

The Place of Phronesis in Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Lewis Oliver Rosenberg
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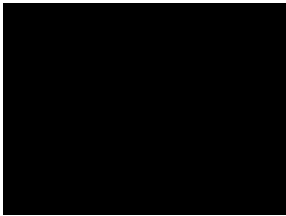
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This thesis was written on the lands of the Darug, Eora and Ngunnawal peoples.

Statement of Original Authorship

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed,



Lewis Oliver Rosenberg.

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Abstract

Gadamer's concern with the concept of *phronesis* was ongoing and deep. This thesis explores the ethical significance of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics by examining the place of *phronesis* in his main work, *Truth and Method*. In that work, Gadamer draws upon the concept of *phronesis* to answer what he calls 'the problem of application.' It is argued that *phronesis* achieves this by furnishing a unique model of the relationship between universal and particular, allowing Gadamer to construct an account of the historicity of understanding which avoids any appeal to a truth outside of history without falling into the pitfall of historical relativism. It is argued that 'concretisation' is the best way to understand the solution arrived at here. This point helps us to understand the way in which human beings exist historically.

However, this thesis also argues that *phronesis* plays a role in *Truth and Method* beyond Gadamer's explicit discussion. *Phronesis* is not only a model or analogy for the historicity of understanding, but also forms part of its content. That is, the truth which manifests in understanding is a truth with an ethical significance. This is made clear in an investigation of Gadamer's discussion of the truth of the human sciences. In this way, this thesis contributes to knowledge of the ethical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics, exploring how understanding is an ethical task.

Introduction

[U]nderstanding, which is the real aim of hermeneutics, does not pose an epistemological problem, but an ethical one.¹

Hermeneutics explores the problem of understanding. Traditionally, hermeneutics has examined the understanding of texts. However, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, understanding assumes a place at the heart of human life. Gadamer explores how, in our relationship to history, our getting about the world, and our being with others, understanding is a central existential feature of our lives. For Gadamer, understanding is not an activity we sometimes do – rather it is a constant constitutive feature of all our being and acting.

Described in this way, hermeneutics takes on a significance far broader than often construed, and far closer to human beings' dearest concerns. Understanding is not only an activity in pursuit of the comprehension of difficult texts, but an orientation which opens the world for existing human beings to navigate. Or, put differently, 'reading' taken in a broad sense becomes a constitutive feature of human life. The way that we read the world becomes determinative of how we live within it. The truth that manifests in understanding acquires an existential significance.

This thesis pursues the question of the ethical implications of this finding. If understanding is an existential orientation, one which shapes human being and acting, does it have a bearing on ethical questions? Understanding would, in this case, be a source from which ethical subjectivity arose. Any sense of oneself and one's place in the world, and any decision to act, would be rooted in a 'reading' which disclosed the world and its possibilities. Understanding would open the space in which action could take place. In this case, hermeneutics would be a reflection on the source of actions and ethical consciousness. So this thesis asks, does understanding have an ethical significance? Does the way we understand the world shape our actions and ethical decisions, and, if so, how? This investigation of the ethical consequences of hermeneutics could, potentially, offer a different way of conceiving the ethical challenges of our time as rooted in the way that we understand and misunderstand ourselves and the world around us.

¹ Dennis J Schmidt, "On the Idiom of Truth and the Movement of Life: Some Remarks on the Task of Hermeneutics," *Internationales Jahrbuch Für Hermeneutik* 10 (2011): 53.

If Gadamer's hermeneutics is to be shown to bear the ethical significance described, one must confront the problem that Gadamer's main work, *Truth and Method* (1960), contains few explicit discussions of ethics. Additionally, nowhere in his work does Gadamer announce anything resembling a "theory of ethics" in the usual sense. At the same time, ethical concepts such as *phronesis*, dialogue, and *Bildung* frequently appear in *Truth and Method*. Additionally, ethical intimations pervade Gadamer's corpus, and some of his most important essays from early to late in his long career, such as "Practical Knowing" (1930), "Plato's Educational State" (1942), "On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics" (1963), and "Friendship and Solidarity" (1999) concern ethics.

In particular, this thesis will pursue the ethical implications of the theory of understanding set forth in *Truth and Method*. The theme I will follow in this regard is the concept of *phronesis* [practical wisdom]. *Phronesis* is elaborated in Greek philosophy, especially in the work of Aristotle, as a truth which pertains to how we understand ourselves and how we may act ethically and successfully so as to attain good life [*eu ze*]. Gadamer speaks in many places of the importance of *phronesis* in his thought. In conversation with Riccardo Dottori, Gadamer goes so far as to say, "you could quite easily object that my whole philosophy is nothing but *phronesis* — but, of course, it is nothing but *phronesis*, and this continues to be the case."² In that interview, Gadamer speaks of his ongoing concern with *phronesis* from his study of Aristotle with Martin Heidegger in the 1920s, to his early research on Plato, and through to the development of his hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* and later writings.

But if it is true that Gadamer's philosophy is nothing but *phronesis*, the initial evidence on reading *Truth and Method* does not appear to support this. Rather, *phronesis* appears to play quite a specific and limited role in the work. The role is to assist in resolving what Gadamer calls the "problem of application." Gadamer explains this problem in terms of the proper conception of historicity. *Phronesis*, he suggests, is a model with which we can properly understand the relationship of an individual to the historical-cultural tradition to which she belongs. I will argue Gadamer's description of this relationship as "application" is somewhat misleading, and that the best way to understand what Gadamer is referring to is "concretisation."

² Hans-Georg Gadamer and Riccardo Dottori, *A Century of Philosophy: Hans Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, trans. Rod Coltman and Sigrid Koepke (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2006), 54.

But I will also argue that the role of *phronesis* in *Truth and Method* is broader than its importance as a model for the application of understanding. *Phronesis* lies at the heart of the experience of truth Gadamer describes in his philosophical hermeneutics. In addition to the overt role it plays in reference to the problem of application, *phronesis* also has an implicit presence in Part One of the work, where Gadamer explores the truth at stake in the arts and humanities. In a close reading of this passage, I will seek to show that *phronesis* is not only a model for the truth of understanding; it is also part of its content – i.e. the truth that Gadamer suggests is present in the arts and humanities is in some sense a moral truth. The arts and humanities give rise to ways of reading or orienting oneself within the world, in a way which bears upon practical life. The implication of this would be that understanding in the arts and humanities would take on an explicitly ethical dimension. If this is the case, it will change how we consider the significance of the humanities and arts, and lead us in the direction of a reconsideration of the ethical consequences of understanding in general.

The intention of this investigation of the place of *phronesis* in *Truth and Method* is to deepen our understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics and how a relationship between this hermeneutics and ethics could be mapped. This is because, as becomes clear, the role *phronesis* plays in Gadamer's hermeneutics is central in explicating how the experience of understanding relates to the lived, practical situation of the one who understands. *Phronesis* makes clear how historical understanding relates itself to the present in a way that has not only theoretical but also practical implications. Drawing upon *phronesis*, Gadamer depicts how understanding becomes no longer a merely 'theoretical' issue. It is a knowledge or truth which opens up or discloses a practical situation. Considering the place of *phronesis* in *Truth and Method* will also make apparent how certain ways of understanding Gadamer's work, such as its conservatism, liberalism, or relativism, are inaccurate.

Because the concept of *phronesis* is so important for Gadamer, and has a long history, I begin with a short excursus on Aristotle's explanation of this concept in his ethics. An equally important background concept is the idea of a hermeneutics of facticity in the work of Martin Heidegger (who was, of course, Gadamer's teacher). With Heidegger, hermeneutics takes on a new meaning, and it is important to remember that Gadamer's employment of the term is heavily influenced by the Heideggerian sense. A discussion of this relationship forms the second section of this thesis. I then proceed to an analysis of *phronesis* in *Truth and Method* in two chapters, the first focused on Part Two of the text (the overt role of *phronesis*) and the second on Part One (the implicit role).

Chapter One: Aristotle's Account of *Phronesis*

Aristotle introduces the concept of *phronesis* in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book Five in the *Eudemian*). Here Aristotle has completed a discussion of the virtues of character, one half of the twofold division of virtue (*arete*) into that of character (*ethikes*) and of thought (*dianoetike*).³ Aristotle has defined virtue with his famous doctrine of the mean (*meson*) – that any virtue occupies a middle position between deficiency and excess. This middle position is found according to the *orthos logos*, the correct calculation or reasoning.⁴ The question now arises, how is this *orthos logos* to be determined?

[I]n the other types of supervision [*epimeleias*] where there is scientific knowledge [*episteme*], it is also true to say that we should exert ourselves or relax neither too much nor too little but mean amounts and in the way the correct reason says [*hos o orthos logos*]. If we know only this, however, we are not better off – for example, as regards what sorts of treatments to apply to the body, if we are told that we should apply those that medicine prescribes and in the way the one who possess it would. That is why, with regard to the states of the soul as well, we should not only assert this much of the truth but also determine what the correct reason is and what its defining mark [*horos*].⁵

To say that virtue is the mean is to give little guidance. It amounts, Aristotle says, to the instruction to a sick person that they should take whatever medicines the art of medicine would prescribe.⁶ In other words, it is empty of content, unless it can offer something more to characterise the *orthos logos*.

At the same time, Aristotle will not offer a universal rule for determining the *orthos logos* in any given situation. Those who are disappointed not to find such a rule in Aristotle do not appreciate Aristotle's methodological precept, laid down at the outset of the ethics, that the degree of precision to be expected in an inquiry will correspond to the object to be studied.⁷ In the case of ethics, Aristotle holds that the nature of ethical life is such as not to admit of a precision comparable to, for example, the scientific study of nature. This is because they

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014). 1103a13. Reference has also been made to *Loeb Classical Library: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934). Translation of this text has in some places been modified.

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1138b20-25.

⁵ *Ibid.* 1138b26-34.

⁶ That said, it is worth noting that the comparison with medicine is also somewhat misleading, in that, whereas medicine is a *techne*, Aristotle will claim that the *orthos logos* in ethical life is grasped only by *phronesis*, which is a qualitatively different kind of knowing to *techne*.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1094b11.

admit of “difference and variability.”⁸ Matters of the good in human *praxis* cannot be reduced to general principles in the way of scientific facts. Ethical matters do not have the same law-like consistency as the law of gravity. Aristotle will later distinguish between *episteme*, the knowledge of those aspects of nature which are unchanging and of necessity (sometimes translated as “scientific knowledge”), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), the knowledge of the good with regard to human *praxis*.⁹ If the world of *praxis* is variable and unruly, then it presents a challenge for the application of general ethical principles. Here there is already nascent an argument in favour of the methodological independence of the humanities from the natural sciences, on the grounds that human affairs do not admit of the scientific standards demanded by science. This point would prove a great inspiration for hermeneutics, as I will discuss later.

Thus, when Aristotle sets out to characterise the *orthos logos* in greater detail, he does not simply report the nature of its defining mark or standard [*horos*]. This is not the kind of thing which can be captured by a formula. Rather, he describes the virtues of thought [*dianoetike aretai*] which will allow one to take care [*epimeleia*] for this *horos*. Aristotle distinguishes between five intellectual virtues which he calls ways of *aletheuein*, ways of grasping or being in truth.

The states by which the soul attains truth in affirmation or denial [*aletheuei e psuche to kataphanai e apophanai*] are five in number – they are: craft knowledge [*techne*], science [*episteme*], practical wisdom [*phronesis*], theoretical wisdom [*sophia*], intelligence [*nous*].¹⁰

Aristotle describes five ways by which the soul attains truth (using the verb form *aletheuei* – literally, ways in which the soul “reveals the truth” or “tells the truth”). These terms are really impossible to translate, so I give the English rendering now urging much caution and revert to the Greek term for the remainder of this thesis.¹¹

Here Aristotle has described five different modes of truth. This is difficult for us to understand, perhaps, because in the modern world truth is generally thought of according to the model of the proposition. Truth is a “value” assigned to a proposition. It is assigned

⁸ Ibid. 1094b15.

⁹ Ibid. Bk. 6, §§3-6.

¹⁰ Ibid. 1139b15-17.

¹¹ Aristotle also mentions *upolepsis* (supposition) and *doxa* (opinion), which seem to hold a lower place than the initial five due to their capacity for “error [or falsehood – *diapseudesthai*].” Ibid. 1139b18.

according to whether the proposition “corresponds” to the matter, or “coheres” with other accepted propositions. *Phronesis* is perhaps the most difficult of the five to reconcile with this standard view, as it is a truth relating to action. It is characteristic of a *phronimos*, one who has practical wisdom, says Aristotle:

[T]o be able to deliberate well [*dunasthai kalos bouleusasthai*] about what is good and advantageous for himself [*peri to auta agatha kai sumpheronta*], for example about what furthers health or strength, not over a portion [*kata meros*], but about what sorts of things further living well as a whole [*alla poia pros to eu zen holos*].¹²

Phronesis is a power of deliberating well with regard to what is good and advantageous for oneself. It is a truth with regard to *praxis* – a truth pertaining to what is good in action. It allows what Aristotle calls “practical truth [*aletheia praktike*].”¹³ In this regard, *phronesis* is not only a “theoretical” matter. Rather, the knowledge at stake in it is of material import to one’s way of acting. Its truth is not a theoretical truth which is later applied to one’s action. Rather, *phronesis* is essentially related to action. This means that the common distinction between theory and practice is put under pressure by *phronesis*. This will be one of the reasons why it appeals to Heidegger and Gadamer.

In that it is a consideration of how to be successful in a practical endeavour, *phronesis* is not unlike the practical knowledge of *techne*. For example, practical knowledge of the craft of medicine, which would be a *techne*, enables one to deliberate well about matters of promoting health. *Phronesis* is distinguished in that it pays regard not to some specific region of practice, as in the case of *techne*, but to *eu ze holos*, good life as a whole. It is not merely an expanded *techne*. The holistic perspective of *phronesis* makes it qualitatively different to *techne*. There is no *techne* of life as a whole.¹⁴ This is shown by the fact that the end of *techne* is external to it. *Techne* governs *poiesis* while *phronesis* governs *praxis*, and Aristotle is definitive that “*praxis* is not *poiesis* and *poiesis* is not *praxis*.”¹⁵ The difference resides in the different relations of ends. Whereas the activity of *poiesis* has its end in the thing to be produced, and ultimately the purpose for which that thing will be used, *praxis* has no end outside of itself. “[T]he end of production is something other than production, while that of

¹² Ibid. 1140a24-28.

¹³ Ibid. 1139a26.

¹⁴ This would lead Aristotle to oppose Annas and others’ claim that virtue can be understood as a “skill” akin to playing the piano (pp. 13-14). Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Matt Stichter, *Virtue as a Skill* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1140a5.

action is not something other than action, since doing well in action [*eupraxia*] is itself action's end."¹⁶ Medicine has an end outside of itself – health. One desires health so that one can live well. But, for Aristotle, *eu ze holos* does not have an end outside of itself. The most Aristotle will say of the end of life is that it is “happiness [*eudaimonia*]” which is itself an “activity [*energeia*]” and not a final object.¹⁷

Aristotle makes it plain that *phronesis* is a matter not only of what is good but what is “advantageous” (*sumpheronta*). Indeed, the way he places this term beside *agatha* suggests that he sees little tension between them. This is a comment to be placed in the broader context of Aristotle's eudaimonism, which denies the divide between the morally good and the personally advantageous one sees in certain Christian and Kantian moralities.¹⁸ *Phronesis* is a practical reasoning which allows one to identify the means to achieve success in action. Does this mean that *phronesis* is merely an instrumental reasoning, considering the means to given ends? This question is much debated.¹⁹

One discussion which suggests that there is more to *phronesis* than instrumentality is the contrast with *deinotes* [cleverness, cunning] that occurs at the conclusion of Book Six. For Aristotle, *deinotes* is “the sort of thing that, when it comes to the things that further hitting a proposed target, is able to do these and hit upon them.”²⁰ *Deinotes*, it seems, is a purely instrumental kind of cleverness. Aristotle makes it clear that the end thus sought after may be good or bad, and so both the *phronimos* and the *panourgos* [“crafty” or “unscrupulous one”] can be said to be *deinos*.²¹ So Aristotle says *phronesis* and *deinotes* are “close as regards *logos*, but different as regards *proairesis*.”²² Both *phronesis* and *deinotes* involve skill in

¹⁶ Ibid. 1140b6-7.

¹⁷ Ibid. Bk. One, §7.

¹⁸ Kant says that “A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it...” Here, the will is “good” without regard for “advantage.” In contrast, Aristotle will emphasise that *phronesis* allows one to be successful in action. Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4:394.

¹⁹ For example, in Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ursula Coope, “Why Does Aristotle Think That Ethical Virtue Is Required for Practical Wisdom?,” *Phronesis* 57, no. 2 (2012); John M Cooper, *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1975); Jessica Moss, ““Virtue Makes the Goal Right”: Virtue and Phronesis in Aristotle's Ethics,” *Phronesis* 56, no. 3 (2011).

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1144a23-4.

²¹ Ibid. 1144a23.

²² Ibid. 1152a13.

instrumental reasoning. However, *phronesis* also includes a correct conception of the right ends to strive for.

This conception is undergirded by a virtuous character, without which it is impossible to have *phronesis*.²³ Without ethical virtue, *phronesis* is unable to function – one’s character [*ethos*] is the “starting-point [*arche*]” from which the deliberation of *phronesis* begins.²⁴ *Phronesis* functions in a pairing with *ethos*, such that *ethos* provides guidance and consistency for *phronesis*. Virtue then is not only an intellectual matter for Aristotle – without the guidance of good character, one’s moral reasoning can easily go astray, or can lack motivating force.²⁵ “Thought by itself moves nothing,” Aristotle writes, evincing a pragmatism and humility about the power of thought.²⁶ Additionally, one must possess the right kinds of desires: “if the deliberation [*proairesis*] is to be an excellent one [*spoudaia*], both the reason must be true and the desire must be correct [*ton te logon alethe einai kai ten orexin orthon*].”²⁷ Virtue is not only a matter of reasoning, but of cultivating the right desires so as to be guided towards good ends.

In this regard, Aristotle revises the “intellectualism” of Plato and Socrates’ ethic. Plato’s dialogues famously feature the claim that virtue is identical with knowledge. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates argues that the only cause of wrongdoing is ignorance, while in the *Meno* he considers whether “virtue must be a sort of wisdom [*phronesis*].”²⁸ The extent to which this evidence is sufficient to attribute the claim that “virtue is knowledge” to Plato and/or Socrates is unclear.²⁹ However, Aristotle certainly attributes such a view to Socrates, and mounts a sympathetic critique. For example, he says:

²³ Ibid. 1144b30.

²⁴ Ibid. 1144a31.

²⁵ Hence the importance of *ethizein* [habituation, cultivation] and *paideia* in Aristotle’s ethics and politics. For example, *Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1964), Bks. 7 and 8; *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 10, §9. A similar concern for *paideia* as a political task also strongly animates Plato’s politics in, for example, the *Republic*. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1139a35. G. E. M. Anscombe famously praised this pragmatism in contrast with the analytic ethics which was predominant at the time, leading to a resurgence of interest in Aristotle under the auspices of “virtue ethics,” in her influential article “Modern Moral Philosophy.” Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958).

²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a24-5.

²⁸ *Prot.* 357d, 358c-d; *Meno* 88d, 89a. Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin, 1956).

²⁹ For a nuanced discussion, see Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Virtue Is Knowledge: The Moral Foundations of Socratic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Pangle argues that Socrates’ concept of wisdom is “not merely a cognitive quality... it is a virtue of the human being as a thoroughly embodied being, whose passions and judgements are all intimately connected and whose confidence is a judgement rooted in visceral strength,” 208. This would mean that Socrates (and perhaps also Plato) has already moved away from ‘intellectualism’ towards an ‘Aristotelian’ direction.

For it is not the state that is only *in accord with* the correct reason [*kata ton orthon logon*] that is virtue but the one that *involves* the correct reason [*meta tou orthou logou*]. And the correct reason about such matters is *phronesis*. Socrates, then, thought that the virtues *were* cases of reason [*logous*] (all being cases of scientific knowledge [*episteme*]), whereas we think that they *involve* reason [*meta logou*].³⁰

The distinction here is between virtue as *logos* or as conforming with *logos* (*kata logou*), and virtue as *meta logou*. The preposition “*meta*” means “among,” “alongside,” and “along with.”³¹ Aristotle here is subtly re-defining the place of *logos* in virtue. Virtue certainly involves *logos* – Aristotle follows Socrates’ ‘intellectualism’ this far. However, accordance with the right *logos* alone is not sufficient for virtue. While virtue involves *logos*, it must also include other components, e.g. a virtuous appetitive disposition (*orexis*). *Logos* does not stand alone. It starts from and requires the support of *ethos*. If philosophers are sometimes guilty of overestimating the power of reason over human life, this cannot be said of Aristotle’s ethics.

Phronesis then is a truth of a practical kind. It is a practical truth, governing *praxis* in human life. In this sense, it is not easily reconciled with the theory-practice divide as commonly understood in modernity. It ponders what is good for a human being in life as a whole, a reasoning which in its open-endedness is thus qualitatively different to *techne*. It takes its guidance from *ethos*, the character one has developed through habituation and education. In this sense, it is a concept of truth which pays heed to the finitude and dependence of reasoning in the sphere of ethical life.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b26-30. See a related passage, 1144b18-20, “in thinking that all the virtues were types of *phronesis*, [Socrates] was in error, but in saying that they did not exist without *phronesis*, he spoke correctly.”

³¹ Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1108-09.

Chapter Two: Heidegger's Existential Hermeneutics

This theme of finitude will be of recurring importance in Gadamer's hermeneutics. As Risser writes, "finitude may be *the* term around which the discourse of philosophical hermeneutics is organised."³² Another source from which Gadamer draws resources for this philosophy of finitude is Heidegger's hermeneutics. Heidegger employed the concept of hermeneutics in an attempt to capture the historical and temporal finitude of human life. With Heidegger, hermeneutics finds a new meaning which drastically changes its ethical implications. Gadamer's use of the term hermeneutics is profoundly shaped by Heidegger's innovation. Because Gadamer follows Heidegger, it is crucial to understand the innovation at stake in Heidegger's hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics Before Heidegger

The term 'hermeneutics' derives from the Greek *hermeneia*, a word with a number of meanings including interpretation or expression.³³ Traditionally, hermeneutics referred to the theory of the interpretation of texts. Hermeneutic thinkers considered what principles could govern the understanding of texts, especially religious texts.

In the Romantic period consciousness of hermeneutic problems was altered by reflection upon the nature of language and culture and their role in shaping meaning. Perhaps the historical context of colonisation played a role here, having brought about increased contact between Europeans and the rest of the world, as in, for example, the arrival of Eastern texts in Germany. Alongside this was an intense interest in the Classical world and a growing awareness that understanding these ancient texts required attending to the problem of historical distance. Although he receives little attention in *Truth and Method*, Herder was immensely important for his attentiveness to the problems of language and history³⁴ – his language philosophy³⁵ was a great influence on Heidegger and Gadamer. Herder's critique of

³² James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

³³ Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 690. For a brief discussion of the history of meanings of the term, see Martin Heidegger, *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John Van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6-11.

³⁴ For discussions of the importance of Herder for hermeneutics, see Kristin Gjesdal, *Herder's Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, "Treatise on the Origin of Language," in *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). In this text, Herder argues that language is not merely a neutral tool to express pre-formed thoughts, but is rather constitutive of the human experience of the world. In this regard, he anticipates some of the developments of more recent philosophy of language, such as that of Heidegger and Gadamer.

the ahistorical rationalism of the Enlightenment was rooted in the view that human beings understand the world through concepts furnished by their historical and cultural situation, for example, their native language.³⁶ The idea arose that writers were rooted in their historical and cultural horizon and that adequately understanding foreign texts required attending to the distance between the horizons of the author and reader.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was another significant figure in hermeneutics. One aspect of his legacy was his emphasis upon the inherent difficulties of understanding which arise from the status of a text as an external expression of the author's thoughts. Rather than the previous assumption that misunderstanding was a problem case, for Schleiermacher "misunderstanding results as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point."³⁷ This is a result not of deficient skill on the part of the reader, but rather of the nature of language and texts, which reflects a divide between the objective nature of language as a historical structure and the subjective mental state from which speech acts originate.

Texts involve the expression of the writers' thoughts in language, which Schleiermacher describes as "what mediates sensuously and externally between the utterer and the listener."³⁸ At the same time, language is not only a neutral medium or tool. The utterer is not herself the creator of language. Rather, "neither language nor the individual as productive speaking individual can exist except via the being-in-each-other of both relationships."³⁹ Corresponding to this duality, Schleiermacher identifies two different aspects of the act of interpretation – "psychological interpretation" understands language as the expression of inner thoughts and individuality, while "grammatical interpretation" sees texts and speech as products of the structure of language such that the speaker or writer is merely "the location of language and his utterance [is] only that in which language reveals itself."⁴⁰ Schleiermacher emphasises that these two aspects have equal priority.⁴¹ With this distinction, Schleiermacher points to a difficult hermeneutic problem, according to which understanding a text requires

³⁶ That cultures cannot be judged according to the concepts and values of another culture is a theme of, for example, "On the Change of Taste," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N Forster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. Schleiermacher says elsewhere, "Understanding has a dual direction, towards the language and towards the thought." *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

both seeing it as an expression of the inner thoughts of an individual and seeing it as situated in an objective whole of language. With this idea, Schleiermacher gives new meaning to the traditional idea that hermeneutics involves a circle, so that the part can only be understood in terms of the whole, and vice versa. As we shall see, the notion that hermeneutics is circular is one that Gadamer and Heidegger develop even further.

For Schleiermacher, hermeneutic difficulties do not arise only in the rare case when a book is not completely transparent. Rather, for Schleiermacher the problem of misunderstanding can arise with any text. This is because it is of the nature of even the most apparently simple text to gesture towards inner thoughts which are not completely expressible within language (understood through psychological interpretation), and also to refer to language as a whole structure (examined in grammatical interpretation). Thus, for Schleiermacher understanding is an “endless task.”⁴² Gadamer sees Schleiermacher’s awareness of the limitations of understanding, such that misunderstanding is a constant haunting problem, as a great advance.⁴³ However, even so Gadamer thinks that Schleiermacher was overly optimistic about transcending the hermeneutic circle, suggesting that one could “put oneself in the place of the author.”⁴⁴ In this way, Schleiermacher hopes that the interpreter will be able “to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author.”⁴⁵ The idea that the interpreter could understand the author better than she understands herself epitomises the optimism Schleiermacher retains about the interpreter transcending her limited perspective.

While Heidegger’s hermeneutics is a dramatic advance, an important precedent was Wilhelm Dilthey.⁴⁶ With Dilthey, hermeneutics becomes further broadened from interpreting texts to a methodology of the human sciences. For Dilthey, understanding is a technical term referring to the grasping of the inner meaning of human behaviour through its outward manifestations.⁴⁷ In this sense, understanding becomes an important way of knowing for the human sciences. Hermeneutics reflects on the epistemological foundations of this understanding, considering the conditions by which human life in the socio-historical world

⁴² Ibid., 22.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 191.

⁴⁴ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁶ Heidegger acknowledges this in §77 of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh and Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010). Future references to this source follow the convention of using “H(page number)” to refer to the pagination in the German editions.

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Rise of Hermeneutics,” in *Selected Works Volume IV: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 236 (318).

can be grasped. Dilthey espouses hermeneutics as a result of his view that the world of human life as understood in modern philosophy is one-sided. "No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume and Kant; it is only the diluted juice of reason, a mere process of thought."⁴⁸ As Risser notes, Dilthey's reaction against scientism in favour of a concern for life in its many-sidedness resonates with the later hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. "'Man' is not regarded for Dilthey as a thing of nature to be explained by other universal laws of events, but is understood as a living person actively involved in history."⁴⁹ So Heidegger spoke positively of Dilthey, suggesting that his work was animated by "an elemental restlessness, of which the one goal is to understand 'life' philosophically and to secure for this understanding a hermeneutical foundation in terms of life itself."⁵⁰ In this regard, Heidegger sees Dilthey's project as coinciding with his own. Like Heidegger, Dilthey argues that explicating the historicity of the human being as essential to understanding human life in the socio-historical world.

However, ultimately Dilthey retains hermeneutics as a matter of method, i.e. the method of the historical sciences. Hermeneutics, although it seeks to understand life in its lived complexity, nevertheless is itself a theoretical method separate from the practical movement of life. Dilthey's perspective is concerned with hermeneutics as related to theoretical science. In contrast, Heidegger's and Gadamer's will view hermeneutics as an existential feature of the human being, in a way that transcends the divide between *praxis* and theory.

Additionally, like Schleiermacher, Dilthey ultimately thinks that hermeneutic distance can be overcome in ideal understanding. For example, he expresses optimism about the possibility of historical consciousness "enabl[ing] modern man to hold the entire past of humanity present within himself."⁵¹ With ideal historical consciousness, distance between an interpreter and the past can be completely bridged and what is alien in the text can be resolved. In this regard, Dilthey retains the Enlightenment project of a search for a truth which is 'timeless' or transcends its historical finitude. Heidegger will contest this, suggesting that temporality is ineliminable in all understanding and thus placing hermeneutics on quite different footing.

⁴⁸ "Introduction to the Human Studies," in *Selected Writings*, ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 162.

⁴⁹ Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 30.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H398.

⁵¹ Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," 235 (317).

The Hermeneutics of Facticity

The importance of hermeneutics for Heidegger is a consequence of his definition of Dasein in the opening of *Being and Time* as that being which “understands itself in its being in some way and with some explicitness.”⁵² Understanding, then is an essential feature of ‘Dasein,’ the German word for existence or being which is Heidegger’s term for the human being.⁵³ That understanding is such a significant feature of Dasein already signals the importance of hermeneutics.

Heidegger employs the term “facticity [*Faktizität*]” to describe the being of Dasein that is to be investigated. This term appears in the work of prior thinkers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In Heidegger’s work, it refers to the concrete existing human being. In his turn towards concrete existence, Heidegger is informed by Søren Kierkegaard’s critique of the abstraction of the idealist philosophies of his time. Under the “hermeneutics of facticity [*Faktizität*],”⁵⁴ hermeneutics is not a matter of elaborating principles for the interpretation of texts or attempting to understand foreign cultures. Rather, hermeneutics is a reflection on Dasein’s concrete existence, arising as it does out of temporality. Facticity refers to a cluster of notions which distinguish the inquiry into the being of Dasein from the being of any other thing. Five aspects of this cluster will be discussed.

Firstly, when Dasein attempts to understand itself in its world, Dasein in this case is not a ‘mere object.’ Rather, Dasein investigates its own being. The inquiry has a particular cast due to the fact that it is ‘my own’ being which is under investigation. Heidegger explains this aspect of facticity in a lecture course of that title given in 1923:

"Facticity" is the designation we will use for the character of the being of "our" "own" Dasein. More precisely, this expression means: in each case "this" Dasein in its being-there for a while at the particular time, insofar as it is, in the character of its being, "there" in the manner of be-ing. Being-there in the manner of be-ing means: not, and never, to be there primarily as an object of intuition and definition on the basis of

⁵² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H12.

⁵³ This is a simplification. Heidegger carefully resists equating ‘Dasein’ and the human being. This point relates to Heidegger’s complicated and critical stance towards humanism, most fully articulated in the “Letter on Humanism.”

⁵⁴ This term plays a significant role in *Being and Time*, even though the term is not employed often. Additionally, it was a frequently-used descriptor of Heidegger’s project in his lecture courses in the 1920s, such as Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). [given in 1919-1920] and *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*. [given in 1923]

intuition, as an object of which we merely take cognizance and have knowledge.

Rather, Dasein is there for itself in the "how" of its ownmost being.⁵⁵

What Heidegger emphasises here is that facticity refers to the fact that Dasein is always "my own". Heidegger would elaborate this in *Being and Time* with the concept of "*Jemeinigkeit* [mineness]."⁵⁶ For Heidegger, Dasein does not exist in the way the objects of intuition or of scientific knowledge do. Dasein is not only an object of knowledge. It is also the knower – it is its own being which it seeks to understand. This creates a unique reflexivity of the investigation.

Another aspect of facticity alluded to in the quotation above refers to the notion that Dasein's being is not to be understood merely as an object analogous to the objects of natural science. With the concept of facticity, Heidegger seeks to understand human being more fundamentally than can be done by treating it as an object of scientific knowing. Heidegger explains:

Dasein understands its ownmost being in the sense of a certain "factual objective presence." And yet the "factuality" of the fact of one's own Dasein is ontologically fundamentally different from the factual occurrence of a kind of stone.⁵⁷

Facticity refers to the idea that Dasein does not investigate its own being in the way that it examines the being of a stone. Dasein is not to be understood only as an object of consciousness or knowledge. Thus he stresses that his hermeneutics of facticity is fundamentally different to any scientific study of the human being such as a biology or anthropology.⁵⁸

In the above passage, Heidegger also refers to another aspect of what is referred to in facticity: "the way in which every Dasein actually is." Heidegger notes that Dasein is always rooted in some contingent circumstances. Dasein never occurs apart from some specific rootedness in place and time – for example, in a particular historical and cultural background. Heidegger introduces the concept "*Geworfenheit* [thrownness]" to describe this idea.⁵⁹ This aspect of facticity refers to the contingent, particular facts which always characterise any particular Dasein's being. These contingent facts cannot be reasoned or grounded. Rather, the

⁵⁵ *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 5.

⁵⁶ *Being and Time*, H41-42, H53.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, H56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, H48-50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, H135.

concept of thrownness emphasises their irrational or inexplicable nature – Dasein is simply ‘thrown’ into them. The “fact” in this sense is that “behind which and back of which one cannot go.”⁶⁰ Facticity in this sense refers to the concrete circumstances in which existing Dasein always finds itself. These contingent facts have always informed and been taken up by Dasein in existing.

A fourth meaning of facticity raises the idea of the practical. The term derives from the Latin “factum,” which primarily refers to an act or deed.⁶¹ Dasein’s relationship with its own being is not only one of knowing. Existing is not only something which Dasein must know, but something it must undertake. Dasein’s ‘how’ of being, to use Heidegger’s word, is not only that of a theoretical existence but also, perhaps more importantly, a practical one living a life. Grondin explains:

Facticity means our own specific being insofar as it is something that we have "to be," that is, to assume and take into our care... It suggests, simply put, that our being, our Dasein, is a task for ourselves. Whether it realizes it or not (the latter means for Heidegger fleeing from oneself, our Dasein is characterized by the fact (thus the facticity) that it is open to its own being.⁶²

One’s own Dasein is something one must not only understand from a theoretical point of view, but more importantly, something one undertakes. Facticity refers to the practical import of the question of one’s own being. I will expand on the relationship between Heidegger’s hermeneutics and *praxis* to some extent in a later section.

The fifth and final aspect of facticity which will be discussed here is Heidegger’s suggestion that the nature of human life is to always elude the grasp of a complete understanding. Facticity refers to the fact that Dasein’s being is never completely transparent to itself. Because Dasein is not only an object of understanding, Heidegger notes that the ‘fact’ of Dasein’s being is something which Dasein can never completely understand. Dasein encounters its own being as a brute fact which cannot be completely grasped. Dasein’s being

⁶⁰ My trans. Original: “hinter das man nicht zurückgehen kann.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke Band 3* (Tuebingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987), 422.

⁶¹ J. R. V. Marchant and Joseph F. Charles, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Funk and Wagnall's Company, 1953), 216.

⁶² Jean Grondin, "The Ethical and Young Hegelian Motives in Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Facticity," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 347.

is not something which can ultimately be rationally grounded. Heidegger would agree with Nietzsche's claim that:

[W]e are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law, "Each is furthest from himself" applies to all eternity—we are not "men of knowledge" with respect to ourselves.⁶³

Existing human beings are never completely transparent to themselves. Gadamer explains how facticity refers to the fact that life is never completely transparent to itself. He explains:

The sentence, "Life is hazy [*diesig*]," is given to us by Heidegger in his earliest lectures. Hazy has nothing to do with the "this" [*Dies*]; rather it means misty, foggy. Thus, the sentence means that it belongs to the essence of life that no complete enlightenment can be gained within self-consciousness; rather it is constantly being re-enshrouded in fog.⁶⁴

Gadamer suggests that the concept of facticity refers to what in life is ultimately impassable for understanding, extrapolating that the phrase "hermeneutics of facticity" is in a sense paradoxical.

[t]o speak of a "hermeneutics of facticity" is to speak of something like "wooden iron." For facticity means precisely the unshakable resistance that the factual puts up against all grasping and understanding, and in the special phrasing in which Heidegger couched the concept of facticity, it meant the fundamental determination of human Dasein.⁶⁵

Thus facticity refers to how Dasein's own being is always a question for it. While this question can be fled from (what Heidegger calls "fallenness") it cannot be conclusively answered. A complete understanding or grasping of Dasein's lived facticity is impossible, which means any hermeneutics of facticity will be a never-ending and difficult process.

Heidegger's suggestion that 'hermeneutics' is the proper name for an inquiry into Dasein's facticity is unconventional. Heidegger notes that his definition of hermeneutics is a departure

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *Nietzsche: Basic Writings*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), pref. §1

⁶⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

from the modern meaning of the term as a set of principles for interpreting texts. On Heidegger's meaning, hermeneutics refers to:

a definite unity in the actualizing of *hermeneuein* (of communicating), i.e., of the interpreting of facticity in which facticity is being encountered, seen, grasped, and expressed in concepts.⁶⁶

The hermeneutics of facticity works towards an understanding and expression of facticity. In this regard, the hermeneutics of facticity coincides with Heidegger's phenomenology, which is the interpretation and reflection upon what appears to existing factual Dasein – as Heidegger says, “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself.”⁶⁷ Heidegger makes hermeneutics and phenomenology coincide, a point crucial to understanding what Heidegger means by phenomenology and how he distinguishes himself from the earlier phenomenology of his mentor Edmund Husserl.⁶⁸ Heidegger's discussion also presents hermeneutics as a further development of a tendency already present in Dasein, which, as we have seen, he has defined as the being which understands its own being to some extent.

As another consequence of this important definition, Heidegger finds that Dasein always understands the world around it in a certain way. This understanding takes in the things which surround Dasein as embedded in a context in which they are meaningful. The important Heideggerian concept of “world [*Welt*],” refers to Dasein's characteristic as encountering things in terms of their relations in a meaningful context. This meaning refers to Dasein's projects and activities.⁶⁹ Understanding, then, is not a theoretical attitude but rather an orientation towards the world which undergirds practice as well as theory.

To say that Dasein, existing, is its there [*Da*] means: World is “there”; its Da-sein is being-in. Being-in is “there” as that for the sake of which Dasein is. Existing being-in-the-world as such is disclosed in the for-the-sake-of-which, and we call this disclosedness understanding. In understanding the for-the-sake-of-which, the significance grounded therein is also disclosed.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Being and Time*, H34.

⁶⁸ Far more could be said about this point, but that is perhaps the topic for another thesis.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Heidegger discusses this especially in §§14-18. Especially important here are the concepts of “useful things (*Zeug*)” and “handiness [*Zuhandenheit*],” and the infamous example of the hammer.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, H143.

This passage, dense with Heideggerian terminology, explores the relationship between Dasein and understanding. Understanding characterises Dasein in that it always meaningfully perceives the world around it. Dasein sees the world around it as made up of meaningful things – the chair I sit on, the table where I have breakfast, my partner whom I love, etc. Heidegger describes this meaningfulness in terms of the “as-structure.”⁷¹ The chair is understood “as” that on which I sit, etcetera. In Heidegger’s terms, this meaningfulness is “disclosed [*erschlossen*]” to Dasein. Thus Dasein’s being in the world is the ‘for the sake of which,’ that which grounds the meaningfulness of things evident in the as-structure. With this word *Erschlossenheit*, Heidegger emphasises that things do not appear to Dasein, and then receive a meaning. Rather, Dasein always already understands things as meaningful, and this meaning is not something Dasein as a subject has imposed on the world around it. As Heidegger writes,

Interpretation does not, so to speak, throw a ‘significance’ over what is nakedly objectively present and does not stick a value on it, but what is encountered in the world is always already in a relevance which is disclosed in the understanding of world, a relevance which is made explicit by interpretation.⁷²

Meaning is not “thrown over” things which are first objectively present. Rather, what appears within the context of the world is always already understood as meaningful, to the extent that it is understood.

Of particular importance for Heidegger, among the things which Dasein understands, are possibilities. This is because Heidegger argues that Dasein is defined by its possibilities. Dasein is defined as *geworfener Entwurf*, “thrown projection.” Out of its unchosen factual circumstances, Dasein projects future possibilities for itself. The way it envisions these possibilities is shaped by its understanding of the world and its place in it. This understanding articulates the world in terms of *practical* possibilities. Understanding, in this way, sets out the future possibilities of Dasein’s action.

Heidegger describes the relationship between Dasein’s understanding and action in terms of “sight.”

In its character of project, understanding constitutes existentially what we call the *sight* [*Sicht*] of Dasein. In accordance with the fundamental modes of its being which

⁷¹ Ibid., H149.

⁷² Ibid., H150.

we characterised as the circumspection [*Umsicht*] of taking care, the considerateness [*Rücksicht*] of concern, and as the sight geared towards being as such for the sake of which Dasein is as it is, Dasein *is* equiprimordially sight existentially existing together with the disclosedness of the there.⁷³

Understanding constitutes the ‘sight’ of Dasein. Heidegger does not mean ‘sight’ as in the sense of vision through the eyes. Rather, sight is the way that Dasein sees the world around it and the possibilities at play. Sight undergirds the *habitus*, the way of carrying itself, through which Dasein engages with the world. The term *Umsicht*, composed of *Sicht* and the prefix “*Um* [around],” refers to Dasein’s looking about itself and envisioning possibilities for action. This is nicely echoed by the English translation “circumspection,” which again with its “circum” prefix refers to a “looking about oneself.” Understanding provides this sight, disclosing the world around it in a meaningful way for Dasein.

The as-structure means that understanding for Heidegger undergirds *praxis*. Understanding is seeing things as meaningful with regard to our life and projects. If we do not relate the thing to our own being and our possibilities of acting, we do not really understand it at all. “When we just stare at something, our just-having-it-before-us lies before us as a failure to understand it any more.”⁷⁴ Seeing something without any reference to *praxis* or meaning – seeing something without seeing it “as such-and-such” – is a privation of the ordinary way of seeing. Purely ‘theoretical’ understanding, understanding the thing without relating it to oneself and one’s way of action, is for Heidegger a quite artificial way of looking at the world which requires a great deal of abstraction from the usual way in which the world appears to us.

Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Circle

Heidegger not only shifts the scope of hermeneutics, from a matter of textual analysis or scientific method to an analysis of existence. He also characterises its structure in a different way. One of Heidegger’s key innovations in hermeneutic theory consists in his radicalisation of the notion of historicity. Heidegger’s radical suggestion was that the being of Dasein was to be understood in terms of temporality. “The meaning of being [*Sein*] of that being [*Seienden*] we call Dasein will prove to be temporality.”⁷⁵ Dasein is not conceivable in its being apart from time, as if the way in which it happened to move through time were a

⁷³ Ibid., H146.

⁷⁴ Ibid., H149.

⁷⁵ Ibid., H17.

merely contingent feature. Rather, the way Dasein exists temporally determines its way of being. Dasein's temporality gives rise to its historicity – the fact that its existence takes place in and is shaped by its position in history. Heidegger's claim that Dasein is to be understood as fundamentally temporal means that historicity is an ineliminable feature of all understanding.

If historicity is ineliminable in Dasein's understanding, then any occurrence of understanding is constitutively shaped by its particular place in a historical-cultural horizon. This point leads Heidegger to the idea that understanding is conditioned by what he calls the "fore-structure [*Vor-Struktur*]." ⁷⁶ Heidegger writes,

The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception [*Vorhabe, Vorsicht, und Vorgriff*]. Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given. When a specific instance of interpretation (in the sense of a precise textual interpretation) appeals to what 'is there,' then that which initially 'is there' is nothing other than the self-evident, undiscussed prejudice [*Vormeinung*] of the interpreter which necessarily lies in every interpretative approach as that which is already 'posited' with interpretation in general, namely, that which is pre-given [*vorgegeben*] in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. ⁷⁷

Interpretation proceeds from a fore-structure. Heidegger argues that it never grasps its object without the fore-structure opening the object to it. This fore-structure makes the object comprehensible to interpretation. Interpretation is a deepening and making explicit of an understanding which, as we have seen, is always already there with what is disclosed. This means that interpretation only ever departs from a prior understanding. ⁷⁸

Heidegger's point here can be further illustrated with reference to Plato's doctrine of *anamnesis*. ⁷⁹ In dialogues such as the *Meno*, Plato's characters famously discuss the view that

⁷⁶ Ibid., H151.

⁷⁷ Ibid., H150.

⁷⁸ In the cited passage, Heidegger discusses interpretation (*Auslegung*) rather than understanding (*Verstehen*). However, the difference is not significant. In the history of hermeneutics, a matter of debate has been the relationship between understanding and interpretation. For Heidegger, interpretation is merely the development of understanding to a further level of explicitness. "We shall call the development of understanding *interpretation*. In interpretation, understanding appropriates what it has understood understandingly. In interpretation understanding does not become something different, but rather itself." Ibid., H148.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the relationship between Heidegger and Gadamer's hermeneutics and Plato's idea of *anamnesis*, see James Risser, "Hermeneutic Experience and Memory: Rethinking Knowledge as Recollection," *Research in Phenomenology* 16, no. 1 (1986). Risser writes, "For philosophical hermeneutics, then, recollection,

all knowledge is recollection. Socrates admits that he does not know what virtue is, and Meno asks him, “how on earth will you look for something when you don’t in the least know what it is?”⁸⁰ Without at least some inkling of what is sought, it appears impossible that one could ever begin the search. Some ‘fore-conception’, in Heidegger’s terms, is needed before Socrates can begin the search for virtue. The solution to this problem advanced in the *Meno* and elsewhere is that the soul is immortal, and thus learning is a matter of recollection (*anamnesis*) of what was already known in a past life.⁸¹ Whether this is really Plato’s view or a mythical presentation is unclear. In *Meno*, Socrates “demonstrates” this by teaching a slave boy geometry through nothing more than asking questions. With Socrates’ guidance, the slave figures the basics of geometry for himself. Socrates concludes that the slave has remembered, at his prompting, knowledge that was always there, waiting to be reawakened. For Plato, too, then, knowledge does not begin from a blank slate, but rather must proceed from a prior conception.⁸²

Heidegger’s hermeneutics plays on the familiar idea of the hermeneutic circle, in a new way. The fore-structure of understanding means that understanding never starts from a *tabula rasa*. Rather, it always already begins from a prior understanding of its subject matter. Understanding is always a deepening or development of a prior understanding. Only departing from this prior understanding can the subject matter be reached and inquired into more deeply. Thus, there is a circular movement involved here.

It is a commonplace in the history of hermeneutics to associate hermeneutics with a circular structure. Schleiermacher, for example, argued that the whole of a text and its particular parts are to be understood in terms of one another.⁸³ As Gadamer notes, however, Schleiermacher

the gathering together-again, characterizes the knowing appropriate to the condition of finitude, the condition that precludes origins and beginnings.” 52.

⁸⁰ 80d, in Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*.

⁸¹ Ibid., 82d; Phdo. 75e, in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁸² Heidegger would show great sympathy for the doctrine of *anamnesis* in his later work. He writes, “‘Memory’ does not mean just any thought of anything that can be thought. Memory is the gathering and convergence of thought upon what everywhere demands to be thought about first of all. Memory is the gathering of recollection, thinking back. It safely keeps and keeps concealed within it that to which at each given time thought must be given before all else, in everything that essentially is, everything that appeals to us as what has being and has been in being.” Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. G. Gray (New York: Harper, 2004), 11. Here Heidegger aligns recollection with his own project of thinking being. He will further link memory and thinking of being when he roots both in “the *thanc*.” (138-143).

⁸³ “Even within a single text the particular can only be understood from out of the whole, and a cursory reading to get an overview of the whole must therefore precede the more precise explication... In order to understand the first thing precisely one must have already taken up the whole.” Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, 27-8.

ultimately envisions a moment of complete illumination in which transparent understanding is reached and the circular motion ceases. Gadamer writes,

Nineteenth-century hermeneutic theory often discussed the circular structure of understanding, but always within the framework of a formal relation between part and whole – or its subjective reflex, the intuitive anticipation of the whole and its subsequent articulation in the parts. According to this theory, the circular movement of understanding runs backward and forward along the text, and ceases when the text is perfectly understood. This view of understanding came to its logical culmination in Schleiermacher's theory of the divinatory act, by means of which one places oneself entirely within the writer's mind and from there resolves all that is strange and alien about the text.⁸⁴

On Schleiermacher's model of the hermeneutics, complete understanding dissolves the circle. The circle is a means by which to reach a moment of transparency, in which the circle is ultimately overcome.

Heidegger, in contrast, argues that the circle is not something to be overcome, but rather affirmed.

But to see a *vitiosum* in this circle and to look for ways to avoid it, even to 'feel' that it is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up. It is not a matter of assimilating understanding and interpretation to a particular ideal of knowledge which is itself only a degeneration [*Abart*] of understanding that has strayed into the legitimate task of grasping what is objectively present [*Vorhanden*] in its essential unintelligibility. Rather, the fulfillment of the fundamental conditions of possible interpretation lies in not failing to recognise beforehand the essential conditions of the task. What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get into it in the right way.⁸⁵

The circle is not, Heidegger argues, a vicious one, to be avoided or regretted as a cause of understanding's lack of rigour. For Heidegger, the circle is the condition of all possible understanding. This means that, as Heidegger says, what is important is not to get out of the circle, but to get into it in the right way. Again, this is not to suggest that the circle is something Dasein sometimes enters – rather, Heidegger suggests that Dasein itself has the

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

⁸⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H153.

structure of a circle,⁸⁶ which is a correlate of the fact that Dasein is constituted by its understanding, in particular, of the possibilities which lie before it and which it anticipates. Dasein is always within this circle, and understanding is perfected when this circle is most fully realised, although Heidegger does not yet answer what exactly this means.

In Heidegger's hermeneutical circle there is an incisive critique of the conception of knowledge in natural science. In the comment above, Heidegger describes an ideal of knowledge, hostile to the circularity of understanding, which is "a degeneration [*Abart* – also variation] of understanding" and which aims to grasp the world in terms of "objective presence [*Vorhandenheit*]." Here he refers to science. If Heidegger is correct that understanding is an existential of Dasein, and that understanding has a circular structure, this means a challenge to any positivist epistemology of the sciences. In contrast with the positivist understanding of science as an accumulation of knowledge from the ground up,⁸⁷ Heidegger argues that the inquiry of science must be preceded by a prior understanding which discloses the region of beings to be investigated. He writes,

The totality of beings can, with respect to its various domains [*Bezirken*], become the field where the particular domains of knowledge are exposed and delimited. These domains – for example, history, nature, space, life, human being, language and so on – can in their turn become thematized as objects of scientific investigations. Scientific research demarcates and first establishes these domains of knowledge in a rough and ready fashion [*naiv und roh*]. The elaboration of the domain in its fundamental structures is in a way already accomplished by prescientific experience and interpretation of the region of being to which the domain of knowledge is itself confined. The resulting "fundamental concepts [*Grundbegriffe*]" comprise the guidelines for the first concrete disclosure [*Erschließung*] of the domain.⁸⁸

Heidegger is articulating a critique of science which points to its limits insofar as it is not able to delimit its own basic concepts. Before physics can proceed, it must be furnished with atoms, particles, forces, time, and so on. These basic concepts are necessary for the function of physics, but they are not themselves given by the science. Rather, as Heidegger says, they

⁸⁶ Ibid. H153.

⁸⁷ Consider, for example, Descartes' metaphor of knocking down and building a house or city anew from the ground up. Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method, Etc.*, trans. John Veitch (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1941), Parts Two and Three.

⁸⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H9.

are received in a “disclosure [*Erschließung*]” which opens the region for inquiry.⁸⁹ Science, then, proceeds only from a prior understanding. From this perspective, the suggestion in much of the history of social sciences that hermeneutics might be, not only a science, but an inferior one lacking in the rigour which the natural sciences display, is turned on its head.

The full influence of Heidegger on Gadamer’s thought is too great to elaborate completely here. What we can point to, however, are three components of Heidegger’s elaboration of hermeneutics in his early work, particularly *Being and Time*, which exercise a powerful influence on Gadamer’s own understanding of hermeneutics. Firstly, Heidegger makes understanding a defining feature of Dasein. This means that understanding is not an isolated activity a human being occasionally does, when reading a difficult text for example. Rather, it is ubiquitous to all being-in-the-world. As Gadamer writes in his foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*:

Heidegger’s temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense that the term ‘hermeneutics’ has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world.⁹⁰

Understanding is the being-in-motion of human life. As Figal explains, “Not simply one activity of consciousness among others, understanding implicates, more or less expressly, life itself and thereby sets up in advance the context for other processes of consciousness.”⁹¹ In this way of thinking, understanding is not just one activity within life, but is an essential part of all human life. The human being’s finitude and historicity, Gadamer suggests, belong to its understanding and lack of understanding. Additionally, to do justice to this connection of

⁸⁹ Forty years before Kuhn, Heidegger says that “The real ‘movement’ of the sciences takes place in the revision of these basic concepts.” (H9). Kuhn influentially argued that the progress of a science is constituted by “paradigm shifts” in which the basic concepts of that science are replaced or revised. Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Third ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxvii. Grondin reports that Gadamer initially envisioned his hermeneutics as a “*geisteswissenschaftlichen Hermeneutik* [a hermeneutics of the humanities].” Jean Grondin, “On the Composition of Truth and Method,” in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995). This might explain why, at times, Gadamer suggests his concern is the more narrow question of understanding in the humanities or historical research. However, with Gadamer’s Heideggerian background in mind, it is clear that his hermeneutics is ultimately a philosophy of life. As Gadamer says, in his letter to Richard Bernstein, “our experience of things, indeed even of everyday life, of modes of production, and yes, also of the sphere of our vital concerns, are one and all hermeneutic. None of them is exhausted by being made an object of science.” Richard J Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 263.

⁹¹ Günter Figal, “Life as Understanding,” *Research in Phenomenology* 34 (2004): 20-21.

understanding and life hermeneutics must not be a purely theoretical “knowing-at-a-distance” but a reflection upon life as it is lived.⁹²

Secondly, Heidegger’s elaboration of the hermeneutic circle is of great importance for Gadamer’s own theory of understanding. By arguing that the hermeneutic circle cannot be transcended, Heidegger is able to conceive of the historical finitude of understanding more completely than previous hermeneutics. The belief that historical distance could be bridged and that the past could be “held present” for a sufficiently reflective historian, as Dilthey hoped, is dashed. Because human beings are essentially historical, there is no getting out of the hermeneutic circle: rather, as Heidegger surprisingly explains, Dasein itself has the structure of a circle.⁹³ That the circle is not an intermediate stage but rather an essential condition of all understanding is a distinguishing feature of Heidegger’s hermeneutics compared to his predecessors, and decisively influences Gadamer.

Thirdly, Heidegger’s exploration of how hermeneutics discloses a world, including both the basic concepts for scientific theory as well as possibilities for action, challenges the division of practice and theory. For our consideration of the practical significance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, this point will become important. In Heidegger’s hermeneutics, understanding is closely related to action. Understanding reveals not theoretical facts, but a meaningful world of things ‘as’ such-and-such, including possibilities for action and meaningful projects.⁹⁴ The way one understands the world, then, would have a great impact on the kinds

⁹² In this regard, Heidegger resonates with Kierkegaard’s critique (through the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus) of the abstraction of the Hegelians in Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁹³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H153.

⁹⁴ Heidegger would later develop the theme of understanding as a source for action to some extent (although without using the terms ‘understanding’ or ‘hermeneutics’, which he set aside in his later work) in the “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). Heidegger writes, “We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough. We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead forth into this fullness – *producere*. Therefore only what already is can really be accomplished. But what ‘is’ above all is Being. Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being... Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest, because it concerns the relation of Being to man.” (147) Heidegger’s claim in this rich but complicated passage is perhaps that avenues for action must already be disclosed as possibilities of an actor before there can be any question of their accomplishment. This is why “only what already is can really be accomplished.” This means that, before action can take place, a realm of possibilities for action must reveal themselves. What discloses this realm is, for Heidegger, an enigmatic process in which being reveals itself to human thinking. As the activity through which possibilities for action reveal themselves, thinking acquires great importance. A full understanding of this passage requires a great deal of discussion, including reference to the text to which Heidegger is responding in his letter, Jean-Paul Sartre’s lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in which Sartre argues that “reality exists only in action,” so that existentialism

of actions in which one engages. Understanding, then, would take on a crucial ethical significance. There is far more to say about the relationship between action and understanding, and I will attempt to address this question to some extent in a later section.

An interesting question at this point is to ask what importance *phronesis* had for Heidegger in developing this hermeneutics. The importance of Aristotle for Heidegger's development has become increasingly recognised in recent times.⁹⁵ Of particular aid in understanding this relationship has been the publication of Heidegger's lecture courses given in the years prior to the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927.⁹⁶ These courses make it clear that, although there are few extended discussions of Aristotle's works in *Being and Time*, nevertheless many of the concepts introduced in that work were developed through an engagement with Aristotle. For example, *Umsicht*, circumspection, the "sight" which discloses meaningful possibilities for action in the world Dasein inhabits, is one of the words Heidegger uses to translate *phronesis*.⁹⁷ But a full discussion of the relationship between the hermeneutics of *Being and Time* and Aristotle's *phronesis* goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, I want to turn now to Gadamer's engagement with this concept.

"defines man by his actions." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 37-39.

⁹⁵ Some helpful works charting this relationship are: Franco Volpi, "Being and Time - a 'Translation' of the Nicomachean Ethics?," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start - Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John Van Buren (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994). Walter A Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Twofoldness of Being* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012). William McNeill, *The Glimpse of the Eye: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Ends of Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999); Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Robert Bernasconi, "Heidegger's Destruction of Phronesis," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. Supplement (1990).

⁹⁶ English translations of these courses are available as: Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*.

⁹⁷ *Plato's Sophist*, 15.

Chapter Three: *Phronesis* as a Model for Understanding

As in the work of his teacher, in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* the space devoted to explicit discussion of Aristotle does not correspond to the importance the latter has for the text. The concept of *phronesis* does not receive a great deal of explicit attention in *Truth and Method*. Rather, Gadamer presents *phronesis* as playing quite a specific role in his hermeneutics. This role pertains to what Gadamer calls "the problem of application [*Anwendung*]." The problem of application is crucial for resolving a problem in the way historicity shapes hermeneutic experience. In this chapter I explore how Gadamer employs *phronesis* to resolve this problem. I also point to the way his employment of *phronesis* here has greater implications for his hermeneutics as a whole. In later chapters, I will examine the extent to which *phronesis* also plays a less explicit, but no less important, role in *Truth and Method*.

Introducing the Problem of Application

In Part Two of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer analyses the experience of understanding, particularly in relation to history. The title of this part, "The Extension of the Question of Truth to Understanding in the Human Sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]," is somewhat misleading. This title might make it appear that Gadamer is exploring how the experience of truth occurs in the human sciences alone. In this regard, Gadamer's hermeneutics would be concerned with furnishing a methodological basis for the human sciences – Dilthey's project. However, what *Truth and Method* in fact achieves is an analysis of the experience of understanding in general. With Heidegger, Gadamer broadens hermeneutics from the reading of texts to an existential feature of human being-in-the-world. As Gadamer writes in his introduction, "the understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general."⁹⁸ A consequence of this will be a recognition that life in the present is essentially, rather than only contingently, shaped by historical understanding. At the same time, for Gadamer the human being's historical finitude means that understanding is always shaped by the concerns of the present. There is no transcending one's finite historical horizon, and thus this always shapes any understanding of the past. Gadamer calls the way in which one's present horizon shapes any understanding of the past 'application'.

Decisive for Gadamer's elaboration of historicity will be Heidegger's innovations regarding temporality and the hermeneutic circle. For Heidegger, temporality is a defining feature of

⁹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xx.

the human being. It is not a coincidental feature and cannot be overcome. Similarly, the circular structure of understanding is ineliminable. Ideal understanding does not escape the circle, but rather actualises it fully. For Heidegger, finitude does not refer only to an occasional fallibility or imperfection of understanding – rather, finitude is part of the essential structure of understanding.⁹⁹ Further articulating Heidegger, Gadamer's claim will be that the finitude of historical horizon cannot be escaped. Only by following Heidegger can hermeneutics "do justice to the historicity of understanding."¹⁰⁰ His critique of hermeneutics before Heidegger will be that, in various ways, those thinkers still aspired to an eventual transcendence of a finite historical horizon. In this regard, they continue to cling to a notion that truth should ultimately be timeless. But it is not only by drawing upon Heidegger that Gadamer will seek to surpass this. As we shall see, in his attempt to do justice to historicity Gadamer will find it necessary not only to follow Heidegger, but also to follow Aristotle.

Despite the importance of Heidegger for Gadamer, their respective articulations of the hermeneutic circle differ. For Gadamer, following Heidegger, understanding is always guided by a "fore-structure." For Heidegger, what was understood in this circular structure was Dasein's being – i.e., Dasein's existence in the world surrounded by meaningful things and envisioning future projects. Gadamer's circle is slightly different. It centres on the concept of "tradition [*Überlieferung*]." In the case of Gadamer, the fore-structure of understanding is constituted by the tradition to which, as a historically finite creature, the human being always belongs.

That which has been sanctioned by tradition [*Überlieferung*] and custom has an authority which is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us – and not just what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behaviour.¹⁰¹

Tradition has always shaped our understanding of the world around us, before any reasoning can take place. There can be no presuppositionless or 'tabula rasa' understanding. Famously, this leads Gadamer to a defence of the idea of "prejudice [*Vorurteil*]." Only ever on the basis of prejudices do we approach an object we are seeking to understand. Gadamer argues that

⁹⁹ Heidegger argues in his reading of Kant that "The finitude of reason, however, in no way consists only or primarily in the fact that human knowing demonstrates many sorts of deficiencies such as instability, imprecision, and errors. Rather, this finitude lies in the essential structure of knowledge itself." Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

the Enlightenment critique of prejudice is itself a prejudice, and one which obscures what is really taking place in understanding, including in the Enlightenment's supposedly unprejudiced inquiries.¹⁰²

Here Gadamer is plainly influenced by Heidegger's idea of the fore-structure. However, Gadamer is also interpreting this idea with a different emphasis. Whereas for Heidegger the fore-structure was an initial disclosive grasping of things in their being as related to Dasein's world, Gadamer hesitates to frame the point in the same ontological or existential sense. For Gadamer, prejudice refers to the way that tradition has always already affected one in any event of understanding. Ideas and ways of thinking received from tradition always condition any understanding. In this regard, Gadamer's fore-structure emphasises the past and how it affects understanding (while nevertheless noting tradition's openness to revision and renewal in the future), while Heidegger's fore-structure is largely a matter of projection of the future (while nevertheless noting that this is shaped by one's 'thrownness' into having a past).¹⁰³

Additionally, as Gadamer himself says, whereas Heidegger's discussion of the fore-structure takes place within the context of his ontological investigation, Gadamer's own discussion focuses on the question of how hermeneutics, "once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity [*Objektivitätsbegriff*] can do justice to the historicity of understanding."¹⁰⁴ Gadamer's question, then, is how to determine fully historical understanding. He also consciously positions his discussion of the fore-structure as a critique of the idea of unprejudiced objectivity in science or Enlightenment thinking.¹⁰⁵ He has in

¹⁰² Ibid., 288. Kant described Enlightenment in terms of a growing up out of self-incurred minority, i.e., thinking for oneself rather than a 'childish' reliance upon the authority of others. Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?." What Gadamer describes as a "prejudice against prejudice" can also be seen in Descartes' image of philosophical reason tearing down the house or city of one's received views and building it again from the ground up. Descartes, *A Discourse on Method, Etc.*, Parts Two and Three.

¹⁰³ Grondin suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutic circle can be distinguished from Heidegger's in that, unlike the latter's, Gadamer's is largely a matter of the interpretation of texts. Grondin writes, "Whereas Heidegger is primarily concerned with the anticipation of existence that is involved in every understanding and that his hermeneutics of existence is interrogating, Gadamer seems to concentrate more on the certainly more limited problem of text interpretation in the human sciences. One could say that Gadamer "philologizes" or rather "re-philologizes" what was for Heidegger primarily an existential circularity." Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert Dostal (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 48. There is some truth to this. Gadamer seems to lean closer to the paradigm of textual interpretation in his characterisation of understanding. At the same time, as I have argued, Gadamer's hermeneutics too is not only a matter of the philological interpretation of texts or the method of the human sciences, but also has a practical and existential import.

¹⁰⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

¹⁰⁵ The question of the relationship between Gadamer's and Heidegger's hermeneutic circles is a large one which I cannot completely treat here. The similarities between the two and the fact that Gadamer was Heidegger's student should not justify a neglect of these differences. For one discussion of the differences, see Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding."

mind here the humanities and how understanding can take place in them once liberated from the natural science paradigm – a problem which never really concerned Heidegger.

Gadamer precedes his analysis with a discussion of previous solutions to the problem of history in hermeneutics. Gadamer identifies limitations in the Romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and, later, Dilthey. Gadamer's central critique of his predecessors is that they do not take historicity seriously enough. Romantic hermeneutics in its reaction against the Enlightenment remains conditioned by the Enlightenment, insofar as it retains the Enlightenment standard of ahistorical objectivity. Thus, the Romantic hermeneutics, despite their desire to take history seriously, nevertheless ultimately conceive of knowledge as something which must transcend its historical finitude. This is evident in the belief of both Schleiermacher and Dilthey that successful understanding is ultimately a matter of collapsing the distance between interpreter and text, so that the historical text is made present.

In contrast, Gadamer argues for the ineliminability of historical distance. In the important section, "the Hermeneutic Significance of Temporal Distance," Gadamer argues that,

Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness ... It is in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.¹⁰⁶

Hermeneutics is situated in-between familiarity and strangeness. Its role is not to eliminate strangeness in favour of familiarity. Against the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Gadamer does not envisage the elimination of what is alien in a moment of complete understanding, even as an aspirational goal. Gadamer writes,

Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

The notion of a historical object as present and transparent for understanding is a phantom. No amount of hermeneutic methodological rigour can make the past available in this way, for the reason that understanding is itself historically placed. History is thus not only an object for understanding, but also shapes the subject of understanding, i.e., the interpreter herself. One consequence of this is that historical research is brought into close proximity with historical understanding. “The abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and the knowledge of it, must be discarded.”¹⁰⁸ Inquiring into the past and the ways that it has shaped us, interpreting historical texts in a way that is always shaped by the concerns of the present and one’s own historicity – these activities of the historian and social scientist are intensifications of what we as historical creatures are inevitably already doing. The historian is not looking down at history from above. Rather, she participates in it just like those she studies.

It is important to note that, although he sees historical finitude as ineliminable, Gadamer is not arguing for some kind of relativism or cultural determinism according to which it is impossible to escape the bounds of one’s own perspective. As Gadamer points out, “Horizons change for a person who is moving.”¹⁰⁹ Here we have an echo of the etymological root of the term ‘hermeneutics’ in the Greek god Hermes, who was tasked with carrying messages between the gods and mortals.¹¹⁰ This image evokes a notion of transcendence. In the encounter with a foreign text or speaker, understanding involves a transcending of one’s own perspective. As Gadamer says, “as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.”¹¹¹ But understanding is never complete: that which remains to be understood constantly transcends the grasp of the interpreter, just as the gods transcend the power of mortals. On the other hand, the transcendence which Gadamer envisions is a distinctively mortal form of transcendence – the fact that texts and words from other times and cultures constantly transcend the horizons of an individual’s understanding, and that the process of understanding these alien texts is constant. In this process of transcendence, the “working out” or questioning of one’s historically inherited prejudices is an endless task, and so the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 294.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 315.

¹¹⁰ Discussions of this etymological story are common in the hermeneutics literature. Gadamer himself discusses it in “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 44.

¹¹¹ *Truth and Method*, 317.

“fore-structure” undergoes a continual process of renewal – it is questioned and modified or affirmed in a continual dynamic process.¹¹²

Gadamer’s point is that holding fast to historical finitude does not imply historical determinism. Rather, the opposite is the case. As historical creatures, human beings are constantly moving into the future, developing and reworking their fore-structures. Heidegger too argued in favour of dynamism and motion in the function of history when he claimed that:

[Dasein] is its own past not only in such a way that its past, as it were, pushes itself along ‘behind’ it, and that it possesses what is past as a property that is still objectively present [*vorhanden*] and at times has an effect on it. Dasein ‘is’ its past in the manner of *its* being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion ‘occurs [*geschieht*]’ out of its future.¹¹³

Heidegger’s point here is radical. It points to a rethinking of the nature of historicity. Dasein, Heidegger says, is its past – it is determined by its historical origins. However, it is not determined in the sense of objective causal determination. The past is not an object which determines the present in a mechanical causal chain. Rather, the past is renewed in each present, in light of the future. As Gadamer says, “in every new present, history must be written anew.”¹¹⁴ The past is dynamically revived in each moment. The conservative who wants to maintain the past in an objective sameness is just as guilty of misunderstanding historicity as the revolutionary who dreams of completely escaping the past.¹¹⁵

That tradition is a continuous, dynamic revivification of the past is what Gadamer is seeking to explain with his notion of *Anwendung*. Introducing the problem of application, Gadamer cites the traditional division of hermeneutics into three parts: interpretation, understanding,

¹¹² The difficulty here is how we may, as Gadamer suggests we must, distinguish between “legitimate” and illegitimate prejudices. Ibid., 289. Gadamer provides no rubric for how this distinction could be made, probably because, due to the ubiquity of prejudice, he does not think that there can be a transcendent standard for this distinction. He was famously criticised on this score by Habermas for being too quick to reject the Enlightenment ideal of opposition to prejudice. Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990). Gadamer’s reply might be that any standpoint which claims to free itself from prejudice is in fact prejudiced in the most pernicious way of all.

¹¹³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H20.

¹¹⁴ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 160.

¹¹⁵ Gadamer speaks against the conservative and the revolutionary alike in his essay “Das Alte und Das Neue.” Gadamer writes. “Alles ist im Wahrheit veraltet, das nicht in jedem Augenblick neue ist und aufs neue seinen Bestand beweist. Restauration und Revolution haben beide Unrecht.” [Everything is in truth outdated that is not new in every moment and does not continually re-establish its continuity. Both restoration and revolution are in the wrong. – my trans.] *Gesammelte Werke Band 4* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987), 158.

and application. In Schleiermacher and other Romantic hermeneutics, interpretation and understanding came to be situated close by one another. However, the third element, application, received little attention.¹¹⁶ Gadamer turns to revive the notion of application. With this notion, Gadamer suggests, the sense in which one's "fore-structure" is dynamically renewed and reproduced in light of the present can be grasped.

However, Gadamer's revival of application is not a simple return to the tripartite division. As we have seen, Gadamer takes up the first two categories, interpretation and understanding, not in order to maintain the division but rather to dissolve it. Following Schleiermacher, and later, Heidegger,¹¹⁷ Gadamer argues that "interpretation is not an occasional, *post facto* supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding."¹¹⁸ Similarly, when Gadamer takes up the concept of application it will not be to maintain its autonomy with regard to interpretation and understanding – quite the opposite. Rather, Gadamer will claim that understanding, insofar as it is understanding, already is application. Application is a part of the process of understanding, not a separate process occurring afterwards. To the extent that the concept of application implies the setting-into-action of something already understood, as when we speak of the application in practice of what has been understood in theory, this means that perhaps application is not the right word at all.

The importance of something like application is decisive for Gadamer's conception of meaning. In his understanding of meaning, Gadamer argues that the meaning of a text does not reside only in the author's intention or in the original circumstances of its production (as Schleiermacher thought). Rather, the meaning of a text emerges in an event in which the reader's present concerns also play a role. Gadamer writes,

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ "Only what Ernesti calls *subtilitas intelligendi* properly belongs to hermeneutics," Schleiermacher writes [my trans.]. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959), H31.

¹¹⁷ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §32.

¹¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

The meaning of a text is not entirely dependent on the original author. Hermeneutics' role is not to recreate the original conditions of the text's production or the meaning that was originally intended for the author. For one thing, this is impossible, insofar as the interpreter is always shaped by her own historicity and thus her distance from the original production. Rather, the meaning of a text is codetermined by the interpreter. Meaning is generated only insofar as an interpreter, with her prejudices, encounters and understands the text. Gadamer calls this encounter a "*Horizontverschmelzung* [fusion of horizons]."¹²⁰ As a melting-together of horizons, one's own horizon obviously plays an active part in this process. The activity of the *Horizontverschmelzung* simply is the notion of application.

It is important to note that, where Gadamer speaks of history and historical distance, I speak of both historical and cultural distance. *Truth and Method* speaks of the human being as essentially "belonging to a tradition," and of understanding as an "event of tradition."¹²¹ Additionally, Gadamer suggests that "the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way,"¹²² and that it is the "commonality that binds us to the tradition" that furnishes us with the fore-structure which enables us to enter the hermeneutic circle with regard to a text.¹²³ If we think of tradition here as a canon of texts from a particular culture, then Gadamer's claims may give rise to the impression that his hermeneutics is monocultural, essentially concerned with the question of

¹²⁰ Ibid., 317. This concept has created controversy, with some interpreters, such as John Caputo and Robert Bernasconi, arguing that this concept involves a problematic ultimate triumph of unity over difference. For example, Caputo writes, "*Verschmelzung* (fusion) is the Gadamerian version of *Vermittlung* (mediation) and assumes its rightful place alongside *Aufhebung*, *anamnesis*, and *Erinnerung* in a last-ditch effort to hold off the foundering of metaphysics." John D Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 113. For Bernasconi, although Gadamer seeks to pay heed to alterity, ultimately his hermeneutic theory, with concepts such as the *Horizontverschmelzung*, places too much emphasis on "agreement [*Einverständnis*]" which ultimately amounts to "assimilation" of the other. Robert Bernasconi, "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995). Theodore George provides a contrasting reading of the concept of *Horizontverschmelzung*. George writes "From the viewpoint of our factual lives as a whole, Gadamer's notion of 'fusion' points above all to a dynamic that entails not only fusion, but also infusion, diffusion, confusion, and fusion again... In German the word derives from the verb *verschmelzen*, which means to merge, to amalgamate. But, as especially the root *schmelzen* makes apparent, the word connotes that such fusion takes shape as a process of melting together. Accordingly, we may venture Gadamer's notion stresses that the fusion of horizons concerns the continual challenge of dissolution, the continual heating, softening and liquefying that allows for our prejudices to become permeable and combine in novel ways." Theodore George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 62. George's reading emphasises the dynamism of the notion of *Horizontverschmelzung*, expressed through the imagery of liquefying and remoulding metal. George reminds us that the *Horizontverschmelzung* is a constant process, never reaching a conclusion or resolution.

¹²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

¹²² Ibid., 322.

¹²³ Ibid., 305.

how one can understand texts from one's own culture. And while it is perhaps true that Gadamer has in mind the question of how a 20th-century German can understand an Ancient Greek text, I think the same problem arises in dialogue between different cultures and continents. As Gadamer says, following Hegel, "the life of the mind [*Das Leben des Geistes*] consists precisely in recognising oneself in other being [*Anderssein*]." ¹²⁴ While those from different cultures may be rooted in quite different horizons, still there is no reason to believe that interaction of these horizons is impossible. Although a contemporary European may have been "historically-effected" by Greek thought and not so by Indigenous Australian thought, nevertheless the alienness of these cultural horizons undergirds a possibility of their moving towards one another in fusion (a fusion which, as we have seen, is never complete).

The importance of application in understanding and creating meaning helps us to understand Gadamer's claim that understanding is productive. This is one of the more difficult claims of the relevant passage of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer says, "understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity." ¹²⁵ In what sense does understanding 'produce?' The contrast here is with reproducing. This is a reference to Schleiermacher, who argued that understanding was a matter of reproducing the psychology of the original creative act – the mind of the author. Because understanding is always the application of something to one's own situation, Gadamer cannot hold with this reproductive theory. ¹²⁶ Rather, understanding requires the contribution of the interpreter too, for meaning to be created. The historical object, the text, or the words to be understood, are meaningful in an event of understanding in which the prejudices of the interpreter play an active role. Thus, in a sense the interpreter contributes to producing the understanding. This is not a creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, the interpreter is constrained by the requirement of faithfulness to the text. Application is always an application of something. This is the sense in which understanding is productive. Because tradition is always understood in terms of the interpreter's finite horizon, it is always produced anew. ¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Ibid., 355.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 307.

¹²⁶ Gadamer makes the point that his notion of application is partly intended as a rejection of the *mens auctoris* view of hermeneutics in "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics," 58-62.

¹²⁷ One could compare Gadamer's sense of 'creativity' here with the Platonic notion of recollection. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato distinguishes between 'memory [*mneme*]' and mere 'reminding [*upomnesis*].' Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin, 2005), 275a. Memory is not only a reminding, a reproducing of the past. Rather, memory involves a vital relationship to the past, unlike mere reminding, which, when inscribed in writing, is only the phantom [*eidolon*] of the living, breathing *logos* which it inscribes (276a). For further discussion, see Dennis J Schmidt, "The Garden of Letters: Reading Plato's Phaedrus on Reading," *International*

As an example, Gadamer criticises the idea that the performance of an artwork could be a matter of reproducing as closely as possible the situation of the original composer.

In a certain sense interpretation probably is re-creation, but this is a re-creation not of the creative act but of the created work, which has to be brought to representation in accord with the meaning the interpreter finds in it. Thus, for example, historicising presentations – e.g., of music played on old instruments – are not as faithful as they seem. Rather, they are an imitation of an imitation and are thus in danger ‘of standing at a third remove from the truth.’¹²⁸

Performers who feel that they can approach closest to the ‘authentic meaning’ of the artwork by approximating as closely as possible the conditions of its original performance (e.g. playing on period instruments) evince an ahistorical naivety.¹²⁹ Their imitation is a mere copy, lacking the positive valence Gadamer assigns to the picture.¹³⁰

An important precursor of Gadamer’s argument here is Friedrich Nietzsche. Gadamer can be fruitfully compared with Nietzsche on this point, illuminating how Gadamer’s concept of history includes within it a relation to the present which is active, vital and creative. In his second *Untimely Meditation*, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche mounts a polemic against historical research which does not seek to relate itself to the present time. In this view, historical knowledge is a theoretical knowledge with no bearing on present life. For Nietzsche, an excessive emphasis on the past in this way is stifling of life and action in the present. Nietzsche argues that “there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.”¹³¹ History as an antiquarian curiosity is harmful to life and paralyses action. We can think of Jorge Luis Borges’ character Ireneo Funes to

Yearbook for Hermeneutics 12 (2013). Risser, "Hermeneutic Experience and Memory: Rethinking Knowledge as Recollection."

¹²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123. Gadamer’s reference here is to the famous discussion of *mimesis* in Book Ten of Plato’s *Republic*. Plato, *The Republic*.

¹²⁹ For example, the “early music movement” in classical music emphasises the importance of ‘authentically’ approximating the original conditions of performance. For a discussion of the relationship between this movement and Gadamer, see Mark J. Thomas, "Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Early Music Performance," *Research in Phenomenology* 48, no. 3 (2018).

¹³⁰ In on pp. 138-141 of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer distinguishes between the “image [*Bild*]” and the mere “copy [*Abbild*].” Whereas a copy has no other task but to point towards the original, such that “it fulfills itself in self-effacement [*Selbstaufhebung*],” in contrast, the image is a “presentation [*Darstellung*]” which has a positive ontological valence, such that it amounts to “an increase in being [*Zuwachs an Sein*].”

¹³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. RJ Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 62.

illustrate this idea.¹³² Funes lacks the ability to forget. His incredible power of memory, far from enhancing his life, makes his experience of the world sharp to the point of being intolerable. “My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap,” he says.¹³³

Nietzsche’s concern is that history should serve in the interests of life. For this reason, we must avoid the Funes-like paralysis that antiquarian curiosity brings. As he says, “knowledge not attended by action, history as a costly superfluity and luxury, must... be seriously hated by us... We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life.”¹³⁴ Nietzsche’s argument is a critique of historicism, suggesting that its obsession with the past is a mere antiquarian curiosity which, without taking into consideration the concerns of the present, does not enable action or take up a living relationship with the past. Nietzsche urges us to avoid the Funes-like paralysis that is brought on by, in Nietzsche’s terms, ‘an excess of history.’ Thus Nietzsche argues in favour of a certain degree of “unhistorical” forgetting. He writes,

Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic... the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.¹³⁵

For Nietzsche, a balance of the historical and the unhistorical is necessary to support active life and flourishing culture. Nietzsche does not want to completely do away with historical reflection – there is “use” to history too. However, he criticises any relationship to history, such as a purely scientific abstraction,¹³⁶ which does not bring the past to bear on the concerns of the present. He approvingly cites Goethe’s words, “I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.”¹³⁷

Gadamer’s approach resonates with Nietzsche’s, but articulates a broader concept of historicity. For Nietzsche, history is connected to antiquarian fossilisation which is stifling of

¹³² Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious," in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1964).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 59.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³⁶ Nietzsche’s comments on his history essay in *Ecce Homo* make it clear that it is the science [*Wissenschaft*] of historical research which represents the antiquarian and abstract approach to history which Nietzsche criticises. "Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 732.

¹³⁷ *Untimely Meditations*, 59.

action, and thus needs to be supplemented with “unhistorical” forgetting. In contrast, for Gadamer history itself is dynamic and active. Properly historical being includes an orientation to the future and a continual dynamic reappropriation of the past. Like Nietzsche, Gadamer emphasises that we must take up a “living relationship” with the past.¹³⁸ He is similarly critical of historical research which does not relate itself to the present and the lived situation of the researcher. But Gadamer’s explanation of this point is somewhat different. Whereas Nietzsche describes such research as an excess of history, for Gadamer this research misunderstands its own historicity. On Gadamer’s view, because historical understanding always involves application, history is never completely removed from the action and creativity of life which Nietzsche so ardently defends. We do not need to supplement history with the ‘unhistorical’, but rather properly understand historicity in its active and creative temporal nature. “Historicity” does not refer only to “the past” – rather, it refers to the human being’s nature as a being standing between past, present and future. The key to Gadamer achieving this broader concept of historicity is the notion of application, which allows us to understand how the past is understood anew in light of the concerns of the present. But now we ask the question, how does this application occur?

Phronesis as Solution to the Problem of Application

If ‘application’ in Gadamer’s sense were a matter of applying something already understood, it might follow the model of *techne* as described in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.¹³⁹ In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle describes a kind of application which proceeds from a prior understanding of the universal. *Techne* is a knowledge which governs making or production (*poiesis*). In Aristotle’s view, *poiesis* involves a form (*eidos*) being held in the soul (*psuche*). *Techne* proceeds from this form, pondering how it can be realised in matter (*ule*). The *eidos* of health, for example, is held in the physician’s mind, until the actions needed to realise this form in the material world, such as certain treatments, become clear.¹⁴⁰ The *eidos* is the starting point of *techne*.

[I]n a way health is produced from health and a building from a building, the building, namely, that has matter [*ulen*] from that which does not. For medicine and architecture are respectively the forms [*eidos*] of health and a building, and I say that

¹³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 167.

¹³⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 2004), 1032a25-b10.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1032b8-10.

this substance without matter is the what-it-was-to-be-that-thing [*ousian aneu ules to ti en einai*].¹⁴¹

The event of making involves the application of this general *eidōs* to the particulars of the situation –for example, the particular opportunities or challenges which might be thrown up by the material with which the craftsman is to work. In the application of *techne*, the *eidōs* pre-exists the particular, so that crafting involves realising this general notion in the particular material at hand. *Techne* begins at the point where the *eidōs* is already given.

If application followed the model of *poiesis*, in which an *eidōs* is applied to matter, then it would involve applying the pre-given understanding of a text to a situation. Perhaps this is how we usually understand the idea of application. However, as we have seen, for Gadamer application does not take place after understanding. Rather, application and understanding are simultaneous, so that something is understood only in light of the present context. This means that “application” in Gadamer’s terms is not the insertion of a pre-given universal into a particular circumstance.

This point can also be illustrated with reference to Kant’s theory of judgement. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant distinguishes between “reflective” and “determinative” judgement. As we shall see, Gadamer’s conception of understanding eludes this distinction in a way that is illustrative for the idea of application. Explaining the distinction, Kant writes:

Judgement in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given then judgement, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative* (even though [in its role] as transcendental judgement it states *a priori* the conditions that must be met for subsumption under that universal to be possible). But if only the particular is given and judgement has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*.¹⁴²

Kant defines the faculty of judgement as the capacity for thinking the particular in terms of the universal. In determining judgement, the particular is subsumed under the universal. Determining judgement requires that the universal is given. It then works to bring the particular case under that universal. As Kant says, determining judgement has its law marked out for ahead of time. Its task is to apply the law with which it already furnished. Reflective

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 1032b10-14, trans. modified.

¹⁴² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 18-19, Ak. 179.

judgement is the form of judgement which Kant sees as involving greater problems. In reflective judgement, the universal is not pre-given. The task of reflective judgement, then, is to “ascend from the particular in nature to the universal.” Reflective judgement, then, has a productive task. It must produce, from the particulars which lie before it, a universal.

Gadamer’s concept of application follows neither reflective nor determinative judgement, but rather involves a different relation of universal and particular. In fact, Gadamer’s employment of the vocabulary of universal and particular in his discussion of application is somewhat strained. As we have seen, application in Gadamer’s sense is not the subsumption of a particular under a universal. There is no given universal prior to the moment of understanding, as one applies a model in a technical procedure. On the other hand, application is not quite the same as reflective judgement either. In Kant’s reflective judgement, the universal does not exist until judgement constitutes it. Reflective judgement takes its bearings from a manifold of particulars.¹⁴³ In contrast, for Gadamer application is guided by tradition, which is, with some linguistic strain, the ‘universal’ in this case. It is present as having always already exerted an influence on the one who understands, furnishing her with a fore-structure with which she approaches what is to be understood. The movement is neither solely from particular to universal, nor from universal to particular. Rather, in the simultaneity of understanding and application, meaning is constituted in the particular circumstance of the interpreter.¹⁴⁴

A second problem in comparing Gadamer’s understanding with Kant’s reflective judgement is that judgement for Kant is ultimately rooted in subjective grounds – reflective judgement is a capacity of the thinking subject.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, Gadamer’s understanding is an “event” which transcends the subjectivity of the individual.¹⁴⁶ The effort to go beyond the perspective of subjectivity is an important feature of Gadamer’s work.

¹⁴³ That said, Kant does seem to admit that judgement precedes from prior experience when he acknowledges that examples and exercise can sharpen one’s faculty of judgement. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Vasilis Politis and Alexander Meiklejohn (London: Everyman, 1993). A134/B173

¹⁴⁴ Perhaps for this reason, Gadamer argues that the distinction between determinative and reflective judgement is “not absolute” at Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §8. That said, a number of commentators have argued that Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* looks ahead to the critiques of the autonomy of the subject that would characterise the Post-Kantian tradition of continental philosophy. For an argument that Kant, with his third critique, is already moving in a “Post-Kantian” direction, see Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), chapter six. For an argument that Kant, particularly in his discussion of aesthetic judgement, opens to an account of human being beyond the traditional subject, see Dennis J Schmidt, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), especially chapter one.

¹⁴⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 320. Gadamer criticises Kant for his rootedness in the perspective of the subject with regard to the understanding of art in Part One of *Truth and Method*.

It was already a theme in earlier hermeneutics that understanding was not the mere application of rules. Schleiermacher, possibly with Kant's theory of judgement in mind, is keen to emphasise that hermeneutics is not merely the mechanical application of rules, but is rather an "art."¹⁴⁷ However, Gadamer's turn to *phronesis* as an alternative to the rule-based model of application goes beyond Schleiermacher. What Gadamer draws out as of special importance in *phronesis* is the relationship at stake in it of the universal and the particular. This aspect of *phronesis* is important because, in Gadamer's terms, the problem of application is a problem of the relationship of the universal to the particular.

If the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way, the problem, logically speaking, concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation.¹⁴⁸

Gadamer explains understanding as applying the 'universal' of tradition to the particular situation of the interpreter. As already noted, the vocabulary of universal and particular is somewhat unusual here. Certainly tradition is not a universal in the sense of a Platonic *eidos*, nor is Gadamer suggesting that tradition is a repository of truths that are 'universal' in the sense of timeless or eternal. What Gadamer will really find promising about *phronesis* is in fact that it subverts the relationship between universal and particular as usually understood.

Gadamer explains the unique position of *phronesis* between universal and particular with reference to Aristotle's critique of Plato. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle refers to "friends of ours" who hold with the theory of the "universal good [*katholou beltion*]" – that the good is "something common and in accord with a single form [*koinon ti kata mian idean*]."¹⁴⁹ Aristotle makes the point that "the word 'good' is used in as many senses as the word 'is'" – for example, in terms of quality, quantity, time, or place.¹⁵⁰ A consequence is that there is no one "science [*episteme*]" of the good, whereas, according to Aristotle, if something is captured under one *idea* it ought to be grasped by a single

¹⁴⁷ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, 11. Gadamer explores how this notion of 'art' derives from a heritage in classical practical philosophy in Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 229.

¹⁴⁸ *Truth and Method*, 322.

¹⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. one, §6.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1096a24-27. Here Aristotle echoes his claim in the *Metaphysics* that "being can be said in many ways" *Metaphysics*, 1003a34. This is a point Aristotle develops further with his theory of the *kategoriai*. Loeb *Classical Library: Categories; on Interpretation; Prior Analytics*, trans. H. P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938).

episteme.¹⁵¹ Aristotle further questions how the idea of the good, if it were thinkable, would be relevant to practice.

[E]ven if the goodness predicated of various things in common really is a unity or something existing separately and absolute, it clearly will not be practicable or attainable by man; but the good which we are now seeking is a good within human reach.¹⁵²

Here we see the practical bent of Aristotle's ethics. The point, as Aristotle says, is not to attain a merely theoretical knowledge of the good which could never relate itself to *praxis*.¹⁵³ But as he says, how does knowledge of the "idea of the good" make the carpenter better at carpentry or the physician better at medicine? The notion that the good is to be understood in terms of an all-encompassing universal, then, faces both theoretical and practical challenges. In matters of ethical life, there plainly is no *eidōs* akin to the *eidōs* which Aristotle places at the heart of *techne* in the *Metaphysics*.¹⁵⁴

All of this appears to be a critique of Plato's notion of the "idea of the good [*idea tou agathou*]." A "theory of forms" or "theory of ideas" is generally attributed to Plato. The notion of the *idea tou agathou* appears in many places in Plato's works, perhaps most famously in Books Six and Seven of the *Republic* where it is held up as the cause of knowledge, truth and being of all things.¹⁵⁵ The Platonic idea theory went on to exert tremendous influence on Western philosophical tradition. On Gadamer's reading, Aristotle's ethics is fundamentally shaped by its polemical stance against this purportedly Platonic view.¹⁵⁶ It is because of a resistance to the implementation of universal concepts in the realm

¹⁵¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a29-32.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 1096b32-35.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1103b25-30.

¹⁵⁴ It was already a theme of Platonic ethics that there is no *techne* of the good, for example in the *Apology*, where Socrates argues that, while the craftsmen have a kind of knowledge, they do not possess the wisdom he seeks (22d-e), or in *Protagoras*, where Socrates notes that virtue, unlike *techne*, has neither experts nor teachers (319b-320b). Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*; *Protagoras and Meno*.

¹⁵⁵ *The Republic*, e.g. 508a-09b. That said, for interpretations which challenge what is usually meant by the claim that Plato holds a "theory of forms," see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); *Being and Logos*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Drew A Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

¹⁵⁶ Gadamer reads Aristotle in this way in many of his writings, including Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*; "Praktisches Wissen," in *Gesammelte Werke Band 5*, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Tuebingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985). Gadamer also makes the claim that Aristotle's polemic caricatures Plato's real position, which is more nuanced than the metaphysical "doctrine of the ideas" according to which it is often characterised. In this regard, Gadamer says:

of ethics that Aristotle turns instead to *phronesis*. In *phronesis*, then, Gadamer hopes to find an alternative to the traditional metaphysical understanding of the relationship between universal and particular as most influentially articulated in Platonism's idea theory.

Gadamer argues that *phronesis* involves a different relationship of universal and particular. In this way, it can be "a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics."¹⁵⁷ Gadamer contrasts *phronesis* and *techne* with regard to the differing ways in which they conceive the universal-particular relationship.

[W]e can only apply something that we already have; but we do not possess moral knowledge in such a way that we already have it and then apply it to specific situations. The image that man has of what he ought to be – i.e., his ideas of right and wrong, of decency, courage, dignity, loyalty, and so forth – are certainly in some sense images that he uses to guide his conduct. But there is still a basic difference between this and the guiding image the craftsman uses: the plan of the object he is going to make. What is right, for example, cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action from me, whereas the *eidōs* of what a craftsman wants to make is fully determined by the use for which it is intended.¹⁵⁸

Here Gadamer explains the complicated relationship of the universal and the particular at stake in *phronesis*. Moral knowledge is not achievable outside of the context of a particular situation. While one may know in a general sense what kindness is and be able to recall examples of kindness, still what kindness means in a particular situation is not knowable in advance. Rather it appears to the *phronimos* in the moment in the form of what Aristotle calls *to prakton*, that which is to be done.

Phronesis is not a matter of simply applying something which we already have, Gadamer has said. So he admits that using the concept of application in this context is problematic¹⁵⁹ – prompting Schmidt to ask why he uses the term at all.¹⁶⁰ The answer is that, in a certain sense, *phronesis* is an application of something we already possess. The distinction noted

"It might well be that Aristotle's critique, like so many critiques, is right in what it says, but not against whom it says it." *Truth and Method*, 560.

¹⁵⁷ *Truth and Method*, 333.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 327-8.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁶⁰ Dennis J Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," *Research in Phenomenology* 42, no. 1 (2012). Schmidt writes, "Gadamer calls the problem of application [*Anwendung*] 'the overarching and central problem of hermeneutics.' One might put the point more directly: the basic task of hermeneutics is to overcome the notion that understanding needs to be applied." 41.

earlier between Gadamer's sense of application and Kant's reflective judgement is important. *Phronesis* does not proceed only from the particular. Although it is not merely the application of a universal, as in Kant's determinative judgement or a certain reading of the theory of the *idea tou agathou*, neither does it conform precisely to what Kant calls reflective judgement. Whereas in reflective judgement the universal is not yet constituted, in *phronesis* it is, but only in a foggy or indeterminate way. The *phronimos*, with their good character and generalised knowledge that, for example, kindness is a virtue, possesses the universal in an indeterminate way. Their task is to determine what this universal means in the particular circumstances. *Phronesis* has its starting-point in *ethos*, which involves general conceptions of what virtue and goodness constitute. It is, in a certain sense, the application of this general conception. Aristotle emphasises that it is impossible to be *phronimon* without *ethike arete*.¹⁶¹

Phronesis takes *ethos* as its starting-point. Without the guidance of good character, the reasoning of *phronesis* will lack its orientation. This good upbringing educates in the generalities of what constitutes virtue, and cultivates a disposition of desires and emotions that furnishes one with the starting-points of the moral reasoning which will characterise *phronesis*.¹⁶² Aristotle writes, "virtue makes the target correct, and *phronesis* what furthers it."¹⁶³ Virtuous *ethos* provides the universal conception of what is good, which *phronesis* has as its task to concretise. In particular, Aristotle emphasises that *ethike arete* supports a conception of the right ends to aim for. However, as I discussed earlier, this does not indicate that *phronesis* is a purely instrumental reasoning. If that were so, then the distinction Aristotle makes between it and *deinotes* would collapse.¹⁶⁴ *Phronesis* is not only a matter of means.

¹⁶¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b32. C.f. 1144a35, "it is impossible to be practically-wise without being good [*agathon*]."

¹⁶² The importance of possessing the right emotional disposition is why Aristotle says, in what is a play on words in the original Greek, that temperance [*sophrosune*] "saves [*sozousan*]" *phronesis*. Ibid., 1140b12. A similar etymological play appears in Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 411e-12a.

¹⁶³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a7.

¹⁶⁴ Gadamer discusses this problem, arguing that Aristotle's exposition of the relationship of means and ends in *phronesis* is uncertain because of Aristotle's desire to contrast himself with Plato's *idea tou agathou* theory. "Aristotle's definitions of *phronesis* have a marked uncertainty about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 331. In a footnote, he expands. "Aristotle says in general that *phronesis* is concerned with the means [*ta pros to telos*] and not with the *telos* itself. It is probably the contrast with the Platonic doctrine of the idea of the good that makes him emphasise that. However, *phronesis* is not simply the capacity to make the right choice of means, but is itself a moral *hexis* that also sees the *telos* toward which the person acting is aiming with his moral being. This emerges clearly from its place within the system of Aristotle's ethics." Ibid., 393fn75. In this regard, Gadamer strikes a middle-ground between the conception of *phronesis* as purely instrumental, and Heidegger's reading, which sees *phronesis* as solely oriented toward the ends of action, the *ou eneka*, which is Dasein's being. Heidegger writes, "the *telos* of *phronesis* is not a *pros ti* and not a *eneka tinos*; it is the *anthropos* himself... Dasein is disclosed as the *ou eneka*." Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, 35.

Aristotle's claim that ethical reasoning must start with *ethos* is also evident in his methodological introduction. Aristotle explains that the audience for which his writings are intended are only those who are well-brought-up. Without this basis in *ethos*, the intellectual aspects of his ethical theory will be of no use.

That is why we must be nobly brought up if, where noble things, just things, and the topics of politics as a whole are concerned, we are to be an adequate audience. For the starting-point is the fact that something is so [*arche gar to hoti*], and, if this is sufficiently evident, we do not also need the explanation of why it is so. A nobly brought up person, then, either has the starting-points or can easily get hold of them.¹⁶⁵

Not only for the reasoning of *phronesis*, but also for the reasoning which forms Aristotle's ethics, there is no axiomatic self-sufficient starting-point. Rather, both proceed from "the fact that something is so" – that courage is a virtue, for example. The role of philosophical ethics is not to prove this to someone who does not believe it. Reasoning in ethical life cannot stand alone, furnishing ethical truths from out of pure autonomous reason, as one might associate with Kant's ethics. Rather, it requires the support of good *ethos*. As Gadamer says, "*Ethos* for [Aristotle] is the *arche*, the "that [*Daß*]" from which all practical-political enlightenment has to set out."¹⁶⁶

Gadamer discusses the relationship between *phronesis* and *ethos* in his essay "On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics," (1963). Gadamer writes,

[Aristotle's] analysis of *phronesis* recognises that moral knowledge is a way of moral being itself, which therefore cannot be prescinded from the whole concretion [*der ganzen Konkretion*] of what he calls *ethos*. Moral knowledge discerns [*erkennt*] what needs to be done, what a situation requires: and it discerns what is doable on the basis of a conviction that the concrete situation is related to what is considered right and proper in general. It has, therefore, the structure of a conclusion in which one premise

¹⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b4-9.

¹⁶⁶ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," 262., referring to Aristotle's claim that ethical reasoning has its *arche* in the assumption "that something is so [*to hoti*]." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b7. Much could be said about Gadamer's use of the term "enlightenment" here, alluding to his effort to balance the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment with a critique of its rationalist excesses. But that is the topic of another thesis.

is the general knowledge [*allgemeine Wissen*] of what is right, as that is adumbrated in conceptualised ethical values.¹⁶⁷

Phronesis, Gadamer explains, has its origin in *ethos*. It has the structure of a conclusion in which one premise is the general knowledge of what is right – for example, that courage is a virtue, that virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency, and so on. That justice is a virtue is an *allgemeine Wissen* – Aristotle offers no defence of the claim that justice is a virtue. Any educated student of his would accept this immediately. If one required a justification for this claim, that person is probably beyond the reach of any ethical teaching anyway. Because the *phronimos* possesses *ethike arete*, she can start from a firm grasp on these ethical generalities. Her task, then, is to concretise these values in the form of *das Tunliche*, that which is to be done. Gadamer continues,

That which we consider right, which we affirm or reject, follows from our general ideas about what is good and right. It achieves its real determinacy [*Bestimmtheit*], nevertheless, only from the concrete reality of the case [*der konkreten Wirklichkeit des Falles*]. This is not a case of applying a universal rule. Just the opposite: it is the real thing we are concerned with, and the generic forms of the virtues and the structure of the ‘mean’ that Aristotle points out in them offer only a vague schema.¹⁶⁸

As a concretisation of *ethos*, the knowledge of *phronesis* involves, in a certain sense, an ‘application’ of *ethos*. But this application is not like the application of a universal rule. Rather, the universalities of virtue achieve “determinacy [*Bestimmtheit*]” only in the application itself. It is only in a situation requiring kind action that the meaning of kindness comes to have concreteness. The term *Wirklichkeit* used here nicely captures the “effective” or “productive” power of the particular situation in bringing *ethos* to concretisation. Gadamer describes *phronesis* as “the virtue enabling one to hit upon the mean and achieve the concretisation.”¹⁶⁹ *Phronesis* is the virtue of concretising the *ethos* correctly.

The *phronesis-ethos* pair are intimately bound together. Their relationship is not a matter of a balance or mediation, but rather they coproduce one another. Gadamer makes a comment that is problematic here. He writes:

¹⁶⁷ Gadamer, "On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics," 284.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 285.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

The crux of Aristotle's philosophical ethics, then, lies in the mediation [*Vermittlung*] between *logos* and *ethos*, between the subjectivity of knowing and the substance of being.¹⁷⁰

What Gadamer is trying to express here is that, unlike Kant, Aristotle emphasises that *logos* is not autonomous. If Kant is guilty of overestimating the power of reason in moral life to provide universal prescriptions, this cannot be said of Aristotle. But Gadamer's way of expressing this is problematic. The terms "mediation," "subjectivity" and "substance" recall Hegel.¹⁷¹ But the relationship of *logos* and *ethos* ought not to be thought in terms of a Hegelian mediation. Perhaps it is correct to say that the *phronimos*' stance towards *ethos* is dialectical, but not in the Hegelian sense of dialectic. Hegel's dialectic is oriented towards the ultimate triumph of the universal in Absolute knowledge, which is not relevant to the situation of the *phronimos* in Aristotle's ethics nor the interpreter of historical tradition in Gadamer's hermeneutics. While Gadamer learns a great deal from Hegel, such as the productivity of the negative element in experience,¹⁷² it is incorrect to associate Gadamer with Hegelian dialectic.

Gadamer emphasises a number of features of *phronesis* in his discussion. Gadamer speaks at length of the distinction between *phronesis* and *techne*. In addition to the differing relationship of ends, and the relationship of universal and particular, both of which I have already discussed, Gadamer also dwells on the relationship of *phronesis* to the self. He writes,

It is obvious that man is not at his own disposal in the same way that the craftsman's material is at his disposal [a reference to *techne*]. Clearly he cannot make himself in the same way that he can make something else. Thus it will have to be another kind of knowledge that he has of himself in his own moral being, a knowledge that is distinct from the knowledge that guides the making of something. Aristotle captures this

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ The term *Vermittlung* is crucial for Hegel's dialectic, while he explores ethical life as a dialectic between the subjectivity of *Recht* and the substance of *Sittlichkeit* in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. Alan White (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015). Dostal's comment that it is curious that Gadamer does not discuss Hegel in this essay is intensified when we consider implicit references to Hegel such as this. Robert Dostal, "Gadamer, Kant, and the Enlightenment," *Research in Phenomenology* 46, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁷² See the section of *Truth and Method* entitled "The Concept of Experience and the Essence of Hermeneutic Experience."

difference in a bold and unique way when he calls this kind of knowledge self-knowledge – i.e., knowledge for oneself [*Für-sich-Wissen*].¹⁷³

Gadamer is referring to Aristotle's comment that *phronesis* is a wisdom concerning one's own good [*peri auton*].¹⁷⁴ For Gadamer, this means that *phronesis*, as a moral knowledge, is a self-knowledge.¹⁷⁵ It is knowledge with a specific relation to the knower, which differs from technical or scientific knowledge. These, as Gadamer says, are “für-jedermann [for anyone/everyone].”¹⁷⁶ The knowledge at stake in natural science is supposed to be valid regardless of the individual circumstance of the knower. Gadamer holds that tradition too, to be properly understood, must refer to oneself. “The interpreter dealing with a traditional text tries to apply it to himself.”¹⁷⁷

To summarise, Gadamer's analysis of *phronesis* reveals three findings of significance for hermeneutics. Firstly, *phronesis* is a form of knowledge which does not abstract from the particular situation of the knower, as science aspires to do. Rather, it is a knowledge that has a special relationship to the knower. According to Gadamer, understanding of tradition is like this – a knowing which refers to the individual situation of the interpreter. Secondly, Aristotle's *phronesis* acknowledges the situated and finite nature of human reasoning. For Aristotle, reason in ethics is not autonomous or all-powerful – rather, *logos* requires the support of upbringing, character, custom, and emotional disposition. Gadamer does not follow Aristotle in emphasising the importance of emotion or desire. However, like Aristotle he does seek to point out the dependence of reason on tradition, e.g. in the form of the ‘prejudices’ which make reasoning possible. Thirdly, *phronesis* exhibits a relationship

¹⁷³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 326. Gadamer particularly emphasises that *phronesis* is a *Für-sich-Wissen* in “Praktisches Wissen.”

¹⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b30. The sense of the passage is somewhat unclear. Aristotle goes on to explain that *phronesis* also applies to wisdom in economics, lawmaking and politics. One possible interpretation is that Aristotle is distinguishing here between wisdom concerning the individual and wisdom concerning one's relationships with others in the setting of the *oikos* or *polis*, and assigning *phronesis*' proper sense to only one of these. This is suggested in Rackham's translation of the passage. However, this interpretation would forget that Aristotle understands the human being as essentially linked to the community of the *polis*. He has defined the human being as “by nature a political animal [*phusei politikon zoon*].” *Politics*, 1253a3. So he says “a person's own welfare cannot be achieved, presumably, without household management or without a constitution.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a8. *Phronesis*' status as a self-knowledge does not preclude it from considering the communal good. As Gadamer says, “*Die Sorge um das eigene Beste erweitert sich vielmehr von selbst in den Bereich von Haus und Staat*. [the care for one's own excellence of itself expands to the area of house and state].” Gadamer, “Praktisches Wissen,” 243-4.

¹⁷⁵ The connection between moral knowledge and self-knowledge is of course an important Socratic theme, e.g. in Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229d-30a. Cf the discussion of *sophrosune* as self-knowledge in *Charmides*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1986), 164d-71d.

¹⁷⁶ Gadamer, “Praktisches Wissen,” 243.

¹⁷⁷ *Truth and Method*, 333.

between universal and particular different in kind to the relation in Kant's determinative judgement or the Platonist idea theory. The particular in *phronesis* is not subordinated to or determined by a pre-existing universal. Rather, in *phronesis* the universal of *ethos* only achieves concreteness in the particular situation, in determining the *Tunliche*, that which is to be done. Gadamer will say that the 'application' of tradition functions analogously. In this way, Gadamer draws upon *phronesis* to envision how application and understanding can stand side-by-side in historical understanding.

Phronesis as Appropriation

For some interpreters, Gadamer's point here is best understood in terms of "appropriation."¹⁷⁸ For these interpreters, the relationship to tradition modelled by *phronesis* is a matter of an appropriation of tradition in light of one's present circumstances. Bernstein, for example, writes,

The English expression 'appropriation' better conveys what Gadamer means, especially when we think of appropriation as transforming and becoming constitutive of the individual who understands.¹⁷⁹

There are a number of problems with associating Gadamer's *Anwendung* with the concept of appropriation. First, as Risser notes, appropriation suggests a model of subjectivity.¹⁸⁰ In appropriation, the individual subject, encountering tradition, appropriates it for his or her own ends. Bernstein thus turns for support to Paul Ricoeur, who retains the framework of the subject in his hermeneutics. But this is not a viable description of Gadamer's account of understanding. Gadamer constantly emphasises that understanding is not a subjective act. Rather, it is an "event."¹⁸¹ This is the import of his discussion of play, for example. As Gadamer says, play cannot really be understood as a subjective act. Rather, play draws its players in and, in a sense, takes them over. Gadamer writes,

All playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players... The real subject of

¹⁷⁸ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, 110; Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 56.

¹⁷⁹ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, 251fn41.

¹⁸⁰ Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 102.

¹⁸¹ "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as a participating in an event of tradition." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

the game is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play and keeps him there is the game itself.¹⁸²

In play, the player submits to the game itself. For Gadamer, this way of describing the game is more accurate than explaining it in terms of the subjective decisions of the players.¹⁸³ Soccer players, for example, do not consciously, subjectively decide where to locate themselves on the field. Rather, they allow themselves to become subject to the movement of the play and the formation of the team and find themselves moved. As Gadamer says, play “absorbs” the player, freeing her from “the burden of taking initiative.”¹⁸⁴ In play, one cannot speak of ‘appropriation’ on the part of the player. Gadamer will go on to say that play characterises the mode of being of the artwork.¹⁸⁵ The artwork, in turn, is paradigmatic for the experience of understanding in general. If understanding follows the “play” structure of art, then it cannot be an appropriation.¹⁸⁶

Another issue is that appropriation suggests a turning or twisting of tradition in light of one’s individual ends or goals. One receives tradition in a way that is guided by one’s personal objectives. However, Gadamer emphasises that understanding is not chiefly guided by one’s own interests.

Hermeneutics in the sphere of philology and the historical sciences is not ‘knowledge as domination [*Herrschaftswissen*]’ – i.e., an appropriation [*Aneignung*] as taking possession [*Besitzergreifung*]; rather, it consists in subordinating ourselves to the text’s claim [*Anspruch*] to dominate our minds.¹⁸⁷

Here Gadamer explicitly states that understanding is not appropriation [*Aneignung*]. Rather, in understanding the interpreter is subordinated to the call [*Anspruch*] of the text. The text makes a claim upon us, which in proper understanding is not merely subsumed to the

¹⁸² Ibid., 111.

¹⁸³ In this regard, Gadamer’s discussion of play is meant as a critique of Kant and Schiller, who, according to Gadamer, employed the concept within the framework of subjectivity. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

¹⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 109. This can be compared with Gadamer’s claim that a genuine conversation takes on a life of its own, beyond the will of the speakers. Ibid., 401.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸⁶ The importance of play for Gadamer’s account of understanding is signalled from the start of *Truth and Method* with the Rainer Maria Rilke poem he chooses as his epigraph, “*Solang du Selbstgeworfenes fängst...*” This poem asks the reader to consider the world which is opened up in becoming responsive to the play cues of the other.

¹⁸⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 322. The notion of mind does not appear in the German. A better translation might be, “consists in subordinating ourselves to the dominant claim of the text [ordnet sich selbst dem beherrschenden Anspruch des Textes unter].” (GW1, 316).

monologue of the self. So George emphasises that, for Gadamer, what occurs in understanding is not a subsumptive appropriation, but rather a “displacement.” George writes,

Seen from the perspective of the whole of our factual lives, displacement is not an intermediary phase, as if our lives were somehow to conclude with the achievement of a final understanding! Rather, from the perspective of the whole of our factual lives, displacement is definitive: as the ubiquitous, recurrent exposure of exteriority that interrupts each time an event of understanding unfolds.¹⁸⁸

For George, the dispossessing moment in understanding is of greater importance than any “appropriation.” While I will have more to say later about George’s claim in a later section, it nicely illustrates how understanding for Gadamer is not primarily a taking-possession of what is other, but rather a dispossession or displacement in which the appeal of another interrupts one’s settled understanding. This means that *Anwendung* should not be understood as “appropriation.”

The Question of Action

An alternative interpretation of *Anwendung* is “enactment.” Risser suggests that ‘application’ is better understood as “the concretisation of meaning that defines the present enactment.”¹⁸⁹ Interpreting *Anwendung* as enactment gives rise to the question of the relationship between understanding and action. As we have seen, hermeneutics in the Heidegger-Gadamer sense rejects the notion that hermeneutics is merely a “theoretical” procedure of interpreting texts. Does this mean that it is instead a practical endeavour? What is the relationship of understanding and action?

Risser explains that Gadamer’s concept of *Anwendung* bears a close relationship with *praxis*. *Phronesis*, as we have seen, is a knowing intimately connected to action. Aristotle states this most strongly when he compares *phronesis* with *sunesis*, the virtue of empathetic understanding or considerateness. *Sunesis* is closely related to *phronesis* – like the latter, it is concerned not with general truths of nature, but with a particular individual’s circumstance.

Sunesis is not concerned with what always is and is unchanging, nor is it concerned with just any of the things that come to be but with those one might puzzle and

¹⁸⁸ George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*, 48.

¹⁸⁹ Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 103.

deliberate about. That is why it is concerned with the same things as *phronesis*, although it is not the same.¹⁹⁰

Like *phronesis*, *sunesis* considers matters of life and *praxis*, matters for which neither *episteme* nor *techne* apply. *Sunesis*, the virtue of empathetic understanding, is in play when we consider the practical situation of another. For Aristotle, this virtue approaches *phronesis* very closely.

The difference between the two, however, is in their relation to action. Aristotle says, “*phronesis* is prescriptive [*epitaktike* – also commanding], since what should be done [*to gar dei prattein*] or not is its end, whereas *sunesis* is discerning only [*kritike monon*].”¹⁹¹ *Sunesis* merely judges [*krinein*]. In contrast, *phronesis* includes not only judgement but also a command to action. *Phronesis* is not first known, and then set into action. Rather, in the knowledge of *phronesis* itself there is an impulse to act. Recognition of what is to be done is immediately accompanied with the impulse to act. So Aristotle denies that a *phronimos* can be *akrate*, lacking in self-restraint or self-control, as is one who does not uphold a considered decision [*proairesis*].¹⁹² This is not to say that Aristotle is claiming that the intellectual state of knowledge is alone sufficient for action. Aristotle himself criticises Socrates for overestimating the power of reason on this score. Rather, we must remember that *phronesis* is not only a *hexis meta logou* but is also wedded to the virtue of *ethos*, character.

Given the close relationship between *phronesis* and action, we might think that Gadamer’s use of it as a model is meant to indicate a relationship between understanding and action. Furthermore, Gadamer offers a number of indications that this is his intent. Firstly, in his own readings of Aristotle he emphasises that *phronesis* is a “practical knowing” directed towards action.¹⁹³ Secondly, Gadamer claims in many writings after *Truth and Method* that his hermeneutics is a “practical philosophy” in the Aristotelian vein.¹⁹⁴ Thirdly, Gadamer, as we have seen, seeks to capture in his hermeneutics not only a theoretical experience of knowing, but a knowing that is related to factual life. He often emphasises that *theoria* in the Greek sense is itself a form of *praxis*.¹⁹⁵ These points might well make us think that, as Risser

¹⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a3-6.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1143a8-9.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 1152a7.

¹⁹³ E.g., Gadamer, "Praktisches Wissen."; "What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason," in *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981).

¹⁹⁴ E.g., "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy."; "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task."

¹⁹⁵ "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 230. Aristotle states that *theoria* is a *praxis* at Aristotle, *Politics*, 1325b18-22.

argues, “*Anwendung* is a form of practice.”¹⁹⁶ In this case, ‘enactment’ would certainly be a fitting word to describe the ‘application’ of tradition.

But there are two problems here. The first is that, apart from the indications we have noted, Gadamer does not explicitly connect understanding to action. There is no significant discussion of action in *Truth and Method*. In his essay, “What is Praxis?”, Gadamer defines action as “conducting oneself and acting in solidarity.”¹⁹⁷ Solidarity is the key word here, and a key term in Gadamer’s late work. Gadamer makes it plain that *praxis* requires solidarity in a political community. He implies that his hermeneutics is an effort to cultivate solidarity and public reason in the face of threats posed to it by modern science and technocracy. Gadamer notes that, with the tremendous advance of modern science and technology, certain questions regarding ultimate ends in politics and morality have been neglected.

Two things have become obscure for us on account of this [the progress of modern science and technology]. For whose benefit is the work being accomplished? And how much do the achievements of technology serve life? From this there arises in a new way the problem that has been posed in every civilizational context, the problem of social reason.¹⁹⁸

Gadamer laments what he observes as the rise of technocracy in the modern world. The technical “expert” is expected to “substitute for practical and political experience,” a role which, Gadamer says, an expert “cannot fulfill.”¹⁹⁹ The problem of social reason arises in that technology alone does not answer the question of what ends individuals and communities should direct their powers. Here Gadamer strongly implies the practical significance of his hermeneutics. However, even here the relationship between understanding and action is not made clear. Gadamer does not explicitly say that “understanding is a *praxis*.” It seems, rather, that understanding seeks to cultivate solidarity, out of which social reason and thus *praxis* can emerge.

The second problem is that understanding in the Heideggerian vein actually lies one step removed from action. As we have seen, for Heidegger Dasein’s understanding is a disclosure

¹⁹⁶ Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 103. Arthos is another commentator who argues that understanding for Gadamer is “a noble ethical practice.” John Arthos, “What Is Phronesis? Seven Hermeneutic Differences in Gadamer and Ricoeur,” *Philosophy Today* (2013): 62.

¹⁹⁷ Gadamer, “What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason.”

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

of the world in terms of practical meaning, a “sight” which guides *praxis*. In this regard, it is not itself an action, but is rather an existential feature of Dasein’s being-in-the world which operates prior to any possible action. This is not to say that it is a “theoretical” matter, however. Rather, both practical and theoretical knowing proceed only from a prior understanding.²⁰⁰ As Schmidt writes, for Heidegger:

Understanding is never found apart from factual life; it does not stand above it as a theory, but neither is it to be defined as a matter of *praxis*. Rather, understanding is a continuous act that is renewed at every instant; it is a way of life that is informed by history, language, and habits – all of the realities of the situation of factual life. As such, understanding is not to be understood as a theory—even though a theory may eventually result from understanding—nor is it to be understood as an action...

Rather, understanding forges the center, the "who," that we become; it becomes the basis for how it is that we come to know and conceptually articulate our world and ourselves.²⁰¹

For Schmidt, understanding stands prior to *praxis*. Understanding constitutes Dasein’s sense of itself and the world it inhabits, giving rise to the ‘centre’ out of which any action ensues. If Gadamer is to follow Heidegger in this vein, then it is not right to say that understanding is itself an enactment. Understanding is not itself an action, but rather a disclosure of the world conditioned by history, language, and so on which precedes any action. In this regard, understanding opens the space in which action can occur.

Gadamer’s notion of *praxis* could be compared with Simone Weil’s claims regarding a kinship between action and reading in her “Essay on the Notion of Reading.” In that essay, Weil argues that one’s actions ultimately emerge from the way in which one ‘reads’ the world. “I believe what I read, my judgements are what I read, I act based on what I read, how could I act otherwise?”²⁰² This rhetorical question points to the fact that, for Weil, action is not a matter of choosing or willing a particular action from out of an array of possible

²⁰⁰ “As a primordial structural totality, care lies ‘before’ every factual ‘attitude’ and ‘position’ of Dasein, that is, it is always already *in* them as an existential *a priori*. Thus this phenomenon by no means expresses a priority of ‘practical’ over theoretical behaviour... ‘Theory’ and ‘*praxis*’ are possibilities of being for a being whose being must be defined as care.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H193. Here we see that, for Heidegger, the disclosure of care [*Sorge*] lies before both theory and practice.

²⁰¹ Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," 42.

²⁰² Simone Weil, "Essay on the Notion of Reading," *The Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2020): 12.

options. Rather, the understanding of a situation which reading discloses issues simultaneously in action. Weil extrapolates that:

Action carried out either on oneself or on others consists in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings spring up around each of forty million men... War, politics, rhetoric, art, teaching, every action directed towards others is essentially about changing what men read.²⁰³

In Weil's notion of reading, as in Gadamer's notion of *Anwendung*, there is a close proximity between understanding and action. The way that one 'reads' the world exerts a decisive influence on the actions that one takes. Understanding someone as 'enemy' or 'threat,' as in Weil's war example, determines the violent actions that issue.

At the same time, in Weil's words there is some uncertainty as to whether reading is itself action or is rather the origin from which action arises. Weil first describes reading as giving rise to action, and then later describes action as that which transforms the meanings one reads in the world. The question here is whether understanding is itself an action, or rather takes place at one step removed from action. As we have seen, this uncertainty also presents itself in the reception of Gadamer's notion of *Anwendung*.

There is far more to say here about the relationship between understanding and action. But such a discussion would take us beyond *Truth and Method* and perhaps even beyond Gadamer's corpus altogether. What we can conclude is that neither "appropriation" nor "enactment" are fully accurate interpretations of *Anwendung* as it appears in *Truth and Method* (whether enactment fits better with Gadamer's later developments of his hermeneutics in the direction of practical philosophy, or with others working in his wake, is another question). I therefore suggest that the best way in which to understand what Gadamer is trying to say with the term *Anwendung* is "concretisation." The role *phronesis* is to play in the problem of application is as an analogy for how tradition is concretised in action. As the *phronimos* sees how *ethos* is to manifest itself in the situation of action, so the interpreter sees the meaning of the text in the context of her present situation. The meaning of this universal, tradition, appears in concreteness only in light of the situation of the interpreter. Prior to this, it exists in a foggy or insubstantial lack of concreteness, just as "courage" is an insubstantial or general precept until its meaning in a situation of action becomes clear. With this

²⁰³ Ibid., 14.

Aristotelian model, Gadamer articulates an account of historicity that avoids, as in the previous hermeneutics of Dilthey or Schleiermacher, any appeal to a ultimate transcendence of the historical horizon. That is, Gadamer is able to account for understanding as historical through-and-through.

The ethical implications of this are several. Firstly, Gadamer's hermeneutics implies a critique of any rule-based ethics. If understanding always involves application, then understanding in ethics too would fall under this. In understanding what to do, it is not simply a matter of setting forth universal principles. Rather, there must always be sensitivity to the particular situation, a sensitivity which, like the virtue Aristotle describes as "equity [*epieikeia*]," accounts for where no law can suffice.²⁰⁴ If philosophers often understand ethics as a project of lawmaking, Gadamer draws upon Aristotle to show that this is wrongheaded.

Secondly, Gadamer's analysis of application in understanding helps us to see how all reasoning, including ethical reasoning, is historically and culturally finite. Ethical consciousness emerges out of our tradition, just as *phronesis* emerges from *ethos*. One can never adopt a standpoint of critique which is untouched by the tradition which has always already exerted its influence on any event of understanding. We can pretend that we are free from history, but then we will only misunderstand ourselves.

At the same time, Gadamer's notion of application also helps to understand that Gadamer is far from implying a cultural relativism or determinism. *Ethos* is, as we have seen, where *phronesis* starts, yet, in the concretisation of *phronesis*, *ethos* can manifest itself in new and unique ways. Similarly, Gadamer does not view traditions as closed or unchanging, so that norms cannot evolve over time. Rather, following Socrates, Gadamer emphasises the importance of the question in hermeneutic experience, so that all understanding, while originating in the fore-structures of one's historical-cultural situation, also subjects these to continual questioning, revision and renewal. Fully recognising our historicity means acknowledging that we are never 'free' of the influence of the past. But it also means that the past is never 'finished' but is always open towards a future in which it can be understood differently. For Gadamer, historicity not only permits but commands that tradition be understood in constantly new and revised ways. By drawing on the unique relationship of

²⁰⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 5, §10.

universal and particular at stake in Aristotle's *phronesis*, Gadamer is able to articulate this to give us a better conception of how we belong to historical-cultural traditions.

Aside from these points, we have noted that Gadamer's employment of the concept of *phronesis* points in many ways towards the question of action. These are hints which, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer does not completely follow. However, they raise the question of the extent to which the truth gained in understanding tradition is itself a truth with some kind of moral significance. If this were so, the truth gained in understanding tradition would not only follow the model of *phronesis*, but also would resemble *phronesis* in its content – it would itself be a kind of *phronesis*, a moral knowledge which prompted or shaped action. The suggestion that the truth of tradition might be a moral truth suggests another role for *phronesis* in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, a role which is most evident in Gadamer's discussion of the humanities. Consideration of this part of the text will reveal the extent to which the truth Gadamer hopes to uncover in the humanities and arts is itself a truth with moral significance. This is the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter Four: *Phronesis* and the Truth of the Arts and Humanities

Gadamer articulates his concerns in *Truth and Method* initially as a question pertaining to the *Geisteswissenschaften* [human sciences]. This term refers to the disciplines which in English would be categorised as humanities, such as history and literature. Gadamer's initial concern in *Truth and Method* is to explore the foundations of knowledge in these disciplines.

Gadamer argues that there is a sense of truth in these disciplines which has been misrecognised due to the preponderance of the natural-scientific orientation towards truth. The human sciences, Gadamer claims, are not properly understood within the epistemological framework of the natural sciences.

The specific problem that the human sciences present to thought is that one has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity [*Regelmäßigkeit*]. The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences. Whatever 'science [*Wissenschaft*]' may mean here, and even if all historical knowledge involves the application of experiential universals to the particular object of investigation, historical research does not endeavour to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule. The individual case does not serve only to confirm a law from which practical predictions can be made. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness.²⁰⁵

The human sciences are not properly understood in terms of a knowledge of laws. For one thing, if measured against this ideal, they will always appear inadequate and even pseudoscientific compared with the natural sciences, because understanding the sociohistorical world in terms of laws (perhaps laws of human nature) is undermined by the complexity and freedom of human action. Gadamer writes, "[t]he world of human freedom does not manifest the same absence of exceptions as natural laws."²⁰⁶ In raising the issue of freedom, I do not want to broach the philosophical controversy regarding the nature of freedom and its relationship to natural causal determinacy. Gadamer does not prove, but rather asserts, that the sociohistorical world is a sphere of freedom and thus cannot be understood in terms of natural laws. The social scientists throughout history who have

²⁰⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 4.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

attempted to understand their objects in this way have been pursuing an impossible task, Gadamer argues.

Aristotle too argued that the world of human action does not admit of law-like regularity. In Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle noted that the universal pronouncements of the law cannot always be straightforwardly applied to the diverse situations which confront the magistrate. “All law is universal [*katholou*], but about some sorts of things it is not possible to pronounce correctly in universal terms.”²⁰⁷ Certain situations that face the law cannot be easily dealt with through reference to a general principle. In such situations, Aristotle says that there is an “error [or flaw – *hamartema*].”²⁰⁸ This error resides not in the law but in “the nature of the matter [*en te phusei tou pragmatos*]. For what is doable in action [*ton prakton*] consists of this sort of subject matter [*hyle*] right from the outset.”²⁰⁹ The error that occurs when a general principle confronts a problematic particular is not the fault of the law itself. It is not the kind of error which can be resolved by replacing one law with a better one. Rather, the error resides in the nature of *praxis*, the unruly matter [*hyle*] which *praxis* is. Something of the nature of *praxis* makes it unreceptive to speaking in universal terms. Any possible law will result in some level of error when applied to diverse particular situations.

In characteristic fashion, Aristotle begins his ethics with a reflection on methodology and the level of rigour which is to be expected from the inquiry. The Aristotelian principle is that the degree of precision to be expected will correspond to the object to be studied.²¹⁰ In the case of ethics, the nature of the virtuous and the just is such as not to admit of a great deal of precision. This is because they admit of “difference and variability.”²¹¹ Matters of the good in human *praxis* cannot be reduced to general principles in the way of scientific facts. Ethical matters do not have the law-like consistency of the law of gravity. Aristotle will later distinguish between *episteme*, the knowledge of what is unchanging and of necessity (sometimes translated as “scientific knowledge”), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), the knowledge of the good with regard to human *praxis*.²¹² If the world of *praxis* is variable and

²⁰⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b13-14.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 1137b15.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 1137b16.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 1094b11.

²¹¹ Ibid., 1094b15. Broadie notes that Aristotle is so bold as to state general, apparently invariable claims regarding ethics, such as that virtue is a mean. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, 18. However, the conclusion that Aristotle’s ethical claims can “possess the universality and exactness of mathematical truths” is not warranted. As Aristotle explains, while the claim that virtue is the mean is “true to say, it is not at all enlightening.” 1138b25. It lacks concreteness until one specifies what this mean amounts to in practice. This cannot be determined according to a universal law, but only in the situation.

²¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Six, especially §§3-5.

unruly, then it presents a great challenge for the application of general legal principles. Here there is already nascent an argument in favour of the methodological independence of the humanities from the natural sciences, on the grounds that human affairs do not admit of the scientific standards demanded by science.

Following a similar logic, Gadamer criticises the tendency of the human sciences to understand themselves in terms of the epistemology of the natural sciences. This tendency is widespread in the history of reflections on the human sciences in modernity. For example, Gadamer complains that:

[t]he logical self-reflection that accompanied the development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century is wholly governed by the model of the natural sciences.²¹³

Understanding themselves in terms of the epistemology of the natural sciences, the human sciences will inevitably misconstrue themselves. Their tendency to do this, Gadamer complains, is widespread. The modern human sciences have consistently failed to understand the distinctive epistemological basis which secures their independence from the natural sciences. Evaluating themselves against the natural science standard of knowledge of natural laws, they appear inevitably as inadequate in comparison.

What then is the distinctive epistemological basis of the human sciences? What is the sense of truth in the human sciences, if it is not the same sense of truth as that of the natural sciences? This is the question with which Gadamer begins *Truth and Method*, and from it emerge reflections on the function of understanding in general – reflections which, in the end, have implications far beyond the academic disciplines of the social sciences. Indeed, given the scope that Gadamer's hermeneutics has as an existential structure of human being, we might wonder why Gadamer couches his concerns initially in terms of an epistemology of the human sciences. This might give the impression that Gadamer's project coincides with that of Dilthey, who sought a methodological basis for the human sciences in hermeneutics – an impression which we have already seen is erroneous. But an Aristotelian methodological precept is to move from what is clear to what is obscure, and perhaps Gadamer seeks to follow this guidance by moving from understanding in the human sciences to understanding in general. To begin his reflections, Gadamer follows a breadcrumb trail of hints as to the unique truth of the humanities. The first crumb of this trail, significantly, is Helmholtz's

²¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 3.

address concerning “the Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Totality of the Sciences,” (1862).²¹⁴

In this chapter, I will argue that the truth Gadamer claims to find in the humanities is akin to *phronesis*. That is, it is a truth which has ethical-practical implications and involves a disclosure of what to do that is sensitive to the particularities of a practical situation. The means that Gadamer’s hermeneutics has an ethical vocation – the experience of truth it seeks to uncover is an ethical truth. This also means that hermeneutics is an argument in favour of the ethical truth of the humanities and arts. If Gadamer’s hermeneutics is sometimes seen as an epistemological project, examining the trace of *phronesis* in part one reveals that it is also an ethical project. To make this argument, I will continue my methodology of tracing the importance of the concept of *phronesis* in Gadamer’s discussion. I will first examine Gadamer’s engagement with the epistemological reflections of Hermann Helmholtz, before turning to Gadamer’s discussion of the basic concepts of humanism and the link he identifies between the eighteenth and nineteenth century humanism and Aristotelian practical philosophy.

Helmholtz and the Independence of the Humanities

That something like *phronesis* might be at stake is already signalled by Gadamer’s positioning of his question in relation to Hermann Helmholtz’s reflections on the sciences. The importance of Helmholtz for Gadamer should be emphasised: as Grondin says, “with only a little exaggeration, one could claim that Gadamer’s privileged conversation partner in the first part of *Truth and Method* is Helmholtz.”²¹⁵ As I shall argue, Gadamer chooses Helmholtz as an interlocutor because, although thoroughly embedded in modern natural science epistemological norms, Helmholtz nevertheless points to the problem of a moral knowing as necessary complement to the “hard” sciences. In this regard, Helmholtz refers to the problem Aristotle would seek to answer with the *phronesis-episteme* distinction.

Gadamer identifies three ideas in Helmholtz’s address which are pertinent to the question of the epistemological basis of the human sciences.²¹⁶ The first is that, retaining the methodological ideal of the natural sciences, Helmholtz describes the human sciences as comparatively inexact and uncertain. Helmholtz ascribes a “systematisation,” “organisation,”

²¹⁴ Hermann Helmholtz, *On the Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Totality of the Sciences*, trans. C. H. Schaible (London: C. F. Hodgson and Sons, 1869).

²¹⁵ Grondin, "On the Composition of Truth and Method," 27.

²¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 5, 7-8.

and “formal completeness” to the natural sciences, which the human sciences lack.²¹⁷ For Gadamer, the human sciences will inevitably appear inferior in this way when evaluated against the standards of the natural sciences. One of Gadamer’s primary aims will be to furnish the humanities with an alternative set of measures so that this inevitably unflattering comparison can be shown to be incomplete.

Secondly, despite their supposed lesser rigour, Helmholtz concedes that the human sciences possess a significance for human beings’ “mental and moral development” which distinguishes them from the physical sciences.²¹⁸ The humanities have a moral significance of some kind. Helmholtz suggests that the human sciences have to do “directly with the dearest interests of man, and with the social ordinances which he has established.”²¹⁹ However, he does not elaborate how they speak to these dearest interests. How does the study of literature or history touch on issues of such great moral importance? He also does not explain his implication that these interests would be insufficiently addressed if left to natural science alone. This neglect is regrettable, as a fuller articulation of the special contribution of the human sciences vis-à-vis the natural sciences could help us to understand their unique truth.

Thirdly, Helmholtz gives an unusual description of the method of the human sciences, connecting them to the arts in a way which will be significant for Gadamer. Helmholtz describes the method of the human sciences as “artistic induction.”²²⁰ Whereas the natural scientist employs “logical induction,” proceeding from empirical observation to general law, for Helmholtz the human sciences function differently, in a way that is exemplified by the artist.

It is of the essence of the artist’s particular talent, that, by the medium whether of language, or form and colour, or of the tones of music, he is able (without being consciously led by any definable rule) to represent the outward phenomena of character, and by a sort of intuitive perception to realise the way in which the varying phases of mind and heart must manifest themselves under varying conditions.²²¹

The artist manifests the virtues of the successful social scientist. Without consciously following a general rule, she is able to predict human behaviour under varying conditions,

²¹⁷ Helmholtz, *On the Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Totality of the Sciences*, 19.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

and depict this in artistic media. Art is like social science, Helmholtz says, in that it examines human behaviour without consciously applying a universal rule. In doing so, it is aided by “memory” and “a fine and cultivated sense for the emotions of the human heart.”²²² With this suggestion, Helmholtz seems to be opening a space for both art and the humanities to have a very different logic to that of the natural sciences.

At the same time, Helmholtz still understands the method of both art and social science in terms of “induction.” For Helmholtz, the human sciences (and arts for that matter) function according to an inductive logical structure, moving from particular to general rule just as in the natural sciences. The difference is that, in the former, the process is unconscious. The judgement is arrived at through a “psychological intuition” rather than a “conscious process of reasoning,” but the inductive method of movement from particular to universal has been the same.²²³ While the law is not made explicit, nevertheless it is by unconsciously following a law that artistic induction comes to its conclusion. This means that the logic which Helmholtz has ascribed to the human sciences is in the end not so profoundly different to that of natural science. Gadamer will draw upon Kant’s notion of “reflective judgement,” Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*, and other models in order to depict quite a different logic for the human sciences.

In his discussion of Helmholtz, Gadamer has already found a number of clues regarding the distinctive truth of the human sciences. Art, memory, and sense are all themes he will develop in *Truth and Method* on his way to the truth of the human sciences. For our purposes, the notion that there is a moral significance of the humanities is important. This point refers us to Aristotle’s *phronesis* and the ethical significance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Indeed, the moral significance of science is an overriding concern of Helmholtz’s speech. However, Gadamer gives little explicit attention to this theme. Dwelling on Helmholtz’s discussion of the problem of the moral significance of the humanities can help us to understand this point better.

The central problem of Helmholtz’s address is establishing a foundation for the different sciences to work in unison. This is ultimately a moral, and not only an epistemological, issue for Helmholtz. What concerns him is that the sciences serve “the noblest interests of humanity.”²²⁴ According to Helmholtz, balance and cooperation among the different

²²² Ibid., 15.

²²³ Ibid., 14.

²²⁴ Ibid., 23.

disciplines is necessary to achieve this.²²⁵ This is threatened by the growing specialisation and compartmentalising of the sciences. Helmholtz ardently defends the ideal of the university as an institution where all of the disciplines have a place and work in unison to achieve social progress. Not only the natural sciences, but also the human sciences have a role in this. And ultimately Helmholtz speaks optimistically about the achievements and progress that he believes lie in the future for science. However, there is a moment when Helmholtz expresses his concern which is material for our purposes and gestures towards the importance of something like *phronesis*. I am not suggesting that Helmholtz is himself advocating for a concept of *phronesis*. However, he certainly implies that the theoretical knowledge of the natural sciences might be morally problematic in some way without the supplementation of some other form of knowledge.

Helmholtz expresses this concern with a classical reference which connects to our inquiry into *phronesis*. The reference is to a line from a choral ode of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Polla to deina, kouden anthropou deinoteron pelei.

Much is wonderful, but nothing is more wonderful than man.²²⁶

The term translated as “wonderful” is *deinos*. *Deinos* has a curious polyvalence here which makes it difficult to translate into English. Liddell and Scott suggest such translations for *deinos* as “wonderous,” “fearful,” “terrible,” and “strange.”²²⁷ Schmidt argues that “monstrous” [*ungeheuer* in German] might be accurate.²²⁸ This meaning-cluster includes both positive and negative connotations, and it is thus unclear whether the description of the human being as *deinos* is praise or censure. This ambiguity is deepened as the ode continues, with acclamation of the human being's ingenuity and prowess contrasted with its propensity for “evil [*kakon*]” doings and its vulnerability to death. So in something being *deinos* there is an ambiguity, hovering between great power and fragility or danger.²²⁹

²²⁵ Ibid., 22.

²²⁶ Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 135; cited at Helmholtz, *On the Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Totality of the Sciences*, 6.

²²⁷ Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 374.

²²⁸ Dennis J Schmidt, “The Monstrous, Catastrophe, and Ethical Life: Hegel, Heidegger and Antigone,” *Philosophy Today* 59, no. 1 (2014).

²²⁹ Heidegger had an ongoing interest in Sophocles' choral ode and the ambiguous description of the human being presented there and encapsulated by the word *deinos*. See for example Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 156-76. For discussion, see Schmidt, “The Monstrous, Catastrophe, and Ethical Life: Hegel, Heidegger and Antigone.” Also, Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 245-54.

Helmholtz's suggestion that modern science might be seen as *deinos* is a provocative claim. Introducing the Sophocles quotation, Helmholtz says, "in contemplating this amazing activity in all branches of science, the daring enterprises of men may well excite in us a feeling of astonishment mingled with terror."²³⁰ Helmholtz thus recognises that modern science possesses a certain ambiguity, both wonderful and also terrifying. In this regard, it is well-described by Helmholtz's turning to the Greek word *deinos*. In the description of modern science as *deinos*, one hears a note of concern and ambiguity which contradicts the Enlightenment optimism that characterises the main thrust of Helmholtz's discussion.

If the state of the modern sciences is aptly described as *deinos*, how are we to respond? For Helmholtz, the harmonious balance and solidarity of the sciences can allow us to answer the *deinos* nature of modern science. Apparently, there is some contribution which all of the sciences must make in cooperation within the institution of the university. If this harmonious balance were to be tipped in favour of the natural sciences or the human sciences alone, Helmholtz implies, the negative aspect of science as *deinos* might win out. However, as we have seen, Helmholtz's account of the moral contribution of the human sciences is not fully developed in this text. That is, if he implies that the human sciences hold some power of responding to or tempering the consequences of the rapid advance of the natural sciences in modern times, yet he does not explain what this power is.

Someone we can look to for assistance here is Aristotle. As we have already discussed, the concept of *deinotes* [an alternative grammatical form of *deinos*] plays an important role in Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle contrasts *deinotes* with *phronesis*, in a contrast which reveals their closeness while also distinguishing *phronesis* as including a consistency in pursuing good ends.²³¹ *Deinotes* alone is not *phronesis*, yet *phronesis* does not exist without *deinotes*;²³² *phronesis* is *deinotes* in addition to something more. *Deinotes* allows one to recognise the advantageous and to achieve one's goals. These goals may be virtuous or vicious – so both the wise person [*phronimos*] and the unscrupulous one [*panourgos*] may be called *deinos*.²³³ Thus *phronesis* answers the ambiguity of the *panourgos*, who is capable of putting his cunning to all kinds of immoral ends. Following Aristotle, we might suggest that the response which the *deinos* nature of modern science calls for is the cultivation of *phronesis*. We might even go so far as to suggest that cultivation of *phronesis* is the way in which Helmholtz's call

²³⁰ Helmholtz, *On the Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Totality of the Sciences*, 6.

²³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1144a24-36, c f. 1144b1-1145a2, 1152a6-15

²³² *Ibid.*, 1144a29.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 1144a28.

for the balanced and cooperative function of the sciences in answering the moral needs of society can be satisfied.

There is far more to say here about the description of modern science as *deinos* and the extent to which this word with its tragic, violent, or monstrous overtones is a correct description, and, if so, what the proper response is. However, for now let it suffice that Gadamer's employment of Helmholtz as an interlocutor has already signalled the ethical vocation of his philosophy of the humanities. An intimation of the notion of cultivating *phronesis* has arisen as a frame for all that Gadamer will say about the humanities. This means that Gadamer's discussion of the humanities is not only a matter of epistemology, but also concerns their moral importance. The purpose of the humanities, we might say, is the cultivation of something like *phronesis*. The humanities seek to cultivate a knowing which is not only a means to theoretical understanding or technical mastery, but has a practical and moral significance of some kind. To lend further support to this claim, it is necessary to examine more closely Gadamer's actual discussion of the human sciences and their unique truth.

Basic Concepts of Humanism

As we have seen, Gadamer's search is for a conception of the human sciences which can be independent of the natural sciences' epistemological assumptions. He finds hints towards such a conception in the notion of humanism.

[T]he human sciences are a long way from regarding themselves as simply inferior to the natural sciences. Instead, possessed of the intellectual heritage of German classicism, they carried forward the proud awareness that they were the true representatives of humanism.²³⁴

It is in their self-understanding as intertwined with humanism, Gadamer suggests, that hints towards a more adequate conception of the humanities can be found. The English word "humanities" suggests even more strongly than the German "*Geisteswissenschaft*" the connection between disciplines such as literature and history and the notion of humanism.

At the same time, Gadamer does not mean to take the humanities' self-understanding at face value. As we have already seen, for Gadamer the self-understanding of the modern human sciences has been misconstrued and distorted by the comparison to the natural sciences. Gadamer's aim, then, will be to critically examine this self-understanding in order to reveal

²³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 8.

something more fundamental within it. As we shall see, although Gadamer does not say so in as many words, this critical examination will make it apparent that the humanities are defined by *phronesis*. That is, Gadamer will claim that the epistemological independence of the humanities derives from the fact that the knowledge they seek to produce is something like *phronesis*, the practical wisdom which discloses the situation of action and what is to be done. Additionally, Gadamer claims that this is evident implicitly in the humanities' own self-understanding.

It is Gadamer's own hermeneutical principle that texts should be understood in light of the question that they are answering. Following this principle, it is important to keep in mind Gadamer's agenda in his discussion of humanism. The issue which shapes Gadamer's concerns here is the question of truth. As Gadamer's title suggests, and Schmidt rightly reminds us,²³⁵ the basic concern of Gadamer's hermeneutics is the question of truth. In particular, Gadamer seeks to articulate a notion of truth not bounded by the epistemology of the natural sciences, according to which truth is a property assigned to a proposition based on whether it conforms to the matter or coheres with other accepted propositions.²³⁶ For Gadamer, the truth of the humanities cannot be understood according to this model. Rather, there is some other form of truth at stake in the humanities, which will provide a clue for Gadamer's further development of his hermeneutics. It is this sense of truth which Gadamer sets out to uncover through an examination of humanism.

It is important to note that Gadamer's inquiry into the idea of humanism does not mean that he is a humanist or is seeking to retrieve humanist ideals, as some commentators suggest.²³⁷ Gadamer thinks there is a great deal to be learned about the human sciences and about understanding in general from humanism, but does not necessarily endorse humanism wholeheartedly. He turns to humanism not in order to defend some doctrine or position, but in order to retrieve the notion of truth at stake within it. Of course, humanism is a somewhat general or amorphous notion. If humanism means a conception of the human being in terms of some timeless "essence" of the human being, then the historically-attuned anti-essentialism of Gadamer's hermeneutics cannot be reconciled with this view. Similarly, if humanism is

²³⁵ Schmidt, "On the Idiom of Truth and the Movement of Life: Some Remarks on the Task of Hermeneutics."

²³⁶ In this regard, Gadamer's approach resonates with Heidegger's critiques of this notion of truth in, for example, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H33-4; "The Essence of Truth," 69-71.

²³⁷ George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*, 29-38; Jens Zimmerman, *Humanism and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch 6. Jerome Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 146.

meant as a glorification of the power and independence of the human being, Gadamer's hermeneutics points to the ways in which existence is shaped by what exceeds the human, such as tradition and language. In this regard, Gadamer shows the influence of his teacher Heidegger, who famously criticised humanism in the "Letter on Humanism."²³⁸ So Gadamer's turn to humanism does not make him a humanist.

That Gadamer's concern with humanism is not to develop it as a determinate philosophical position is perhaps also signalled by the limited and partial way in which he characterises humanism. Gadamer characterises humanism rather skeletally in the form of four basic concepts. Indeed, it is far from certain that humanism is at all adequately captured by these four concepts. However, this is not really Gadamer's claim. Rather than giving a full articulation of the essence of humanism, Gadamer's discussion has the more specific and limited aim of identifying the kernel of an alternative notion of truth. As I shall argue, this notion of truth bears a close relationship with Aristotle's *phronesis* (which, as we have seen, Aristotle describes as a way of unveiling truth, a *hexis tou aletheuein*).

The first humanist idea Gadamer turns to is *Bildung* [formation, cultivation]. This significant idea in German humanism refers to the notion of developing or cultivating oneself. It is a moral and pedagogical idea accompanied by certain metaphysical presuppositions. Gadamer argues, following Hegel, that *Bildung* involves an encounter with the alien. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is devoted to the "long process of culture [*Bildung*] towards genuine philosophy."²³⁹ Commentators have noted that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be understood as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, following the development of spirit towards knowledge.²⁴⁰ On Gadamer's reading, Hegel's dialectical *Bildung* means encountering, learning from, and becoming familiar with what is other. Gadamer writes:

²³⁸ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism." George notes that Gadamer's interest in unveiling the ideas behind humanism makes him more sympathetic towards it than Heidegger. George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*. This fits with a general tendency noted by commentators such as Ambrosio and Brogan that, whereas Heidegger's rhetoric tends towards disparagement of the metaphysical tradition, and thus searches for a new philosophical vocabulary with occasionally awkward neologisms, Gadamer's inclination is towards a stance of sympathetic critique, seeking to free traditional terms of metaphysical baggage. Walter A Brogan, "Basic Concepts of Hermeneutics," *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology* 1, no. 1 (2020); Francis J Ambrosio, "Dawn and Dusk: Gadamer and Heidegger on Truth," *Man and World* 19, no. 1 (1986).

²³⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §68.

²⁴⁰ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973).

To recognise one's own in the alien [*Fremden*], to become at home [*heimisch zu werden*] in it, is the basic movement of spirit [*Grundbewegung des Geistes*], whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other... Thus what constitutes the essence of *Bildung* is clearly not alienation [*Entfremdung*] as such, but the return to oneself [*die Heimkehr*] – which presupposes alienation, to be sure.²⁴¹

Gadamer is using employing Hegelian language here [*Geist, Entfremdung*]. As in Hegel, for Gadamer the nature of intellectual life is to encounter what is unfamiliar and 'other', and to gradually develop familiarity with this so as to return to oneself. Thus, for both thinkers, the alien or other has a productive or pedagogic force.²⁴² Learning and the self-development described by *Bildung* function through the encounter with what is unfamiliar.

Despite this resonance, Gadamer's and Hegel's conceptions of *Bildung* differ in several respects. For Hegel, *Bildung* culminates in philosophical knowledge of the absolute. The absolute involves the triumph of the universal over the particular, while the finitude of substance is transcended or sublimated. But Gadamer takes issue with Hegel on these scores.²⁴³

Bildung is not to be understood only as the process of historically raising the mind to the universal; it is at the same time the element [*das Element*] in which the educated man [*Gebildete*] moves. What kind of element is this? The questions we asked of Helmholtz arise here. Hegel's answer cannot satisfy us, for Hegel sees *Bildung* as brought to completion [*vollendet*] through the movement of alienation and appropriation [*Aneignung*] in a complete mastery of substance [*Bemächtigung der*

²⁴¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 13-14.

²⁴² Hegel would explain this in terms of "the tremendous power [*ungeheure Macht*] of the negative..." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §32. Following Hegel, and also Socrates and Aeschylus, Gadamer develops an account of experience in terms of negation later in *Truth and Method*.

²⁴³ The question of the relationship between Hegel's and Gadamer's philosophy is a large and controversial one which this thesis cannot treat in entirety. Some interpreters equate the dialectical motion of understanding in Gadamer with Hegel's dialectic. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Although Gadamer often speaks positively about Hegel and learns much from him, it is important to note that Gadamer's hermeneutics is quite different to Hegel's dialectic. One might suggest that, to the extent to which one can speak of a dialectic in Gadamer's hermeneutics, it is closer to Plato's dialectic than Hegel's. For discussion of the influence of Platonic dialectic on Gadamer's hermeneutics see Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Gadamer's Dialectical Hermeneutics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). Gadamer elaborates Plato's dialectic in terms of a belonging-together of *methexis* and *chorismos* in Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy; Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus*.

Substanz], in the dissolution of all concrete being [*gegenständlichen Wesens*], reached only in the absolute knowledge of philosophy.²⁴⁴

Hegel identifies *Bildung* with appropriation. For example, he writes, “formative education [*Bildung*], regarded from the side of the individual, consists in his acquiring what thus lies at hand, devouring his inorganic nature, and taking possession of it for himself.”²⁴⁵ For Gadamer, *Bildung* should not be understood according to the Hegelian dialectic, culminating in the universality of absolute spirit. As we have seen, Gadamer rejects the notion of “mastery” and “appropriation” in Hegel’s dialectic. Understanding does not master its matter, but rather is itself a becoming-subject to the appeal [*Anspruch*] of the matter [*Sache*], in a way typified by the phenomenon of play. *Bildung* then is not completed with the conceptual grasping and mastery of what is unfamiliar.

But Gadamer’s most important criticism of Hegel here is in the first sentence quoted: that *Bildung* is not only a matter of the mind rising to the universal, but is also the “element” in which the cultivated person moves. What does this mean? The notion of moving returns us to Gadamer’s concern with the motion of life. As we have seen, following Heidegger, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not merely a theory of understanding detached from practical existence, but is rather supposed to be a reflection on the movement of existence itself. In this regard, Gadamer would not be satisfied with the universality and abstraction of Hegel’s notion of *Bildung*. Instead, he follows Kierkegaard’s critique of knowing-at-a-distance.²⁴⁶ For *Bildung* to be concerned with the concrete movement of existence, it must be relevant to particular situations of action. As we have seen, for Gadamer the situation of action entails a concretisation of the universal in the particular situation. If *Bildung* is not only an abstract universal concept, but is supposed to inform the action of the *Gebildete* in life, then it cannot take on the universal conceptual form of Hegel’s absolute.

Thus Gadamer argues that, although Hegel is right that *Bildung* involves an openness to what is alien, it is not a matter of assimilating what is strange to the grasp of a universal concept. So Gadamer describes a quite different notion of ‘universality’ at stake in *Bildung*.

It is not enough to observe more closely, to study a tradition more thoroughly, if there is not already a receptivity to the ‘otherness’ of the work of art or of the past. That is

²⁴⁴ *Truth and Method*, 14.

²⁴⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §28.

²⁴⁶ Kierkegaard criticises the abstractness and distance from concrete existence of Hegelian philosophy in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

what, following Hegel, we emphasised as the general characteristic of *Bildung*: keeping oneself open to what is other – to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance [*Maß und Abstand*] in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality. To distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them. This universality is by no means a universality of the concept or understanding. This is not a case of a particular being determined by a universal; nothing is proved conclusively. The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated man keeps himself open are not a fixed applicable yardstick [*ein fester Maßstab*], but are present to him only as the viewpoints of possible others. Thus the cultivated consciousness has in fact more the character of a sense [*eines Sinnes*].²⁴⁷

Gadamer makes a number of points here. Firstly, *Bildung* is a matter of cultivating a receptivity to what is other. Gadamer connects this notion of openness to Hegel's idea of universality. However, it is plain that this universality is of a vastly different kind to the universality of Hegel's absolute. It is not a universality in the sense of a "view from nowhere." It is not complete or eternal truth. Rather, it is an openness to the viewpoints of particular others one may encounter. In this regard, it involves a distance or detachment from one's own perspective. These others are always particular others, rather than an all-encompassing concept, so the element of particularity is never eliminated. Thus "universality [*Allgemeinheit*]" is perhaps not the right word for Gadamer to use.

Gadamer argues that this universality is a "sense [*Sinn*]." This sense involves a sensitivity and receptivity to unfamiliar perspectives and a distance or detachment from one's own particular situation. The purpose of *Bildung*, according to Gadamer's exploration of the self-understanding of the humanities, is to cultivate this kind of sense. Such a sense would obviously be not only a theoretical matter – allowing one, for example, to successfully study foreign literatures or cultures. Rather, as a sensitivity to the viewpoints of others, this sense would have a moral significance. If Gadamer is correct that the truth at stake in the humanities is ultimately a sense of this kind, then it is clearly quite different to that of the natural sciences.

Gadamer finds further evidence for this point in the other concepts he identifies as basic to the humanities. Another concept he turns to is *sensus communis*. Derived from ancient

²⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 16.

sources and defended in the early modern era by thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, *sensus communis* is the idea of a communal “common sense.” For Gadamer, it represents a sense of what is true or right according to the consciousness of a community.

The *sensus communis* is the sense of what is right and of the common good that is to be found in all men; moreover, it is a sense that is acquired through living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims.²⁴⁸

The *sensus communis* is an explicitly ethical and political sense, which is linked to the shared consciousness of a community. What is known in this sense is not a universally-true proposition or law. Rather it is a sense of what is right given the particular circumstances of the community in which one resides. Thus, as Gadamer says, in the concept of *sensus communis* “we are introduced to an element of truth in the human sciences that was no longer recognisable when they conceptualised themselves in the nineteenth century.”²⁴⁹ Later, Gadamer will argue that Kant’s interpretation of the *sensus communis* as a merely aesthetic taste, rooted in subjective experience rather than collective *ethos*, bears much of the blame for this.²⁵⁰

Gadamer notes that, in his appeal to *sensus communis*, Vico was drawing upon a heritage of classical ethical and political thought. Gadamer is somewhat ambiguous about the ultimate origin of this idea. On the one hand, for Gadamer the trace of Aristotelian *phronesis* is clearly evident here.²⁵¹ The *sensus communis* refers to an ethical knowing, derived from the shared consciousness (one could say, *ethos*) of a community, sensitive to the particular situation, and irreducible to the knowing of science or *episteme*. On the other hand, Gadamer acknowledges that *sensus communis* is a Roman concept born partly out of a republican critique of the Greek philosophers.²⁵² The effort to map the fault lines of the differences between Roman *sensus communis* and Aristotelian *phronesis* goes beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important at this point, though, is that, once again, Gadamer has traced the genealogy of a humanist concept back to Aristotelian practical philosophy.

Gadamer’s discussion of the remaining concepts, judgement [*Urteilskraft*] and taste [*Geschmack*], point back in similar ways to this heritage. Judgement, as Gadamer points out,

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 39-74. Kant understands *sensus communis* in this way in Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §40.

²⁵¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 20.

²⁵² Ibid., 21.

is not to be understood as the direct subsumption of particular cases to a universal rule. Judgement, which considers how universal rules are to be applied to the particular case, cannot itself be a universal rule – otherwise, some other ‘judgement’ would be needed to apply it.²⁵³ Rather, judgement “cannot be taught in the abstract but only practiced from case to case, and is therefore more an ability like the senses.”²⁵⁴ Judgement is an ability, which manifests itself only in the particular case. We have an echo here of Aristotle’s claim that *phronesis* is a knowing in the particular situation of action, and that it is a kind of perception (*aisthesis*).²⁵⁵

As for taste, we might be surprised to find a discussion of this concept in a work devoted to truth, and in the context of a discussion of humanism. It may seem that taste is a subjective preference pertaining to the realm of the aesthetic. What this concept could have to do with Gadamer’s epistemological or ethical themes may be initially unclear. However, Gadamer reminds us of a tradition according to which taste is not only an aesthetic, but a moral matter. Seventeenth-century humanist Balthasar Gracian, for example, understood the discernment in judging which defines good taste as an ethical quality.²⁵⁶ Gadamer writes, “the concept of taste was originally more a moral than an aesthetic idea. It describes an ideal of genuine humanity...”²⁵⁷ Social cultivation aims to develop this sense of taste. Gadamer claims that, for Gracian,

His ideal of the cultivated man [*Gebildeten*] is that, as an ‘*hombre en su punto*’, he achieves the proper freedom of distance from all the things of life and society, so that he is able to make distinctions and choices consciously and reflectively.²⁵⁸

As with Hegel, Gadamer is casting Gracian as a supporter of Gadamer’s own conception of *Bildung* as a matter of distance and reflectiveness regarding one’s particular circumstances

²⁵³ Kant makes this point at Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. A132/B171 “If this logic wished to give some general direction for how we should distinguish whether this or that did or did not stand under them, this again could not be done otherwise than by means of a rule. But this rule, precisely because it is a rule, requires for itself direction from the faculty of judgement.” However, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, judgement is understood as the direct subsumption of cases to a rule, ignoring cases in which the universal is not specified. Kant would later revise this position in the *Critique of Judgement*.

²⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 29.

²⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a27.

²⁵⁶ In Gracian’s *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, taste appears as a moral quality connected to ethical judgement and character. For example, Gracian argues that the ability to “choose well” requires “good taste and correct judgement,” (§51) while he notes “You may know a noble spirit by the elevation of his taste,” (§65). Balthasar Gracian, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, trans. Joseph Jacobs (New York: MacMillan, 1945).

²⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 32.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

and life. In his discussion of Hegel, Gadamer referred to this as a kind of ‘universality’. In Gracian’s terminology, this quality is connected to the matter of having “good taste.”

Gadamer argues that taste is a mode of knowing. “Taste knows something,” he claims, adding, “admittedly in a way that cannot be separated from the concrete moment in which that object occurs and cannot be reduced to rules and concepts.”²⁵⁹ Taste is a mode of knowing, but one plainly different to the rule- and concept-based knowing of the natural sciences. This is an ambitious claim, which Gadamer makes in dialogue with Kant. Kant’s influential discussion of the judgement of taste distinguishes it from knowledge, which is for a Kant a matter of concepts.²⁶⁰ However, Kant noted that the judgement of taste has a “universality” – its claim is not merely that something is beautiful for me, but that something is beautiful in general, and we expect the agreement of others.²⁶¹ At the same time, this universality is not the same as the universality of a law of nature. It is not rooted in any objective feature of what is judged. For this reason, Kant concludes that it is a subjective universality, rooted in the subjectivity of “the entire sphere of judging persons.”²⁶² Thus taste has a greater significance than mere personal preference or “agreeableness.”

Whether Kant, in spite of his earlier position, is already moving here towards acknowledging taste as a form of knowing is a question which goes beyond our concerns here.²⁶³ Regardless, for Gadamer there is a knowing at stake in the notion of taste. He points as evidence for this to the fact that taste can be distinguished from fashion. Although taste is informed by social standards, it is not completely determined by them, as fashion is. Rather, Gadamer suggests that there is an independence of taste, such that one’s individual taste has a “freedom” with regard to social standards of fashion.²⁶⁴ This is significant, because it means that taste is not merely relative to social circumstances, but is oriented towards some standard of correctness.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 35. The notion of “object [*Objekt* or *Gegenstand*]” does not appear in the German. A better translation might be, “cannot be separated from the concrete moment in which it [taste] takes place and cannot be reduced to rules and concepts.”

²⁶⁰ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that knowledge is a matter of the concept as a general rule. “All knowledge requires a concept, however imperfect or obscure. But a concept is always, as regards its form, something general serving as a rule.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A104.

²⁶¹ *Critique of Judgement*, §6.

²⁶² Ibid., Ak. 215.

²⁶³ See Schmidt, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects*, especially ch. 1. In regard to the way Kant’s Third Critique begins to question elements of his earlier Critiques, Deleuze and Guattari’s comment is felicitous: “Kant’s *Critique of*

Judgment is an unrestrained work of old age, which his successors have still not caught up with: all the mind’s faculties overcome their limits, the very limits that Kant had so carefully laid down in the works of his prime.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London: Verso, 2009), 2.

²⁶⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 35.

This is what Gadamer calls the “special normative power” of taste: “the knowledge that it is certain of the agreement of an ideal community.”²⁶⁵ Taste orients itself not only in relation to the present community, but in reference to an ideal community. This means that its standards are not only determined relative to the time. Yet the standard of correctness is not a ‘timeless’ or ‘eternal’ rule. Gadamer’s position here is nuanced, in that he is adopting a middle ground between essentialism, where taste would refer itself to a universal, timeless standard, and relativism, according to which taste would be entirely relative to the standards of a particular community. For further characterisation of the middle position Gadamer adopts here, one could consider his reading of Aristotle on natural law.²⁶⁶

In this discussion, Gadamer refers to an unusual passage in which Aristotle distinguishes the legally just from the naturally just.²⁶⁷ For Aristotle, the naturally just is natural but “nevertheless changeable”, unlike scientific natural laws, which are constant (“fire burns [the same] here and in Persia”). Gadamer argues that Aristotle is here attempting to avoid the pitfalls of both legal conventionalism and universalism – justice is not universal and unchangeable, but neither is it wholly relative to legal conventions. Rather, there is a “nature of the thing [*Natur der Sache*]” which is however not a “fixed standard” but rather has “only a critical function.” Moral concepts such as justice:

are not norms to be found in the stars, nor do they have an unchanging place in the moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them. Nor are they mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing – except that the latter is always determined in each case by the use the moral consciousness makes of them.²⁶⁸

The nature of the thing is determined, or, I would prefer, concretised, in the particular situation, opening a critical distance from presently existing conventions. The nature of the *Sache*, in this case, is not a fixed essence but rather a critical notion which challenges the conventions of a society by referring one to a transcendent ideal.²⁶⁹ At the same time, this transcendent ideal is not an essence existing in the clouds.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 328-30.

²⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134b16-35a15.

²⁶⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 330.

²⁶⁹ There is far more to say about the notion of the ideal in Gadamer’s work. To investigate this, one could examine his reading of Plato’s *Republic*, with its notions of utopia and the ‘idea of the good’ which lies ‘beyond being.’ Plato, *The Republic*, 509b8-10. Gadamer provides an interpretation of the sense of transcendence meant by Plato here in Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, while he interprets the

Following Gracian, Gadamer suggests that taste is ultimately a moral matter. He makes this claim again in dialogue with Kant, referring to the idea of judgement. As we have seen, in the Third Critique Kant argued that judgement could be distinguished as either “determinative” or “reflective,” depending on whether it was merely the application of a general rule, or operated in a space without a determinate rule. As we have already discussed, for Gadamer this distinction is problematic, nowhere more so than in the world of the ethical. Following Aristotle, Gadamer argues that ethical *praxis* cannot be mastered with laws.

Every judgement about something intended in its concrete individuality (e.g., the judgement required in a situation that calls for action) is – strictly speaking – a judgement about a special case [*Sonderfall*]. That means nothing less than that judging the case involves not merely applying the universal principle according to which it is judged, but co-determining, supplementing, and correcting [*mitbestimmt, ergänzt und berichtigt*] the principle. From this it ultimately follows that all moral decisions require taste – which does not mean that this most individual balancing of decision is the only thing that governs them, but it is an indispensable element. It is truly an achievement of indemonstrable tact to hit the target [*das Richtige zu treffen*] and to discipline the application of the universal, the moral law (Kant), in a way that reason itself cannot. Thus taste is not the ground but the supreme consummation (*Vollendung*) of moral judgement.²⁷⁰

Ethical judgement is not merely the mechanical application of a rule to a particular situation. Rather, it must be sensitive to the unique case [*Sonderfall*] it confronts, in a way that may require departure from or revision of existing rules. Thus it appears that ethical judgement is governed by a form of “taste” or “tact”.

Gadamer here is expanding upon themes of Kant’s Third Critique, in such a way as to pose a challenge to Kant’s ethics as expressed in other works. In the Third Critique, Kant had already acknowledged a connection between the beautiful and the moral. For example, he

political significance of the *Republic* as a utopia in "Plato's Educational State," in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, ed. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). C.f., "What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason," 80.: "Utopia is a dialectical notion. Utopia is not the projection of aims for action. Rather the characteristic element of utopia is that it does not lead precisely to the moment of action, the setting one's hand to a job here and now. A utopia is defined by the fact that it is a form of suggestiveness from afar." Utopia is not a law of what to do in the present moment. Rather, it is an ideal which opens a critical distance from the present society. In this regard, it resembles what Gadamer speaks of as the ideal of taste.

²⁷⁰ *Truth and Method*, 37.

claimed that “to take a direct interest in the beauty of nature is the always the mark of a beautiful soul.”²⁷¹ However, this idea is not fully worked out in the Third Critique and the extent to which it is a departure from views in Kant’s other works of moral philosophy is unclear. For Gadamer, the notion of judgement implies a fundamental revision of Kant’s ethics and a close connection between the moral and the beautiful. This is because, in judging the beautiful, universal rules alone cannot be sufficient. Reflective judgement, as we have seen, is for Gadamer as for the Kant of the Third Critique a space beyond the straightforward application of rules. But whereas Kant restricts this form of judgement to the spheres of aesthetic and teleological judgements, for Gadamer this form of judgement appears most obviously in the sphere of the ethical. This means that judgement in the moral as well as the aesthetic sphere requires a “taste” or “tact” as a guide.

It is clear that Gadamer has, not only Kant, but also Aristotle in mind here. The notion that judgement must co-determine or even “correct” the rule echoes Aristotle’s claim that in the judgement of equity there must be a “rectification [*epanorthomena*]” of the law.²⁷² Gadamer claims that the humanist notion of moral taste harkens to a classical heritage.

The emergence of the concept of taste in the seventeenth century, the social and socially cohesive function of which we have indicated above, has connections with moral philosophy that go back to antiquity. There is a humanistic and thus ultimately Greek component at work in Christian moral philosophy. Greek ethics – the ethics of measure in the Pythagoreans and Plato, the ethics of the mean (*mesotes*) that Aristotle developed – is in a profound and comprehensive sense an ethics of good taste.²⁷³

Gadamer is tracing a kinship between modern humanism and ancient Greek sources. Describing Greek ethics as an ethics of good taste is unconventional, and nonsensical if we understand taste as a subjective, unreasoned aesthetic preference. But, as we are by now ready to understand, Gadamer’s understanding of taste is not this. Instead, taste is a sensitivity in judgement informed by but also independent of relative cultural circumstance. Taste is a virtue of judging well in circumstances where there is no directly applicable rule, and thus is at stake not only in aesthetic but also moral judgement.

²⁷¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Ak. 298. The discussion in §17, of how a beautiful human form can express a moral ideal, is also significant here.

²⁷² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b12.

²⁷³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 37.

To conclude, Gadamer's discussion of the four basic concepts is not an argument for or against humanism. Neither is it the presentation of a method for the human sciences. Rather, what Gadamer's discussion aims to establish is the sense of truth present in the humanities, as a component of the task of determining the sense of truth in understanding in general. To do this, he examines four basic concepts of humanism which he takes as distinguishing the humanities. While Gadamer is not explicit on this point, we have found that, whenever Gadamer hints towards the unique truth evident in these concepts, it turns out that this truth has an ethical relevance. All four of Gadamer's concepts are ultimately ethical ones. Evident in the form of knowing they exhibit is sensitivity to difference, measure and perspective regarding one's own interests, tact and judgement in dealing with situations where general rules do not apply, and attentiveness to the particular. This form of knowing is informed by shared cultural values, but not in such a way as to imply a cultural relativism. Finally, Gadamer has argued that this truth refers back to an ancient Greek heritage.

Thus, it is clear that this discussion of the basic concepts of humanism has been referring to the tradition of *phronesis*. That is, for Gadamer, something like *phronesis* lies at the basis of the humanities. The humanities are distinguished from the natural sciences by virtue of their alternative sense of truth, a sense of truth which is akin to *phronesis*. It is a truth which has a moral and practical significance and is related to the *ethos* of one's historical tradition. The notion of a moral sensitivity present in ideas such as *Bildung*, taste, judgement, *sensus communis* is analogous to *phronesis*. This means that the epistemological independence of the humanities from the natural sciences is based in the Aristotelian distinction between *episteme* and *phronesis*.²⁷⁴ The self-understanding of the humanities as representatives of humanism has given way to their status as representatives of Greek (in particular Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian) ethics.

Also, it is important to note that Gadamer has developed *phronesis* as a form of knowing which necessarily involves openness to and understanding of others. Aristotle already acknowledged this when he identified the proximity of *phronesis* to *sunesis*, and when he emphasised the importance of friendship in his ethics. Particularly in his conception of *Bildung*, drawing rather freely upon Hegel, Gadamer argues that the truth apparent in the humanities is an attentiveness to the perspectives of others. This fits with the overall

²⁷⁴ In this regard the term "epistemology" itself is part of the problem, as it is the distinction of *phronesis* and *episteme* that Gadamer is seeking to remind us of.

perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics as a philosophy of dialogue with the other.²⁷⁵ Implicit here is a critique of Heidegger, who understood *phronesis* as essentially pertaining to Dasein's own being.²⁷⁶

But openness is not the only important aspect of Gadamer's reading of humanism. If the truth of the humanities is *phronesis*, it is not only a matter of openness but also a sensitivity and good judgement regarding what to do. *Phronesis* is not only a sensitivity to the perspective of others. It also prescribes how to deliberate well in a particular situation of action.

Additionally, unlike *sunesis*, it is not only a matter of judging but also commands action. This means that George's and Veith's readings of Gadamer's discussion of humanism in terms of "openness" are one-sided. George describes Gadamer's version of *Bildung* as the cultivation of a "capacity for displacement" – an ability to "be open for and grapple with the displacement we experience in the predicament of the exception posed to us by every situation."²⁷⁷ Similarly, Veith argues that the importance of the humanities is that "they cultivate the ethical comportment of openness."²⁷⁸ While there is much truth to this, the problem is that, if the truth of the humanities is something like *phronesis*, then it is not only a capacity for displacement. It is also a capacity to judge and act well. *Phronesis* is not only a liberal openness to the viewpoints of others, a negative requirement to adopt distance from one's own perspective. It also involves wise decisions regarding what to do. The *phronimos* possesses not only a capacity for displacement but also a capacity for good action. *Phronesis* gives a positive prescription to do certain actions and to live in a certain way (*eu prattein* and *eu ze*), thus enabling one to embody virtue or excellence (*arete*). Gadamer's interpretation of the humanities is not fully captured in readings which bring Gadamer's hermeneutics into proximity with a liberal openness.

At this point, we must raise a problem for Gadamer's understanding of the humanities. Is it really the case that the truth of the humanities is a matter of *phronesis*? This is a strong and surprising claim. If the truth established in the humanities is *phronesis*, then their understanding of themselves as "theoretical" disciplines standing at a distance from the

²⁷⁵ Risser writes, "Philosophical hermeneutics maintains that the act of understanding is constituted in relation to the other; it asks about the conditions under which one is able to hear the voice of the other." Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 20-21.

²⁷⁶ Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, 33-35. In conversation with Riccardo Dottori, Gadamer suggests that his first inclinations towards an original hermeneutics arose from a dissatisfaction with Heidegger's thin account of the other during the period of *Being and Time*. Gadamer and Dottori, *A Century of Philosophy: Hans Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, 21-22.

²⁷⁷ George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*, 47.

²⁷⁸ Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 150.

praxis of life becomes questionable. A consequence of this would be that it becomes difficult to establish a difference between what a historian does, for example, and the actions of the subjects of her study – both participate in the *praxis* of historical life informed by tradition. Gadamer often reminds his readers that, in Ancient Greece, *theoria* was in fact a form of *praxis*.²⁷⁹ Yet we might think that a historian, unlike the actors she studies, is engaged in an activity that is in some way at a higher level of reflection or stands at a greater distance from practical life, even if this distance is not total. Is there no sense in which history is a theoretical discipline, which produces a truth more akin to *episteme* than *phronesis*?

It is worth noting that, for Aristotle, the *phronimos* need not be a philosopher. *Phronesis* can sometimes be gained from practical experience, and is embodied in figures like Pericles, who may not have theoretical wisdom.²⁸⁰ One need not be a political scientist to become a good politician. Likewise, philosophers like Anaxagoras and Thales may be theoretically wise (*sophon*) but not practically wise (*phronimon*).²⁸¹ How exactly one may understand Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* and *sophia* and the overall relationship between the different *hexeis tou aletheuein* is much debated. But, even if they have a practical significance, to place the humanities entirely on the *phronesis* side of this divide seems an exaggeration. The knowledge Pericles brings to bear in his governance of Athens, and the knowledge that a political theorist or political scientist seeks in her reflections upon such political actors, seems to differ in kind. Rather, we might think that the political theorist or scientist stands to some extent distanced from the action of politics, while nevertheless noting that one can never completely remove oneself from the practical situation of factual existence.

For this reason, it is important not to overstate the relationship between *phronesis* and the humanities. Gadamer's point is not that the truth of the humanities can be entirely assimilated to *phronesis*. Nor, as we have already seen, is his point to set out a philosophy of the humanities which comprehensively explains their function or the methods by which they can attain truth. Gadamer has established a connection between the humanities and *phronesis*, but not an identity. The question of the nature of the truth that occurs in the humanities is not

²⁷⁹ E.g., Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 230. C.f., Aristotle, *Politics*, 1325b18-22.

²⁸⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b6-12.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1141b5.

completely answered by relating it to *phronesis*.²⁸² But the question of the sense of truth in general for Gadamer is a topic for another thesis. What is important for present purposes is to note that Gadamer argues that the heritage of the humanities in humanism, and ultimately classical practical philosophy, endows them with a practical significance. But to assimilate the truth of the humanities to the truth of *phronesis* would be to overstate the case. While the humanities do have an existential-moral significance, there also seems to be a sense in which they are scientific disciplines aiming to attain a theoretical knowledge.

In summary, Gadamer's investigation of the humanities argues for a link between the truth at stake in the humanities and the truth of *phronesis*. For Gadamer, the unique truth of the humanities is a moral-existential truth which discloses an orientation within a practical situation. The importance of the humanities, then, is to be measured by how they illuminate the world with an ethical understanding. Gadamer's point here leads to a fundamental reconsideration of how the humanities and their place within society and within the institution of the university is to be understood. While Gadamer has not set forth explicitly a comprehensive theory of the truth that is at stake in the humanities, it is plain that this truth will resemble the truth of *phronesis*. Gadamer's hermeneutics seeks to elaborate how a truth akin to *phronesis* emerges in a modern context.

²⁸² This point leads Günter Figal to argue that Gadamer ultimately lacks a comprehensive account of truth in general, or at least does not give one explicitly. Günter Figal, "Hermeneutische Wahrheit: Gadamers Frage Und Ihre Phaenomenologische Antwort," *Internationales Jahrbuch Für Hermeneutik* 10 (2011).

Conclusion:

A tendency exists today to frame the gravest problems our society faces in technical terms. According to this view, the destruction of the natural environment which supports human existence, for example, is a problem in need of technical solutions. Scientific and technological achievements which can allow more efficient use of natural resources, different modes of economic organisation, and so on, offer avenues for a proper response to these challenges.

This technical approach is by no means without value. Certainly, more effective solar panels or waste-management processes will contribute immensely to any response to the ecological crisis. However, this thesis has explored how scientific and technical solutions alone may not be sufficient for the most pressing contemporary challenges. A paradox of the ecological crisis is that the technological advancement of modern society has been accompanied with a worsening of the problem. While most human cultures have had some impact on the surrounding environment, it is only since the rise of modern science and industrialism that the disruption of natural ecologies has accelerated to catastrophic levels. Yet more technology may be the solution to a problem technology has exacerbated, but something else may be needed.

Some of the gravest problems our society faces might instead be framed as problems of reading. Here reading is taken in a very broad sense, as the way in which human beings come to understand the world around them. People read not only texts but also situations, events, and other people. I suggest that the way that we read or understand the world around us shapes our actions or inaction. The ecological crisis, for example, arises because the environment is read as a resource for human exploitation; the self is read as an isolated island motivated to seek its own interest; and the lives of non-human creatures are read as without inherent value. Alternatively, we read the world uncomprehendingly and experience a vague sense of anxiety and alienation. The poet Muriel Rukeyser says that “the world is made of stories, / not atoms.”²⁸³ The stories that are told and the meanings that are read decisively shape that world.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer allows us to explain how the problems of modern society could be usefully understood as problems of reading. For Gadamer, reading or understanding is an existential feature of human life. In understanding, a

²⁸³ Muriel Rukeyser, *Out of Silence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 135.

truth emerges which is not contained within the ‘correspondence’ or ‘coherence’ theories which dominate much philosophical discussion of the question of truth. It is not only a theoretical or epistemological matter, but rather has an ethical significance. It is a way of reading the world which constitutively shapes human being and action. Understanding is the source from which individual and collective forms of action emerge. If Gadamer is correct, then hermeneutics, the philosophy of understanding or reading, acquires a critical importance. To confront the problems our society faces, we must transform the meanings we read in the world around us.

In this regard, Gadamer suggests that the scientific approach to understanding the world is incomplete, in a way which recalls Socrates. Like Gadamer, Socrates describes a form of understanding which goes beyond a scientific or technical explanation. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates describes his encounter with the book of Anaxagoras.²⁸⁴ Anaxagoras speculated that the phenomena he observed around him in the workings of *phusis* could be explained as caused by ‘mind [or intellect, *Nous*].’²⁸⁵ While it is difficult to know what exactly Anaxagoras originally meant by this, Socrates reports his hope that this would mean an explanation of natural phenomena in terms of what is “best [*beltiston*].”²⁸⁶ That is, Socrates expected to find in Anaxagoras an understanding of the world around him in an ethical register. But Socrates’ hope was disappointed. For Socrates, Anaxagoras’ explanations of the natural world were in fact ‘mindless,’ explaining the world without reference to the question of the good.²⁸⁷ Socrates explains how such an account can only be inadequate and disorienting. What this passage makes clear is a question regarding the nature of understanding. Understanding, for Socrates, is not only scientific account of causes. Anaxagoras’ book, filled though it may have been with ingenious theories, left Socrates strangely cold and unfulfilled. Perhaps Anaxagoras had knowledge or facts regarding nature, but the understanding which Socrates really sought, Anaxagoras could not provide. Understanding must refer itself to the question of the good or the best.

Socrates’ reflections in the passage from *Phaedo* strike a chord with the state of modern science and technicity. The problem of Anaxagoras finds itself repeated today. Although modern science constantly extends the reach of its theoretical knowledge and technical mastery of nature, nevertheless there is a growing sense that this form of knowledge is by

²⁸⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 97b-100a.

²⁸⁵ Patricia Curd, ed. *A Presocratics Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011). 59 B12.

²⁸⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, 98b.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 98c.

itself not completely adequate. To the questions of how one should live, how science's vast power should be employed, and what place we occupy in the world around us, science itself can respond only with deafening silence. From this vacuum arises alienation and anxiety, increasingly recognisable and destructive forces in global politics. This gives rise to a paradoxical situation in which, although modern human beings know more and more, yet perhaps they understand less and less.

How can a way of reading allow us to respond to social problems? This thesis explored how, for Gadamer, understanding has an ethical significance. The understanding which Gadamer elaborates in *Truth and Method* and elsewhere is not only a theoretical knowing, but a reflection on the practical questions which Socrates was compelled to ask. It refers itself to the question of the good, ideally giving rise to a truth akin to *phronesis*, a reading which offers a practical orientation to the world. If this is true, Gadamer's concern is not only to furnish a method for the human sciences, a guide on how to read texts, or a philosophical anthropology of historicity – rather, hermeneutics ultimately has ethical concerns at its core.

This hypothesis was tested by tracing the place of one key concept through Gadamer's *Truth and Method* – Aristotle's *phronesis*. The investigation made clear that *phronesis* furnished Gadamer with a model of the relationship between universal and particular. This allowed him to articulate the human being's belonging to historical tradition in such a way as to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, relativism, conservatism or revolution. However, it was found that Gadamer's description of this notion as "application [*Anwendung*]" was perhaps misleading. If historical human beings concretise tradition as Aristotle's *phronimos* concretises *ethos*, then the illusion of an escape from the influence of history, a *creatio ex nihilo* in which the past is left behind, is dispelled. At the same time, the past re-establishes its continuity anew in each present, so that the conservative who wishes to stay in the past is equally misguided. Gadamer's notion of application reflects his belief that historical tradition is the element in which human understanding always moves. The ethical implications of this are that ethics is no longer to be understood as a matter of identifying timeless laws or formulae, and that ethical reflections always arise from out of the finitude of one's historical and cultural horizon.

This finding already affords to *phronesis* an essential importance for Gadamer's thought and has significant implications for how we understand moral problems. But this does not make clear whether or not Gadamer's hermeneutics could be related to the 'reading' problematic of

a search for understanding amid a world of facts. If *phronesis* were no more than a model for Gadamer, then the understanding he depicts in his hermeneutics would not itself have acquired a moral significance, and would have done nothing to satisfy Socrates' desire. However, consideration of Gadamer's discussion of humanism made it clear that *phronesis*' presence in *Truth and Method* was more than immediately apparent and that its significance transcended that of a mere model.

Rather, it became clear that the truth which Gadamer argues manifests itself in the arts and humanities is itself a truth akin to *phronesis*, a knowing with some form of moral significance. This truth comes with an openness to the perspectives of others and an existential prescription to live or act in a certain way. The stakes of Gadamer's discussion of the humanities become clear when we find that the key concepts of humanism Gadamer identifies are all moral concepts which ultimately refer to a heritage in classical practical philosophy. It becomes apparent that Gadamer's discussion is not an argument for or against some doctrine of 'humanism,' nor is it a merely theoretical discussion of the 'epistemology' or the methods of the human sciences. If Gadamer's characterisation of the truth of the humanities is correct, then their independence from the natural sciences comes to rest on a profound ethical significance. The humanities open different ways of reading the world.

Gadamer's hermeneutics, then, finds its ethical significance in its call for the development of an understanding to enrich social reason and supplement scientific knowledge. The findings of this thesis imply that Gadamer's hermeneutics cannot be understood as a solely 'epistemological' exercise or a reflection on the function of the humanistic disciplines. Rather, it must be placed within the context of a project to develop a wisdom to respond to contemporary ethical dilemmas. It depicts how understanding can give rise to a wisdom which allows one to navigate the world, engage in practical reasoning, and flourish as a community. In reading the world differently, new responses can emerge to the challenges our society faces.

But how can we read in such a way that this *phronesis* can emerge? Distinguishing between good and bad ways of reading the world is a challenge. Any decision regarding what constitutes 'good reading' would itself be rooted in a way of reading. Gadamer does not give any rules or guidelines for how one can attain a better understanding. *Phronesis* cannot be encoded in a method or learned from a textbook. It is a constant theme of the Platonic dialogues that *phronesis* and virtue cannot be taught like scientific facts. In the *Seventh*

Letter, Plato explains why he does not write explicitly about his most central philosophical views.

There is certainly no treatise of mine on it, nor will there ever be. For unlike other sciences [*mathemata* – better: forms of learning], this one can in no way be communicated by means of words. On the contrary, it is only through a prolonged communion [*sunousias*] with the subject, by living with it, that, like a light that is kindled by a flickering flame, it begins to suddenly nourish itself within one's soul.²⁸⁸

For Plato, the most important forms of philosophical learning cannot be directly written or read. Rather, they come from prolonged communion with the matter. They are not 'content' which can be transmitted to a student. Similarly, for Gadamer the way by which understanding is to be attained cannot be encoded in a method or textbook. There are no direct rules or procedures by which one can securely attain better ways of understanding.

Nevertheless, Gadamer indicates what might be involved in ideal reading. Many of these themes have emerged in this thesis: openness, questioning, and critically engaging with tradition. The most important requirement of hermeneutics is merely to listen to the voice of the other. "Uninterrupted listening," – Gadamer describes this as the true "rigour" of hermeneutics.²⁸⁹ To take on the task of 'reading' or trying to understand the other, to be open to this task, is the rigour for which Gadamer calls. Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests that this listening could be the source of greater understanding and therefore better responses to the important problems of our times. In this way, perhaps a spark can be nourished from which transformed readings of the world and new ways of being can emerge.

²⁸⁸ Plato, "The Seventh Letter," in *Plato at Syracuse*, ed. Heather Reid and Mark Ralkowski (Parnassos Press, 2019), 341c-d.

²⁸⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 481.

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