

Article

Gadamer's Appropriation of Pietism

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Abstract: A foundation stone of Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is the notion of the *sensus communis*. The philosophical significance of a "sensus communis" (common sense) begins with Aristotle, who offered scattered reflections. The topic was taken up in earnest in Enlightenment thought and in German idealism, but it became more of an individual faculty, lacking the deep sense of community and tradition found in earlier formulations. In this paper, the author demonstrates Gadamer's debt to Pietist thought, examining his appropriation and use of the theology of Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782), a leading figure in Swabian Pietism, whose ideas had a significant impact in theological circles and broader cultural life. Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice,' owes a debt to the Pietist conception of the *sensus communis* and his practical philosophy to Pietism's emphasis on 'application' as a fundamental aspect of a hermeneutical triad.

Keywords: hermeneutics; *sensus communis*; scientific method; Gadamer; Oetinger; Pietism



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1. Introduction

The philosophical hermeneutics developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer is profoundly opposed to a narrow understanding of the nature and meaning of human experience resulting from the effort to unilaterally apply the methods and assumptions of modern science to human beings and social-cultural life. For Gadamer, understanding is to be premised not on the model of the scientific grasp of an object but rather on the model of a dialogue between conversation partners. One of Gadamer's minor (though important) conversation partners was the tradition of German Pietist thought, especially the work of Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782). Gadamer was drawn to Oetinger's discussion of the *sensus communis*, a central notion in religious and philosophical thought since the time of Aristotle. Gadamer's understanding of the *sensus communis* has received attention, but only in relation to Kant and Vico [1–3]. My aim here is to recover and develop Gadamer's appropriation of Oetinger's understanding of 'common sense,' as well as the Pietist commitment to a hermeneutics that includes the dimension of 'application,' another key concept informing Gadamer's thinking.

Oetinger was a leading figure in Swabian Pietism, and his life and ideas had a significant impact in theological circles but also the broader currents of eighteenth and nineteenth German thought. Goethe, for example, read and appreciated Oetinger's work [4]. Gadamer's appropriation of Oetinger has, to my knowledge, received no attention. In considering Gadamer's assimilation of Oetinger I (1) exemplify the very working of the *sensus communis*, (2) locate a source of Gadamer's critique of the 'prejudice of against prejudice' and (3) reveal aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutical method.

2. Scientific Method and Mechanism

The modern field of philosophical hermeneutics emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the complex set of cultural changes known as modernity. We mention here four pervasive factors shaping philosophical concerns. First was the rise of historicism as a foundation for truth and understanding, along with concern over historicism's limits.

Nietzsche's essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874) can be taken as an example of the felt need to assess the extent to which historical understanding could or should be the arbiter of all scholarly aims and discourse and the measure par excellence of truth [5]. Second was the sympathetic desire or nefarious need, in the wake of colonization and the first wave of globalization, to understand 'the other.' Friedrich Schleiermacher, sometimes referred to as the 'father' of modern hermeneutics, was motivated by the effort to understand how understanding was even possible, in the context of Europe's encounter with and colonization of other cultures. This disposition was later generalized into the question of the relationship between subjectivity and otherness, and informed two currents in hermeneutical thought; one emphasized engagement with otherness as a means to better understand ourselves, the second current critically examined the need to properly understand the other in so far as they are a recipient of my actions [6]. Third was the growing awareness that cognition and thought are intertwined with language, leading to the linguistic turn in philosophy inaugurated by Ferdinand Saussure and the rise of structuralism and semiotics. We do not merely describe our perceptions or experiences in representational fashion; these very experiences are shaped in and through our linguisticality [7]. Lastly, a centerpiece of modern thought and practice entailed extending the methods and worldview of deterministic science (and its twin, technology), from the natural to social sciences. These four dimensions form the cultural matrix of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Here, we will develop this last dimension, as it is crucial to understanding what Gadamer is up to in *Truth and Method (T&M)*, and in what sense Gadamer sees philosophical value in Pietist thought.

The kind of science promoted in during the era of industrialization was positivistic, reductive, and mechanistic. Knowledge, it came to be assumed, is best acquired by applying a mathematically informed logic and rationality to discerning the relationships between quantified forms of sensory experience. Such an approach produced significant advances in the study of physics and biology, so impressive that the informing conceptual apparatus came to be seen as a skeleton key to unlock the secrets of all domains of knowledge. During what historian Lewis Mumford terms the "neotechnic phase" of the industrial revolution "the scientific method, whose chief advances had been in mathematics and the physical sciences, took possession of other domains of experience: the living organism and human society also became objects of systematic investigation . . . the modes of quantification and abstraction were applied to individuals and society as a whole." This neotechnic orientation, concludes Mumford, "multiplied, vulgarized, and spread the methods and goods produced by the [scientific revolution]: above all it was directed toward the quantification of life, and its success could be gauged only in terms of the multiplication table There arose a new contempt for any other mode of life or form of expression except that associated with the machine [8]."

As neotechnics worked its way into the realm of the humanities there emerged in the course of the nineteenth century a robust critique of mechanism. We may take Thomas Carlyle's essay *Signs of the Times*, published in 1829, as exemplary:

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its preestablished apparatus; it is not done by hand, but by machinery . . . Instruction, that mysterious communing of Wisdom with Ignorance, is no longer an indefinable tentative process, requiring a study of individual aptitudes, and a perpetual variation of means and methods, to attain the same end; but a secure, universal, straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism, with such intellect as comes to hand . . . [T]he same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand . . . Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn to mechanism, and are of a mechanical character . . . Mechanism has struck its roots down into man's most intimate, primary sources of conviction [9]

Though he does not use the word, Carlyle is writing here about *scientism*, the presumption that, even prior to investigating a particular subject or topic, one already possesses the best way to investigate it. Mumford's term *neotechnics* is basically a synonym for *scientism*, which Richard Olsen defines as "the transfer of ideas, practices, attitudes, and methodologies from the context of the study of the natural world into the study of humans and their social institutions" [10] (1). The attitude persists, seen, for example, in Richard Dawkins's bestselling book, *The God Delusion*. Dawkins displays a rudimentary understanding of the traditions and practices informing religious and philosophical thought; the assumption Dawkins makes is that he already possesses everything he needs—scientific rationality—to comprehend religion. The parallel perspective in Christian tradition is *fideism*, the assumption that all one needs to know and understand the world is faith coupled with a hostile attitude to reason, a point of view condemned as a heresy in 1348.

It needs emphasizing that Gadamer (like many continental philosophers) inherits the concerns voiced by Carlyle and others. Gadamer was pushing against what he saw as a fundamental shortcoming of modernity—the instantiating of a technical, instrumentality rationality into all spaces of human endeavor, a trajectory that necessarily degrades and displaces other forms of thinking and understanding. Echoing Mumford, Gadamer writes:

What appears to me to characterize our epoch is not the surprising control of nature we have achieved, but the development of scientific methods to guide the life of society. Only with this achievement has the victorious course of modern science, beginning in the nineteenth century, become a dominant social factor. The scientific tendencies of thought underlying our civilization have in our time pervaded all aspects of social praxis. Scientific market research, scientific warfare, scientific diplomacy, scientific rearing of the younger generation, scientific leadership of the people—the application of science to all these fields gives expertise a commanding position in the economy of society [11]

It is within the context of scientific rationality pervading all aspects of life and ways of knowing that Gadamer seeks to develop a general theory of hermeneutic understanding. Clearly, Gadamer either tacitly or explicitly takes scientism as a significant problem, as when he writes of how Oetinger's development of the concept of the *sensus communis* is in "contrast to the violent anatomization of nature through experiment and calculation" informing the rationalism of a Leibniz [12] (p. 28).

In the passage quoted above, Carlyle points directly to the scientific dream of "secure," "universal," "straightforward" "means and methods." Among the "roots" mechanism put down to "grow" us "mechanical in head and heart" were methodological ones. Francis Bacon is an exemplary proponent of mechanism. In the preface to his *Novum Organum* (1620) Bacon asserted that "the mind itself [should] be from the very outset not left to take its own course but guided at every step; and then the business be done as if by machinery." Such a methodological step was, for Bacon, the means of reorienting the "entire work of understanding" [13] (p. 87). A consequence of this step, for example, is Bacon's demotion of poetry and history to second class status as fields of study that could, at best, have rhetorical moral worth but offer little in terms of a contribution to real knowledge. By the close of the nineteenth century, a positivistic, mechanized, and reductive worldview ruled in science, and had struck deep roots in the conceptions and practices of industry and education: Scientific mechanism, positivism and utilitarianism came to dominate regimes of truth and knowledge in the emerging human sciences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A classic literary example critiquing this cultural milieu is Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), where the cold, quantifying spirit of the industrial age is chillingly personified by the utilitarian ideologue and member of Parliament, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind (the name suggests someone who "grinds up to suit"). This is a man "with a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket." He is always "ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to." For Gradgrind everything in the universe is "a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic," and he organizes the education of children strictly according to the salutary principle that "what

you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be" [14] (14;33). These cultural developments witnessed pushback in the forms of romanticism, phenomenology, existentialism, and philosophical hermeneutics and anthropology, all of which led to considerable reflection on the relationship between truth, knowledge, and understanding on the one hand, and methods on the other—hence Gadamer's title, *Truth and Method*.

Following his predecessor Wilhelm Dilthey, a first step for Gadamer is to carve out an autonomous space for the humanities by distinguishing between those methods and assumptions suitable for the study of nature (*Naturwissenschaften*) and those suitable for the study of the cultural life of humanity (*Geisteswissenschaften*). This move does have the effect of bifurcating knowledge into what C.P. Snow termed 'The Two Cultures,' but the initial move made by Dilthey was to ensure the viability of the study of history, art, literature and other fields with recourse to assumptions and methods other than those drawn from the natural sciences. Indeed, the need to safeguard forms of life and modes of knowledge from industrial capitalism was a central impetus informing Wilhelm von Humboldt's reorganization (in the early decades of the nineteenth century) of the university and the creation of the modern conception of the humanities. These two spheres of human inquiry are concerned, argues Dilthey, with two different kinds of experience: an outer realm of empirical sensation [*Erfahrung*] and an inner realm of "lived experience" [*Erlebnis*]. Scientists never receive "messages" or "communications" from their objects of study, but this is precisely what confronts the student of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. What people think, feel, hope, desire, intend, believe, experience, value, assert—these are given to us by their expressions: the words they utter, the texts they write, the music they play, the stories they tell. Such expressions are the empirical material with and on which the humanities work, and the aim is to understand and evaluate these expressions, to grasp their meanings, significances, and implications. Gadamer is indebted to Dilthey's differentiation of the natural and human sciences, but he also subjects Dilthey's valorizing of *Erlebnis* to a trenchant critique—it is far too subjectivist a concept for Gadamer, who argues it must be integrated into a different kind of experience, one situated in the communal contexts of a tradition, which is Gadamer's broader sense and use of the term *Erfahrung*. (The German terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* both mean "experience," but with subtle differences and differing uses in a variety of thinkers).

3. Sensus Communis in *Truth and Method*

Part one of *T&M* is titled "the question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art." Gadamer uses the experience of being engaged, puzzled, irritated, or moved by an art work as a specific instance of a more general understanding of the nature of experience. Gadamer critiques what he terms "aesthetic consciousness." The phrase points to a Kantian aesthetic of subjective taste, an aesthetic that recognizes a realm of interiority and feeling, while simultaneously separating this realm from human knowledge or truth. Gadamer poses the question of how we might transcend this aesthetic consciousness (or the "aesthetic dimension") so formative of modern sensibilities. To do so, Gadamer looks to guiding notions of the tradition of humanism prior to the Kantian revolution. He takes up such concepts as *Bildung*, taste, tact, judgment, memory and imagination, pushing these beyond Kantian aesthetics by setting these in a non-subjectivized context. Each of these notions (taste, judgment, tact) Gadamer subsumes under the broader purview of the *sensus communis*.

Gadamer offers an extended discussion of the *sensus communis*, referring to both Vico's defence and use of it in setting limits to rational, scientific method as a means of acquiring knowledge, and to the Pietists Friedrich Christoph Oetinger and J.J. Rambach, who sought to defend religious knowledge in the face of rationalist critiques of tradition. There is a further reference to Oetinger and Pietism in the final part of *T&M*, in a complex discussion of the beautiful, language, and ontology. Gadamer also wrote an essay on Oetinger, "Oetinger als Philosoph," published in 1964 as the introduction to the republication of

Oetinger's *Inquisitio in sensum communem et rationem*, which first appeared in 1753. To my knowledge there is but one other brief mention of Pietism in Gadamer's writings, in an essay titled "Hermeneutics and Logocentricism" (1986), which emerged out of the famously failed discussion (in 1981) between Gadamer and Derrida [15].

4. Oetinger on the *Sensus Communis*

Known in German as the *Erweckungsbewegung* (the 'awakening' or 'revival' movement), Pietism was a call to lead a devout and holy life in service of God. Conceived by Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) in the wake of the Thirty Years War, the aim of the movement was to reinvigorate the spiritual life of individual Christians and a complacent Lutheran Church, through an emphasis on personal experience and charitable service in the world. Pietism took on unique characteristic in different regions. In Swabia, where the movement gained a strong foothold, Pietism was imbued with traditions of hermetic, speculative mysticism. Oetinger was an avid reader of Jacob Böhme, and the Lutheran church censored Oetinger for his translations of Emanuel Swedenborg and his advocacy of a theology of universal restoration. Oetinger's thought retained scriptural and Christological foundations, but his positive assessment of the power of reason and the human capacity to perceive truth led to difficulties with orthodoxy. Oetinger advocated the heterodox teaching of the restoration of all things (*apokatastasis panton*)—the universal salvation of all humanity and creation. Oetinger even proclaimed a theology of restoration from the pulpit. As discussed by Weyer-Menhoff, Oetinger's restoration theology was in direct conflict with the Augsburg Confession, article XVII, which explicitly opposes universalism with a doctrine of the final judgment and separation of those eternally damned and saved [16] (pp. 199–204).

Oetinger lived in an age in which the realms of spirit and matter were increasingly being torn apart, a result of the success of the idealism and rationalism of Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff. Oetinger's solution to the split between spirit and matter was suggested to him through his reading of Jacob Böhme. In Böhme's works, Oetinger found the idea of process, a movement of becoming towards a total harmony. Oetinger's struggle to overcome the divide between rationalism and Christian piety, between science and religion, is a key theme of his life's work. Though he was relentless in his critique of Enlightenment rationalism, he also affirmed elements of it. "It is always important," Oetinger writes in his autobiography, "to use logic and metaphysics alongside the teachings of the Holy Scriptures; these two go together: Holy Scripture and the wisdom of the streets" [17] (pp. 76–77). While North German Pietists fought battles with Enlightenment rationalists, many of the Swabians sought to mediate between Christianity and the Enlightenment, were fascinated with scientific theory and new technologies, embraced religious mysticism and romanticism, and were closely associated with the highly learned, cultured literati of the region.

As George Becker has discussed, Pietists such as Oetinger, though interested in the emerging modern science, adopted a position and methodology ultimately at odds with the "normative science" of quantitative measurement and empirical verification. Their method was far more "phenomenological" in orientation. Oetinger developed a

Mystical and organic conception of nature that assigned a central place to biblical prediction and the premise of a God actively involved in the operations of nature. Key components of this endeavor were the identification of the sensus communis as a higher sensorium of knowledge, and its methodological extension, the phenomenological method [18] (p. 655)

Becker rightly argues that the phenomenological and theological framing of Oetinger's excursions into the world of modern science fundamentally set it at odds with that world. This is true enough. On the other hand, a legacy of Oetinger's thought—and one picked up by Gadamer—is the concern that only normative scientific methodologies have legitimacy in forms of human understanding. While I agree with Becker that, from the perspective of normative science, the ideas of Oetinger, Goethe and certain of the Romantics are little "more than a curious footnote in the history of science" [18] (p. 656), it remains an

open question whether an understanding of ourselves and our social-cultural worlds is best achieved through scientific methodologies. Oetinger, in bequeathing this question to thinkers the likes of Gadamer, served as a pathway towards a more comprehensive conception of hermeneutics as not simply a method but an integral aspect of our existential and ontological situation.

A foundation stone of Oetinger's solution to this growing rift between spirit and matter is his conception of the *sensus communis*. Oetinger's *Wahrheit des sensus communis* (1754) is a comprehensive study of the concept. I've relied on several passages from this work, as discussed by Weyer-Menkhoff [16], as well as Oetinger's *Selbstbiographie* [17]. Oetinger affirmed the power of the individual to apprehend God outside of the mediation of scripture, dogma, or sacraments, and he develops and defends this position through the notion of the *sensus communis*, which he takes to be an "organ of the soul in every person which makes knowledge of God . . . through nature possible [19]." For Oetinger, the soul is tripartite, consisting of *ratio*, *virtus*, and *sensus*—logical, analytical reflection; virtue; and feeling or sensibility [20]. His complaint with the emerging modern worldview is that it too heavily emphasized *ratio* at the expense of *sensus*. "[I]n nature there still lies something good," Oetinger writes. "[T]he eternal," he continues, "is to be found in the hearts of people, and they don't need to seek it outside themselves. So turn back from outer to inner, to those things that people don't see, and yet are so certain when seen. Search for God, feel and find him When I find my heart there shines for me the presence of God. Note well: this intuitive realization of the heart is life itself . . . it is love" [16] (pp. 138–139). What the *sensus communis* promises or allows for is the apprehension of life's unity and life's *Geistlichkeit*—the spirit present in all things.

In his early works, Oetinger devotes a great deal of attention to what he terms the *Zentralschau* or *Zentralerkenntnis*, a vision of divine totality, to which Oetinger says he was introduced by a simple farmer, who led him to read the work of Jacob Boehme. The *Zentralschau*, for Oetinger the highest form of the *sensus communis*, is the perception of the origin and unity of all things, through which occurs a transformation of both knower and known. The experience of divine totality transforms the beholder into the object beheld, and its central realization or experience is love, a point Gadamer chooses to emphasize in quoting Oetinger: "Fathers are moved without proof to care for their children; love does not demonstrate, but often against reason rends the heart at the beloved's reproach." Oetinger describes love as one of the three sources that move or stir the self to awakening (the other two are *Selbständigkeit* (independence) and *Selbst-Erkännntnis* (self-knowledge) [16] (pp. 177–178).¹ This valuation of the individual's potential to realize the religious truth of love outside the bounds of positive religion is typical of Pietism, especially radical Pietism, is inherent in Oetinger's understanding of the *sensus communis*, and is emphasized by Gadamer.

5. Gadamer's Appropriation of Oetinger

Gadamer fully realizes that Oetinger has theological and apologetic motivations, but he also states that "[Oetinger's] writing on the *sensus communis* is without doubt philosophically significant" [20] (p. 306).

In rationalist thought, 'common sense' is taken to be a faculty of consciousness, a universal capacity for rational reflection on sense impressions. For Kant, the *sensus communis* pointed to the possibility of shared feeling derived from the higher (universal) faculties of reflection and free, disinterested play. Its application or efficacy thereby founds an ideal community of judges by virtue of their being able to generate abstract, universal principles and values. In time, the *sensus communis* became further restricted to the aesthetic realm and to emotive psychological states. Gadamer sees this aestheticization and abstraction of the *sensus communis* as a loss, contributing to problems in the contemporary hermeneutics of the day, and to an unstable footing for the humanities.

¹ These three are "Selbständigkeit," "Selbst-Erkännntnis," und "Liebe." See Weyer-Menkhoff [16], pp. 177–178.

Though Oetinger uses the metaphor of “an organ of the soul,” the *sensus communis* is not to be understood strictly as a faculty (a power, an ability) that individuals possess—for Gadamer, a faculty psychology is highly problematic.² Yes, the *sensus communis* is power or potential of human nature, yet Oetinger’s epistemology is anchored in the generativity of sensate knowledge. Through the *sensus communis* one knows via the senses as well as an inner sense, rather than through reason—simultaneously and intuitively, rather than through linear analysis and logic. The *sensus communis* is the faculty of feeling and emotion in the soul; it gives credence to inner experience, to aesthetic knowledge, to intuitive inclinations. Oetinger describes the heart as a vehicle of perception and understanding, the “innermost kernel of human being. So too is the *sensus communis* concealed, it is the still feeling [stilles Gefühl]” [19] (p. 138). Oetinger, as Gadamer notes, translates *sensus communis* as “heart” [12] (p. 27)³ and gives this hermeneutical application—we do not know simply or only through rational reflection on sense impressions but through the intuition and feeling of the heart.

However, the *sensus communis* is more than subjective intuition, since this “organ” of feeling and understanding is in turn embedded in a cultural matrix, grounded in communal traditions and knowledge, what Oetinger calls the “wisdom of the streets” (*Weisheit auf der Gasse*). Importantly, the ‘feelings of the heart’ are not merely the possession of the individual, not strictly subjective, but rather cultivated and sustained by communal traditions. Emphatically for Gadamer, the *sensus communis* is not a principle to be rationally derived, but rather something given that serves as a starting point for reflection and interpretation. Oetinger is, argues Gadamer, self-consciously unmethodological in emphasizing the importance of common sense over against *ratio*. There is no methodological bedrock starting point for understanding, since we can only understand on the basis of what we possess, and what we possess is given to us by our culture. Gadamer argues that the German philosophical tradition failed to absorb the social context of the *sensus communis* found in Vico’s thought; the exception, states Gadamer, were the Pietists, and he specifically points to Oetinger in this regard [12] (p. 27).

In this humanist tradition, the *sensus communis* is related to the practice of making sound judgments, a mode of knowing distinct from the kind of rational understanding that emerges in the Cartesian worldview. The *sensus communis* is not driven by rules and procedures (by methods) but draws on the fund of habit, story, exemplary people, tradition, and morals that inform a given a community. The *sensus communis* refers to blend of knowledge, skill, capacities and tradition as central elements in arriving at understanding. It is experimental in nature, works by way of analogy, and arrives not at iron-clad rules and procedures but in-forms our habits, styles, and ethos. The distinction Gadamer makes here is between *sensus communis* as a “common sense” (as an innate faculty, the view of Enlightenment rationalism) and as “communal sense.” Gadamer’s preference for retaining and retrieving the notion of the *sensus communis* as *communal sense* is directly related to his understanding of prejudice,⁴ historical horizons, and the efficacy and rehabilitation of tradition as integral elements in hermeneutical understanding. When Gadamer writes of the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudice,” the background context is the shift in conceiving the *sensus communis* as “common sense,” rather than in terms of inherited traditions; a communal sense recognizes the place of tradition in our understanding [11] (p. 28).

Importantly, for Oetinger, the *sensus communis* is informed by “anticipations and predilections,” which Gadamer metaphorically refers to as “instinct,” where instincts are “not only brief affects which overcome the soul . . . but original tendencies” drawn from tradition [20] (p. 314). Gadamer develops this conception of ‘instinct’ is in *Truth and Method* [12] (pp. 28–30). Before *ratio* can go to the work of cogitating, these formative

² In this regard, Gadamer follows Nietzsche, who rejects a Kantian faculty psychology (see *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 11).

³ Weyer-Menkhoff also emphasizes the epistemological role of the heart in Oetinger’s theology. Oetinger writes, “Das Herz ist der Ort, an dem Gottes lebendiges Wort im Menschen Fuss fast . . .” [16] (p. 137).

⁴ The German word is *Vorurteil*, perhaps better rendered as “prejudgment,” rather than “prejudice,” though this word, too, tends to carry negative connotations.

dispositions, tendencies, and predilections are present. That Oetinger recognized we arrive at knowledge and understanding not through pure rational reflection on sense impressions but always on the basis of previous understanding makes him for Gadamer a philosophically significant thinker.

It is on this point of a debt to or embeddedness within tradition that critics have seen in Gadamer's thought a dangerous conservatism. The question cannot be pursued here, but it needs be said that Gadamer is emphatically not an uncritical defender of tradition. Tradition and authority are not to be accepted simply by virtue of their 'being there,' but they are to be recognized as existing and accorded a measure of respect. Gadamer shares here with Hans Blumenberg the notion that culture, tradition, authority, institutions—these are deserving of at least a measure of trust and the burden of proof calling for their rejection stands with those who object. There can be no ultimate rational justification for everything that exists.

6. Application

Prior to the rise of modern scientific methodologies, traditional hermeneutics was conceived in terms of three interlocking elements or dimensions: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation) and *subtilitas applicandi* (application) [12] (p. 307). Gadamer argues that in the course of modernity 'application' was quietly dropped from hermeneutics in favor of an epistemological emphasis. The first two of these dimensions were a central concern within Romantic hermeneutics, in the recognition of the unity of understanding and interpretation, such as we find in the simple example of translation: We do not understand, then translate; the two proceed together. Part of Gadamer's interest lies in stitching together what the rise of historical and aesthetic consciousness pulled apart, working out the implications of the intertwined nature of understanding and interpretation. Significantly, Gadamer further emphasizes the question of application as "the fundamental hermeneutical problem" [12] (p. 305), arguing that modern hermeneutics had largely ignored or suppressed the matter. Application, claims Gadamer, is part of the "forgotten history of hermeneutics" [12] (p. 307), though a genuine contribution of Pietism, even if this interest was quickly eclipsed in the Romantic era.

In part, application refers to the framing reasons or contexts informing the act and experience of interpretation. Paul Tillich's theology of correlationism, for example, sought to both translate or articulate core theological concepts in terms of contemporary culture, while at the same time bringing these concepts to bear in the effort to understand cultural forms and dynamics. Application in Gadamer's thought expands further to a comprehensive view of *praxis* as encompassing "the totality of practical life, all our human action and behavior, the self-adaptation of the human being as a whole in this world" [21] (p. 78). In *T&M*, Gadamer devotes considerable space to a discussion of application, in the context of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (ethics, practical wisdom) and the paradigmatic nature of hermeneutics characteristic of theological and legal domains [12] (pp. 335–334).

Gadamer emphasizes the role of Pietism in identifying the element of application in hermeneutics, especially in the work of Oetinger and J.J. Rambach [12] (pp. 27, 306). The Pietist emphasis on application was partly in response to representational and objectivist notions of language that were taking root. In Lutheran circles, this was evident in an attitude of objectification toward dogma, catechisms, confessions of faith and the rise of propositional forms of belief. As Pietism was concerned with the rejuvenation of the Church through the cultivation of a vibrant, living faith in the heart and soul of members of the community, a hermeneutic emphasizing application and affect was part and parcel of the effort to recall and make live again the word of the Gospel. Discourse, understanding, and affect were understood as a unity; biblical hermeneutics therefore involved the element of application, an obvious example of which is the preaching of scripture in the Protestant sermon, in which a text from the past is brought to life in the context of the present. The case of the Protestant sermon is then for Gadamer a rather obvious example of this element of application in hermeneutics, and he emphasizes the role

of Pietism in recognizing its importance in the presentation and performance of salvation through scriptural sermonizing, theologizing, and exegesis. Gadamer further develops his understanding of application through a discussion of the legal text and jurisprudence [12] (pp. 320–334), where the work of law is to apply the text to the actual case at hand, the situation before one. Law and theology make apparent what, for Gadamer, is a more general feature of understanding, namely, the unity of understanding, interpretation, and application.

In the cases of law and theology we have more or less obvious examples of application: A judge needs to arrive at a decision, a priest needs to console the grieving. In the modern era, however, interpretation in literary, historical and cultural studies has tended to increasingly detach from the dimension of application, in search of a supposed objective standpoint. We tend to assume a distinction between an applied understanding and pure, unmediated understanding, the latter being referred to as ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake,’ or ‘objective knowledge.’ It is precisely such a posture that a hermeneutics of suspicion interrogates, for there always exists a situated intention, an informing context, a tacit aim. The choice for Gadamer is not between prejudiced and disinterested understanding but between conscious and unconscious application [12] (pp. 296, 354). Modern scholarship (in history, say) often assumes or identifies with the distinction between interested and disinterested understanding. We read Scripture, perhaps, in terms of its address to an original audience or an audience situated in various cultural or temporal locations, but not in relation to ourselves. What makes for a truly interesting historical study is when a finding holds a significance or meaning in the present, triggering what Gadamer terms a “historically effected consciousness” [12] (p. 335).

A basic presumption of modern scientific methodology is that incorporating application would be prejudicial to arriving at objective truth. As Jean Grondin succinctly describes this move, “instead of using the cognitive model of philological and historical interpretation . . . Gadamer reclaims the practical model of legal and theological hermeneutics The first lesson of the notion of *subtilitas applicandi* is for us to remember that an understanding without application is no understanding at all” [22] (pp. 101–102).⁵ The scientific model is to separate ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ sciences. Theoretical physics determines the truths of the workings of matter and energy, which are then put into practical service through technological invention and innovation. However, this model breaks down in the cases of theology and jurisprudence; and it breaks down more generally in the context of the basic practical dimension informing philosophy since Aristotle, where practical wisdom is not something didactically learnt and taught, but rather acquired. For the meaning of a law or the significance of a passage of scripture always includes consideration of questions of its implication, entailment, application. Similarly, the humanities are for Gadamer in their essence moral sciences or activities; they properly belong in the field of praxis and are intimately implicated in forms of self-understanding.

Gadamer’s discussion of application is related to other central elements of his hermeneutics, especially his conception of understanding and *phronesis* [12] (pp. 19–20). The first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* reads that ‘Man [sic] by nature desires to know.’ This desire is not motivated only by the demands for objective knowledge but by the desire to feel at home in the world, to feel comfortable. Understanding has quality of eros and intimacy to it. Heidegger distinguishes, and Gadamer follows him here, between cognitive understanding (‘I get it,’ ‘I grasp it,’ associated with Dilthey’s *verstehen* approach) with know-how (self-understanding, skill, and mutual agreement). Knowledge is not simply cognitive; it also entails practical knowledge, know-how and skill, as when we say, ‘He knows his way around the kitchen.’ Knowledge and understanding entail a skill or proficiency; applied knowledge is as (perhaps more) important than abstract or objective knowledge. Heidegger also adds the reflexive ‘*sich*’ to Dilthey’s notion of *verstehen*. The German ‘*sich*

⁵ Otherness emerges a central theme in many of Gadamer’s later writings and interviews. For a clear exposition on how often Gadamer is misread on this question of otherness, see chapters by Madison [23] and Geniusas [24] and the article by King [25].

verstehen’ connotes both the element of self-understanding and the element of concord or agreement [26] (36–40). Hermeneutical inquiry then is inherently applied understanding involving know-how, self-knowledge and mutual self-understanding [11] (p. 180). The three anchoring points of hermeneutics are, as their adjective connotes, *subtilities*—that is, talents and skills more so than clear-cut methods.

Just as Gadamer uses the experience of art as an example of the universality of hermeneutic experience and as a starting point to launch a critique of hermeneutics conceived simply as a method, he takes up the question of application in theological and legal domains as illustrative of a general feature of hermeneutical inquiry [11] (passim). It would seem that the modern notion of method arose precisely because of problems associated with application; preaching scripture is different from the historical (or even theological) understanding of it. Gadamer wants to argue that this is only apparently the case; with the rise of historical consciousness, we not only recognize the flux of history, but realize ourselves to be historically situated beings. Gadamer does not mean to demean or discredit historical understanding. A Bach cantata can be understood in its historical place and context, and ‘texts’ (broadly conceived) can be used as source materials to study other peoples, places, and times. However, Gadamer wants to emphasize that they are never only this, as what the historian seeks is not to simply know the past but to understand it, which means to consider the implications of a text. As Gadamer notes, tradition (such as a set of laws) need not be equated with a brittle conservatism. Rather, tradition implies transmission; the encounter with tradition “means learning how to grasp and express the past anew” [27] (p. 49). Other suitable terms for application are ‘appropriation,’ ‘significance,’ ‘implication,’ and ‘entailment.’ For those who would criticize Gadamer’s hermeneutics on the grounds that engagement with otherness is merely a prelude to absorbing (or appropriating) the other into the horizon of one’s self, I would caution that, for Gadamer, the “soul of hermeneutics consists in recognizing that perhaps the other is right” [22] (p. 100). In his reflection on his (failed) dialogue with Derrida, Gadamer highlights the way the Pietist tradition carried forward a more generally Christian posture of being “unknown to oneself,” which “consists in constantly putting oneself into question and a constant being-other” [15] (p. 119).

7. Conclusions: Gadamer’s Method

If application in theology is concerned with salvation and in the law with justice, to what is application directed in the human sciences? As noted, Gadamer aims here to retrieve Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* and the tradition it inaugurated. Application is thereby in service of developing practical wisdom. Gadamer also writes of *Bildung*, a concept now unfortunately laden with associations of elitism and snobbery. The humanist tradition developed a philosophy of education centered around the notion of *Bildung* (formation, cultivation, edification, development) which Gadamer goes so far as to claim as “perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century” even if there can be “epistemological justification of it.” *Bildung* characterized an ethos of learning inaugurated by Fichte, von Humboldt and others, now largely lost. It is beyond the aim here to develop Gadamer’s full understanding of this most central notion, but I would note that Gadamer, following Hegel, emphasizes the dimension of “alienation,” of learning “to affirm what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which to view the particular and the local” [12] (pp. 9–14).

It has been suggested that *T&M* might be better titled ‘Truth or Method.’ Gadamer often fulminates against method, but that is not to say he does not have one. The fact that Pietism—a tradition long eclipsed by modernity—appears in *T&M* at all says something about Gadamer’s way of proceeding and demonstrates the concern and place of tradition, including lost tradition, in his hermeneutics. Speculative Pietist thought in many ways was motivated by the need to respond to rational critiques of religion that emerged in the course of the rise of scientific methodology being applied to the study of religion and culture. Pietism is thus for Gadamer philosophically significant in a twofold sense: There

are certain insights that it developed that he wishes the retrieve and use to carry on his conversation with a philosophical hermeneutics dominated or threatened by positivism; these insights are part and parcel of the tradition that, by virtue of their being part of Gadamer's own *wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history), must be taken up and incorporated in a more universal conception of hermeneutics. This is also to say that the notions of *sensus communis* and application as developed by Oetinger and others retain their inherent unity and significance but must also be transcended and incorporated in a fusion with other horizons.

Gadamer emphasizes *Bildung* (education, formation, self-development or self-understanding, self-cultivation) means more than simply individual development: It includes questions of memory and forgetting, the preservation and transmission of tradition, the relevance of memory and history to our grasp of the present and our hopes for the future. *Bildung* is rooted in "historically effected consciousness," a consciousness aware of its history [12] (pp. 340–379). "In *Bildung* . . . that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own . . . in acquired *Bildung* nothing disappears, but everything is preserved" [12] (pp. 11–12).

Gadamer says of tradition that it is not something that we relate to but something that we are. Pietism is certainly part of the intellectual culture Gadamer inherited, and Gadamer's mention and use of Pietism, though brief, exemplifies Paul Ricoeur's idea of "heritage," which ties together the "ideas of a debt and a tradition," and expresses the notion of the efficacy of the past [28] (p. 228). Gadamer was clear that hermeneutics is more than a theory of understanding: Hermeneutics is a practical philosophy embedded in the deeply ethical concern of engaging otherness. "What is at issue [in hermeneutics] is that when something other or different is understood, then we must also concede something, yield—in certain limits—to the truth of the other. That is the essence, the soul of my hermeneutics: To understand someone else is to see the justice, the truth, of their position. And this is what transforms us" [29] (p. 152).

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