Heidegger's disclosure and concealment theory of truth. In this sense, one might say that both Gadamer and Balthasar prefer Heidegger over Kant in their understanding of what it means to be a "subject" in search of truth.

structure. An overemphasis on the subject's role or activity in the play itself (for example, excessive self-consciousness) causes a breakdown in this structure and hence vitiates the nature of play. It takes the person "out of the game," so to speak. The same is true in the encounter with the work of art, where aesthetic differentiation (focusing on form over content) vitiates the truth that the work of art reveals. Instead, the subject must let the truth of the work draw him into it; this creates the "dialogical structure" in which alone the subject can gain insight through the encounter with the work of art.⁸

Balthasar's model of dialogical encounter with the work of art is displayed in his concept of "seeing the form." If the subject stays within himself and reduces the beauty of religious truth to that which he believes corresponds to an abstract universal, a priori of religious consciousness within himself, then he has vitiated the dialogue. Instead, Balthasar understands religious truth to be a dialogue in which God reveals himself to the human being in a concrete, particular manner, "the form" (having as its center, of course, the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ). The human being, in becoming attuned to this revelation through receptive faith and the perception of its beauty, is caught up ("enraptured") with it. For Balthasar, this dialogical encounter with the beauty of revelation is the privileged manner of understanding religious truth, and so for him apologetics must proceed from this encounter in its concreteness and not from abstract philosophical reflection on religious consciousness. This means that fundamental theology must begin with an attitude of faith, not of detachment.⁹

⁸ See TM 101-121.

⁹ See GL I 117-127, esp. 126-27.

IV. Radiance Metaphysics

Perhaps an even stronger metaphysical correlation between the thought of Gadamer and Balthasar can be found in the (Neo-) Platonic concept of radiance as a metaphor for the way that the "truth" and "beauty" of being is conveyed to the human interpreter. Underlying this concept is a strong awareness of the unity of the "transcendentals": the unity of the true, the good, and the beautiful. This is made explicit in the writings of Balthasar, and is implied for Gadamer in the radiance metaphysics that he discusses at the end of Truth and Method.¹⁰ The beautiful is the "true" made concrete and perceivable. As we have seen above, both thinkers regard the beautiful as inseparable from its particular expression (the unity of form and content). Thus, a work of art expresses its truth precisely through its concrete particularity. The same is true for the event of revelation, which is why Balthasar emphasizes the concrete universality of the Form of Christ.

Radiance as a metaphor also employs the concepts of light or of "splendor." In this way, it can be seen that the particularity of beauty is not, for Balthasar or for Gadamer, merely a sign pointing to a deeper, more universal reality.¹¹ Instead, as is made especially clear in Balthasar (but also by Gadamer in his rejection of aesthetic differentiation), beauty is an expression of the inner radiance of the work of art or experience of revelation. To put it simply, appearance manifests the essence, and thus is inseparable from it. Again, this is expressed both by Balthasar and Gadamer in terms of the non-separation between content and form.

¹⁰ These metaphysical presuppositions are dealt with especially in Balthasar's GL I, foreword, and 18-23, in which Balthasar sketches the necessary relationship between beauty and the wonder at the mystery of being that underlies all metaphysics. Gadamer's treatment of radiance metaphysics can be found primarily in TM 477-488.

¹¹ See, for example, GL 151.

Furthermore, the metaphor of radiance suggests an "enlightening" on the part of the human interpreter, so that the truth of the matter is "illuminated." This metaphor of light has ancient philosophical foundations and is often applied to intellectual illumination. For both Balthasar and Gadamer, this illumination is not merely intellectual (that is, it does not merely refer to the process of a human being achieving conceptual clarity). Rather, illumination is the result of a perception of the inner "light" that radiates "outward" from the being itself. It is a perception of the being itself, not merely an intellectual concept. Thus, illumination is ultimately the result of a dialogical encounter with the truth contained within being itself.¹²

This concept of radiance as a beauty contained within the heart of being is also linked to the notion of human participation. The human being is strongly drawn and attracted to the beautiful, through the impulse of eros, and in this way becomes personally affected by his encounter with the true, the good, and the beautiful (that is, the mystery of being). For Balthasar, this aesthetic and erotic impulse is intensified by the interpersonal dimensions of the divine-human relationship. The believer is personally attracted by the initiative of love that the kenosis of God (in creation and especially in the Incarnation) discloses, and responds through the active receptivity that characterizes the attitude of faith. In this way, he is transformed by this encounter with the beauty of God.¹³

¹² This implicit radiance metaphysics is discussed by Gadamer in TM 477-488. However, Gadamer does not sketch out an explicit metaphysics, nor does he deal with the question of the relationship between being and God. Balthasar, on the other hand, discusses radiance metaphysics in light of revelation; see GL I 430-431 and Glory of the Lord, vol. 5, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 429-445 and 628-634. Hereafter cited as GL V.

¹³ See LA 43-50; GL I 120-27, 241-46.

V. Drama and Participative Transformation through the Aesthetic Encounter

Both thinkers, in their discussion of the dialogical encounter with aesthetic truth, use dramatic terms to describe this participation of the subject in this encounter and the transformation that it effects. For Gadamer, the concept of drama is already suggested by the term "play" itself (this play on words is effective both in English and in the German Spiel). It is further elucidated in his concept of presentation and representation, in which the structure of play becomes a form of expression of truth which is meaningful for the participants and the spectators.¹⁴ Of course, for Gadamer, presentation is the mode of revealing aesthetic truth in all the art forms, and not just in drama. However, I have focused on dramatic terminology here because of its obvious parallel with the thought of Balthasar.

For Gadamer, drama itself (and particularly tragedy) reveals the truth about human existence to its spectators. Of course, the actual content of Gadamer's own phenomenology of tragedy is theologically deficient, for it focuses on the frustration of finitude (especially the disproportionate negative effects that can result from a human mistake) without the corresponding hope of salvation that is found in Christian revelation. However, he does in fact suggest that drama is an aesthetic mode of presentation that reveals truth to its spectators, if they existentially participate in the play rather than experiencing it from the detached level of "aesthetic consciousness."¹⁵

Balthasar puts forth this same theory (in much more detail) in his analysis of the ways that drama can open up in the human being a horizon within which he can understand his own existence. This is done in two ways: through the implied view of human freedom in the cosmos that the play presents (i.e., the metaphysical "horizon" of the characters of the play which affects their action and self-understanding), and also

¹⁴ TM 101-121.

¹⁵ TM 129-33.

through the spectator's own search for meaning that becomes heightened by the play (with its promise of a "solution" to the questions of existence).¹⁶ Again, as with Gadamer, this revelation of truth in a drama can only be fulfilled if the spectator existentially enters into dialogue with the truth that the play reveals to him.

However, Balthasar extends his focus on drama beyond the confines of dialogical encounter with a work of art such as a play. He furthers these reflections by extending them into the sphere of the drama of the dialogue between God and humanity. We have seen above that this dialogue can be understood as God's revelation to the human being (the form) and the human being's response to the beauty of this revelation (enrapturement). This is the focus of Herrlichkeit and its approach to apologetics. However, in Theo-Drama, Balthasar applies this concept of dialogical encounter to the sphere of the relation between God's free action in history and the free human response within history.¹⁷ This brings out more clearly that it is only when the subject existentially participates in the encounter with the beauty of divine self-revelation that he is transformed by the truth that is revealed there.

In the case of Gadamer, this transformation takes place on a seemingly "intramundane" level; this was the problem for example with his analysis of tragedy. At the very least, one can say that for Gadamer there is no explicit discussion of a drama that takes place between God and man. For Balthasar, on the other hand, the transformation resulting from the dialogical encounter with beauty (i.e., God's revelation) has the effect of bringing the subject into union with God, through participation in the events of

¹⁶ Balthasar's reflections on the role of drama per se (that is, the role of actual plays and the structure of play-going) in the human search for truth can be found especially in Theo-Drama, vol. 1, Prolegomena (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) 19-20, 249-251, 260-268.

¹⁷ For example, this is the theme of a lengthy section of Theo-Drama, vol. 2, Theological Dramatic Theory (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 53-90.

salvation history that have been revealed. Particularly, it can be said that for Balthasar God's initiating action is necessary in order for the human being to be brought into the dialogue at any stage (creation, redemption, and eschatological fulfillment).

For both, then, the dialogical encounter with aesthetic truth is discussed in explicitly dramatic terms, with the understanding that an encounter with drama reveals the truth about human existence. However, Balthasar alone discusses the divine-human dialogue in dramatic terms and sees human participation in this dialogical encounter as opening out into a supernatural level that is not discussed by Gadamer. This is a significant difference between the two thinkers in terms of the theological and metaphysical "scope" that is given to the aesthetic experience and the search for truth.

VI. Beauty, Metaphysics and Revelation

As stated above, there is a crucial difference between Gadamer and Balthasar in their treatment of the relationship between beauty and metaphysics, namely the absence of a dimension that specifically deals with divine-human dialogue in Gadamer's discussion of aesthetics. Ultimately, since aesthetics explains the link between truth, being, and beauty in the metaphysics of both thinkers, this absence in Gadamer does not permit one to link explicitly aesthetics or metaphysics with God. At most, there is an implicit link between aesthetics/metaphysics and God in Gadamer's discussion of the relationship between radiance and Logos (the verbum creans or creating word) in such Platonically influenced readings of the creation account as Augustine's. There, Gadamer sees a connection between the self-evidentness of language (represented by the creating Word of God) and the radiant self-manifestation of beauty (represented by the radiant "light" that is first created in Genesis 1).¹⁸

¹⁸ See TM 483-484.

It may be fruitful to extend this analogy further than Gadamer does, so that in a sense all of creation is a reflection of the divine creating word (Logos) that, in the Christian tradition, takes place through the agency of the Son. In this sense, all understanding of the "word" of creation can be seen as grounded in the Logos-Christ. This would suggest the existence of a christological dimension to all acts of understanding that take place through the medium of language (including an understanding of the being of creation itself). However, it seems clear that Gadamer himself uses the creation story merely as a metaphor for the relation between understanding and the radiance ontology of "light" with its suggestion of self-evidentness. He does not, therefore, suggest that all metaphysics (reflection on the being of creation) is actually linked ontologically to the triune God. Furthermore, he does not seem to suggest even an implicit christological dimension to aesthetics or metaphysics.

In the case of Balthasar, truth, being and beauty are intrinsically connected with the triune God, their source. So, the aesthetic categories of dialogical encounter and enrapturement with the radiance (splendor) of beauty are for Balthasar not merely metaphysical categories but also theological ones. For Balthasar, these aesthetic categories can be applied both to metaphysics (that is, our encounter with the being of creation and derivatively of the beautiful works of human creation such as art, plays, poetry, etc.) and to revelation itself (that is, the awareness of the work of the triune God in creation, Incarnation, redemption, and eschatological fulfillment).

Balthasar applies these categories to metaphysics most clearly in his discussion on the giftedness of creation in light of his critique of Heidegger's philosophy of being. There, Balthasar compares the philosophy of Heidegger to the ontological distinction of Thomas Aquinas, but claims that Heidegger did not make the final "ontological distinction," namely that between the Creator and Being, and thus did not recognize the

source of the "givenness" or "gift-edness" of Being. For Balthasar, the response of wonder and awe at the mystery of being is a natural one that leads one to a sense of gratitude for the free kenotic gift of the Creator.¹⁹

Furthermore, Balthasar intensifies this response by taking into account not only creation (the wonder at the being of the world) but also revelation (culminating in the Incarnation of Christ). The form of revelation, found in the experience of the Church contained in Scripture and tradition, and in the lived experience of the saints, is an even greater demonstration of the kenosis (and thus the overwhelming love) of God. Therefore, the aesthetic categories of dialogical encounter, enrapturement, and dramatic participation take on the character of a divine-human "dialogical" relationship (characterized, for instance, by the I-Thou relationship). The self-giving of God initiates this relationship and should result in grateful acceptance (although it does not always do so, as the reality of sin and rebellion against God testifies). The human acceptance of the divine relationship is clearly described by Balthasar using the aesthetic categories of enrapturement and dramatic participation that have been outlined above.

VII. Conclusion

In this analysis of the common use of an aesthetic and dialogical approach to the search for truth in the thought of Gadamer and Balthasar, we have seen that both thinkers presuppose a metaphysics which links truth and beauty. I want to suggest that this commonality could lead to a new direction in the theological appropriation of Gadamer.

As stated above, many Catholic theological appropriations of Gadamer's thought rely heavily, perhaps exclusively, on Part Two of Truth and Method, in which he outlines a hermeneutics of the relationship between past and present. Such appropriations tend to

¹⁹ GL V 445-450.

focus on his concept of "fusion of horizons," with the implication that Catholic tradition (the horizon of the past) must fuse or adapt itself to the contemporary culture (the horizon of the present). This reading of Gadamer misses a central aspect of Part Two itself, namely the understanding that preservation is as much an act of appropriation as is revision, and that classic texts reveal an enduring truth.²⁰

However, when Gadamer's hermeneutics are read in conjunction with Part One of Truth and Method (on aesthetics) and with the closing sections of Part Three (on radiance metaphysics), it becomes even clearer that Gadamer believes that certain works of art or texts disclose an enduring truth. Interpreters appropriate various dimensions of this truth into their existential situation, which accounts for different readings over time. To do this, they must remain receptive to the possibility of transformation through dialogue with the truth contained in the text, in the same manner as one must be open to the beauty of a work of art to experience its truth.

This aesthetic approach to the search for truth reaches another dimension, as we have seen, when applied to revelation (the encounter of the human being with the self-disclosure of the triune God over time). Balthasar uses the same categories here as Gadamer does: the rejection of the autonomous subject as starting point in the search for truth, the rejection of a separation between form and content in the aesthetic experience, and the understanding that truth is only revealed through a transformative and existential participation in what is being experienced.

When applied to revelation, these categories imply that the interpreter of revelation is not an autonomous and neutral subject but must be engaged in a dialogue with the triune God, which implies faith and receptivity to the truth that is revealed: theology

²⁰ TM 281-282: "preservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal."

requires an attitude of faith and not of scholarly detachment. These aesthetic categories also imply that the encounter with revelation is one that is existential and potentially transformative: theology is done within the context of lived spirituality.

An application of Gadamer's aesthetic categories to the revelation of the triune God, then, leads to a theology that is not primarily concerned about revision of doctrines in light of contemporary experience. Rather, it leads to an aesthetic and dialogical approach to theology that has profound similarities with the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar.