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TM II.2.2: “The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem”: Application and Normativity

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A reader traversing *Truth and Method* for the first time may be surprised to discover that the chapter entitled “The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem” does not outline the book’s most celebrated ideas.<sup>1</sup> The chapter does not introduce the authority of tradition, conversation or dialogue, the fusion of horizons, historically effective consciousness, linguisticity, play, prejudice, or the speculative character of language. Rather, the chapter’s main topic is application (*Anwendung*), which refers to the way an interpreter involves herself with the item of her understanding and allows the text’s meaning to be intimately relevant and, in that sense, *applied* to her own situation. Application is fundamental to recovering the genuine phenomenon of hermeneutical experience from its modern alienation, which discourages this form of involvement and instead objectifies and distances the interpreter from what she attempts to understand. Gadamer thus places application at the heart of his conception of understanding. And yet, despite its avowedly fundamental status, application has not been as prominent in the reception and influence of Gadamerian hermeneutics as with more famous ideas from *Truth and Method* like those just mentioned.

The present essay provides an interpretation of Gadamer’s idea of application that clarifies the relationship between the *first and third persons* in application. By emphasizing this sense of application, we will appreciate why Gadamer considers application fundamental to the hermeneutic problem. We will also be in a better position to assess a significant objection to Gadamer’s project. Beginning with Emilio Betti’s discussion of this chapter in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer has often been criticized for his alleged neglect of normativity. This *normative critique* of Gadamer, which especially targets his idea of application, has been rejuvenated and reformulated by scholars of hermeneutics in recent years. I will argue that this objection suffers from a failure adequately to come to terms with Gadamer’s attention to the first person in addition to the third person, both of which are integrated into application in a complex

combination. The normative critique betrays a misunderstanding of the role of the first person in Gadamer's account and an overemphasis on third-person factors of understanding. My commentary will respond to the normative critics by showing how the relation between the first and third persons in application contains a viable conception of the normativity of understanding.

My argument will proceed as follows. I will, first, explain the normative critique by reconstructing Betti's early criticism of *Truth and Method* as well as similar arguments in the contemporary literature to frame my reading. These critics suggest that Gadamer's conception of application abandons normative criteria for humanistic research. Next, I will present my reading of "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem" by clarifying the role there of normativity. Application includes a measure for understanding. The thing that is to be understood must be allowed to address me, and such involvement responds to the text's meaning. While this measure is not expressible in principled rules, application is normatively accountable both to the text's third-person claim to meaning and to my first-person involvement with the text. The participation of the interpreter with the item of her understanding forms a normative standard. To conclude my response to the normative critique, I will illustrate Gadamer's account with a phenomenological example of application.

### 1. The Normative Critique of Gadamer

The effective history of *Truth and Method* has been shaped by the diverse and often critical responses the book elicited. For several decades, deconstruction and critical theory articulated the most prominent of these objections within Continental European philosophy.<sup>2</sup> But much recent hermeneutical research bears the influence not so much of Jacques Derrida or Jürgen Habermas but of another early critic of Gadamer, namely, Emilio Betti. As I will show, Betti's response to *Truth and Method* forms the unsurpassed horizon for several recent criticisms of Gadamerian hermeneutics. This fact is of interest for us not only because this normative critique is influential in the contemporary scholarly literature. Further, and even more importantly, Betti's critique precisely takes its provocation from "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem" in particular. For this reason, this chapter in *Truth and Method* is the ideal place to look for resources for defending Gadamerian hermeneutics from its contemporary critics who are inspired by Betti. The purpose of this section of the present chapter

is to explore this background from *Truth and Method*'s reception in order to frame my reading of Gadamer's idea of application, which will respond to this critical horizon.

A distinguished and erudite historian and theorist of law, Betti draws upon the rich historical legacy of hermeneutics to formulate what he calls, as per the title of one of his treatises, "a general method of the humanities [*allgemeine Methode der Geisteswissenschaften*]." Of course, Gadamer subjects to criticism much of the Romantic inheritance from which Betti draws inspiration. One area where Gadamer develops his critique of Romanticism is legal hermeneutics, which he discusses in "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem." Here, Gadamer generously acknowledges Betti's important scholarship on this subject (*TM*, 334–35). Gadamer's account of legal hermeneutics, which I will say more about later, undoubtedly raised Betti's ire. Only a few years before the publication of *Truth and Method*, Betti had systematically laid out his own philosophy of interpretation, taking the technical practice of legal interpretation and other procedures in the humanities as his point of departure.<sup>3</sup> Based on this disagreement, Gadamer goes so far as to refer to Betti's discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics as an "almost angry polemic" (*TM*, 276 n.172). Indeed, Betti places Gadamer's idea of application at the center of his critique. For Betti, acts of application "open the door to subjective arbitrariness and threaten to cover up or misrepresent historical truth and to distort it, even if only unconsciously."<sup>4</sup> When I allow a text to apply to my own situation, Betti suggests, I risk ignoring the text's independent meaning by imposing my own subjective experiences and ideas onto the object during my act of putative understanding. Applying the text to myself prevents me from grasping the real meaning of what I am trying to understand by allowing my subjective consciousness to filter and distort my hermeneutical engagement.

Undoubtedly, the conflation of my personal experience with the meaning of a text is a danger in any hermeneutical intervention. As Friedrich Schleiermacher warns, "One should not unconsciously or indirectly think possible for him [the author] what is only possible for us [the interpreters] . . . one should not attribute our material to his."<sup>5</sup> Betti argues that this risk of subjective distortion is particularly acute for Gadamer, however, because he "does not provide a reliable criterion for the correctness of understanding"; in other words, Gadamerian hermeneutics suffers from "the loss of objectivity."<sup>6</sup> By not formulating *normative criteria* for research in the humanities, Gadamer cannot prevent the subjective imposition of my experience onto a target of interpretation which his idea of application encourages. Betti concedes that Gadamerian

application can be appropriate in restricted contexts, including in “the fields of practical co-existence” in which engagement with the past serves the present needs and purposes of a community.<sup>7</sup> But even in such cases, application should occur only after objective knowledge of history has already been established. If it is to be justified, historical knowledge demands the structure of rules. To guard against subjectivism, hermeneutics requires canons of interpretation that attend to the author’s original intentions, the historical distance between the text and the present, and other factors. On Betti’s view, such discursively formulated guidelines and parameters will permit the reliable discovery of meaning in a rigorously structured manner of which Gadamerian application is incapable.

Betti’s normative critique seemed to have lost the day in debates in hermeneutics for several decades. As Donatella Di Cesare puts it, “In light of the history of effects, however, it must be admitted that today very little remains in the humanities of the search for a method, undertaken by . . . Betti, that could ascertain objective textual meaning.”<sup>8</sup> In the confrontation between philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction, for example, objectivity and discursive rules were not even on the table as ideals toward which interpretation should strive. Betti’s normative critique, which focuses on norms for humanistic research, also largely overlooks political ideology, unlike critical theory, whose responses to Gadamer continue to prove influential. And yet, although this fact has not always been explicitly acknowledged, Betti’s position has been revitalized in the recent scholarly reception of Gadamerian hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup>

Three contemporary philosophers deserve our consideration for following in Betti’s wake and, hence, also responding to “The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem.” Like Betti, these critics advocate a revival of the methodological focus of nineteenth-century hermeneutics against Gadamer’s phenomenological and ontological approach. By regaining normative criteria for humanistic research, they contend, hermeneutics can properly ground and legitimate research in the humanities and social sciences. These philosophers also echo Betti’s discussion in another way. In their reformulation of hermeneutics, these contemporary scholars focus their critical attention on Gadamer’s idea of application.

In her important study of Gadamer and German Idealism, Kristin Gjesdal argues that Gadamer’s “collapse of the distinction between understanding and application . . . makes it possible for the interpreter freely to project upon the text his or her own pre-reflected or reflected prejudices, thereby breathing, as it were, the interpreter’s own meaning into the texts of a past

long gone or a culture distant from his or her own.”<sup>10</sup> Although Gjesdal does not cite him, Betti developed more or less the same objection to Gadamerian application more than four decades earlier, as we have seen. Gjesdal’s omission of Betti is even more surprising given that, exactly like Betti, her critique of Gadamer is motivated by the overarching conviction that Gadamer is unable to provide “an adequate notion of normative issues in hermeneutics.”<sup>11</sup> For Gjesdal and Betti, Gadamerian application is excessively subjective, that is, it *exaggerates first-person features of understanding* and discourages objective knowledge structured by normative rules.

As Gjesdal goes on to argue, Gadamerian hermeneutics is unable to provide normative guidelines because of its assumption of a radical asymmetry between the interpreter and tradition: “The proper hermeneutic experience allows the interpreter to encounter a totality that is stronger than him- or herself, a totality that he or she cannot reflectively master or objectify, but only deal with to the extent that he or she participates in and subjects him- or herself to the truth of tradition.”<sup>12</sup> Application, which merely relates an item of understanding to my condition and situation, is unable, according to Gjesdal, actively to guard me against the overwhelming power of tradition. Instead, tradition’s horizon of significance threatens to swallow me whole, leaving me unable to establish a cognitive distance between me and the past that would permit objective knowledge of the original meaning at issue. Here we see another crucial feature of the normative critique—namely, its claim that Gadamerian application *overemphasizes third-person aspects of understanding*, such as tradition.

In his own recent critique of Gadamerian application, Rudolf A. Makkreel echoes Gjesdal’s objection when he argues that, for Gadamer, “everything may dissolve into an overarching universal perspective.”<sup>13</sup> According to Makkreel, Gadamer does not permit the interpreter to arrive at an individuated and distinctive response to an item of understanding. Instead, the Gadamerian interpreter fuses with the horizon of tradition in general. The past subsumes the present interpreter, prohibiting cognitively legitimate scholarly knowledge. For this reason, Gadamer’s “approach leaves little room for the initiative of individual judging subjects.”<sup>14</sup> To correct Gadamer’s distorted focus on potent third-person factors such as historical tradition, Makkreel develops a dynamic and innovative theory of judgment inspired by Kant and Dilthey. This method would permit the interpreter to produce a normatively structured judgment about the item of her understanding without allowing formidable third-person factors like tradition to prevent her from arriving at her own objectively constructed response.

Another contemporary proponent of nineteenth-century hermeneutics also objects to Gadamerian application. In his vigorous defense of Herder's philosophy of language and theory of interpretation, Michael N. Forster concurs with Gjesdal and anticipates Makkreel when he argues that "Gadamer conceives meaning as something that only arises in the interaction between texts and an indefinitely expanding and changing interpretive tradition."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Gadamer obscures the first person in interpretation and locates significance only in the fusion between past and present horizons. Gadamer's neglect of normative criteria allows the historical past unduly to influence interpretive validity. Further, Forster makes a similar point to Betti and Gjesdal in his characterization of Gadamer's idea of application: "[Gadamer] holds that [interpretation] must and should incorporate an orientation to distinctive features of the interpreter's own outlook and to the distinctive application that he envisages making of the text in question."<sup>16</sup> Application illegitimately permits subjective considerations to contaminate interpretive research. For Forster, it would seem, Gadamer's notion of application involves a simultaneous and unstable orientation toward *both* the first person (that is, my subjective situation) *as well as* the third person (in other words, historical tradition which conditions meaning). By emphasizing both these registers, Forster's account of Gadamerian application synthesizes the insights of the normative critique as an overall theoretical movement.

The normative critique takes Gadamerian application to task for two reasons. First, these thinkers suggest that the application of the target of my understanding to my own situation allows subjective considerations to distort my reception of the text's meaning. This danger signals the excessively *first-person* character of application. Next, according to the normative critics, Gadamer does not provide any mechanism for distinguishing and protecting the interpreter from the overwhelming power of historical tradition, which threatens to subsume both the interpreter as well as the item of understanding into tradition's expansive horizon of meaning. That is, Gadamerian application overstates *third-person* features of understanding. These twin dangers, these philosophers argue, would be obviated by normative criteria for humanistic research that will provide rules against subjective impositions and, further, would preserve the independence of the interpreter by ensuring objective distance from the past. Interpretation, as practiced in this rigorously objectified fashion, would produce historical knowledge proper for academic disciplines.

These arguments by Betti, Gjesdal, Makkreel, and Forster are reminiscent of, and draw upon, those made by Herder, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey, the Romantic founders of modern hermeneutics whom Gadamer criticizes in his development of a phenomenology of understanding. The normative critics remain loyal to and deepen this Romantic heritage. Their advancement of debates in hermeneutics is impressive, and their commitment to the dignity of the humanities is laudable. But their account of Gadamer's idea of application, which is central to their departure from his hermeneutics, is incoherent.

## 2. Gadamer's Normative Account of Application

My gambit is that the key to defending Gadamer from the normative critique is found in clarifying the relationship between the third and first persons in his theory of application. The dynamic interplay between these aspects will reveal a conception of normativity, which of course is precisely what these critics claim Gadamerian application lacks. To make headway on this issue, we can begin with the fact that in this chapter Gadamer employs the term "normative" when objecting to Betti's theory: "To distinguish between a normative function and a cognitive one is to separate what clearly belong together" (*TM*, 321). To explain this important criticism, I will now contrast two models of application, which will thereby reveal the relevant sense of normativity that Gadamer advocates.

The first approach is best illustrated by an admittedly crude and even vulgar formulation of what is (significantly) called "applied ethics." On this view, application takes place by means of the following procedure. One begins with an explicitly formulated rule that has been fixed in advance. In the context of ethical reasoning, such rules include inflexible principles like Kant's Categorical Imperative or Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, which admit of discursive expression and provide guidelines and demands for action. In other words, such moral principles provide the source of normativity for subsequently resolving moral dilemmas or decisions. These rules get *applied* to an instance or example that falls under the rubric of situations or dilemmas that these principles are meant to govern. The specific content of the instance is insignificant on its own; what matters above all is that the rule genuinely applies to the case. When this fit obtains, the instance receives its normative shape from the rule that gets applied to it. We shall call this model *objectifying application*.

Objectifying application is familiar in moral philosophy today in examples like Peter Singer's animal ethics.<sup>17</sup> Singer's view proceeds from the assumption of the basic correctness of Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, which suggests that the rightness of an action is assessed in terms of the extent to which it maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for as many beings as possible, given the extent and reach of the action at issue. Singer's celebrated contribution to utilitarian ethics is to have grasped how this absolute principle applies to our treatment of sentient animals (that is, animals capable of suffering). Understood in this way, Singer's argument extends the applicability of the already formulated principle of Mill's moral theory. Singer shows that, if one accepts the Greatest Happiness Principle, then there are clear and unambiguous implications for how we should treat animals. The relationship between humans and animals, in other words, is an instance of utilitarian ethics to which the relevant moral rules apply. Notice that the first person is erased in this formulation.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as I am a member of human society who comes into contact with animals, I am bound by the results of Singer's argument. My personal stance toward these norms, such as whether I authentically identify with them, is irrelevant. The normative consequences of Singer's view follow only from the relationship between a binding norm that is formulated in advance and an instance of that rule which must, in turn, abide by the norm.

Singer's objectifying approach to ethical reasoning is significant for us not because of any conclusions of his animal ethics. Indeed, we are not challenging Singer's moral prescriptions, the arguments for which I have not fully reconstructed. Rather, the general structure of Singer's argument is an illustrative exemplification of a form of rationality that defines application in terms of a discursive norm applied to instances of the rule. Put another way, Singer provides a mechanistic decision procedure. Gadamer departs from and rejects this form of application: "Application does not mean first understanding a given universal in itself and then afterward applying it to a concrete case" (*TM*, 350). To understand how, let me explain why I call this model "objectifying." The notion of a norm that stands over and against instances of that rule is basically characteristic of the subject/object ontological scheme of the modern age: "It is clearly an incorrect description of this [hermeneutical] understanding to speak of an object [*Gegenstand*] existing in itself and of the subject's approach to it" (*TM*, 337–38/334). The rules of utilitarian ethics, returning to our example, belong to subjective consciousness. Outside that consciousness lies an objective reality consisting of situations to which the rules apply. Just as



the Kantian categories inhere within transcendental subjectivity and constitute experience, so too do explicit rules originate in conscious subjects. In turn, these rules provide the normative structure that govern scenarios encountered throughout objective reality. Following from the subject/object dichotomy, objectifying application recurs throughout our scientific and technological culture and fits so naturally within our dominant form of intelligibility that we scarcely notice its eminent questionability.

Indeed, the ontology behind applied ethics in this mechanistic and procedural vein also provides the background for the hermeneutical theory of the normative critics. Betti is once again exemplary in this regard. As mentioned, Betti's philosophy of interpretation aims to provide, as per a section heading from his treatise, "Guidelines for interpretation: the canon of the hermeneutical autonomy of the object."<sup>19</sup> Such canons or guidelines provide discursively explicit rules in advance of interpretation. Specifically, these norms apply to what Betti does not hesitate to call hermeneutical *objects* whose historical distance from the present must be kept in mind. Proper methodological regulations, such as this awareness of historical distance, will ensure the necessary separation between the interpreter and the autonomous object of her attention in order to produce historical knowledge. This form of knowledge, further, will have no direct bearing on the interpreter herself. Since its "task is purely contemplative," Betti's theory pursues scholarly knowledge of the hermeneutical object in its historical context.<sup>20</sup>

Betti's hermeneutics, which remains indebted to the subject/object dichotomy, includes a distinction between normativity and cognition that Gadamer rejects. Consider here again Singer's ethics. On the one hand, there is a normative structure provided by the assumed principle; on the other, there is the application of the Greatest Happiness Principle to the case at issue, which will in turn produce a moral decision. Betti's hermeneutics mirrors this procedural structure that separates normativity from the interpretive act. According to Betti, canons provide the normative framework for interpretation in advance; the correct judgment about the hermeneutical object is subsequently arrived at by applying the rule to the object. Importantly, this process is entirely impersonal and contains no regard or role for the interpreting self. The identity and attitude of the agent or interpreter do not matter either to Singer or Betti; what matters is that the rules are properly applied. The objectification involved in a mechanistic decision procedure, whether in ethics or hermeneutics, erases the first person in the name of arriving at a correct judgment.

Gadamer challenges the assumptions behind this form of rationality by employing Aristotle as his guide: “The alienation [*Überfremdung*] of the interpreter from the interpreted by the objectifying methods of modern science, characteristic of the hermeneutics and historiography of the nineteenth century, appeared as the consequence of a false objectification. My purpose in returning to the example of Aristotelian ethics is to help us realize and avoid this” (*TM*, 324/319). Now we can grasp why moral approaches like Singer’s provide an ideal foil for Gadamer’s Aristotelian critique of Betti’s hermeneutical method. There are many ways to illustrate why Gadamer insists upon “The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle” (*TM*, 322).<sup>21</sup> But given our foregoing discussion, the following well-known passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a point of departure:

But let it be agreed to in advance that every argument concerned with what ought to be done is bound to be stated in outline only and not precisely—just as we said at the beginning as well, that the demands made of given arguments should accord with the subject matter in question. Matters of action and those pertaining to what is advantageous have nothing stationary about them, just as matters of health do not either.<sup>22</sup>

Here Aristotle sketches a form of application that differs from the objectifying version we have considered so far. That mechanistic and procedural model of application, we will recall, begins with a norm that remains external to the instance to which it is applied. The rule then imprints the normative shape upon the situation, producing a judgment or decision. By contrast, Aristotle claims that such inflexible or “stationary” norms are categorically inappropriate for human ethical life. To achieve the goal of flourishing (*eudaimonia*)—living well and doing well—no absolute or precise rule formulated in advance can genuinely guide us. As any spiritually hungry person who has yearned for enlightenment and inner peace can tell you, there is no single path to the good life. To achieve excellence at becoming who we are, we need sufficiently sensitive and dynamic norms, not precise but reductive ones. To that end, we actualize the best qualities within ourselves by cultivating our talents and passions in cooperation with social and communal forms of life as expressed in the virtues. We respond, in other words, to an inchoate and imprecisely expressed goal or “outline” that cannot be stated in advance of the process of flourishing. In turn, the accomplishing of that goal responds to the particularities of our unique position and situation.

On Gadamer’s reading, Aristotle’s ethics unfolds a dynamic interplay between the goal of flourishing and that goal’s responsiveness to and effect upon the first-person character of the

ethical agent: “What interests us here is precisely that [Aristotle] is concerned with reason and with knowing, not detached from a being that is becoming, but determined by and determinative of it” (*TM*, 322/317). As an ethically sensitive and thoughtful human being, I submit myself to fulfilling my function to live well. But the norm of flourishing does not provide me with specific rules for how, exactly, to actualize myself. Like vainly trying to find a single measure for physical health, such absolute rules for living well are not forthcoming. Instead, as I open myself to wanting to live and do well, flourishing gradually shows up for me as latent within my own special talents. I see what could become better within myself. When I try to become a better friend, for example, I work on and develop my proclivities toward sociality and intimacy. I am cultivating my distinctive tendencies in the direction of excellence. In doing so, I am genuinely responding to the call to flourish but without that norm objectively imposing itself on me and dictating any absolute recommendations. Indeed, it is my own particular way of being human that allows the norm of flourishing to take shape in my life in the way it does. But in pushing myself to flourish, I am also in turn responding to and allowing myself to be shaped by the goal of *eudaimonia*.

Departing from the procedural model of objectifying application, Gadamer’s positive conception, which I shall refer to as *hermeneutical application*, follows this Aristotelian lead. Interpretation, Gadamer thinks, possesses the same structure as Aristotle’s ethics. Gadamer explains in particularly clear terms the movement from the objectifying to hermeneutical forms of application in the following programmatic passage:

We also determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it from the start and as a whole. Here too application did not consist in relating some pregiven universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with tradition tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the traditionary text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, this text—i.e., to understand what tradition says, what constitutes the text’s meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his concrete hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all. (*TM*, 333/329)

Coming at the very end of the section on Aristotle, this passage clarifies how Aristotelian ethics prepares the roadmap outside of objectifying application. No rule formulated prior to interpretation can genuinely determine the hermeneutical process. Understanding, like living a good life, cannot be reduced to discursive principles. Betti's theory and its contemporary analogues locate normativity outside of or prior to interpretation, so to speak. In other words, rules formulated in advance provide the normative shape of the interpretive process. Crucially, however, the absence of expressed rules in Gadamer's account does not mean he thinks that understanding lacks normative criteria. Instead of having the prescriptive rule given previously by an objective and third-person authority, *hermeneutical application is normative from the very outset of interpretation*. The irreducible normativity of application includes two poles that govern the interpretive process, as this passage indicates. One pole of normativity comes from the first person, which means I apply the text to myself and my situation when I interpret. The second comes from the third person, referring now to interpretive faithfulness to the text's meaning and how that mode of significance has been shaped by tradition. These two poles shape and codetermine each other.

Gadamer explains both these aspects of normativity throughout "The Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem." Let us begin with the *first-person* valence of this form of normativity. Hermeneutical application means involving myself with the text and allowing it to speak directly to me. I must give the item of my understanding permission to show itself as relevant and, hence, applicable to my situation. Gadamer provides a particularly effective and even beautiful description of the first-person character of application through a phenomenological account of giving advice:

Both the person asking for advice and the person giving it assume that they are bound together in friendship. Only friends can advise each other or, to put it another way, only a piece of advice that is meant in a friendly way has meaning for the person advised. Once again we discover that the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather he thinks along with the other and from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected. (*TM*, 332–33)

Advice is positioned within a normative structure related to and shaped by my first-person stance toward the person who speaks to me. If I hear counsel from my boss, my father, or a stranger, I will receive and interpret their utterances differently than if I received them from my friend. The

words of the friend are received *as advice* in this special sense when they are contextualized within a particular history and set of practices that establish that my friend has my best interests at heart and that I trust him. No discursive rule can exhaustively express this dynamic context of intimacy in advance of my interpretation of the utterances. As I interpret the words and allow them to address me as advice, my understanding is shaped by the norms of our relationship and the current context in which the words were spoken. Advice applies to me or counts for me as advice to the extent that I am engaged in friendship with the person offering advice. If I find out that my friend has betrayed my trust or that he offered me his advice with a sinister agenda, then I will now understand his words in an entirely new light. The success conditions for advice—namely, the norms structuring it as intelligible for me as advice—are related to my identity and situation.<sup>23</sup> Far from objective factors that have no intrinsic connection to who I am, these conditions matter profoundly to me.

Another paradigmatic example of hermeneutical application Gadamer discusses at length in this chapter is theological hermeneutics. According to Gadamer, theological hermeneutics includes an irreducibly first-person element: “The word of Scripture addresses us and . . . only the person who allows himself to be addressed—whether he believes or doubts—understands. Hence the primary thing is application” (*TM*, 341). Certainly, some forms of scholarly knowledge of biblical and ecclesiastical texts will require objectifying methods, such as acquaintance with facts about the text’s historical context or philological techniques. But I can also understand the Passion of Christ, for example, as a deeply moving illustration of Christ’s divine sacrifice on behalf of humanity and not merely as some historical artifact. My first-person attitude toward the text shapes how its significance shows up to me. I have to adopt a particular stance toward the Passion to receive its meaning in a distinctively spiritual fashion. Understanding the religious significance of the Passion of Christ requires giving the text permission to address me in an affective and moral register. The text will resonate with me most profoundly when I connect its message with, for example, my sense of nobility and loss. Any good teacher of the humanities knows how readers need to be open to hearing what a text has to say to genuinely understand it. The cultivation of this openness to the text’s meaning cannot be stated in precise rules. Indeed, in the case of theological hermeneutics, I do not need to be a religious believer or adopt any creed to appreciate the beauty of the Passion of Christ. I only need to allow myself to be moved by the story as if it were the word of God. Then the text will

address my situation in any number of surprising and unexpected ways, encouraging the text's meaning to show up for me in dynamic dialogue with my attitudes and experiences.

My first-person comportment toward a target of interpretation is a necessary condition of understanding for Gadamer. But it is not sufficient. *Third-person* normative factors contribute to hermeneutical application as well. Gadamer's account of third-person conditions for understanding, including language and tradition, count among his best-known philosophical contributions.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the preeminence of such celebrated ideas as the fusion of horizons and historically effective consciousness in the reception of *Truth and Method* has perhaps occluded application because of the first-person elements the latter idea encompasses. But Gadamer's account of application also incorporates the statement of meaning that a text from the past makes that gets heard in the present. By the third-person pole of normativity in hermeneutical application, I mean all such claims to meaning as mediated in the present. Here again we may illustrate Gadamer's insight with an example. In addition to virtue ethics and theological interpretation, legal hermeneutics provides Gadamer with a model for application:

The judge who adapts the traditionary law to the needs of the present is undoubtedly seeking to perform a practical task, but his interpretation of the law is by no means merely for that reason an arbitrary revision. Here again, to understand and to interpret means to discover and recognize a valid meaning. The judge seeks to be in accord with the "legal idea [*Rechtsgedanken*]" in mediating it with the present. (*TM*, 337/333)

Gadamer's discussion here anticipates politically charged debates in contemporary American jurisprudence concerning the possibility of accessing the original intentions behind the U.S. Constitution. But, regardless of such currently simmering controversies, his thesis should be clear enough. Certainly, when a judge interprets a law written in the past, he must be attuned to the present context in which the law is enacted, both in the case at hand and in society at large. Here we recall the first-person factors discussed earlier: The judge is attuned to his situation. But in addition, the judge is responsive to the "valid meaning" of the law itself. He cannot invent the law's meaning to suit his own purposes, such as his preferred political outcome or social arrangement. Rather, he must relate the real sense of the law, as it has been historically transmitted, to the present. Gadamer calls this process mediating between past and present.

Interpretation requires the sensitive disclosure of the law's statements of meaning. This thesis exemplifies Gadamer's attention to third-person conditions of hermeneutical application.

The interpreter's first-person situation is not enough to understand. We also need to factor in the meaning from the past that we receive: "Is this not true of every text, that it must be understood *in terms of what it says*? Does this not mean that it always needs to be restated? And does not this restatement always take place through its being related to the present?" (*TM*, 337, emphasis mine/334). The meaning of an item of interpretation from the past is related to the present. But this mediation must always respond to and draw upon the actual content of the target of understanding. To be sure, these statements cannot be divorced from their historical effects. But the item of interpretation nevertheless stands over and against us and issues its claim to meaning.<sup>25</sup> We must hear these statements in their genuine challenge to us.

Gadamer goes so far as to call interpretation "not a form of domination but of service [*Dienstformen*]" : "We have the ability to open ourselves to the superior claim the text makes and to respond to what it has to tell us" (*TM*, 322/316). Interpretation brings the meaning of, say, a law or theological text to bear upon the interpreter's situation. But this integration of the past into the present context must always responsively serve and subordinate itself to whatever meaning is being brought to life. Meaningful statements belonging to items of interpretation provide an essential input for the interpretive process. To serve or perform a duty on behalf of textual meaning may sound disturbingly reminiscent of religious fundamentalism or conservative traditionalism.<sup>26</sup> But this reaction would be misleading. Gadamer is clear that *third-person* textual meaning, while it demands our attention, always remains in dynamic dialogue with the interpreter's *first-person* present situation. Together these twin valences form a normative standard: "We participate in the essential expressions of human experience that have been developed in our artistic, religious, and historical tradition—and not only in ours but in all cultures; this possible participation is the *true criterion* for the wealth or the poverty of what we produce in our humanities and social sciences."<sup>27</sup> My participation in the claims I encounter from the text means entering a normative space of meaning. The text's statements and my involvement each condition and jointly provide the measure of my hermeneutical engagement.

### 3. Responding to the Normative Critique

The dynamic relation between the third and first persons in hermeneutical application encourages interpretation to respond to the needs of both the past and the present, both the textual meaning at issue and the interpreter's situation. This argument finds its inspiration in

Aristotle's ethics. For Aristotle, the ethical agent responds to the inchoate goal of flourishing by making it concrete in his own life, through cultivating qualities of his character that enable him to achieve *eudaimonia*. The third-person goal of flourishing inspires the ethical person to live well in his first-person life situation. Similarly, for Gadamer, only when the first and third persons work together and complement one another can application happen: "The text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application" (*TM*, 319–20). The third-person claim the text makes, which interpretation must begin by acknowledging, gets conditioned by the first-person situation of the interpreter to which that meaning, in turn, is applied. Hermeneutical application involves an interplay between first and third persons: "*Understanding proves to be a happening*" (*TM*, 320/314). In other words, understanding happens somewhere around the fluid margin between my situation and the claim of the text.

This mutually conditioning process recalls the hermeneutic circle and the radically anti-foundationalist structure of Gadamerian hermeneutics in general.<sup>28</sup> More germane to our purposes, the first and third persons show themselves as poles belonging to one *axis of normativity* that exposes the inadequacy of the normative critique. First, the normative critics argue that Gadamer permits the interpreter to impose her own first-person, subjective experience onto the object of understanding, preventing genuine knowledge of the historical artifact. But Gadamer is clear that the third-person claim to meaning of the text provides one basis of interpretation. Hermeneutical application must faithfully acknowledge and engage with the meaningful statements of the text itself. Further, according to the normative critics, Gadamer permits the third-person horizon of historical tradition to threaten the autonomy of the interpreter as well as of the object of interpretation. Tradition will erase the first-person standpoint of the interpreter and the distinctive claim to meaning of the text. But hermeneutical application, in addition to engaging with the traditionally mediated claims of the text, resolutely incorporates the first person by making the text speak directly to my situation and context.

In short, the normative critics have not adequately contended with the integration of first and third persons in hermeneutical application: "The meaning to be understood is concretized and fully realized only in interpretation, but the interpretive activity considers itself wholly bound by the meaning of the text" (*TM*, 341). Normativity arrives from both directions, from the



third-person meaning of the text and from the first-person standpoint of the interpreter. For Gadamer, these two poles of normativity constantly condition the interpretive process. By contrast, the normative critics operate with a conception of normativity that is expressible in discursive rules formulated prior to the interpretive act. These critics conclude that the absence of such rules in hermeneutical application signals Gadamer's neglect of normativity in general. But this criticism reveals the one-sidedness of these critics' conception of normativity. Although he is not referring to Gadamerian application specifically, Claude Romano articulates my objection to the hermeneutical school founded by Betti clearly and succinctly: "Hermeneutics does not reject the existence of norms and criteria, but the existence of *exact* norms and criteria that it would suffice to apply mechanically without appealing to discernment, judgment, and experience on the part of the interpreter. The rules of interpretation are *rules of experience*."<sup>29</sup> We shall now deepen our response to the normative critique by further clarifying and illustrating the conception of normativity in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Here we may draw upon Steven Crowell's groundbreaking work on normativity in the phenomenological tradition. Crowell argues that phenomenology operates with a conception of norms that he construes as a measure or standard that cannot necessarily be formulated in concepts or rules. Rather, such norms express the imprecise but binding possibility of success or failure in some enterprise: "I do not merely do certain things but commit myself to the possibility of failure. That is, for *me* being a father is a normative status. Even if I cannot define what it means to be a father, I am oriented toward that meaning as toward a measure."<sup>30</sup> Crowell crystallizes the relation between third and first persons that I have referred to. On the one hand, it is my actions and being that are at issue for me. I want to succeed as a father in my life. On the other, my success or failure as a father takes place against the backdrop of a standard of what it means to be a good father generally. My first-person attempt at being a father is judged *in light of* a third-person measure: "To act in light of norms, however, is to measure *myself* against a standard of success or failure, to grasp *myself* in terms of the very idea of better and worse."<sup>31</sup> For Crowell, such norms are not invented or determined by me, since otherwise they would have no genuine grip on me. But these norms only matter to me insofar as they show up in and condition my attempt at being a father. I take on and make a standard my own and judge myself by that norm. I commit myself to a measure, and only in light of that norm can I even attempt to live up to that standard. I take responsibility for these norms by making them own.

The model of phenomenological normativity outlined by Crowell can further illuminate my account of hermeneutical application. Like Crowell, Gadamer thinks of norms as impossible to express definitively and finally: “As with every norm, one can always come only relatively close to it.”<sup>32</sup> And yet such norms provide a genuinely binding measure of success or failure:

All this [our linguistic acts] should be “correct.” We must listen exactly to the word we use in such circumstances. It does not mean correspondence to a prescribed rule, but rather its opposite, the correct application of rules. What we mean everywhere by “correct” goes beyond the pregiven and prescribed, and points in this direction: to behave correctly; to make the correct judgment; to find the correct word; to give the correct advice; to understand what a correct prayer is; to read a text correctly; to carry on a correct conversation.<sup>33</sup>

Recall that the normative critics locate normativity in rules formulated outside of or prior to interpretation. Gadamer rejects this conception, not only because binding norms cannot be fully expressed. Further, as he argues here in this passage from 1992, linguistic acts are normative *from the very beginning* and do not have normative structures imposed on them only subsequently. That is, using language entails entering a space of meaning that is already saturated with normative constraints. As soon as I use words, I subject myself to standards of success or failure for speaking as is “normally” done in the context of advice, conversation, flirtation, gossip, judgment, lecture, prayer, protest, recitation, song, or whatever linguistic situation into which I enter. In speaking, I am not beholden to arbitrary standards that are external to my existence. Rather, I judge myself by a measure with which I identify because this linguistic activity matters to me in my life. In trying to speak well, I hold myself to the standard of how one should or is supposed to speak. I employ language in light of a norm for which I take responsibility by entering into the space governed by that standard.

Hermeneutical application from *Truth and Method* mirrors this normative structure that Gadamer explicates in the later essay quoted above. In interpretation, I take a third-person measure of success or failure and make it my own. If my thesis is correct, then it becomes impossible to accept the central contention of the normative critique, which Gjesdal summarizes: “Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not ... an attempt to carve out a notion of normativity.”<sup>34</sup> I will now crystallize the normativity of hermeneutical application with a phenomenological example.

When I read *The Education of Henry Adams*, I receive the text's transmissions from the past as they have been mediated by tradition.<sup>35</sup> The book's reputation as an august landmark in American letters suggests an academic dryness that discourages me from entering Adams's world. Further, I am not initially compelled by the book's seemingly Victorian diction, including Adams's choice to write about himself in the third person. But when I become a reader, I am initiated into conditions of success or failure. As soon as I begin interpreting Adams, I submit myself to the possibility of getting his text right or wrong. I persist, then, in trying to read thoughtfully and charitably because I want to get the text right. I identify with the third-person standard of a successful interpretation of Adams insofar as I strive toward that success in my interpretive engagement with Adams's text.

Committing myself to understanding the text adequately, I grapple with what Adams means by "education." I recognize that my disclosure of Adams's meaning by this term must be responsive to the particularities and subtleties of his view as he expresses it. My reading, to be successful, requires an exegetically sufficient engagement with his textual statements. While his positive definition is not yet obvious to me, I conclude that Adams's account of education cannot refer to formal schooling or higher learning, both of which he criticizes explicitly. Here I discover a horizon for interpretive failure of Adams's meaning.

In confronting my continued puzzlement about how to interpret Adams's definition of education, I begin to relate to Adams's descriptions of feeling out of step with his time and struggling to understand his experience. Adams's experience of cultural alienation echoes mine. When I feel moved by Adams's expressions, I begin to care even more deeply about understanding his meaning. This resonance becomes the window through which I glimpse the vista of Adams's account in *The Education*. I have taken Adams's point of view and allowed it to speak directly to my situation and outlook. I am stepping into Adams's world picture. This relation encourages me to understand Adams as expressing the need to find one's orientation in a rapidly changing society in which one does not feel at home. I discover evidence for this interpretation in Adams's depictions of political cynicism, civilizational decline, and scientific and technological development against the backdrop of his advocacy for self-cultivation amid this alienating cultural landscape. I find Adams promoting the obligation to learn from the surprises and drama of one's experience even within a bewildering modernity.

My disclosure of Adams's view of genuine education is grounded in the text. I could only have arrived at this interpretation through my careful engagement with moments throughout his book. But I have located these features of his text by allowing them to show up for me and resonate with my experience. There can be no question of my inventing this reading or imposing it onto the text. I am neither irresponsibly creating an anachronistic impression nor am I allowing the text to recede into the expanding horizon of the tradition of its reception. Rather, I am faithfully responding to the text's claims and relating them to my experience and viewpoint. Through this engagement, the text's meaning arrives before and speaks to me, pointing in the direction of a successful interpretation and away from a failure to grasp its real content.

For Gadamer, my hermeneutical engagement with Adams is judged by the norm of *my participation in the text's claim to meaning*. As soon as I begin any interpretive process, I enter a space of meaning that draws its normative force from two directions. This normative framework receives its measure from the text's third-person statements and from my first-person involvement with the text. My reading is accountable to and balanced against both these poles, which open up a framework in which my interpretive activity takes shape and counts as better or worse as an engagement with Adams's text. I allow myself to feel moved by Adams's writing. This entry point encourages me to adopt a first-person comportment toward the text of reading it responsibly and thoroughly, which in turn means that I have taken on for myself the third-person norm of getting the text right. The first and third persons co-constitute my interpretation. Understood in this way, Gadamer's account of hermeneutical application includes a robust normative standard.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 318. Hereafter cited in text as *TM*. Where the German is cited or the translation has been altered, the page number of the original is indicated after the slash. These refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 1: Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See David Liakos and Theodore George, "Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, ed. Kelly Becker and Iain Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), especially 408–12.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 125–29.

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<sup>4</sup> Emilio Betti, “Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*,” trans. Josef Bleicher, in *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1980), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263.

<sup>6</sup> Betti, “Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*,” 78.

<sup>7</sup> Betti, 83. See also Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 190. To focus my argument, I have omitted Di Cesare’s reference here to E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who also followed in Betti’s footsteps in the Anglophone context.

<sup>9</sup> The frame of reference of the scholars I am about to discuss is avowedly shaped by Dilthey, Herder, and Schleiermacher. The importance of Betti, although he also belatedly comes from the Romantic milieu, is rarely discussed. I also provide a critical treatment of methodological hermeneutics in David Liakos, “Attitude Isn’t Everything: Hermeneutics as an Unfinished Project,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* XIII (2021): forthcoming. In the present essay, I have been influenced by the framing of the normative critique in Theodore George, “Hermeneutics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hermeneutics>.

<sup>10</sup> Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Gjesdal, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Gjesdal, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Makkreel, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 310.

<sup>16</sup> Forster, 310.

<sup>17</sup> See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 1–24. This is the well-known chapter “All Animals Are Equal.”

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Williams makes this point about the role of the first person in his wide-ranging critique of modern moral philosophy, especially regarding Kant. See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 66–70.

<sup>19</sup> Betti, “Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*,” 58.

<sup>20</sup> Betti, 83.

<sup>21</sup> See also Carlo DaVia, “The Role of Aristotle in Gadamer’s Work,” in *The Gadamerian Mind*, ed. Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 28, 1104a1–5.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff argues that Gadamer develops “an account of knowledge that links experience and identity as constitutive features for understanding without making them all-determining.” Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 96. I agree with this crucial insight concerning Gadamer’s contribution to a theory of identity, but Alcoff does not connect this idea to application, which for me is the main site of Gadamer’s account of the first person.

<sup>24</sup> Sympathetic commentators have appealed to third-person conditions as sources of normativity in Gadamer’s thinking. See Morten S. Thaning, *The Problem of Objectivity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics in Light of McDowell’s*

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*Empiricism* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 160, who appeals to language; and Brice Wachterhauser, “Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58, who refers to tradition. While this scholarship is important, these accounts neglect the first person, and hence application, entirely.

<sup>25</sup> I have adopted this conception of a hermeneutical object standing over and against the interpreter from Günter Figal, *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, trans. Theodore George (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 1–4.

<sup>26</sup> I distinguish Gadamer from the politics of conservative traditionalism in David Liakos, “Hermeneutics and the Conservatism of Listening,” *Cosmos and History* 16, no. 2 (2020): 495–519.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 40–41, emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> See Jeff Malpas, “Placing Understanding/Understanding Place,” *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (2017): 379–91, here 381.

<sup>29</sup> Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Claude Romano (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 500.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 215.

<sup>31</sup> Crowell, 187.

<sup>32</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Artwork in Word and Image: ‘So True, So Full of Being!’,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, trans. and ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 217.

<sup>33</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt and Monika Reuss, in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 50. I was pointed to this important passage by Greg Lynch, “Does Conversation Need Shared Language? Davidson and Gadamer on Communicative Understanding,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 3 (2014): 359–81, here 372.

<sup>34</sup> Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000).