

## GADAMER AND UNIVERSALITY

THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSALITY IN  
GADAMER'S THEORY OF HERMENEUTICS

By

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## Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer's contribution to the philosophical discipline of hermeneutics is clearly acknowledged and has been reflected upon at length, particularly following his publication of *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960. However, far less attention has been given to his contributions to hermeneutics in the field of theology. Since it is often thought that Gadamer's concentration on philosophical and historical themes suggests he was deliberately setting himself apart from religious discussions, few scholars have seriously engaged Gadamer's contribution to theological hermeneutics. In this thesis, I am attempting to unify Gadamer's diverse writings on the topic of religion in order to determine where he believes the project of theological hermeneutics ought to be found within the overall scope of hermeneutics as a general discipline. In order to do this, I begin with the division Gadamer establishes between the natural sciences and the human sciences. I draw upon the idea of application – as found in the natural sciences – as well as the concept of historical-linguistic universality – as it emerges from within the human sciences – in order to situate the interpretation of theological texts within Gadamer's framework. I present this account of theological hermeneutics as one that shares some characteristics of both the natural and the human sciences because of its unique subject of faith. I argue that Gadamer offers an account of theological hermeneutics that is clear and evident, although it does not fit neatly into his original disciplinary division but is instead found at the intersection of the natural and human sciences.

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Thank you also to Professors Harvey White, Jamie Crooks and the other members of the Plato Group in Lennoxville who first introduced me to philosophy and later to hermeneutics in an exciting and extraordinary manner.

I owe many thanks to so many people in Heidelberg who helped me tremendously with my attempts to learn German in anticipation of this project. The kindness I was shown during my year in Germany has left me with fond memories, enduring friendships, and many hopes of returning.

The completion of this thesis would never have been possible without the continued support and encouragement of family and friends, all of whom always believed this project was possible, even in brief moments when my own certainty wavered. Thank you.

Bien que je ne sois pas théologien, je crois qu'il existe un parallélisme assez intime entre la théologie et cette forme de savoir qu'on appelle <philosophie pratique>.

“Herméneutique et Théologie”  
Hans-Georg Gadamer

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## Introduction

In both the professional and personal aspects of Hans-Georg Gadamer's life, he demonstrated an overall commitment to interdisciplinary study, and more specifically to the unique relationship between philosophical and theological hermeneutics. In a relatively early review of *Truth and Method*, Fred Lawrence remarked that when encountering this text, "the realization grows that one is meeting the thought of a man who does not merely discuss interdisciplinary studies in an abstract way but incarnates the interdisciplinary."<sup>1</sup> Given his constant commitment to the interconnectedness of philosophy, literature, history and art among others, his weaving together of multi-faceted themes and ideas, it is hardly surprising that Gadamer's philosophically-based proposal concerning the nature of interpretation should influence and involve religious texts. However, given his relatively few writings focusing directly on theological topics,<sup>2</sup> Gadamer's position towards religion may be considered to be far less influential than his many contributions to philosophy and literature.

On a personal level, it is clear that Gadamer had an interest in – and felt a

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Lawrence "review of *Truth and Method*," *Religious Studies Review* 3 (1977): 36.

<sup>2</sup> In the following texts, Gadamer explicitly addresses religious topics at length: *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990), 1-491. // *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), 5. Auflage (1986), *Gesammelte Werke Band 1* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 1-494.; "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 44-58. // "Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses: Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zur Frage der Entmythologisierung," (1961) *Gesammelte Werke Band 2* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 121-32.; "Hermeneutics and Historicism," *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990), 505-41. // "Hermeneutik und Historismus," (1965) *Gesammelte Werke Band 2* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr: 1993), 387-424.; "Herméneutique et Théologie," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 51 (1977): 384-97.; "Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science," *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 119-27. // "Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft," (1984) *Gesammelte Werke Band 8* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 156-62.



responsibility to discuss – the often controversial nature of theological hermeneutics. For several years, as a young scholar in Marburg, he participated in a weekly seminar group hosted by Protestant theologian, Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>3</sup> Comments made later in his life about Bultmann and Karl Jaspers among others<sup>4</sup> suggest that Gadamer did not wish to completely isolate himself from the domain of theological hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup> Even given this personal curiosity, Gadamer adamantly self-identified as a philosopher and not a theologian.<sup>6</sup> Gadamer’s movement between philosophy and theology often involved literature or poetry<sup>7</sup> as an intermediary step between these two disciplines. This reflects his initial training in Greek philosophy where Gadamer was first able to access theological questions from within a traditionally philosophical framework.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for which he hesitated to tackle these themes in a more direct manner are not easily discernable.

Recently, two scholars have offered different reasons for Gadamer’s lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert R. Sullivan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985). // *Philosophische Begegnungen, Gesammelte Werke Band 10* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995), 375-440.

<sup>5</sup> Even the assumption of universality (which will be discussed in chapter 2) assumes a relationship and suggests a level of interconnectedness between academic disciplines.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Eberhard recalls an interview in which Gadamer clearly stated “Ich bin kein Theologe.” Interview by Erwin Koller, 1984, Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 177.

<sup>7</sup> Note, for example: “Aesthetic and Religious Experience,” *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 140-53. // “Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung,” (1964/1978) *Gesammelte Werke Band 8* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr: 1993), 143-55.; “The God of Most Intimate Feeling,” *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. Robert H. Paslick (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 119-29. // “Der Gott des innersten Gefühls,” (1961) *Gesammelte Werke Band 9* (8 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr: 1993), 162-70.

<sup>8</sup> Note, for example: “On the Divine in Early Greek Thought,” *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 37-57. // “Über das Göttliche im frühen Denken der Griechen,” (1970) *Gesammelte Werke Band 6* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr: 1985), 154-70.

serious attention to theological hermeneutics: Jean Grondin has suggested that Gadamer's distance from theological interpretation results from his reluctance to enter into discussions in which he had limited background knowledge, as well as an attempt to differentiate himself from Martin Heidegger's position on religion<sup>9</sup> which Gadamer described in a recorded conversation with Grondin as follows: "[M]y life mission was very different from Heidegger's, for example, who was searching for a more appropriate language than that of Catholicism – that is, he was searching for a religious language."<sup>10 11</sup> If Gadamer is, admittedly, not "searching for a religious language," then to what extent is he interested in and contributing to theology and theological interpretation?

Alternatively, Philippe Eberhard asserts that Gadamer's distance from religion emerges more immediately from his philosophical position and that his tension with

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Grondin, "Gadamer and Bultmann," *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 122.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, tape recorded conversation, 18 September 1994, Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> In a discussion of Heidegger's relationship to the history of philosophy and the place of religion within it, Gadamer states the following: "[T]his was not Nietzsche. There was also nothing of a religious eccentricity here. Even when occasional eschatological tones sounded, when the seemingly oracular talk was about the God who 'supposedly suddenly' might appear, there were extrapolations of philosophical thought and not the words of a prophet. This was a strenuous struggle for a philosophical language, which sought to go beyond Hegel and Nietzsche for the sake of retrieving and then 'repeating' the beginnings of Greek thinking." Gadamer, "Martin Heidegger," *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert R. Sullivan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 51. // "[E]s war nicht Nietzsche. Es war auch nichts von religiöser Verstiegtheit darin. Selbst wenn gelegentlich eschatologische Töne anklangen, wenn, orakelhaft genug, von >dem Gott< die Rede war, der >jäh vermutlich< erscheinen könnte, waren das Extrapolationen des philosophischen Gedankens und nicht Prophetenworte. Es war ein angestregtes Ringen um eine philosophische Sprache, die jenseits von Hegel, aber auch jenseits von Nietzsche, den ältesten Anfang des griechischen Denkens zu wiederholen, wieder zurückzuholen vermöchte." "Martin Heidegger – 85 Jahre," (1974) *Gesammelte Werke Band 3* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 267-8. Note also Gadamer's article, "The Religious Dimension in Heidegger," *Transcendence and the Sacred*, trans. Dennis Looney, ed. Alan M. Olson and Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 193-207. // "Die religiöse Dimension," (1981) *Gesammelte Werke Band 3* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 308-319.

theology lies in the fundamental difference between “the hermeneutic event and the *kerygma*.”<sup>12</sup> “The hermeneutic event,” argues Eberhard, is an encounter that is not only open to but invites our interpretations. An historical or literary text comes alive through the dynamic encounter between what the text represents in its own history and the framework or horizon that is presented to it by the interpreter. Alternatively, the *kerygma* is strictly limited to an individual encounter with God. As such, this encounter is effectively beyond the boundaries of hermeneutics as a philosophical discipline.<sup>13</sup> Eberhard further claims that, “[f]or Gadamer Scripture is the word of God. It takes absolute precedence over its interpretations.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the message of God cannot be interpreted in the same manner as other texts. Given this, it is not open to interpretation in the same way and requires a different framework.

The relationship between the unique character of theological interpretation, which Eberhard argues originates in the definition of *kerygma*, is further developed in Gadamer’s discussion of faith as a necessary, particular condition for possible interpretation and acceptance of the word of God. Building upon Eberhard’s discussion of the significant distinction between the subject matter of philosophical and theological interpretation, I will posit that, for Gadamer, the unique nature of the theological subject – faith – cannot be fully aligned the universal historical-linguistic foundation of understanding that emerges most clearly within the human sciences. For Gadamer, the necessity of faith in theological hermeneutics challenges the universality that he argues is

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<sup>12</sup> Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications*, 189.

<sup>13</sup> “The *kerygma* appears to be above the hermeneutic pit or outside the hermeneutical circle!” Ibid., 189.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 191.

the defining feature of the hermeneutical system in the human sciences.

Therefore, in this project, I will focus on the place of theological hermeneutics within Gadamer's hermeneutical system. In particular, I will consider the tension that exists between the methodology of the natural sciences and universality within the human sciences, as it is at the intersection of these two approaches that I believe Gadamer has placed the interpretation of religious texts. I intend to demonstrate that Gadamer's discussions of faith and theological hermeneutics claim elements that he describes as pertaining to both the natural and human sciences. As such, theological interpretation is not simply one possible example within the category of the human sciences; it is unique because of the status (and accessibility) of faith and, therefore, requires a different hermeneutical framework.

In chapter 1, I will examine Gadamer's assessment of the natural sciences' methodology – as a methodology that is based upon reason and application – and why he believes that in this framework, there is a lack of unity between the particular and the universal. This is a necessary starting point for my project because Gadamer will appeal to a particular type of application in his description of theological hermeneutics. In the natural sciences, this application takes the form of a pre-determined method or universal rule that is established prior to any encounter with what one endeavours to interpret and understand. This is not dissimilar from how Gadamer will later describe faith as a necessary precondition for the interpreter who wishes to discern meaning in religious texts.

I will then discuss how Gadamer expressly differentiates between two types of

inquiries – those of the natural sciences and those of the human sciences – thereby setting forth a structure through which we can gauge the appropriateness of using the tools of either approach for a given task of inquiry and interpretation. In so doing, Gadamer addresses the characteristic or defining features of each framework: In the natural sciences, this involves a focus on reason, control, method and certainty. Alternatively, the human sciences are primarily concerned with our collective and inherent relationship with history and language as the guiding principles of human existence as well as any ability to successfully interpret what we encounter.

In chapter 2, I will focus upon the structure of universality as Gadamer uses this term to categorize inquiries in the human sciences. I will examine both the historical and linguistic character of universality, since both are important to how Gadamer ultimately characterizes faith and our potential ability to interpret theological texts. I will also address issues of particularity, unity and alienation, as these categories further serve to establish the limits and boundaries of different types of hermeneutical investigation.

In chapter 3, I will examine Gadamer's discussions of theology, in an attempt to ascertain where exactly he places this discipline within his framework. The unique risks posed by theological hermeneutics are aptly described by the authors of *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* as follows:

[A] central concern of biblical hermeneutics has been that the interpreter allows the text of Scripture to control and mold his or her own judgments and does not subordinate the text to the interpretive tradition to which the interpreter belongs. The

interpreter must somehow be prevented from finding in the text only what he or she is already expecting or hoping to find.<sup>15</sup>

This idea of allowing one's beliefs to be confirmed or verified by what is encountered in Scripture reflects Gadamer's discussions of faith which will be the central focus of chapter 3. In this section, I will examine the nature of transcendence, application and the specific pre-understanding that Gadamer describes as foundational for theological hermeneutics. In these discussions, Gadamer effectively places the status of theological interpretation mid-way between the natural sciences and the human sciences. He utilizes categories of application and particularity, both of which are definitive features of the natural sciences. However, Gadamer simultaneously groups theological interpretation with other human sciences by appealing to its inherent historical-linguistic universality.

For Gadamer, there exists the particularly unique – and not necessarily universally accessible – subject matter of faith. In addition, he suggests that the category of application is integral to theological inquiry. As such, any substantial discussion regarding theological hermeneutics would have to deal with the somewhat ambiguous nature of a subject that Gadamer believes requires application (as definitive of the natural sciences), yet simultaneously maintains the basic criteria of universality as they are outlined within the human sciences.

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<sup>15</sup> Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 80. Although this quotation concerns Protestant Christianity in particular, I believe it offers a helpful starting point for any assessment of theological hermeneutics.

## Chapter 1: Investigation and Interpretation in the Natural Sciences

Gadamer begins his important text *Truth and Method* with a section entitled “The problem of method” (*Das Methodenproblem*).<sup>16</sup> From the very beginning, we are confronted with what exactly Gadamer believes this problem to be and how, if possible, we may begin to solve it. The problem concerns the relationship between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and why the latter must claim an interpretive identity that is separate from the scientific method that he believes inappropriately dominates all modern inquiry. Gadamer suggests that the need for this project in *Truth and Method* arises from an historical overextension of the scientific method into other (non-scientific) domains of inquiry and spheres of experience. Thus, he accuses science<sup>17</sup> of assuming an unwarranted universality in the application of its particular method of understanding the world.

Gadamer suggests that the prevailing paradigm of science has been (and continues to be) misapplied through our collective attempt to use the tools that were designed to govern the scientific world in order to understand encounters that are found outside its disciplinary boundaries. However, it is important to recognize that Gadamer’s description of the scientific method is not intended to negate or subordinate scientific projects. Rather, he is concerned with the dangers of overextending the scientific method into other domains (i.e., the human sciences) that cannot – and ought not – conform to its

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 3-9. // *Wahrheit und Methode*, 9-15.

<sup>17</sup> My use of the term “science” throughout this chapter refers to the dominant method of the natural sciences that Gadamer confronts with his own description and presentation of the category of universality.

structure and application.<sup>18</sup> Gadamer affirms the importance of utilizing the scientific method as a tool that can be applied to some experiences and events in the world; however, he resists a common appeal to scientific method in any and all investigations.

What is particularly interesting about this criticism of science is that Gadamer eventually claims universality for his own project. The hermeneutical inquiry that emerges from the human sciences is ideally intended to include the scientific method since it describes a universal mode through which we can and do interpret the world, both as scientists and as humanists. In this chapter, I will inquire into the nature of the universality that Gadamer dismisses in the natural sciences, while at the same time claiming for himself what he believes is a positive, all-encompassing version of this same term. The questions I am asking are as follows: Is Gadamer critical of something within the natural sciences – a definition of universality – that he then describes and promotes as both inherent and necessary within the field of the human sciences? Does he attempt to invalidate a particular description of science (i.e., its purported universality) that he will ultimately affirm as integral to his own project and emerging definition of universality? If so, is this an illogical position to maintain? I believe that although his position on universality may seem contradictory, Gadamer is not in fact dismissing a characteristic of the natural sciences that will then become the foundation for his discussions of interpretation within the human sciences. Instead, he is offering a picture of how his

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<sup>18</sup> Georgia Warnke concisely summarizes this idea as follows: “For Gadamer the problem with modern philosophy’s epistemological orientation is not its attempt to offer a justification or account of our knowledge. Rather, the problem is that it restricts this ‘giving of accounts’ (*Rechenschaftsangabe*) to a legitimation of scientific knowledge. The validity of natural science is both taken as a given and held up as a model for all other forms of knowledge.” Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 162.



definition of universality ought to encompass – and, in fact, already encompasses – all investigations by appealing to the common origin of the natural and human sciences. Given his emphasis on this common point of departure, I do not believe Gadamer’s criticism is strictly directed at the assumed universality within the natural sciences, but instead at this method’s inability to reconcile the particular with the universal.

In order to explain this distinction, I will first examine the nature of science and its assessment by Gadamer as being primarily characterized and based upon reason and an attempt at controlling the environment. Secondly, since Gadamer has identified the need to explicitly propose an alternative (yet encompassing) framework of universality, there must be a fundamental error in the application of scientific methodology that has traditionally been applied in an effort to understand the human sciences. Given this, I will examine the nature of scientific methodology and its dangers of misapplication.

Finally, following from these discussions, I will investigate the nature of the division between the natural and human sciences. Gadamer appeals to the common origin of both disciplines, reminding us that these disciplinary distinctions are a modern creation and not a position that has been inherited through our history. I wish to align this discussion with the relationship between the subject matter of the investigation, the mode of inquiry and the inquirer. It is the subject matter that began as unified and then differentiated; it is with this first separation that Gadamer begins his discussion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “The difference [between the natural and human sciences] that confronts us is not in the method but in the objectives of knowledge.” Gadamer, “Forward to the second edition,” *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990), xxix. // “Nicht eine Differenz der Methoden, eine Differenz der Erkenntnisziele liegt vor.” “Vorwort zur

Following from this, his criticism of the purported universality of the natural sciences eventually calls into question the relationship between this separation of subject matter and the eventual lack of unity between what is being investigated and the person who is engaging in that investigation. Gadamer's concern is, therefore, not actually with universality as a category but with a definition of universality that does not adequately unite the investigator with what is being investigated.

### Reason and Control:

In order to consider how Gadamer evaluates and critiques the scientific method, his assessment of reason must first be examined as Gadamer believes this to be both the guiding force and the manner of application within the field of scientific understanding. Gadamer argues that in science, “the self-conscious inferences of the natural scientist depend entirely on the use of his own reason.”<sup>20</sup> What Gadamer identifies here is a complete dependence upon reason. The scientist is both enabled and limited by his or her capacity for rational thought that leads to the proper or improper use of the scientific method. “[I]t seems to be the way of science to recognize the objective facts and the objective laws and to make them controllable and at the disposal of everyone.”<sup>21</sup> In this

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2. Auflage,” (1965) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1993), 439. The point of differentiation is, therefore, found in the subject matter itself. Following from this, a new framework may emerge but it is not from the level of method that the difference first presents itself.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 5. // “[D]as selbstbewußte Schließen des Naturwissenschaftlers ganz auf dem eigenen Verstandesgebrauch beruht.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, “The Science of the Life-World,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 189. // “[D]ieser Sachlage gegenüber scheint auf den ersten Blick der Weg der Wissenschaft, die objektive Tatsachen feststellt und Gesetzmäßigkeiten herausarbeitet und so die Dinge für jedermann kontrollierbar und verfügbar macht. . . .” “Die Wissenschaft von der Lebenswelt,” (1972) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 3 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 153.

sense, the rationally-derived “facts” and “laws” are found at the heart of the scientific project. Reason provides the tools through which this system of interpretation, this manner through which we acquire knowledge, can emerge. Gadamer cites the ideals of this system as being control and accessibility. It is our collective desire to understand and control the environment in which we live that underlies the scientific project. The second factor, accessibility, suggests that everyone can use reason to interpret and understand the world in this way. However, this universal accessibility emerges from using reason in a particular way, such that the scientific method may be properly derived and applied. The natural sciences’ project of “recognition” that Gadamer describes involves realizing and applying the appropriate method to an object of investigation, in order to acquire knowledge.

Gadamer also believes that the invocation of reason in the realm of interpretation and understanding leads us to seek a type of unified epistemology. He describes the link between reason and unity as follows: “[R]eason’s need for unity and for the unity of knowing stays alive today, but now it knows itself to be in conflict with the self-awareness of science. The more honestly and rigorously science understands itself, the more mistrustful it has become toward all promises of unity and claims of final validity.”<sup>22</sup> Here, Gadamer suggests that it is reason that claims the ability to achieve

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, “On The Philosophic Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 7. // “Zwar bleibt das Bedürfnis der Vernunft nach Einheit und Einheit des Wissens bis heute lebendig, aber es weiß sich von nun an im Konflikt mit dem Selbstbewußtsein der Wissenschaft. Je ehrlicher und strenger diese sich versteht, desto mißtrauischer ist sie gegen alle solche Einheitsversprechungen und Endgültigkeitsansprüche geworden.” “Über das Philosophische in den Wissenschaften und die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Philosophie,” (1975) *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), 15.

unity, and scientific investigation has merely been caught up in believing that this is both desirable and attainable. He does acknowledge that modern science may no longer have this aim, yet its initial ties to this ideal objective of unity remain. This search for an ultimate, comprehensive truth has laid the foundation for the scientific method that has been taken up and assumed as both the structure and criteria for truth in other non-scientific investigations.

Gadamer's suggestion that "self-awareness" is the key to avoiding this mistake relates to his later discussions of historically-effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) as an important element of interpretation in the human sciences.<sup>23</sup> The idea of self-reflection remains prominent in both the natural and human sciences; however, as Gadamer suggests above, science's introspection is deliberate – an "honest understanding" – and, therefore, not assumed or taken for granted.

Another dimension of Gadamer's characterization of reason in relation to science concerns the acknowledgement of limitations within the scientific project. "The true natural scientist does not have to be told how very particular is the realm of knowledge of his science in relation to the whole of reality."<sup>24</sup> For Gadamer, the recognition of the limits of the projects of the natural sciences involves two things: First, it ought ideally to recognize the particular scope of the immediate project and, in so doing, not endeavour to

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<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300-7. // *Wahrheit und Methode*, 305-12. This term refers to the tradition and historical circumstances that inform one's perspective or orientation towards what is being interpreted.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, "On The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. G. B. Hess and R. E. Palmer, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 40. // "Dem echten Naturforscher ist es ohnehin klar, wie partikular der Erkenntnisbereich seiner Wissenschaft im ganzen der menschlichen Wirklichkeit ist." "Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik: Metakritische Erörterungen zu >Wahrheit und Methode<," (1967) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 248.

extend its method of application beyond that project. Second, science ought to acknowledge the broader limitations of its field of inquiry. Not every attempt to understand is a scientific attempt; not every acquisition of knowledge results from the scientist's proof or disproof of a carefully constructed hypothesis. The belief that we can understand the totality of what we encounter by using the same tools and applying them a similar manner to every situation is a mistake.

Just as he is critical of instrumental reason as an overextended tool in the natural sciences, Gadamer is equally dismissive of those who use the natural sciences to determine the standards and criteria for success in non-scientific inquiries. He is particularly critical of the historical reliance of the human sciences upon the natural sciences. Gadamer believes that any attempt on the part of either the natural or the human sciences to define the legitimacy of the projects of the human sciences based on the methods of the natural sciences is problematic. In this sense, he is also critical of the human sciences' appeal to the criteria and measures set forth by – and initially only intended for use within – the natural sciences.

Gadamer suggests that self-knowledge is essentially incompatible with a perceived control – or attempt to be in control – of nature that he believes is the foundation of scientific discourse.<sup>25</sup> Given this, science often operates accordingly

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<sup>25</sup> “Self-knowledge alone is capable of saving a freedom threatened not only by all rulers but much more by the domination and dependence that issue from everything we think we control.” Gadamer, “On the Natural Inclination of Human Beings Toward Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 150. // “Selbsterkenntnis allein vermag die Freiheit zu retten, die nicht nur durch die jeweils Herrschenden bedroht ist, sondern mehr noch durch die Herrschaft und Abhängigkeit, die von all dem ausgeht, das wir zu beherrschen meinen.” “Über die Naturanlage des Menschen zur Philosophie,” (1971) *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), 124.

within a non-self-reflective sphere where the method itself is prioritized above the possibly self-reflective use of that method. In this sense, Gadamer differentiates the scientific method (as largely unreflective) from the human sciences by emphasizing the method itself as it stands independent from any inquiry or investigation. If the scientific method is understood by Gadamer as a static application, then it need not reflect upon its use at all. It need not refer itself to historical contexts or situations in order to be properly applied. It must only refer to its own structure and form of application, a structure that Gadamer proposes may be appealing precisely because it is unchanging.

Gadamer suggests that the origin of modern science with Galileo is based upon the following foundation that has persisted as the basis of the modern scientific method:

It was especially the idea of **method**, or of securing the path of **knowledge** in accord with the guiding ideal of **certainty**, that brought a unified meaning of knowing and knowledge to the fore.<sup>26</sup>

This description suggests a relationship between method, knowledge (as determined by reason) and certainty where the proper mode through which truth can be ascertained is by using reason to invoke a pre-determined method (which itself arose through reason) in an attempt to reach rational certainty (or knowledge) about the world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century divide between science and philosophy (as included within the human sciences), this

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, “Philosophy or Theory of Science?,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 156. // “Es war insbesondere die Idee der **Methode**, d. h. der **Sicherung des Erkenntnisweges** durch das leitende Ideal der Gewißheit, das einen neuen Einheitssinn von Wissen und Erkenntnis zur Geltung brachte. . . .” “Philosophie oder Wissenschaftstheorie?,” (1974) *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), 131-2 (my emphasis).

association between method and reason was not an inevitable or unavoidable guiding relationship within the natural sciences.

Gadamer believes it is in the scientific community's appeal to reason through the prioritization of method over historical context that has led science to forget its roots in philosophy. He asks the question, "[i]n the age of science, is there any way of preserving and validating the great humane heritage of knowledge and wisdom?"<sup>27</sup> It is not Gadamer's response to this question that is most interesting but the fact that the question itself is recollecting a pre-17<sup>th</sup> century (pre-Galilean) world where the relationship between reason and historical knowledge was thought to be inseparable. The modern scientific method assumes a direct relationship between human reason and truth such that the construction and application of a rationally determined method will eventually lead to an objective understanding of the world and our experiences within it. Gadamer desires, therefore, to remind us of a pre-scientific, pre-modern paradigm where the objectives and approaches of the natural and human sciences are consistent with each other.

#### Methodology – its Nature, its Use and its (Potential) Misapplication

Gadamer emphasizes the modern scientific community's movement toward a model that regards every phenomenon as one that could possibly be subsumed – and therefore potentially understood – by a universal rule. The rules themselves are derived from an empirical observation and rational assessment of nature. Gadamer suggests that,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 159. // "Ist da überhaupt noch ein Weg, im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft das große Menschheitserbe von Wissen und Weisheit zu bewahren und zu bewahrheiten?" Ibid., 136.

“science views everything that can be experienced as its possible object.”<sup>28</sup> This assumes that science can objectify the world without fully acknowledging the relationship between the one who objectifies (through his or her reason in the process of applying the scientific method) and that which can allegedly be objectified (our experiences of and in the world). Alternatively, research within the human sciences (“historical research”) “does not endeavour to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule.”<sup>29</sup> Gadamer further describes a link between the *subject* (inquirer) and the *object* (experience) in the human sciences where the two are mutually defining and cannot, therefore, be considered as independent.<sup>30</sup> Gadamer regards this independence between subject and object as a chief characteristic of scientific inquiry.

In his essay, “Philosophy or Theory of Science?,” Gadamer appeals to the history of scientific discovery and innovation (in particular, that of Galileo) in order to set forth a clear link between science, categories of knowledge or epistemology, and certainty. It is here that inquiries within the scientific realm are understood as being related to the pursuit of truth and the governing desire for a certain, unequivocal understanding of *things*. Again, reference to understanding objects as something that is separate from one’s self-understanding is emphasized.

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<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, “Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science,” 120-21. // “[D]ie Wissenschaft alles Erfahrbare als ihren möglichen Gegenstand ansieht. . . .” “Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft,” 157.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 4. // “[H]istorische Erkenntnis erstrebt dennoch nicht, die konkrete Erscheinung als Fall einer allgemeinen Regel zu erfassen.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> This unity will be discussed in chapter 2 where Gadamer’s understanding of the process of interpretation is described as being analogous to a game between two people in which both participants are constantly referring to each other and cannot engage in the process alone without this interconnectedness. For Gadamer, the same is true of textual interpretation: As an interpreter, I cannot attempt to understand the text without acknowledging a unified process between myself and that text.



Here, attaining knowledge for the purpose of achieving certainty is affirmed. Gadamer's belief that the history of thought splits in this way reinforces the suggestion that he is ascribing to science an historical link with methodological development aimed at absolutely certainty that is not (or ought not to be) shared with the human sciences. This appeal to method and reason within the natural sciences has created a fundamental separation between the natural and human sciences.

The relationship between methodology and science is further described by Gadamer as an overriding characteristic of modernity: "For modernity is defined – notwithstanding all disputed datings and derivations – quite univocally by the emergence of a new notion of science and method."<sup>31</sup> Here, methodology becomes characteristic of both science and modernity. For Gadamer, the definition of modernity includes this "new" form of method. The attempt to derive and ascertain absolute truth values occurs when methodology becomes the guiding structure and ultimate tool of science. Once again, Gadamer observes that science loses its historical affiliation with philosophy once its methodology – and that methodology's purported certainty – becomes the defining feature of its inquiry.

The techniques and methods of science can be understood on their own, apart from their application. It is this movement towards a characterization of the method of science apart from its use in the world that separates it further from pursuits within the human sciences. For Gadamer, any belief that we could understand the process of

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<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, "On the Philosophic Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy," 6. // "Denn Neuzeit definiert sich – gegenüber all den umstrittenen Herleitungen und Datierungen – eindeutig dadurch, daß ein neuer Begriff von Wissenschaft und Methode aufkommt. . . ." "Über das Philosophische in den Wissenschaften und die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Philosophie," 13.

understanding apart from our engagement in that process is misplaced if it is upheld within the human sciences. The natural sciences have, however, made this claim (at least implicitly).

Gadamer argues that the proper place of application is in concert with understanding and interpretation. He suggests that following the separation of these terms, an overriding emphasis has been placed upon a particular form of application – the application of method – in the natural sciences. In the hermeneutical process that Gadamer describes in the human sciences, we must be vigilant about “regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising one unified process.”<sup>32</sup> This is what must be recovered following the separation of these terms in modern discourse. By revisiting the original connection between understanding, interpretation and application, Gadamer wishes to situation a particular form of application, within the human sciences, as essential to the hermeneutical process.

Jean Grondin suggests that what Gadamer means by application in the human sciences with reference to its unity with understanding and interpretation is “much more akin to. . . ‘translation.’”<sup>33</sup> This distinction is also evident in Gadamer’s word choices: Here, he uses the term *Anwendung* to signify the type of application that is part of the unified hermeneutical process described above. When discussing the application of method within the natural sciences, Gadamer generally uses *Applikation*. This distinction

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<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 308. // “[W]ir nicht nur Verstehen und Auslegen, sondern dazu auch Anwenden als in einem einheitlichen Vorgang begriffen denken.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 313.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Grondin, “Gadamer’s Basic Understanding of Understanding,” *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43.

is significant because Gadamer uses to both *Applikation* and *Anwendung* in order to properly describe theological hermeneutics (chapter 3).

Gadamer further cites the error of science as follows: “The independence of science from philosophy means at the same time its irresponsibility – not in the moral sense of the word but in the sense of its incapacity and its lack of any perceived need to give an account of what it itself means within the totality of human existence, or especially in its application to nature and society.”<sup>34</sup> If we compare this with the following quote from his essay, “The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,” we can begin to identify the basis of Gadamer’s criticism: “For as triumphant as the march of modern science has been, and as obvious as it is to everyone today that their awareness of existence is permeated by the scientific presuppositions of our culture, human thought is nonetheless continually dominated by questions for which science promises no answer.”<sup>35</sup>

Two things emerge from these quotations: First, Gadamer is suggesting a limitation of science, both historically and phenomenologically, with respect to the “totality of human existence.” This limitation is developed in the second quotation where

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<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, “Philosophy or Theory of Science?,” 161. // “Die Unabhängigkeit der Wissenschaft von der Philosophie bedeutet ja zugleich ihre Verantwortungslosigkeit – natürlich nicht im moralischen Sinne des Wortes, sondern im Sinne ihrer Unfähigkeit und Unbedürftigkeit, über das Rechenschaft zu geben, was sie selber im Ganzen des menschlichen Daseins, d. h. vor allem in ihrer Anwendung auf Natur und Gesellschaft bedeutet.” “Philosophie oder Wissenschaftstheorie?,” 138.

<sup>35</sup> Gadamer, “The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 109. // “Denn so triumphal auch der Siegeszug der modernen Wissenschaft gewesen ist und so selbstverständlich auch für jeden heute Lebenden die wissenschaftlichen Voraussetzungen unserer Kultur sein Daseinsbewußtsein durchdringen, so beständig ist dennoch das Denken der Menschen von Fragen beherrscht, auf die die Wissenschaft keine Antwort verheißt.” “Die philosophischen Grundlagen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts,” (1965) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 4 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 5.

Gadamer suggests that science is simply not a sufficient framework for answering the questions that continually emerge from human thought. The questions and issues to which Gadamer alludes include artistic expression and morality.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Gadamer is relating interpretation to ontology (which will be discussed further in the following chapter). “Human thought” produces questions that science fails to answer. We are capable of thinking, of existing, in a manner that scientific methodology cannot contain.

Recent scholarship suggests that what Gadamer identifies as the problematic point of differentiation between the natural and human sciences – the emergence of, and reliance upon, method – concerns the inability (or impossibility) of the human sciences to conform to this methodological manner of interpreting and attempting to understand the world. The idea that method brings forth understanding (in the natural sciences) must be contrasted with Gadamer’s suggestion that in the human sciences, understanding manifests itself through the direct, unmediated, unified interaction between the interpreter and that which is interpreted. The process of interpretation happens both because of and beyond our involvement. As interpreters, we are necessary, yet we do not deliberately control our interpretations. The ability to engage in interpretation is a characteristic of our existence; it is not self-consciously exercised upon the world as a tool of reason.

Herta Nagl-Docekal has suggested that Gadamer approaches the methodological difference between these two forms of inquiry (the natural and human sciences, respectively) by reflecting primarily on the foundations of science in order to ascertain the limits of scientific investigation and, following from this, the limits of its

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 111-2. // Ibid., 7-8.

applicability.<sup>37</sup> She believes Gadamer is essentially drawing a contrast between the natural and human sciences as representative of the broader differentiation between epistemology and ontology. That is, the natural sciences maintain the “ideal of objectivity” by making the world “the object of scientific investigation” and, therefore, the object of methodology.<sup>38</sup> Here, Nagl-Docekal is identifying a critical relationship between method and understanding. Her evaluation of Gadamer’s position suggests that the natural sciences view the application of methodology as the epistemological basis for understanding the world. As such, the primary ontological consideration has been overlooked or forgotten. What is of particular interest in this assessment is that it is the “ideals” and not necessarily the realities of scientific investigation that stand in contrast to the projects of the human sciences. As explained earlier, Gadamer readily acknowledges that self-awareness of the limitations of method within the scientific community limits the scope of investigation to what can actually be achieved without necessarily assuming an unwarranted, universally applicable method.

The belief that the world contains potential “objects” of understanding which are grasped through the application of a predetermined method suggests that we cannot connect with these “objects” without the benefit of the method itself. Understanding depends upon methodology; there is not a pre-methodological manner of encountering the world. This distinction between what can be achieved through the use of method and what can be accomplished without it is significant because Gadamer posits that the

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<sup>37</sup> Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Towards a New Theory of the Historical Sciences: The Relevance of *Truth and Method*,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, trans. Murray Woody, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 193-4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-5.

human sciences require an ontological relationship – between the one who experiences and interprets and that which is experienced – that occurs before any possible application of method. The necessity of method in the natural sciences suggests a problematic intermediary step in our encounters with the world. One no longer encounters the world and attempts to understand it purely through that encounter; instead, we encounter the world through the lens of a pre-determined method. The direct interaction may be lost and this is precisely what Gadamer views as problematic when the ideals of understanding can only be attained through the use of method.

Gadamer’s critical response to this article begins with the suggestion that: “[I]t did not occur to me [Gadamer] to criticize the sciences or their struggle for objectivity. . . . I am concerned with philosophy. I ask myself how the spectacular development of modern science with its concept of method and its concept of objectivity is supposed to be related to the lived reality of being-in-the-world.”<sup>39</sup> Here, Gadamer emphasizes that his primary concern is not with the natural sciences’ focus upon objectivity and application of method; moreover, he is critical of what he regards as a removal from “being-in-the-world.” This “removal” invites an objectification of what is being examined and, correspondingly, of the investigator himself. The focus has shifted to an emphasis upon the lack of unity between these two elements – subject and object – which becomes the basis of Gadamer’s criticism of the natural sciences’ claim to universality. Universality must, for Gadamer, involve the recognition that the subject and

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, “Reply to Herta Nagl-Docekal,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 205.

object are related, changeable and mutually defining.

Charles Taylor further expresses Gadamer's concern by appealing to the binding character of language as follows: "[I]n *Truth and Method*, Gadamer shows how understanding a text or event, which comes to us out of our history, has to be construed, not on the model of the 'scientific' grasp of an object, but rather on that of speech-partners who come to an understanding [*Verständigung*]."<sup>40</sup> Without yet entering into Gadamer's discussion of language (which will be examined at length in chapter 2), what Taylor suggests is that Gadamer disagrees with the "model" of science (its methodological model) when applied to historical or human sciences. Ultimately, Gadamer is suggesting that the truth of human sciences is found outside or beyond the structures of method. Now the question becomes, what precisely is the distinctive feature of the human sciences (and the texts found therein) that will not allow for the application of this modern scientific "model"?

#### A Common Origin and a Different Inquiry: Natural Sciences versus Human Sciences

Gadamer attributes the modern separation<sup>41</sup> between the two disciplines (the

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer argues that, historically, there was no differentiation between these two modes of inquiry as science and philosophy began as one in ancient Greek thought: "The foundation upon which philosophy in Greece established itself in this way was, of course, the unrestricted nature of the desire to know, but not indeed that which we call science. . . . [W]hat we call science for the most part would not have even entered into the scope of the Greek use of the word *philosophia*." Gadamer, "On The Philosophic Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy," 5. // "Die Grundlage, auf der sich dergestalt in Griechenland Philosophie erhob, war zwar die Unbändigkeit des Wissenwollens, aber doch nicht das, was wir Wissenschaft nennen. . . . Was wir Wissenschaft nennen dagegen, wäre zu einem größeren Teile bei dem griechischen Gebrauch des Wortes *philosophia* überhaupt nicht in den Blick getreten." "Über das Philosophische in den Wissenschaften und die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Philosophie," 12. In this essay,

natural and human sciences) to science's prioritization of a particular use of reason and its resulting method as *the* applicable tool that governs interpretation and potential understanding. The current projects of the two disciplines, their respective objects (and objectives) of investigation differ as follows: "[The human sciences'] ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness."<sup>42</sup> It is the historically determined circumstances (tradition, language, prejudices, etc.) that Gadamer believes must be taken into account and given priority in the human sciences. The application of method is not sufficient as *the* fundamental tool of understanding.

Gadamer's assessment of the scientific method focuses on the uniform application and repeatability of the method itself. Truth and meaning are possible in this domain because a method has been devised for this purpose. In contrast to this, the human sciences and the interpretations within them, as Gadamer describes them, are found precisely in the impossibility of ascribing a method and corresponding purpose or directive that could govern the hermeneutical process. By basing the scientific method on application, Gadamer suggests that its use is both deliberate and conscious, whereas the hermeneutical process is unavoidable and implicit.

For Gadamer, science is goal oriented and its objectives are clearly defined. Science endeavours to understand something about the world through the invocation and use of its carefully delineated method. There is an element of finality when this objective has been reached and a particular piece of knowledge has been ascertained. In the human

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Gadamer is suggesting that science – as a rationally/methodologically driven modern discipline – does not have an independent origin, and was in fact originally subsumed under the broader category of philosophy.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 5. // "Ihr Ideal ist vielmehr, die Erscheinung selber in ihrer einmaligen und geschichtlichen Konkretheit zu verstehen." *Wahrheit und Methode*, 10.



sciences, the truth that is being ascertained is created by the very act of attempting to define it. Given this, the objective is constantly manifesting, changing and renewing itself as the interpretive process continues.

Gadamer bases this differentiation in what he believes is the unique character of *Bildung* (culture/cultivation/creation/formation) in the human sciences. Since the natural sciences need not contend with this concept, the application of method within their own framework is not inadequate. It is, however, inappropriately applied when used in a field that is defined by *Bildung*. For Gadamer, culture/cultivation offers a preliminary response to the following question: What is the unique character of the human sciences that has not been adequately addressed – or perhaps has not been addressed at all – by the methodological framework devised for and through investigations in the natural sciences?

Gadamer suggests that “*Bildung* is intimately associated with the idea of culture and designates primarily the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities.”<sup>43</sup> This initial description suggests a definitively human process that is encompassed within (and also defines) the projects of the human sciences in contrast to those of the natural sciences. Gadamer develops this idea by suggesting that *Bildung* is or ought ideally to be associated with “a special source of truth,”<sup>44</sup> thereby necessitating a unique manner of interpretation. Gadamer’s concept of *Bildung* appears to emphasize an ongoing process. This idea of self-development and fulfillment as a central and defining feature of human existence further suggests a continual process of recognition and self-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 10. // “Bildung gehört jetzt aufs engste mit dem Begriff der Kultur zusammen und bezeichnet zunächst die eigentümlich menschliche Weise, seine natürlichen Anlagen und Vermögen auszubilden.” Ibid., 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 18. // “eine eigene Quelle von Wahrheit” Ibid., 24.

understanding.

Gadamer's characterization of reason and methodology within the natural sciences is not designed to minimize the scientists' projects. Instead, Gadamer describes the dangers of using these tools to understand a discipline that is characterized less by objectives and more by becoming, and has less reliance on rational thought and more on the inherent nature of human beings as interpretive beings. For Gadamer, the hermeneutical process within the human sciences is governed and defined by the properties of human existence itself. This process does not appeal to reason or method in an effort to make sense of the world, but acknowledges the manner in which human beings exist as (historical-linguistic) interpretive beings. It is this basic ontology that establishes the foundation for Gadamer's category of universality.

In his forward to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes the following claim: "My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing."<sup>45</sup> I believe that ultimately Gadamer is able to critique the universality of the scientific method while upholding that of the hermeneutical project based on this reference to the difference between "what we do or what we ought to do" and "what happens to us" despite this. The scientific method is associated with the former, while the universality of hermeneutics is based on our encounters with the world as they "happen" both beyond and because of our involvement. The scientific process is directed by a given hypothesis

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<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, "Forward to the second edition," xxviii. // "Mein eigentlicher Anspruch aber war und ist ein philosophischer: Nicht, was wir tun, nicht, was wir tun sollten, sondern was über unser Wollen und Tun hinaus mit uns geschieht, steht in Frage." "Vorwort zur 2. Auflage," 438.

that is either upheld or rejected following the methods and procedures dictated by the discipline. Gadamer believes this represents both “what we do” – since this has become the dominant mode of modern inquiry – as well as “what we ought to do,” as other non-scientific discourses now attempt to model their respective (and unique) investigations on this framework. Alternatively, what “happens to us” is our continual involvement with what we wish to understand without attempting to remove ourselves from this process. Invoking a method for this purpose is a secondary and – in the case of the human sciences – unnecessary step towards understanding. We are already deeply connected with what we desire to know and the process of ascertaining truth is significantly determined by this inseparable relationship between subject and object.

For Gadamer, the scientific method claims universality through intentionality and imposition. It intends its own universality because it can be applied in order to achieve an end goal – i.e., “we ought” to be able to understand the world through the application of method by separating ourselves and our process of inquiry from the objects into which we are inquiring.<sup>46</sup> The alternative hermeneutical project that Gadamer proposes is universal simply because we are already unavoidably engaged in it, regardless of our intentions – i.e., interpretation occurs as a fact of our existence “over and above our wanting and doing.” If we understand universality as differing in this way, then

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<sup>46</sup> Gadamer further explains this process of separation as abstraction: “[S]cience always stands under definite conditions of methodological abstraction and. . . the success of modern sciences rests on the fact that other possibilities for questioning are concealed by abstraction.” Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 11. // “Wissenschaft stets unter bestimmten methodischen Abstraktionsbedingungen steht und daß die Erfolge der modernen Wissenschaften darauf beruhen, daß andere Fragemöglichkeiten durch Abstraktion abgedeckt werden.” “Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems,” (1966) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 226.

Gadamer's critique of science on the grounds of application becomes clearer. The scientific method anticipates universality, while the hermeneutical project is already universal in nature. While we can recognize the extent to which the universality of the scientific method can be determined and controlled, the universality of hermeneutics is the unavoidable process in which we are already involved; not the goal or end result.

Gadamer insists that the universality of the hermeneutical project extends and encompasses all other inquiries, including those of scientific investigation: "The hermeneutical question, as I have characterized it, is not restricted to the areas from which I began in my own investigation."<sup>47</sup> Gadamer emphasizes this point as an attempt to deliberately include the scientific project within his own investigation. Science is not to be displaced by Gadamer's proposed hermeneutics; rather, the scientific method must be subsumed within the unavoidable universality of hermeneutics as a mode of being. Gadamer's critique of the scientific method is primarily concerned with what happens when the end result of an inquiry is intended and assumed. Ultimately, this is not a concern about universality as such but about the assumed relationship between universality, application and intentionality. Gadamer will not allow the universality of hermeneutics to be subjected to the same critique he makes of the scientific method as long as the hermeneutical project does not forget that universality in this context is understood as an unavoidable state of being in the world.<sup>48</sup>

Within the domain of the natural sciences, Gadamer relates universality to the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10. // "Die hermeneutische Frage, wie ich sie charakterisierte, ist durchaus nicht beschränkt auf die Gebiete, von denen ich bei meinen eigenen Untersuchungen ausgegangen bin." Ibid., 226.

<sup>48</sup> This unavoidable state of being is determined by our historical-linguistic nature which will be discussed in further detail in chapter 2.

deliberate application of method in scientific investigations; alternatively, universality is related to an unavoidable state of interpretive being in hermeneutics. The universality of the scientific method is, therefore, more prescriptive, while it is decidedly (or allegedly) more descriptive in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Within the scientific realm, a method is determined in advance and prescribed for the purpose of understanding a given phenomenon or situation. Alternatively, in the human sciences, Gadamer suggests that the manner in which we encounter and interpret is determined by the ontological properties of history and language. As such, its occurrence is not deliberate.

Universality in the human sciences cannot be a deliberate, directed act for which the actor (the interpreter) is solely responsible. Instead, it derives from the unified nature of "common experience."<sup>49</sup> This relates to Gadamer's assessment of the scientific method as something that is grounded in purposeful application and not in the inherent mode of being of (historical-linguistic) existence itself. Truth and meaning are possible in natural science because there is a deliberately established method that allows for this possibility. The universality of Gadamer's hermeneutics is found precisely in the *impossibility* of ascribing a corresponding purpose or directive that could govern the hermeneutical process.

Gadamer's concern with the concept of universality within the natural sciences is not effectively a criticism of the concept itself. It is a critique of the lack of unity between the subject of inquiry and the inquirer herself. Gadamer's proposal of

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<sup>49</sup> "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," 7. // "ein Stück Lebenserfahrung" "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems," 223.

universality forces the re-convergence of subject and object, between the one who investigates and the entity towards which that investigation is focused. Gadamer's return to the historical unity of academic inquiry – between the natural and human sciences, as well as the unity of interpretation, understanding and application – revisits this question of universality in a different way. Now, it is not the basis for the scientific method (i.e., reason) that is at the foundation of Gadamer's criticism. It is the very attempt to differentiate between the subject and object that is being called into question.

Chapter 2: Universality and the Human Sciences

Gadamer's presentation of the unique nature of the human sciences suggests both contingency (i.e., the significance of historical context) and the possibility of unexpected occurrences. It is from these discussions that Gadamer's description of universality – as properly defined within the hermeneutics of the human sciences – emerges. In order to understand why and how Gadamer considers the hermeneutical project to be universal, we must first examine how he defines human existence as a continuous interpretive encounter with the world. Gadamer's discussion of universality begins with the idea that the interpretation of texts is not something altogether different from our essential nature as beings who are always already engaged in processes of interpreting and understanding what we encounter. In order to explicate this, Gadamer appeals to our status as both historical and linguistic beings; he regards these categories as unavoidable and necessary. To exist is to exist historically and linguistically. I will, therefore, examine Gadamer's ontology – as it emerges from his discussions of history and language – in order to explore the concept of universality as it pertains to hermeneutics as a naturally occurring human process. How, and to what extent, Gadamer's category of universality includes interpretation within the human sciences – and infers the inclusion of the natural sciences as well – is crucial to establishing where theological interpretation may be found in this framework. In this section, I will determine the foundation for Gadamer's universality as a first step towards understanding whether or not theological interpretation may be found within this category.

## History

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer focuses on the necessity of historical context by building on Heidegger's concepts of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) and being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*). We cannot interpret without attending to the historical situation that has determined and, therefore, allowed for the very possibility of interpretation. Our ability to interpret originates with the unavoidable fact that we necessarily find ourselves constrained and determined by historical contexts or traditions that we have not created and, thus, do not control.<sup>50</sup> From this initial viewpoint or horizon, Gadamer describes how we encounter and attempt to ascertain meaning within our world. We are both thrown into and project beyond our immediate situations. That is, the ability to interpret depends upon the traditionary circumstances that have created our initial interpretive horizons. It is from these horizons that interpretation and meaning are made possible. It is further from this position that our future circumstances and subsequent interpretive frameworks are created.

Borrowing Heidegger's discussion of temporally defined perspectives (i.e., we exist in time which is itself characterized by the situations, circumstances and horizons that describe this point in time in which we exist),<sup>51</sup> Gadamer suggests that interpretation

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<sup>50</sup> c.f. the earlier discussion of control (chapter 1 – pp.11-16) as one of the features of reason when it is related to the methodology of the natural sciences.

<sup>51</sup> "Human Dasein is distinguished by the fact that it understands itself in terms of its being. In order not to lose sight of the finitude and temporality of human Dasein, which cannot ignore the question of the meaning of its being, Heidegger defined the question of the meaning of being within the horizon of time." Gadamer, "Heidegger's Later Philosophy," *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 215-6. // "Das menschliche Dasein ist dadurch ausgezeichnet, daß es sich auf sein Sein hin selber versteht. Um der Endlichkeit und Zeitlichkeit des menschlichen Daseins willen, das die Frage nach dem Sinn seines Seins nicht ruhen zu lassen vermag, bestimmte sich ihm die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein im Horizont der Zeit." "Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks," (1960) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 3 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 251.



cannot be a foreign application that is uniformly exercised by the interpreter upon the world. By virtue of existing as temporal beings, we are governed by our history and it is through this context that interpretation is made both possible and unavoidable. Here, Gadamer emphasizes the lack of separation between the interpreter and that which is interpreted. In so doing, he rejects the suggestion that the interpretive process could ever be a conscious application of method. For Gadamer, this remains the crucial point of differentiation between the natural and human sciences.

It is in the development of the phenomenological tradition that Gadamer believes we see an alternative to the ineffective attempt to ground the human sciences epistemologically. Gadamer believes that in this Heideggerian heritage, “[u]nderstanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself.”<sup>52</sup> By reintroducing ontology as the primary philosophical concern and investigating the nature of *Dasein* in its temporality, the hermeneutical question of how *Dasein* interprets and understands is also raised.<sup>53</sup> Given that *Dasein* is always already in the world (in historically limited and determined circumstances), and is always already interpreting that world, the process of understanding is not an objective application to what is encountered; it is a process we are already engaged in by virtue of our existence. Gadamer focuses on how this lack of

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<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 259. // “Verstehen ist der ursprüngliche Seinscharakter des menschlichen Lebens selber.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 264.

<sup>53</sup> “[I]n *Being and Time* Heidegger finds a kind of access in the fact that one has with his existence, along with it, a certain understanding of what fullness of being is. It is not a fixed understanding but historically formed, accumulated in the very experience of encountering phenomena. Being can perhaps, then, be interrogated by an analysis of how appearing occurs. Ontology must become phenomenology. Ontology must turn to the process of understanding and interpretation through which things appear; it must lay open the mood and direction of human existence; it must render visible the invisible structure of being-in-the-world. . . .ontology must, as phenomenology of being, become a ‘hermeneutic’ of existence.” Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1969), 129.

separation between the interpreter and the object of interpretation reorients the hermeneutical process away from a method that is determined in advance and then applied to what we encounter, and towards a process in which we are already unavoidably involved whether we recognize this or not.

Gadamer suggests that historical research is always guided by the pre-judgments (*die Vorurteile*) or inherent positions that define one's tradition. Gadamer acknowledges that tradition can play a part in how inquiries in the natural sciences are conducted as well, "[b]ut scientific research as such derives the law of its development not from these [historical] circumstances but from the law of the object it is investigating."<sup>54</sup>

Tradition occupies a much greater significance in the human sciences because we both participate in and attempt to understand through this framework. Gadamer suggests that prejudices are the necessary conditions through which we can understand. This is contrasted with the attempt of earlier scholars of the Enlightenment to overcome all prejudices and deny the significance of tradition and authority in the interpretive process.<sup>55</sup> According to Gadamer, tradition, as a particular form of authority, unavoidably affects our responses to and relationships with what we encounter in the world because the process of understanding is already guided by and found within a given tradition. Gadamer posits that tradition is not in conflict with reason (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment suggest) since it is through reason that tradition is preserved. The insight this represents for hermeneutics is that "[u]nderstanding is to be

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<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283. // "Aber die wissenschaftliche Forschung als solche empfängt ihr Schrittgesetz nicht von solchen Umständen, sondern von dem Gesetz der Sache. . . ." *Wahrheit und Methode*, 288.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-77. // *Ibid.*, 276-81.

*thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition.”*<sup>56</sup> This formulation suggests three things: First, the process of understanding cannot be separated from tradition as we unavoidably confront texts from within a framework (a tradition) that we have not created. Second, the relationship between the past and the present involves an ongoing process of understanding and our direct participation in this process. Third, if understanding is “an event of tradition” then the process of understanding involves an encounter between various phases of history and the traditions that define those periods.

The interpreter exists historically and, as such, always belongs to a tradition that carries with it certain unavoidable (and therefore unchosen) prejudices.<sup>57</sup> One’s own point of reference differs from that of the text that one desires to interpret. Understanding, for Gadamer, involves a relationship between the present context of the interpreter and the past context of the text. This point of communication between the interpreter and the text is not defined by the interpreter’s attempt to reveal the author’s intended meaning (as posited by Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics),<sup>58</sup> nor is it an attempt to reproduce the original tradition of the text itself. In contrast, Gadamer depicts understanding as occurring when the interpreter and the text are able to share something in common. This

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 290. // “*Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen, in dem sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart beständig vermitteln.*” Ibid., 295 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

<sup>57</sup> Note John Hogan’s explanation of this process: “The very prejudices of one’s tradition make understanding possible. Although some prejudices are obstacles and should be overcome, it is the pivotal prejudice of language which provides the medium in which understanding can happen. Language is the locale of the merger of past and present. Presuppositionless thinking is impossible.” Hogan, “Gadamer and the Hermeneutical Experience,” *Philosophy Today* 20 (1976): 5.

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 166-9. // *Wahrheit und Methode*, 171-4.

is an ongoing process, rather than a passive reception of the text by the interpreter. The preliminary (or implicit) goal of an interpretative project involves recognizing an alternative standpoint – the horizon of the text – and finding a way of navigating what Gadamer refers to as the “*in-between*,”<sup>59</sup> the point of meaningful encounter between the foreign tradition of the text and the familiar tradition to which the interpreter belongs.

The process of interpretation can never involve the objectification or isolation of either the text or the interpreter’s context. Given this, the meaning that emerges when the text and the interpreter enter into conversation cannot occur without active participation from these two histories. Both the text and the interpreter are necessarily found in (and governed by) historical situations and each brings to the process of interpretation certain prejudices or presuppositions that uniquely define their respective historical contexts. For Gadamer, the interpretive process is not an attempt to eliminate these prejudices in an effort to reach an ideal, objective, presuppositionless meaning. Instead, it represents the recognition of what is already defining one’s horizon of understanding in order to bring that horizon into a productive dialogue with that of the text so that meaning may be ascertained as a result of that exchange. Moreover, because history both confines and makes possible the act of interpreting, understanding must involve two simultaneous activities: First, it is a reflective process whereby one recognizes the prejudices that are being brought to the project of attempting to understand; second, it is through the creation of a common language that meaning can be determined.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 295. // “*In diesem Zwischen*” Ibid., 300 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

<sup>60</sup> “To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us.” Ibid., 397. // “Auslegen heißt gerade, die eigenen Vorbegriffe mit ins Spiel Bringen, damit die Meinung des Textes für uns wirklich zum Sprechen gebracht wird.” Ibid., 401.

Language

In addition to our historicity, Gadamer often refers his readers back to the unavoidable linguistic character of our being in the world. It is through language that we are able to describe our traditional contexts, experience the world, and begin to interpret by relating our own contexts to those that are initially foreign to us. For Gadamer, the key to understanding hermeneutics as unavoidable and universal rests in the character of language. Language occupies the primary manner in which our engagements with the world are made possible. “[T]radition is essentially verbal in character.”<sup>61</sup> We cannot escape our linguistic framework, nor can we avoid interpreting from that viewpoint. In his discussion of Gadamer’s focus on the linguistic character of existence, Rod Coltman reminds us that, even for Gadamer, “[t]he hermeneutic experience, then, will ‘find its proper ground’ in the ‘middle of language,’ which is not something separable from reason. Language, in other words, ‘is the language of reason itself.’”<sup>62</sup> In this sense, the appeal to language, as an implicit appeal to reason, must diverge from the problematic application of reason (as associated with method) that Gadamer has identified in his discussion of science (see chapter 1). Since Gadamer must grant that language emerges from our rational abilities, he is identifying a link between reason and language that occurs before any conscious attempt at application. It is in this use of reason and the subsequent emergence of language that Gadamer initially places the universal character of interpretation within the human sciences.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 389. // “[D]as Wesen der Überlieferung durch Sprachlichkeit charakterisiert ist. . . .” Ibid., 393.

<sup>62</sup> Rod Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 106.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer offers an assessment of hermeneutics by first relating it to linguistic communication. By drawing out the relationship between two participants in a conversation, their respective interpretations and understanding, and the conversation itself, Gadamer isolates and focuses on the life of the conversation that emerges from an encounter between two people. Gadamer describes how we “fall into,” “become involved in,”<sup>63</sup> and are led by the conversations in which we are involved. This suggests that as participants, we are both necessary and incidental. Our involvement creates the conditions for the possibility of the conversation, yet ideally the conversation moves beyond any attempt to maintain control or ownership of it. The conversation is created because of the involvement of the participants, yet they do not determine (or perhaps even predict) its future projection.

Gadamer parallels this relationship to the hermeneutical structure in which the participants – the reader and the text – engage each other in an effort to reach an understanding. The distinctive feature of textual interpretation is the one-sided responsibility of the reader who is the only active participant in this dialogue. Whereas in a conversation, both individuals are actively involved in creating the common dialogue and coming to a mutual understanding, the process of textual interpretation involves the reader uncovering and determining both sides of this dialogue. The interpreter must facilitate the text’s participation in the conversation while remaining cognizant of his or her own contribution to the process and avoiding the projection of a meaning onto the

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<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 383. // “[W]ir in ein Gespräch geraten. . . .[W]ir uns in ein Gespräch verwickeln.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 387.

text that is not actually given. The text can only offer its contribution to this dialogue *through* its engagement with the reader. Gadamer describes how the process of interpreting a text, as with the experience of a conversation between two people, attempts to “find a common language.”<sup>64</sup> Given that it is through this common language that the text finds its expression, language is unavoidably related to hermeneutics. The dialectic between the reader and the text is successful when understanding is achieved through and with interpretation which is itself determined linguistically.

Since the relationship between interpretation and understanding manifests *in* language (as that which defines traditions), language is not a pre-determined application that is consciously invoked by the reader for the purpose of interpreting and understanding a text.<sup>65</sup> Language must not be considered as secondary to, or independent from, thought. For Gadamer, there is no pre-linguistic thought that is later identified and linguistically conceptualized in an attempt to understand the world. Language is the mode through which experience, interpretation and understanding are made possible. Gadamer solidifies the relationship between language and tradition in the final section of Part III of *Truth and Method* as follows: “*Verbal form and traditional content cannot be separated in the hermeneutic experience.* If every language is a view of the world, it is so . . . because of what is said or handed down in this language.”<sup>66</sup> It is through

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 388. // “eine gemeinsame Sprache erarbeiteten muß. . . .” Ibid., 391.

<sup>65</sup> Again, Gadamer rejects the idea of application for the purpose of understanding within the human sciences, as can be the case with the (mis)use of the scientific method.

<sup>66</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 441. // “*Sprachliche Form und überlieferter Inhalt lassen sich in der hermeneutischen Erfahrung nicht trennen.* Wenn eine jede Sprache eine Weltansicht ist, so ist sie das in erster Linie nicht als ein bestimmter Typus von Sprache, (wie der Sprachwissenschaftler Sprach sieht), sondern durch das, was in dieser Sprache gesprochen wird bzw. überliefert ist.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 445 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

tradition, and thereby through language, that we experience the world. Our linguistic context makes possible the very ability to interpret. Given this association, we must be capable of recognizing our interpretive (and linguistic) frameworks. This recognition becomes the first stage of the hermeneutic project.

Gadamer suggests that the unique relationship human beings have with our environment, defined by our linguistic traditions, is found in an individual's ability to "rise above the particular environment in which he happens to find himself."<sup>67</sup> This suggests at least three things: First, in "rising above" one's particular circumstances and context, an interpreter becomes conscious of the limits of that context. Second, the possibility for entering into dialogue with other (alternative) traditions is only made possible by this act of self-reflection; otherwise, we would not be aware of any tradition beyond our own. Third, as Gadamer has already suggested a fundamental relationship between language, tradition, experience and interpretation, the recognition of the boundaries of one's interpretive sphere also determine the limits of the elements that have comprised that interpretive lens (i.e., language, tradition and experience).

The link between two traditions is further elucidated through Gadamer's description of learning another language, which he believes is definitive of this movement beyond one's original linguistic context. This process of learning and acquiring a new linguistic framework brings two traditions and two modes of experience into contact and potential conflict with each other:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 444. // "[D]er Mensch, weil er sich über seine jeweilige zufällige Umwelt immer schon zu erheben vermag. . . ." Ibid., 448.



However thoroughly one may adopt a foreign frame of mind, one still does not forget one's worldview and language-view. Rather, the other world we encounter is not only foreign but is also related to us. It has not only its own truth *in itself* but also its own truth *for us*.<sup>68</sup>

By recognizing the prejudices inherent in our original worldview, we become capable of identifying and acknowledging the prejudices of those traditions to which we do not belong. Gadamer cautions us not to objectify the world we experience; the other language and foreign tradition do not represent an alternative model that we are at liberty to accept or reject. Such objectification is more likely to occur in scientific endeavours that desire to “dominate” (*beherrschung*) the world by understanding it.<sup>69</sup> This terminology suggests one's desire and ability to conquer or overtake another language and tradition. Linguistic knowledge, in contrast, is concerned with our “natural experience of the world. . . . Using language by no means involves making things available and calculable.”<sup>70</sup> Given that our experience *is* linguistic, language cannot be detached and regarded as a method of application. This explanation of language recollects the ongoing and self-referential nature of the hermeneutical project. We cannot understand experience without language, and we cannot investigate the nature of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 442. // “Auch wenn man sich noch so sehr in eine fremde Geistesart versetzt, vergißt man nicht darüber seine eigene Welt–, ja seine eigene Sprachansicht. Vielmehr ist die andere Welt, die uns da entgegentritt, nicht nur eine fremde, sofern eine beziehungsweise andere. Sie hat nicht nur ihre eigene Wahrheit *in sich*, sondern auch eine eigene Wahrheit *für uns*.” Ibid., 445 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 454. // Ibid., 458.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 453. // “[D]er natürlichen Welterfahrung. . . . Sprechen bedeutet keineswegs Verfügbar- und Berechenbarmachen.” Ibid., 457.

language apart from our experiences within a linguistically framed tradition. As the interpretive process can never be completed, a linguistic engagement in and experience of the world is correspondingly process oriented rather than goal oriented. Language is further described as finite because it is ever changing, always accommodating new experiences of the world and developing in response to these encounters.<sup>71</sup> Gadamer further describes how every individual word that corresponds to a unique experience also expresses the larger worldview of which it is a part. A tradition is represented in the language that defines and emerges from within that tradition.

The hermeneutical process has reached its most ideal form when through the encounter between the interpreter and the text, “something occurs.”<sup>72</sup> This event is the “coming into play, the playing out, of the content of tradition.”<sup>73</sup> This is reminiscent of Gadamer’s initial description of a conversation that unfolds between yet is not self-consciously created by the two participants involved in that conversation. Similarly, when one is properly interpreting a text, something occurs both because of and beyond the traditions that are represented by the interpreter and the text. It is in this event that the relationship between meaning and understanding is revealed.

Gadamer discusses how the hermeneutical project already finds itself engaged in a tradition. Just as we find ourselves thrown into the word and into historically determined circumstances we did not establish yet cannot avoid,<sup>74</sup> hermeneutics also

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 457. // Ibid., 461.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 461. // “etwas geschieht” Ibid., 465.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 462. // “Geschehen das Insspielkommen, das Sichausspielen des Überlieferungsgehaltes. . . .” Ibid., 466.

<sup>74</sup> c.f. Gadamer’s earlier reference to Heidegger (Part II.1.A.i) where *Dasein* is described as thrown into the world. Ibid., 265-71. // Ibid., 270-6.

lacks an origin in this sense. The hermeneutical project depends upon the relationship between the tradition and the particular experiences that are found within that tradition: “Every appropriation of tradition is historically different. . . .[E]ach is the experience of an ‘aspect’ of the thing itself.”<sup>75</sup> Each experience must therefore be related to the tradition in which it occurs. It must refer to its tradition in order to be interpreted and understood. The importance of relating the parts (experiences) to the whole (tradition) and the whole to the parts is demonstrated by this relationship. Gadamer describes how the speculative nature of language is tied to reflection and ultimately to meaning. Each particular experience refers to the entirety of the tradition it represents. In this way, meaning is never isolated to the part but is constantly referential to the whole. Through language, one is able to express more than what is actually said. The unsaid, the traditionary context, is reflected in every use of language that emerges from within a given context. This reaffirms Gadamer’s emphasis on the significant interplay between the whole and the parts; the historical context (the whole) finds its expression when it is reflected in the language (the parts) of that tradition.

Gadamer’s discussion of the ontological importance of hermeneutics focuses on the relationship between the being of something and its presentation or disclosure. It is in the human sciences that “[s]elf-presentation and being-understood belong together”<sup>76</sup> such that there can be no differentiation between the nature of something and its ability to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 473. // “Jede Aneignung der Überlieferung ist eine geschichtlich andere. . . .[J]ede ist vielmehr die Erfahrung einer >Ansicht< der Sache selbst.” Ibid., 476-7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 477. // “Sichdarstellen, Verstandenwerden, das gehört nicht nur zusammen, so daß das eine in das andere übergeht und das Kunstwerk mit seiner Wirkungsgeschichte, das geschichtlich Überlieferte mit der Gegenwart seines Verstandenwerdens eins ist. . . .” Ibid., 480.

reveal that nature. Through Plato's example of the beautiful, Gadamer describes how the presence or being of beauty in fact belongs to the beautiful.<sup>77</sup> In relating beauty to truth, Gadamer elucidates the following: First, as with what is beautiful, what is meaningful is also "clearly evident" (*einleuchtend*).<sup>78</sup> The character of interpretation shares this quality as truth clearly shows and presents itself to us from within its tradition. Second, the concept of truth is related to truth itself in the same manner as the mode of being beauty is related to the beautiful. Truth reveals itself in experience, not in the application of method. There is no distinction between truth and the experiential process through which truth is revealed. Therefore, in this context, truth becomes synonymous with its presentation and disclosure.

Through the example of the poetic, Gadamer further expresses this relationship between art and existence by appealing to the idea of permanence: "The detachment of what is said from any subjective opinion and experience of the author constitutes the reality of the poetic word."<sup>79</sup> The poetic word appears to have a life of its own which is reminiscent of Gadamer's earlier argument that the original author's intention is not the ultimate standard for meaning. The poetic word also has the character of repetition or permanence through this "detachment" from its author. He further describes how "the verbal event of the poetic word expresses its own relationship to being."<sup>80</sup> Again, the linguistic character of poetry – and, perhaps by extension, of all artistic representation –

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 480-2. // Ibid., 484-6.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 485. // Ibid., 488.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 470. // "Die Ablösung des Gesagten von allem subjektiven Meinen und Erleben des Autors macht ja erst die Wirklichkeit des dichterischen Wortes." Ibid., 473.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 470. // "[D]as sprachliche Geschehen des dichterischen Wortes seinerseits ein eigenes Verhältnis zum Sein ausspricht." Ibid., 474.

has unmediated access to being.

Gadamer relates the character of beauty to both poetry and truth in a later essay, “On the Contribution of Poetry for the Search for Truth,” (1971) in which he returns to the Greek concept of *aletheia* in order to remind us that it corresponds to a sense of “openness” (*Unverhohlenheit*).<sup>81</sup> In its German form, this word has a stronger sense of blatant or unconcealed presentation than when translated into English. Gadamer uses this sense of presentation to suggest that:

A poem. . . is not a remainder of an original performance of an idea, and is not simply in the service of further performances. It is the other way round – so much so that the text enjoys greater reality than any of its potential realizations can ever claim for itself.<sup>82</sup>

The truth is found in the presentation. It is in this original “openness” that the poetic word finds its most meaningful form. In this sense, its existence – its being and its truth – is brought forth through its presentation and our openness to receiving it in its originality. In poetry, Gadamer finds an example of something that is properly interpreted only when it remains “‘autonomous’ in the sense that we subordinate ourselves to it and concentrate

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<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, “On the Contribution of Poetry for the Search for Truth,” *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 108. // “Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der Wahrheit,” (1971) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 8 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 72.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. // “Ein Gedicht. . . ist nicht eine Erinnerung an den ursprünglichen Vollzug eines Gedankens, nur für seinen Neuvollzug dienlich. Es ist umgekehrt, und so sehr umgekehrt, daß der Text viel mehr Wirklichkeit hat als jede seiner möglichen Darbietungen je für sich beanspruchen kann.” *Ibid.*, 73.

all our efforts upon it ‘as a text.’”<sup>83</sup>

### The Universal Nature of Hermeneutics

In this ultimate association between ontology and hermeneutics, Gadamer has described the interpretive process as something that is closely bound to the historical and linguistic structures of our experience. The importance of these relationships separates the truths of the human sciences from those that are accessible in the natural sciences only through an application of the scientific method. It is in the human sciences that truth is revealed through an unmitigated encounter with the world, through the experiences that define and describe the historical-linguistic traditions to which we belong. In contrast to the natural sciences, in the human sciences, there is an unavoidable relationship between interpretation and being from which we cannot distance or separate ourselves. To interpret a text is to experience the integration of two traditions and the meaning that emerges from that encounter. However, this is not a relationship that we can passively witness or one in which we can be partially invested. It remains a process where truth can only be revealed through involvement and engagement, and the attempt to separate oneself from the fundamental experience with a text denies the possibility of uncovering the truth within any text. Richard E. Palmer concisely states this process as follows: “Understanding is not conceived as a subjective process of man over and against an object but the *way of being* of man himself; hermeneutics [is]. . . a philosophical effort to

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 109. // “. . . >autonom< ist, so daß wir uns ihm unterordnen und auf es in seiner Gestalt als >Text< unser Bemühen konzentrieren müssen.” Ibid., 74.

account for understanding as an ontological – the ontological – process in man.”<sup>84</sup> The universal guiding force of hermeneutics is the fabric of being itself; to exist is to exist as an interpretive being. The universal nature of human existence underlies the universal claim of hermeneutics.

Meaning ultimately occurs as a “fusion of horizons” (*die Horizontverschmelzung*)<sup>85</sup> when the original tradition of the text and that of the interpreter come together to establish a common language through which they can interact and ascertain meaning. It is in this meeting of traditions, represented by a dialogue between two different sets of presuppositions (each defining a respective tradition), that interpretation, understanding and application emerge together. From this interaction, meaning is made possible. The ideal interpretive situation unfolds as a conversation between the interpreter and the text, as the two traditions respond to each other in an effort to create a common discourse. It is here that history and language present themselves together as the basis of Gadamer’s ontologically-founded (universal) hermeneutic.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer offers descriptions of a game between two people as analogous to the process of textual interpretation: He describes how “[t]he players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players.”<sup>86</sup> Through interaction between the players, the game or the play itself is

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<sup>84</sup> Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, 163 (my emphasis).

<sup>85</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 374-8. // *Wahrheit und Methode*, 380-4.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. // “Das Subjekt des Spieles sind nicht die Spieler, sondern das Spiel kommt durch die Spielenden lediglich zur Darstellung.” *Ibid.*, 108.

created. The players are not incidental to this creation but they are not deliberately determining what emerges as a result of their interaction. Similarly, when the participants in a conversation lose themselves to the process itself, the conversation has reached its most ideal form. By establishing a parallel between the hermeneutic project and our understanding of a game or play, Gadamer describes the understanding of texts as something that emerges and becomes present only when the two participants (the interpreter and the text) engage each other. In this sense, hermeneutics is not a project of uncovering a meaning that has already been determined; one does not realize what has been lost and discover it again such that an ultimate, true meaning can be re-established. It is not a process through which the interpreter uncovers a pre-existing, static meaning that the text has always and will always present to its readers in the same manner.<sup>87</sup> What Gadamer is suggesting, in contrast, is that the very meaning of the text is created through the interaction of the text and the reader.

How is this self-reflective and conversational nature of hermeneutics to be understood as universal? And is Gadamer truly able to affirm universality in this sense, when he would not allow universality to be ascribed to (the methodology of) the natural sciences? G. B. Madison describes Gadamer's hermeneutical project as, "a discipline whose goal is 'to discover what is common to all modes of understanding'; it is concerned with 'all human experience in the world and human living.'" Hermeneutics,

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<sup>87</sup> For textual interpretation, "[r]econstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being." Ibid., 167. // "Wiederherstellung ursprünglicher Bedingungen ist, wie alle Restauration, angesichts der Geschichtlichkeit unseres Seins ein ohnmächtiges Beginnen." Ibid., 172. Again, Gadamer reminds us that we cannot attempt (as Schleiermacher and others have done) to "reproduce" (*reproduzieren*) the exact process and history through which the artist or author first conceived of his or her work. Ibid., 166. // Ibid., 172.



Gadamer says, is a theoretical, reflective inquiry”<sup>88</sup> The relevant question in this claim is, how does one assume (or defend) that something either is or is not concerned with “all human experience”? Would the scientists claim this same description for their own method? Since Gadamer has so strenuously resisted the application of a method akin to that of the natural sciences’ methodology, what, in his alternative proposal, comprises a universally valid theory? In partial response to this question, Madison returns us to the opening of *Truth and Method* where Gadamer reminds his audience that hermeneutics is simply “concerned with ‘all human experience of the world and human living.’” In this sense, Madison rightly identifies Gadamer’s project as one in which we are already engaged. The prominence of an ontologically-focused hermeneutic (rooted in history and language) reveals a primacy of encounter, prior to any advent of method or application of a system or framework. Gadamer’s universality occurs before any form of conscious application. In fact, it can only occur once the attempt to ascertain meaning through the benefit of rationally-constructed methodology is abandoned. It is this self-conscious recognition that the interpretive process emerges and belongs to our ontology that Gadamer regards as the universal character of hermeneutics.

The emphasis on self-consciousness represents another dividing feature between the natural and the human sciences. In a short autobiographical account outlining the development of his philosophical position, Gadamer clarifies this as follows: “What I wanted to bring about by insisting on the ‘historically affected consciousness’ was a

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<sup>88</sup> G. B. Madison, “Hermeneutics’ Claim to Universality,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 349.

correction of the self-concept of the historical human sciences. . . .that they are not ‘sciences’ in the manner of the natural sciences.”<sup>89</sup> This “historically affected consciousness” is further described as being completely “other” because it represents the culmination of the hermeneutic event.<sup>90</sup> Hermeneutics itself is not possible without this necessary reflection upon one’s own history and tradition. By suggesting that the natural sciences as a discipline lack this crucial element, Gadamer builds upon the idea that universality must reflect a unified process. Chapter 1 focused upon the importance of unification between the inquirer and that which he or she investigates. Here, another layer is added: The investigator must not be removed from his or her history if the hermeneutical process is to be successful.

This concept of unification is further described as an expressly ontological concern. Jean Grondin suggests the universal structure of Gadamer’s project in *Truth and Method* is as follows:

Gadamer commence par rappeler les acquis de la mise en évidence  
par Heidegger de la structure ontologique du cercle

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<sup>89</sup> Gadamer, “Reflections on my Philosophical Journey,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, trans. Richard E. Palmer, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 28. // “Mit der Anerkennung des wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewußtseins war daher vor allem eine Berichtigung der Selbstauffassung der historischen Geisteswissenschaften, die auch die Kunstwissenschaften einschließen, impliziert. Die Problemdimension ist damit aber keineswegs voll ausgemessen. Auch in den Naturwissenschaften gibt es so etwas wie eine hermeneutische Problematik. “Selbstdarstellung Hans-Georg Gadamer,” (1973) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 496. This is not an exact translation because Gadamer rewrote and revised sections of the German text specifically for the purpose of this English publication. Further information concerning this is offered by the translator in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 58.

<sup>90</sup> “It is quite different with historically effected consciousness, in which hermeneutical experience reaches its consummation.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 472. // “Ganz anders steht es mit dem wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewußtsein, in welchem sich die hermeneutische Erfahrung vollendet.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 476.

herméneutique. Ontologique veut dire ici, comme à peu près toujours chez Gadamer. . . universel, ou fondamental. Le cercle bénéficie d'un statut universel parce que *toute* compréhension s'effectue sous la coupe d'une motivation, de préconceptions, en un mot, sous une visée préalable de sens.<sup>91</sup>

Here, Grondin identifies the universality of Gadamer's hermeneutics as the very ontological structure (borrowed from Heidegger) that underlies it. It is the basic composition of being – as both historical and linguistic – that offers universality to this project. Ontology and hermeneutics are already referential and ontology, in this sense, means universal. If this ontological structure is to be historically-linguistically engaged in the interpretive process, then the process may itself be deemed universal in the same manner.

This structure is explained in more detail in two of Gadamer's expository essays emerging from his work in *Truth and Method*. In "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" and "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," Gadamer develops the precise relationship between ontology and hermeneutics in a more nuanced way and discusses why this suggests a universal basis for all hermeneutics. Here, he introduces categories of alienation – both between the self and other, and between the context of the interpreter and the context belonging to that which is interpreted. In both cases, Gadamer stresses a return to the fundamental relationship between the individual

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<sup>91</sup> Jean Grondin, *L'universalité de l'herméneutique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 166 (emphasis Jean Grondin).

and the world, such that the process of attempting to ascertain meaning first involves a recognition of the self as it exists in an ongoing, inseparable relationship with what it encounters in the world as well as with its own tradition.

In “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” Gadamer again emphasizes that language represents “the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world.”<sup>92</sup> He notes that one of the fundamental errors in the history of interpretation is the alienation “between I and thou.”<sup>93</sup> Gadamer suggests that this very phrase assumes a distance that does not (or should not) exist. Indeed, I cannot even understand myself, as an “I” apart from the world I inhabit and interpret. Again, the linguistic-interpretive groundwork that permits me to say “I” at all is that to which Gadamer asks us to return when considering the hermeneutical project. “I” is infused with history, with the historical framework from which it has emerged; given this, by attempting to separate existence from history, Gadamer suggests that one is engaging in an impossible task.

In “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” language becomes the grounding for any and all attempt to ascertain truth. Gadamer defines the relationship between hermeneutics and human existence in linguistic terms.<sup>94</sup> He further relates the linguistic character of being to what he describes as the “universal function” of the

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<sup>92</sup> “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” 3. // “die Grundvollzugsweise unseres In-der-Welt-Seins” “Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems,” 219.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 7. // “Ich und Du” Ibid., 223.

<sup>94</sup> “The universal phenomenon of human linguisticity also unfolds in other dimensions than those which would appear to be directly concerned with the hermeneutical problem, for hermeneutics reaches into all the contexts that determine and condition the linguisticity of the human experience of the world.” Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” 19. // “[D]as universale Phänomen der menschlichen Sprachlichkeit entfaltet sich auch in anderen Dimensionen. So reicht das hermeneutische Thema noch in andere Zusammenhänge hinein, die die Sprachlichkeit der menschlichen Welterfahrung bestimmen.” “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik: Metakritische Erörterungen zu >Wahrheit und Methode<,” 233.

hermeneutic project.<sup>95</sup> Now, hermeneutics is not only tied to our linguistically-based ontology, but it further serves a function: a universal *function*. Gadamer argues that hermeneutics – as a universal phenomenon – must address the initial “strangeness” that we encounter when faced with a text that “does not ‘fit’ into the customary order of our expectations based on experience.”<sup>96</sup> This form of alienation occurs between the tradition and framework (the horizon) of the interpreter and that of the text that the interpreter desires to understand. In this sense, the “universal function” of hermeneutics is to engage this initial alienation between two different traditions and contexts.

Later in this essay, Gadamer refers to what he calls “methodical alienation”<sup>97</sup> or the ability of method to become, in itself, more important than that to which it is applied. By using method as an intermediary between the interpreter and that which is interpreted, the immediacy of the interpretive project is lost. This is precisely what Gadamer regards as problematic when the methods of the natural sciences extend beyond their discipline. The question that remains is whether or not, for Gadamer, there is both an appropriateness and a misuse of any form of intermediary application. If both categories exist, how are we to discern the difference between them? In particular, as will be evaluated in the next chapter, how does theological interpretation – as something that Gadamer acknowledges brings with it its own necessary type of application – fit into this discussion of universality (as a historically-linguistically understood ontology) versus the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 24-25. // Ibid., 237.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 25. // “Die Unverständlichkeit oder Mißverständlichkeit überlieferter Texte, die sie ursprünglich auf den Plan gerufen hat, ist nur ein Sonderfall dessen, was in aller menschlichen Weltorientierung als das *atopon*, das Seltsame begegnet, das sich in den gewohnten Erwartungsordnungen der Erfahrung nirgends unterbringen läßt.” Ibid., 237.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 39-40. // “methodische Verfremdung” Ibid., 249.

misapplication or “methodical alienation” that may result from the application of method?

Given this framework, where will the status of theological interpretation – as based in the particular (non-universal) characteristic of faith – find itself?

### Chapter 3: The Status of Theological Hermeneutics

In an interview with Gadamer shortly before his death, Jens Zimmermann describes how:

Gadamer is concerned with transcendence as the limit of human knowledge, a limit that points to something greater and more mysterious than ourselves. . . .On the one hand, Gadamer maintains that the natural sciences and philosophy can accomplish only so much alone or in isolation from the religious dimension of human experience. On the other hand, religion itself should admit its limitations by giving up dogmatism and by finding an expression of transcendence that describes what ‘touches us all.’<sup>98</sup>

These comments suggest that Gadamer views religion as something that occupies a status that is related to both science and philosophy, yet is unique from these disciplines. For Gadamer, religious discourse – and, by extension, any attempt at theological hermeneutics – goes beyond these alternatives (natural and human sciences) by speaking of a unique relationship with the transcendent that is not properly acknowledged or dealt with in other fields of inquiry. Although Gadamer may also be proposing a description of transcendence that is common to all facets of religious discourse, this ecumenical project is not my task at present.<sup>99</sup> I am instead concerned with how Gadamer identifies the place of religious studies as independent based on the assumption that it alone is primarily concerned with the transcendent.

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<sup>98</sup> Jens Zimmermann, “*Ignoramus: ‘Gadamer’s ‘Religious Turn,’*” *Symposium* 6 (2002): 208.

<sup>99</sup> For an interesting discussion of Gadamer’s influence on 20<sup>th</sup> Century ecumenical thought, see J. C. Pauw and D. J. Smit, “‘The conversation that we are. . .’ – Reflections on Ecumenical Hermeneutics,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* (2002): 19-39.

In *Truth and Method* as well as in “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” an essay published only five years following his magnum opus, Gadamer offers his most detailed accounts of theology and theological hermeneutics.<sup>100 101</sup> In these texts, Gadamer suggests that the content of theology is unique, yet the fundamental hermeneutical engagement remains the same as with other texts. That is, theological hermeneutics, like other inquiries in the human sciences, has a universal basis in language and history, though what is being interpreted and the manner in which that subject of interpretation can be approached differs. Gadamer, therefore, regards theological hermeneutics as a discipline that is concerned with a more elusive<sup>102</sup> – though not fundamentally obscure – subject than other hermeneutical inquiries within the human sciences (i.e., literature, philosophy, etc.). However, the manner in which he presents theology suggests that the basic character of the interpretive event remains the same.

In this chapter, I will argue that based on Gadamer’s presentation of theological hermeneutics – particularly its defining characteristic of transcendence – he describes

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<sup>100</sup> Selections from the following text will also be examined in this chapter. Though this text deals with theological hermeneutics only briefly, it was written within a year of the publication of *Truth and Method* and, thus, offers a continuity of thought concerning the role of theology expressed by Gadamer in the two texts mentioned above: “On the Problem of Self-Understanding” // “Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses: Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zur Frage der Entmythologisierung.”

<sup>101</sup> Gadamer’s introductory comments in “On the Problem of Self-Understanding” // “Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses: Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zur Frage der Entmythologisierung” recollect Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing project as a starting point for his comments concerning the relationship between theological and philosophical hermeneutics. Jean Grondin has argued that this entire article is intended as a general response to Bultmann’s demythologizing project. Grondin, “Gadamer and Bultmann,” 131. As Gadamer’s references to his contemporary theologians are rare, Grondin’s suggestion makes this essay even more relevant to my current project.

<sup>102</sup> I use this term to denote two things (both of which will be explained below): First, Gadamer believes that the subject of theological hermeneutics is fundamentally incomprehensible. Second, he argues that the interpretation of theological texts (in this case, the Bible) requires the reader to assume a particular viewpoint (of faith) if it is to be interpreted as meaningful. In this sense, theological interpretation is elusive both because its subject cannot be completely understood and because that subject matter may not be accessible to everyone.



theological hermeneutics as a unique example within the human sciences. Gadamer cannot place theological hermeneutics in the same exclusionary category as the natural sciences because, though he does believe it is a discipline involving a particular form application (as will be discussed below), Gadamer does not believe that theological hermeneutics lacks the fundamental historical-linguistic universality that defines the human sciences. Alternatively, he cannot speak of theological hermeneutics as simply one example of a discipline within the human sciences because he views the category of universality differently here. He believes theological hermeneutics – access to the word of God – requires a particular orientation or specific pre-understanding in order to be effective and relevant to the interpreter. Given this, I believe that it is ultimately the special character of the language of faith that limits Gadamer’s further contribution to the discipline of theological hermeneutics. That is, faith represents a particular (non-universal) pre-supposition. In this sense, one cannot conclude that faith is in the same category as history or language (chapter 2). Though it does not share all the attributes of the natural sciences, Gadamer nevertheless believes theological hermeneutics requires a type of application which is one of the defining features of the natural sciences (chapter 1).

In order to argue that Gadamer believes theological hermeneutics represents a point of overlap between his discussions of the natural sciences and the human sciences, I will discuss the nature of transcendence, the particular character of application within theology, the unique pre-understanding that Gadamer believes is necessary for theological hermeneutics, as well as the accessibility (and limitations) of faith.

Theological hermeneutics shares the basic structure of universality of the human sciences (though Gadamer suggests that it also moves beyond this). In addition, it more readily adopts the particular form of application that Gadamer describes in the natural sciences (*Applikation*) and not the ideal, unified relationship between understanding, interpretation and application (*Anwendung*) that describes the human sciences. Therefore, theological hermeneutics occupies a unique status within Gadamer's framework.

### Transcendence

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer discusses the Christian Trinity as an attempt to understand a unique facet of language and communication. In so doing, he identifies a particular linguistic element – the language representing the relationship between the individual and the transcendent – that is both elusive and particular. It is elusive to the extent that it cannot be understood in the same manner as other forms of language; it is particular because Gadamer does not believe access to transcendent language is universally shared. Although the experience of transcendence is universally available, according to Gadamer, the manner in which this transcendent language is accessed – the medium of Scripture – has the character of a promise and access to the language itself requires belief in or acceptance of that initial promise: “Il me semble évident qu'un texte de cette sorte [le texte scripturaire] a le caractère d'une *Promesse*. Ce qui présuppose qu'on accepte cette Promesse.”<sup>103</sup> In this sense, the ability to access the language of God depends upon one's disposition towards the possibility that that language may present

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<sup>103</sup> Gadamer, “Herméneutique et Théologie,” 390 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

something meaningful.

In this discussion concerning the relationship between internal language and the Trinity, Gadamer describes how “[t]he mystery of the Trinity, which the analogy with the inner word is supposed to illuminate, must ultimately remain incomprehensible in terms of human thought.”<sup>104</sup> The subject of interpretation is *incomprehensible*. Two questions follow from this: First, does this incomprehensibility of the subject ultimately mean a complete obscurity or lack of knowledge concerning it? Second, does incomprehensibility of the subject lead to incomprehensibility of the manner through which that subject can be acknowledged? In this section, I believe Gadamer does not commit himself to an affirmative answer to either question, though he focuses primarily upon the second point. Given that not all interpreters share the presupposition of faith necessary for the recognition and acceptance of theological truths,<sup>105</sup> those who do share in this unique framework are, according to Gadamer, alone in their ability to interpret these religious texts as meaningful. Gadamer’s concern is not with the quality or value that believers ascribe to religious texts and messages. Indeed, he focuses solely on an individual’s ability to ascertain any meaning at all. For Gadamer, this ability requires a particular presupposition that allows for the possibility of a connection with the transcendent.

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<sup>104</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 424. // “Das Mysterium der Trinität, das durch die Analogie mit dem inneren Wort aufgeheilt werden soll, muß vom menschlichen Denken her am Ende doch unverstündlich bleiben.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 428.

<sup>105</sup> “[T]he presupposition that one is moved by the question of God already involves a claim to knowledge concerning the true God and his revelation. Even unbelief is defined in terms of the faith that is demanded of one.” *Ibid.*, 331-2. // “So enthält die Voraussetzung, von der Gottesfrage bewegt zu sein, in Wahrheit schon den Anspruch des Wissens um den wahren Gott und seine Offenbarung. Selbst was Unglaube heißt, bestimmt sich von dem geforderten Glauben her.” *Ibid.*, 337.

What I wish to examine in further detail is how Gadamer invokes this non-universally accessible subject matter in order to further discuss the nature of language which, as discussed earlier (chapter 2), is the basis of Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics. In the above quote, Gadamer introduces Trinitarian language as an attempt to draw a parallel between the inherent universal linguistic character of human existence (the inner word) and the Christian Trinity. He suggests to us that both reveal a structure whereby what is known cannot be fully understood. It is further described as a natural process, a form of knowledge upon which one does not reflect in order to understand: “The inner unity of thinking and speaking to oneself, which corresponds to the Trinitarian mystery of the incarnation, implies that the inner mental word *is not formed by a reflective act*. A person who thinks something – i.e., says it to himself – means by it the thing that he thinks.”<sup>106</sup> In this sense, understanding is not necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. Anthony C. Thiselton clarifies this point as follows: “[L]anguage is not merely external clothing for thought, so that what is ‘meant’ is somehow independent of its linguistic expression. Thought and language are intimately bound up with each other.”<sup>107</sup> By relating this to the earlier quotation by Gadamer, it appears that the mystery itself relates to this absence of a reflective step between thought, language and knowledge.

In this section, Gadamer reminds us that language (both thinking and speaking) is

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 426. // “Die innere Einheit von Denken und Sichsagen, die dem trinitarischen Mysterium der Inkarnation entspricht, schließt in sich, daß das innere Wort des Geistes *nicht durch einen reflexiven Akt gebildet wird*. Wer etwas denkt, d. h. sich sagt, meint damit das, was er denkt, die Sache.” Ibid., 430 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

<sup>107</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 314.

not a self-conscious process. He further identifies the Trinity as an analogy of – or as a correspondence to – the human mental process.<sup>108</sup> I believe this offers us initial support for the claim that Gadamer’s view of theological hermeneutics is an example of hermeneutics within the human sciences. By rearticulating the relationship between language, understanding and being in a theological context, Gadamer emphasizes the universal human quality of encountering and interpreting linguistically as our very mode of being.

The word of God, once acknowledged, becomes part of human language; it is interpreted by us in the same natural (i.e., historical-linguistic) manner as any other encounter. The source of the text differs, yet our process of attempting to ascertain its meaning remains constant and universal. Later in this same section, Gadamer suggests that, “[t]he meaning of the word cannot be detached from the event of proclamation.

*Quite the contrary, being an event is a characteristic belonging to the meaning itself.”*<sup>109</sup>

Here, ontology is directly linked to how meaning is ascertained, how the event is interpreted. In this sense, the proclamation, the word that originates beyond our understanding, is nevertheless interpreted linguistically. Since it is the nature of language

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<sup>108</sup> For a more complete treatment of Gadamer’s contribution to this relationship between language and the Trinity, refer to Frederick G. Lawrence, “The Hermeneutic Revolution and the Future of Theology,” *Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2002), 326-67. Note in particular: “The necessity of an inner word in our coming to know supports Gadamer’s teaching that an intrinsic linguisticity, a naturally dialogical component is essential to human beings as human.” 341. Though his project is intended to show a relationship between Gadamer and Lonergan (with respect to their collective debt to the Scholastic interpretation of the Trinity offered by Aquinas and Augustine), Lawrence offers a brief discussion of how the inherent linguistic nature of human existence is significant in Gadamer’s theological interpretation of the Trinity.

<sup>109</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 427. // “Der Sinn des Wortes ist vom Geschehen der Verkündigung nicht ablösbar. *Der Geschehenscharakter gehört vielmehr zum Sinne selbst.*” *Wahrheit und Methode*, 431 (emphasis, Hans-Georg Gadamer).

(as a pre-condition for any and all interpretation) to which Gadamer appeals in his discussion of universality, theological interpretation is not excluded from this category. The subject of interpretation in theological hermeneutics involves both the transcendent and the possibility of accessing it through faith (as will be discussed below); this is not a presupposition that Gadamer believes is universally shared. However, for those who do acknowledge this position of faith, meaningful interpretation of religious texts may be analogous to other hermeneutical models within the human sciences.

### Application in Theological Hermeneutics

Gadamer's discussion of the project of theological hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* follows an account of legal hermeneutics which he argues is a constant interplay between an established law and its application or relevance to each particular case or situation.<sup>110 111</sup> He initially discusses the extent to which theological hermeneutics does not share this attribute by appealing to the subject of its interpretation: "The proclamation cannot be detached from its fulfillment. . . .Scripture is the word of God, and that means it has an absolute priority over the doctrine of those who interpret it."<sup>112</sup> Here, Gadamer emphasizes that the approach one takes towards Scripture must be

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<sup>110</sup> "The work of interpretation is to concretize the law in each specific case – i.e., it is the work of application." Ibid., 329. // "Die Aufgabe des Auslegens ist die der *Konkretisierung des Gesetzes* im jeweiligen Fall, also die Aufgabe der *Applikation*." Ibid., 335 (emphasis Hans-Georg Gadamer).

<sup>111</sup> Note the following article where the author explores the relationship between Gadamer's discussion of application in the law and the desire or intention of the writer of a law with the particular example of the American Constitution. David Couzens Hoy, "Legal Hermeneutics: Recent Debates," *Festivals of Interpretation: Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Work*, ed. Kathleen Wright (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 111-35.

<sup>112</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 330-1. // "Die Verkündigung läßt sich nicht von ihrem Vollzug ablösen. . . .Die Heilige Schrift ist Gottes Wort, und das bedeutet, daß die Schrift vor der Lehre derer, die sie auslegen, einen schlechthinnigen Vorrang behält." *Wahrheit und Methode*, 336.

uniquely defined because it contains within it this special character of “the divine proclamation of salvation.”<sup>113</sup> The question Gadamer then raises concerns the necessary presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) that are appropriate to an encounter with this type of text.

Even given the uniqueness of religious subject matter, Gadamer ultimately places theological hermeneutics in the same broad category – application to a particular circumstance – as legal hermeneutics. With reference to this section of *Truth and Method*, I wish to focus upon the need for application that Gadamer has identified in both judicial and theological hermeneutics. Gadamer is arguing two things here: First, the idea of application separates theology (and law) from other forms of interpretation within the human sciences:

In both legal and theological hermeneutics there is an essential tension between the fixed text – the law or the gospel – on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation, either by judgment or in preaching. . . . [T]he gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 331. // “[D]ie Heilige Schrift die göttliche Heilsverkündigung ist.” Ibid., 336.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 308-9. // “Sowohl für die juristische Hermeneutik wie für die theologische Hermeneutik ist ja die Spannung konstitutiv, die zwischen dem gesetzten Text – des Gesetzes oder der Verkündigung – auf der einen Seite und auf der anderen Seite dem Sinn besteht, den seine Anwendung im konkreten Augenblick der Auslegung erlangt, sei es im Urteil, sei es in der Predigt. Ein Gesetz will nicht historisch verstanden werden, sondern soll sich in seiner Rechtsgeltung durch die Auslegung konkretisieren. Ebenso will ein religiöser Verkündigungstext nicht als ein bloßes historisches Dokument aufgefaßt werden, sondern er soll so verstanden werden, daß er seine Heilswirkung ausübt. Das schließt in beiden Fällen ein, daß der Text,

The interpretive situation begins as unique because one expects something beyond general understanding, i.e., a “saving effect”; a person believes that the text offers a promise (as discussed earlier – p.59), which Gadamer believes is something categorically different from what is anticipated when encountering non-theological texts. It requires application, as does legal interpretation, because it is already believed to be different or *more than*<sup>115</sup> other historical writings. Gadamer is drawing a distinction between theological and legal hermeneutics and the interpretation of other historical texts (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Because of the pre-determined expectation on the part of the interpreter, interpretation of the former constantly requires application in a manner that Gadamer does not believe is present in other forms of writing. For example, as alluded to earlier in Gadamer’s discussion of beauty in Plato’s dialogues, there is no immediate requirement for application when interpreting the speeches concerning beauty in the *Symposium*.<sup>116</sup> The interpreter desires understanding which requires the convergence of two histories, two traditions in order to be meaningful; however, this understanding does not find its meaning when used in conjunction with – *when applied to* – a particular, unique situation that has been established prior to the interpretive process. Nor does it require that the interpreter hold a particular position concerning the promise of the text before it is interpreted.

In contrast, Gadamer argues that the fusion of horizons between the past and the

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ob Gesetz oder Heilsbotschaft, wenn er angemessen verstanden werden soll, d. h. dem Anspruch, den der Text erhebt, entsprechend, in jedem Augenblick, d. h. in jeder konkreten Situation, neu und anders verstanden werden muß. Verstehen ist hier immer schon Anwenden.” Ibid., 314.

<sup>115</sup> I am using this phrase in a qualitative, not a quantitative manner.

<sup>116</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 478-9. // *Wahrheit und Methode*, 482-3.



present – between the writings of law or Scripture and those individuals who wish to bring these texts into a contemporary framework and reveal their possible significance – is only the first of two steps when one is attempting to interpret these texts. Their significance is determined once they are brought into direct contact with, once they are applied to, either a concrete legal case or a believing individual. In both situations, the act of application to a concrete phenomenon is essential to achieving understanding. There is an additional level of separation – of application – in theological hermeneutics because the task is not complete once the religious leaders have interpreted the message and offered it to a larger audience. The individual who hears and receives this scriptural message – as something that is often mitigated by someone who has first interpreted and explained it – must then encounter the message as well, on his or her own terms. In this sense, application is critical to understanding.

Second, and more importantly, this type of application in legal and theological hermeneutics appears to bear some resemblance to the application of the scientific method in the natural sciences (chapter 1). With respect to legal hermeneutics, understanding a law for its own sake is not generally considered as important as understanding how a given law may be related to a specific situation in which the law is warranted. For example, if a law states that one should not commit murder, the law itself is constantly open to new interpretations depending on the specific facts of each case. One might consider self-defense or abortion to be situations in which murder is not being committed to the same degree or in the same manner as a calculated, pre-mediated act. The law itself serves as a framework for actions that fall within a certain category of

human behaviour. However, the original law is constantly being considered and re-interpreted.

Similarly, in theological hermeneutics, the most meaningful presentation – and primarily goal – of Scripture occurs once an individual has accepted its message as potentially important in his or her life. If the Gospel writings state that Christ performed miracles, this claim can certainly be understood by someone without being believed. However, the desire of this form of writing is not strict understanding; its intention is to be believed by the one who encounters it. Gadamer believes this type of application is central to the unique character of both legal and theological hermeneutics. Two forms of application have already been discussed: First, *Applikation* as it pertains to the methodology of the natural sciences; second, *Anwendung* as it pertains to the unified relationship between application, understanding and interpretation in the hermeneutics of the human sciences. I believe Gadamer deliberately appeals to a non-methodological sense of *Applikation* in his discussions of theological hermeneutics. However, he simultaneously believes theological hermeneutics maintains a universality both because of the socio-linguistic character of all forms of interpretation, as well as because its interpretive process is still represented by the *Anwenden–Auslegen–Verstehen* unity. Given this, can theology involve a non-methodological form of application while simultaneously maintaining its status within the human sciences and, therefore, within the universality Gadamer has described?

I believe it is precisely in this space of overlap between application and universality (or, more generally, between the natural and human sciences) that Gadamer

initially places the status of theological hermeneutics within his framework. Application has been primarily associated with methodology that is for Gadamer representative of the natural sciences. The natural sciences' further inability to unite the particular with the universal is, as seen in chapter 1, the foundation for Gadamer's criticism. Here, with the introduction of theological hermeneutics, Gadamer appeals to an application-driven system of hermeneutics.

The type of application to which Gadamer refers within a theological system requires a pre-existing attitude, a position that must be undertaken if the meaning of theology – the possibility of salvation through proclamation – is to be ascertained at all.<sup>117</sup> It is the perspective that must be applied, not the method (as is the case in the natural sciences). Here, Gadamer is suggesting that the application (*Applikation*) of a specific form of pre-understanding allows for the interpretive event. There is a particular stance an individual must assume if the message of the text (in Gadamer's example, the biblical Scriptures) can be properly interpreted.<sup>118</sup> Even so, Gadamer does not further suggest that the practice of theological interpretation differs fundamentally as a result of this requirement. Rather, the historical-linguistic universality he has established in the human sciences remains relevant. The difference is found in each individual's

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<sup>117</sup> “But it [theological interpretation] assumes that the word of Scripture addresses us and that only the person who allows himself to be addressed – whether he believes or doubts – understands. Hence the primary thing is application.” Ibid., 332. // “Aber sie [theologische Hermeneutik] setzt voraus, daß das Wort der Schrift trifft und daß nur der Betroffene – glaubend oder zweifelnd – versteht. Insofern ist die Applikation das erste.” Ibid., 338.

<sup>118</sup> Grondin contrasts this unique presupposition of faith in theological hermeneutics with Rudolf Bultmann's alternative framework that suggests the presuppositions of theological interpretation are in fact universal. Concerning Gadamer on this question, Grondin argues the following: “According to Gadamer, the notion that one is moved by the question of God, or faith, cannot be universalized, it is specific, and even crucial, for theological hermeneutics as such.” Grondin, “Gadamer and Bultmann,” 136.

accessibility to the subject, one's openness to the possibility of truth – the transcendent – in religious texts as a result of a particularly defined pre-understanding.

### The Unique Pre-Understanding Required for Theological Hermeneutics

Two things are significant in Gadamer's discussion of the unique pre-understanding (*Vorurteil/Vorverständnis*) that is necessary in theology: First, the openness to faith – an attempt to acknowledge or recognize the transcendent – that Gadamer describes is not a universal characteristic but is instead limited to the domain of theology. “Ouvrir les yeux à l'expérience du divin, en un sens très général, est la condition préliminaire à l'accueil du message chrétien.”<sup>119</sup> One must remain open to the possibility of experiencing the divine. Such a requirement is not necessary for the understanding of scientific or historical texts. The fact that meaning is related to an openness to the divine, to the expectation of a “promise” as seen earlier, is a significant element of ascertaining meaning in a religious (in this case, a Christian) text.

Second, an individual's self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) is acquired and determined differently in a context where a human being has a possible relationship with God. Therefore, pre-understanding within theology continues to include the universal (historical-linguistic) features of the human sciences, yet now serves to redefine what must be brought to a religious text if the reader is to interpret it as meaningful. I wish to focus on the meaning of self-understanding in this context because any attempt to understand how Gadamer views the encounter between the individual and the

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<sup>119</sup> Gadamer, “Herméneutique et Théologie,” 397.

transcendent must involve a discussion of the extent to which he believes one may be aware of or in control of this process. That is, one can be open to the possibility of an encounter with the divine, yet one cannot force the occurrence of this encounter.

Gadamer suggests that, “[f]rom the theological point of view, faith’s self-understanding is determined by the fact that faith is not man’s possibility, but a gracious act of God that happens *to* the one who has faith.”<sup>120</sup> He goes on to claim that this “happening” is impossible to acknowledge from within the framework of science and its representative methodology.<sup>121</sup> Already we see the need to bring something new to one’s experiences in the world if encounters with religious texts are to hold any significance at all. Two things are important in the above articulation: First, Gadamer describes faith as the result of an act of grace that is offered by God. Second, if one is to receive this transcendent message, faith must already be a part of that individual’s perspective, or pre-understanding. Faith is, therefore, required in order to be open to God and also required to accept what may be received as a result of that openness. In this way, the self-understanding of an individual who is faithful both requires and is required by an encounter with the transcendent.

This is a very different model from how Gadamer has previously discussed each interpreter’s openness and willingness to engage the hermeneutical project. In his general discussions concerning openness to the hermeneutical process in the human

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<sup>120</sup> Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” 54. // “Das Selbstverständnis des Glaubens ist ja ganz gewiß dadurch bestimmt, daß der Glaube, theologisch gesehen, nicht eine Möglichkeit des Menschen ist, sondern eine Gnadentat Gottes, die dem Glaubenden geschieht.” “Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses: Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zur Frage der Entmythologisierung,” 129.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. // *Ibid.*, 129.

sciences, Gadamer's focus is on the recognition of a pre-established position. A person cannot change or alter the historical or linguistic terms of his or her existence. However, that person can both recognize and acknowledge these terms for the purpose of bringing one's framework – one's horizon (*Horizont*) – into contact with that of another person or text (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Alternatively, in the context of theological hermeneutics, Gadamer is suggesting that faith is not one element of an already determined viewpoint but is a unique contribution to the framework of some people.

There is also an element of agency that has significantly shifted in this articulation of the self. The possibility for self-understanding, as determined by faith and through God, comes to us from the transcendent. It is beyond our ability to create as well as to properly comprehend. This marks another point of differentiation between theological hermeneutics and all others, as Gadamer has now given the possibility for interpretation to a God who must first allow us to recognize ourselves as faithful beings. Later, Gadamer revisits this problem by exploring these limits of self-understanding within a theological context: "The Christian meaning of proclamation, the promise of resurrection that sets us free from death, consists precisely in bringing the constantly repeated failure of self-understanding – its eventual collapse in death and finiteness – to an end in faith in Christ."<sup>122</sup> Here again, understanding oneself in a (Christian) theological context involves the perspective of faith through which the proclamation can be assessed and interpreted. The added dimension in this section is that

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<sup>122</sup> Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," 525. // "Der christliche Sinn der Verkündigung, die Verheißung der Auferstehung, die vom Tode erlöst, besteht geradezu darin, das immer sich wiederholende Mißlingen des Selbstverständnisses, sein Scheitern an Tod und Endlichkeit, im Glauben an Christus zu beenden." "Hermeneutik und Historismus," 407-8.

self-understanding as a limited category is accepted; to understand oneself in relation to something that transcends finite life is to understand that we cannot completely comprehend or even attempt to interpret ourselves in our completeness. There is a fundamental indeterminacy in the hermeneutical process. The sense of an ongoing play or game that Gadamer invokes as his analogy suggests a lack of finality. In a rather anecdotal fashion, Gadamer even reminds us of this point at the conclusion of his afterword to *Truth and Method*: “The ongoing dialogue [of hermeneutics] permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word.”<sup>123</sup> To properly interpret means one must readily accept this lack of an ultimate conclusion or neatly determined ending to any hermeneutical inquiry. The added feature of theological hermeneutics is that this “ongoing dialogue” itself depends upon the initial belief that the religious text has something important and meaningful to say to the interpreter concerning his or her own situation and view about the world. The dialogue cannot properly begin until one accepts the possibility of an indeterminate relationship with the divine. Only in his discussions of theological hermeneutics does Gadamer suggest that the interpretive process depends upon anything significantly beyond an understanding and engagement of two – theoretically comprehensible – contexts. Concerning theological hermeneutics, Gadamer is suggesting that one’s ability to properly interpret involves a willingness to accept a part of oneself (the faith that

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<sup>123</sup> Gadamer, “Afterword,” *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990), 579. // “Das Gespräch, das im Gange ist, entzieht sich der Festlegung. Ein schlechter Hermeneutiker, der sich einbildet, er könnte oder er müßte das letzte Wort behalten.” “Nachwort zur 3. Auflage,” (1972) *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 478.

allows a person to properly interpret theological texts at all) as unknowable.

### The Elusive Nature of the Language of Faith

Gadamer describes how theological hermeneutics must “go beyond science, in this case with faith and its right proclamation.”<sup>124</sup> In this sense, theological hermeneutics is not directly aligned with either scientific methodology or with the interpretive model of the human sciences. It represents a movement “beyond” what can be properly be offered by both science and philosophy (as seen above in the opening quote of this chapter) because the subject itself cannot be contained by either of these disciplines alone. Here, I believe we see how Gadamer is describing theological hermeneutics as moving beyond yet also dependent upon the interpretive models of other disciplines. He is not suggesting that one accesses and engages theological hermeneutics in a completely unique manner; rather, that if theological interpretation is undertaken correctly, we must acknowledge its special feature of transcendence that is not found in other fields of study. Gadamer finds this idea of situating faith beyond methodology appealing because it reaffirms his position that the meaning of a text is not confined to the wishes and intentions of the person who created that text: “[I]t is not possible to limit the ‘meaning’ of the text to be understood to the supposed opinion of its author.”<sup>125</sup>

Now the question becomes, if we recognize that theological texts must be

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<sup>124</sup> Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 521. // “. . . über die Wissenschaft hinausgehende Interessen, in diesem Falle des Glaubens und seiner rechten Verkündigung.” “Hermeneutik und Historismus,” 403.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 521. // “[D]en >Sinn< der jeweils zu verstehenden Texte nicht auf die imaginäre Meinung ihrer Verfasser einschränken zu können.” Ibid., 403.



accessed in a unique manner because their meaning is accessed through faith, then how are we to access the nature of faith from a hermeneutical point of view? And, to what extent is Gadamer able to offer us a description of both this subject (faith) and the task through which it is encountered and ascertained (theological hermeneutics)?

In an essay written much later in his career (1984), Gadamer contemplates the question, what is religion?<sup>126</sup> He suggests that: “The concept of faith, however, is uniquely suspended between a truth claim that lags behind knowing and a certainty that knowing lags behind.”<sup>127</sup> This is an interesting formulation because Gadamer is placing faith in the category of certainty without knowledge. By knowledge, Gadamer is referring to empirical (scientific) forms of knowledge and proof about what is encountered in the world. He is clearly positing that this model is lacking when it is applied to transcendental experiences. However, what remains is the possibility for certainty even in the absence of knowledge. I believe Gadamer’s claim here is even stronger: The necessity of uncertainty is what defines faith. Being certain without empirical or epistemological justification is what makes this concept meaningful. Obviously, Gadamer is not alone in making this distinction between knowledge and certainty, but in the context of theological hermeneutics, we are now confronted with a project of attempting to interpret that of which we are certain without that certainty being directed or elaborated by knowledge.

This claim is significant for Gadamer’s discussion of theological hermeneutics

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<sup>126</sup> Gadamer, “Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science,” 119. // “Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft,” 156.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 121. // “Nun befindet sich aber auch der Begriff des Glaubens in einer eigentümlichen Schwebelage zwischen einem Für-wahr-Halten, das hinter dem Wissen zurückbleibt, und einer Gewißheit, hinter der das Wissen zurückbleibt.” Ibid., 157.

because in his general discussion of the historical-linguistic universality of hermeneutics within the human sciences (chapter 2), Gadamer suggested that it is precisely one's ability to acknowledge what one brings to his or her particular horizon of interpretation (*Vorurteil/Vorverständnis*) that allows for the possibility of meaning to emerge through the fusion of horizons of different traditions. The resulting dialogue is not possible (in its ideal form) without this self-reflection and recognition of what the interpreter brings to the process itself. Here, Gadamer is suggesting the opposite with respect to theology: It is now the interpreter's willingness to accept his or her *inability to know* a particular element of this horizon of interpretation – the element of faith. This is the very particularity that is necessary for theological interpretation to hold individual meaning in the first place.

Later in the same text, Gadamer discusses two elements of religion: First, he argues that, “[t]he concept of faith can scarcely claim to apply to the whole planet in the same way as the concept of science.”<sup>128</sup> Secondly, Gadamer suggests that:

It seems evident that, in following the principle of self-consciousness, one takes up a viewpoint that claims truly universal breadth and that therefore comprehends all other possible kinds of human behavior, including even comportment toward the holy.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 121. // “Der Begriff des Glaubens kann schwerlich die gleiche planetarische Geltung in Anspruch nehmen, die der Begriff der Wissenschaft besitzt.” Ibid., 158.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 122. // “Eine solche Reduktion des Religiösen auf die Glaubensgewißheit ist zwar mit dem Subjektivitätsdenken der Moderne in gutem Einklang. Auch leuchtet es ein, daß man im Prinzip des Selbstbewußtseins einen Gesichtspunkt einnimmt, der wirklich universale Reichweite in Anspruch nehmen kann und der daher alle anderen möglichen Verhaltensweisen des Menschen umfaßt, zu denen auch das Verhalten zum Heiligen gehört.” Ibid., 158.

These two ideas initially seem to be contradictory: Gadamer is asserting diversity or subjectivity in terms of the expression of faith,<sup>130</sup> yet he is simultaneously claiming that the ability to have faith is a universal human attribute. Given this, one's ability to engage in or accept the possibility of transcendence is where Gadamer places universality, while the particular engagement of this encounter must occur on an individual level.

Gadamer's position on faith is further developed in his discussions concerning the contemporary theologian, Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>131</sup> Gadamer believes that what makes Bultmann's theological position unique is his deliberate, self-conscious reliance upon philosophical (more specifically, Heideggerian) ontology as the point of departure for theological inquiry.<sup>132</sup> Gadamer's positive discussion of Bultmann's proposal focuses primarily on two features of the theologian's ontologically-driven hermeneutic: First, in Bultmann's demythologizing proposal, Gadamer finds the event of proclamation, the moment of faith that presents itself to us from beyond history, to be something that is then understood historically by the one who experiences it.<sup>133</sup> For Gadamer, this description is appealing because it does not force the abandonment of the notion that one encounters and interprets everything from within a historically-determined perspective.

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<sup>130</sup> For an interesting discussion concerning how Gadamer's Western philosophical hermeneutic relates to hermeneutics in Asian philosophy (which, the author argues, ought to be properly called "religion"), see Jay L. Garfield, "Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative," *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 97-110. Garfield's essay discusses the question of the particularity of faith in different contexts by considering the applicability of Western models of hermeneutics to Eastern paradigms of religion and philosophy.

<sup>131</sup> Gadamer also has a brief reference to Karl Barth in which he limits his comments to a short mention of the *Church Dogmatics (Kirchliche Dogmatik)*, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," 521. // "Hermeneutik und Historismus," 403. As his discussion regarding this text is not as detailed as his comments concerning Bultmann's position, I will focus my attention on Gadamer's assessment of Bultmann.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 509. // *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 521-2. // *Ibid.*, 403-4.

Secondly, Gadamer sees in Bultmann a belief that, “[s]elf-understanding refers to a historical decision and not to something one possesses or controls.”<sup>134</sup> For both Gadamer and Bultmann, the moment of encounter with the transcendent determines and is interpreted from within the confines of one’s particular history; yet, the impetus for the “historical decision,” the belief in the promise that the text can offer something fundamentally transformative to the individual, comes from a place beyond understanding. The event itself can only be understood by us in historical terms as we begin to interpret and make sense of its occurrence.

Although he finds Bultmann’s discussions of history and self-understanding to be useful in his own project, Gadamer argues that two things about Bultmann’s position are problematic. First, Gadamer rejects the idea that the characteristic of faith could be a universally shared human attribute. In his essay concerning Gadamer and Bultmann, Thomas B. Ommen suggests that, “[t]he question of God, which for Bultmann is a basically human and properly philosophical question, is, for Gadamer, truly perceived only from the standpoint of faith.”<sup>135</sup> That is, Gadamer’s claim that faith is not a universal attribute (as he believes Bultmann argues it to be)<sup>136</sup> and is in fact limited to theological discourses suggests that the defining feature of theological hermeneutics – the particularity of faith – is essential to the meaningful interpretation of religious texts.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 524. // “Selbstverständnis soll eine geschichtliche Entscheidung meinen und nicht etwa verfügbaren Selbstbesitz.” Ibid., 406.

<sup>135</sup> Thomas B. Ommen, “Bultmann and Gadamer: The Role of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics,” *Thought* 59 (1984): 354.

<sup>136</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?,” *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. and ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 145-54. // “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?,” (1957) *Glauben und Verstehen* Volume 3 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), 142-50.

Ultimately, Gadamer is suggesting that the very possibility for access to the language of faith depends upon the believer himself or herself insofar as that believer is capable of being open to the possibility of the transcendent.

Secondly, Gadamer does not believe that Bultmann fully recognizes religious texts as categorically different from historical texts – a distinction Gadamer makes carefully in his own work. Fred Lawrence relates how Gadamer once suggested to him that, “Bultmann forgets that the books of the New Testament are not *books* in the ordinary sense of the term.”<sup>137</sup> Thomas B. Ommen echoes this claim as follows: “[For Bultmann], [t]here is no ‘believing’ hermeneutic for the Bible. The Bible must be interpreted as any other book would be interpreted.”<sup>138</sup> For Gadamer, the status of the religious text itself seems to be determined by its subject matter and one’s possibility of accessing that subject. This suggests that Gadamer is not placing religious texts in the same category as all others.

Gadamer’s interpretation of Bultmann is important because the issues Gadamer has with Bultmann’s hermeneutical framework concern the relationships between universality, faith and theological interpretation. This further implicates how we are to approach and interpret religious texts as unique both because of what the believer brings to that text – faith – and, correspondingly, what he or she expects from the text.

Gadamer believes that religious texts offer a promise that is not akin to what is anticipated when encountering other forms of texts. He focuses upon biblical texts in

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<sup>137</sup> Fred Lawrence, “Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190 (emphasis Fred Lawrence).

<sup>138</sup> Ommen, “Bultmann and Gadamer: The Role of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics,” 351.

particular as writings that require the interpreter to bring an expectation to the process of interpretation. This expectation is an essential part of the horizon of the believer. This particularity of expectation (based on faith) sets Gadamer's understanding of theological hermeneutics apart from his broader description of hermeneutics in the human sciences. In this sense, theological hermeneutics as a discipline finds itself midway between the application-driven inquiry of the natural sciences and the universality of the human sciences. Its task becomes one where the pre-understanding of faith as the access point to the subject of interpretation must be acknowledged and applied in order for the process of interpretation to be undertaken in a meaningful manner.

Conclusion:

In this thesis, my intention has been to demonstrate how, following the division he draws between the natural and human sciences, Gadamer appeals to features of each form of inquiry in order to properly situate theological hermeneutics. Because of the unique subject matter as well as the particular requirement of faith needed to access this subject in a meaningful manner, theological hermeneutics does not easily fit into the disciplines Gadamer has described. Given this, I have tried to demonstrate how he uses the scientific concept of application in order to discuss the prior conviction of faith, as well as ontology to discuss the historical-linguistic elements of all forms of interpretation. It is in dialogue with both the frameworks of the natural and human sciences that Gadamer places theological hermeneutics.

In chapter 1, I discussed how the natural sciences invoke application as a resource or tool for understanding the world. I explained how Gadamer believes that one of the appealing features of this methodological approach is its alleged universal applicability. The ability to think rationally allows one to access and apply a particular framework – in this case, the scientific method – in the same manner in any and every given situation. Gadamer believes that the danger of this type of inquiry is found in the prioritization of method without necessarily defining it in relation to particular situations. It anticipates and expects universality through the uniform application of a pre-determined method. In the natural sciences, the scientist has an expectation before engaging in her investigation. She expects a given hypothesis to either be confirmed or rejected as a result of conducting the experiment. Here, Gadamer places emphasis upon the separation of

subject (inquirer) and object (what is investigated) such that an intermediary tool – the tool of application of method – is used to aid in understanding.

In his discussion of theology, Gadamer borrows these concepts of application and expectation. He relies heavily on this idea of expectation in his approach to the interpretation of religious texts when discussing how, in contrast to historical texts, religious texts promise something to the believer who encounters them. The necessity of faith prior to the interpretive process is analogous to the application of method in the natural sciences. It is this element of scientific investigation that Gadamer has claimed as an important part of theological hermeneutics.

In chapter 2, I examined what Gadamer believes to be the foundation of universality in the human sciences. The importance of history and language illustrates the natural or unintentional interpretive process of human existence. Since these basic ontological features cannot be escaped, Gadamer argues that this forms the foundation for universality in the human sciences. The close association Gadamer establishes between ontology (as historical-linguistic) and hermeneutics allows him to claim hermeneutical universality as something that directly follows from the universal attributes of being itself. I have also discussed how, for Gadamer, the historical-linguistic nature of our existence in the world ought to prevent the separation between the interpreter and what he desires to interpret. This is contrasted with the deliberate application of method as *the* correct tool for understanding the world.

The relationship between this description of universality and theology may be described by examining the hermeneutical process (as universal) and what Gadamer



believes to be the goals and objectives such a process. Werner G. Jeanrond concisely describes one of the necessities of theological hermeneutics as follows:

The novelty of a call for a theological theory of interpretation does not accordingly lie in the endeavour to find new perspectives. . . .but rather in the efforts to reflect on the process and assumptions of theological text interpretation in a *fundamental* manner.<sup>139</sup>

This passage recollects my introductory comments concerning Gadamer's relationship with religion. In the introduction, I noted that one reason for Gadamer's reluctance to fully engage the topic of theological hermeneutics may be that he does not want to *create* a religious language. It seems that this desire is always at the centre of Gadamer's projects; the search for and creation of a particular language that would be appropriate for the interpretation and understanding of a given set of events or circumstances is never his task. Instead, as I have tried to elaborate in my project, Gadamer is primarily concerned with describing what is already the case with respect to our collective hermeneutical engagement in the world.

In chapter 3, I discussed the need for a distinctive approach to religious language (transcendence) and the manner in which Gadamer considers faith to be a non-universal element of the horizon each of us brings to the interpretive task. Religious texts must be examined differently because they contain the possibility of a divine message and offer us the expectation that a promise may be fulfilled. Those who come to these unique texts

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<sup>139</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1988), 7-8 (emphasis Werner G. Jeanrond).

with a faithful disposition are willing to allow them to speak in a way that may be transformative and defining of who they are as individuals. Gadamer's discussion of theological hermeneutics both validates and prioritizes this process.

In my discussion of the relationship between Gadamer and Bultmann, I have described how Gadamer is willing to align himself with Bultmann's theological position on the question of history with respect to how every experience – including those experiences of faith – must be interpreted historically because our existence as human beings is always defined historically. Gadamer is also in agreement with Bultmann's suggestion that self-understanding may be altered through an encounter with the transcendent. However, Gadamer will not concede that faith is a universal category; further, he does not believe that religious texts are the same as historical texts to the extent that they could share, or ought to share, the same interpretive framework. This discussion suggests that Gadamer does not view his project as fundamentally different from that of a theological hermeneuticist, nor does he believe there is nothing to be gained by examining the relationship between philosophical categories of existence and the unique situation that is presented by a text that considers the divine.

John Hogan paraphrases Heinrich Ott as follows: "The relation between theory and practice, theology and Scripture, faith and history, theology and psychology, Christian and non-Christian religions and most basically the relation of a man to his own tradition are united in the hermeneutical question."<sup>140</sup> It seems that this is precisely the sort of "hermeneutical question" Gadamer envisions for religion. Ultimately, he

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<sup>140</sup> John Hogan, "Gadamer and the Hermeneutical Experience," *Philosophy Today* 20 (1976): 4.

acknowledges that theology occupies a special role in hermeneutics because its subject matter requires a unique type of access that we do not all share. In his discussions of this topic, Gadamer is cautioning us not to overextend methods or ideals that may be believed to be universally useful. Instead, by recognizing the particular features of a discipline such as theology, Gadamer proposes a hermeneutical engagement that begins with reflection upon one's own perspective and the possibilities this offers as well as the limits it enforces with respect to our desire to interpret any text.

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