

## APPLICATION AND PHILOSOPHY WITHIN A HERMENEUTICAL HORIZON\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Application and Philosophy – within a Hermeneutical Horizon.* What is “application” according to its basic meaning, and what does it mean when it is used with philosophical pretensions? How does the relationship between application and philosophy, viz. the role of applied philosophy develop in a context outside hermeneutics, and how can it be thought of in a hermeneutical perspective? How is the question related to the hermeneutical sense of “application” connected to the question of the application of philosophy? And how does contemporary philosophical hermeneutics contribute to the exploration of this relationship?

**Keywords:** *application, applied philosophy, epistemological discourse, practical knowledge, philosophical hermeneutics, Bildung, speculative character*

The more fashionable the term “applied philosophy” nowadays is, the more should it make us think. Philosophical hermeneutics particularly urges us to do just this, since it stands in a characteristically double relationship with the question of application. Contemporary philosophy puts the problem of application into the foreground, while it also posits itself as a philosophy whose essence lies precisely in application.

### 1.

According to its basic meaning, “application” is the transfer of something, i.e. that which is *applied*, upon something else, i.e. that which it is *applied to*. As such, it has a double object, an active and a passive one. The separation of these two objects manifests itself as the pre-existence of that which is *applied* to the act and to the subject that endures the application. Conceived in this way, application is etymologically related

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to two other concepts: *adequacy* and *opportunity*. The conflict between these concepts introduces a semantic tension into the concept of application. *Adequacy* presupposes an inherent correspondence between the active and the passive object of the application. Something is adequate for a certain end or, in other words, possesses the requisite ability to be applied for that end. But then again, *opportunity* is an outside circumstance upon the existence of which it depends whether the intrinsic correspondence can manifest itself. Thus, opportunity requires a continuous state of preparedness. It is either given or not. The opportunity that presents itself can be seized, but it also can be missed. Thus, intrinsic correspondence manifests itself within application as something extrinsic in which the objects of application are related merely *occasionally*, within the *act*.

However, contrary to its basic meaning, application can also be conceived of as an *objectless* process. This is especially emphasized by philosophical hermeneutics. In this sense, application reveals itself in its very essence and meaning as a mode of being of the applier, viz. as an active relationship that involves the applier, and that which is applied as something formed within this historical effect. Within application as a process of occurrence of being and meaning, the applier and the applied can only be separated by analytical means.

## 2.

In the context of the positivist view on science and of discursive rationality, knowing, understanding, and applying are rendered diachronically, as separate and subsequent moments. The appreciation of theoretical knowing is accompanied by the devaluation of application and the emphasizing of its occasional character. Application is reduced to an *occasional marginality* compared to knowing and understanding.

From an epistemological viewpoint, “application” means the use of a pre-existing body of knowledge in solving a theoretical or practical problem. Knowing and applying form a sequence of operations based on the logic of instrumental action. This approach projects the traditional opposition between theory and practice upon the separate and subsequent character of production and application, as the posterior practical use of the previously worked-out theory. Consequently, it renders explicit the context-dependent nature of practical use, as opposed to the internal autonomy of theory. That which is theoretical leaves behind its status of being an *end in itself* and is put to use for an external end (and within an external medium). The extrinsic and instrumental nature of this “relationship” is also hinted at by the fact that application, as a phase that follows the production of that which is applied, can happen, but it can also not happen, since within this view application does not necessarily follow from the essence of that which is applied.

Although not directly, this relationship also reveals a deeper meaning of application as *adequacy* for the attainment of an end that is external to theory. The relinquishment of theory as an end in itself also means – from the perspective of

practice – an entering into the self-determined medium of practice. Hence, the opposition of theory and practice contains a truth that guides our attention to the genuine character of application, according to which the applied knowledge is put to use within the specific, self-determined medium of practice. In other words, the practical validation of the *adequacy* of theoretical knowledge for the attainment of a practical goal does not simply mean a transfer-based usage – as a second step –, but also that this specific theoretical knowledge becomes adequate for becoming and generating within another medium. In this sense, it is the creation of knowledge itself. Consequently, application does not simply mean the mechanical transfer of knowledge from one sphere to another, but the *re-creation* of knowledge in the medium of practice, i.e. its creation as *practical knowledge*. E.g., applied mathematics is not the application of pre-existing mathematical theories for solving a specific practical problem, but an exploration of the specific mathematical context of the problem or, in other words, a mathematics that establishes itself in a different way, viz. a different mode of being of mathematics. Thus, in such cases, the (mis)identification of the “applied” and the “practical” is not welcome. The main opposition is not between theory and praxis. Applied mathematics is no less a theoretical accomplishment than non-applied mathematics. The difference between the applied and the non-applied rather manifests itself as the *process of becoming* of a specific knowledge, viz. whether it develops from within the world of that specific problem or, instead, attempts to draw the problem in its own world. This difference reveals the *original* applied character of any knowledge. As for philosophy, one cannot view the difference between non-applied and applied as a relationship between the theoretical and the practical because this is not difference between theoretical and practical philosophy. If we could posit the identity of applied philosophy and practical philosophy, what sense would it make to speak of, e.g., applied ethics?

### 3.

The function of application is also not clear *within* the hermeneutical perspective. H.-G. Gadamer calls attention<sup>1</sup> to attempts to reconcile the traditional epistemological perspective and the hermeneutical perspective, which operate with the discursive distinction between understanding and application. Those attempts which are aimed at working out a general theory of interpretation – such as the conception of E. Betti<sup>2</sup> – necessarily separate and render into a discursive sequence the operations of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Igazság és módszer. Egy filozófiai hermeneutika vázlatja*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1984, pp. 218–220. (H.-G. Gadamer, “Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik”, *Gesammelte Werke* Band 1. Hermeneutik I. J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1990, pp. 312–316.)

<sup>2</sup> E. Betti considers the requirement of application as legitimate only when applied to normatively oriented interpretation. – Cf. E. Betti, “A hermeneutika mint a szellemtudományok általános módszertana”, in *Olasz filozófiai hermeneutika*, Athenaeum, 1992, Vol. I. No. 2, pp. 34–35.

knowing and understanding, understanding and applying, cognitive and normative functions, and, in doing so, the spheres of theoretical reflection and the practical way of life. On the other side, we can see the perpetuation of the tradition of Romantic hermeneutics, the conception of understanding based on the principle of congeniality, which dissolves the identity of the structural phases of the hermeneutical process in an act of *identification*.<sup>3</sup>

As opposed to the above approach, within the horizon of philosophical hermeneutics as sketched out by H.-G. Gadamer, interpretation, understanding, and application can be thought of as mutually interdependent phases of the same hermeneutical process. The tension between the meaning that constitutes itself within the hermeneutical process and the meaning that manifests itself within a specific phase of interpretation is constitutive for our understanding. To understand the meaning of something means to understand it anew and differently in each specific situation. Thus, understanding is always also application, the concreteness of the meaning that has been developed within the hermeneutical process, as it presents itself in the specific situation of understanding. The meaning that has to be understood, as abstract and general as can be, cannot be separated from a specific situation of interpretation. Since meaning always emerges by means of the specific conditions of the situation, it is also always a meaning *applied* to that specific situation. This is why we can say that application is the mode of being of the meaning which manifests itself within the process of interpretation.

#### 4.

The attributive form of the term “applied philosophy” suggests that that which is being applied and that which it is applied to are logically and linguistically separated. The term carries the meaning that a previously elaborated philosophical conception is used to elucidate a specific problem, viz. philosophical means, methods, and procedures are applied for solving strictly non-philosophical problems. This is how the different philosophical “disciplines” are born, such as moral philosophy or political philosophy – nowadays included under the heading of “applied philosophy”–, but one can also hear about the “philosophy of communication” or about the “philosophy of environmental protection”. These designations lead us to think that such philosophical preoccupations bring philosophy out of the theoretical and methodological confines of the ideal of “rigorous science”, adopted by philosophy under the influence of the positivistic perspective and the prevailing epistemological

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<sup>3</sup> Within Romantic hermeneutics – as Gadamer observes – the “inner fusion of understanding and interpretation led to the third element in the hermeneutical problem, *application*, becoming wholly excluded from any connection with hermeneutics.” Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 218. (*Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 312.)

attitude, and move it closer to the investigation of problems more closely related to human life, which are the so-called *practical* problems. It seems that we are dealing with nothing else than an actualisation (or re-actualisation) of traditional practical philosophy and the so-called practical knowledge that is conveyed by it. However, the methodological situation thus created obscures exactly the real meaning of practical knowledge and practical philosophy. Essentially, the aforementioned “applied” philosophies are still practiced as a kind of theoretical philosophy or as the application of philosophical theories. Thus, there do not seem to be too many opportunities for overcoming the theoretically centred mode of practicing philosophy. All those instances of philosophizing that presuppose a technical sense of application, removed from the essence of philosophy, obstinately resist to this possibility.

Our approach hitherto has used the term “applied philosophy” for designating a disciplinized and professionalized mode (or modes) of being of philosophy in which application and philosophy mutually limit each other. Being “applied” also implies a classification. If there is an *applied* philosophy, there also should be a *non-applied* philosophy. However, our primary question here is not related to the essence of non-applied philosophy. Rather, the question is about how application is related to philosophy. Is this an extrinsic, additional relationship – sometimes present, and at other times absent –, or does application organically and essentially belong to philosophy? If it is a relationship in which an already elaborated philosophy assumes and applied character in a determined context, then it really is appropriate to talk about two different kinds of philosophy, one applied and the other non-applied. However, if being applied does not relate to philosophy extrinsically but essentially, then the question proves to be one of the fundamental problems of philosophy itself, and we need to elaborate and understand the relationship between application and philosophy starting with this question.

## 5.

Modernity defines the essence of philosophy within an *epistemological* perspective. Accordingly, philosophy is primarily knowing, which presupposes a certain field of problems and a specific way in which these problems are handled, associated with a more or less well-defined subject (field), a clearly definable methodology, and argumentative procedures. All these serve as the basis for the legitimation of modern philosophy not only before itself but also within culture as a whole. Within the epistemological discourse, the separation of the theoretical and the practical, viz. the positing of the primacy and superiority of the theoretical to the practical could be well accommodated. This discourse could also be effectively accommodated with the idea of a dominant philosophical paradigm, or the positing of a dominant philosophy of the epoch. In this context, the applicability of previously

worked-out philosophical constructions of a theoretical nature to practical problems also seemed a plausible idea. The enthusiastic vision of the possibility of creating the dominant and total philosophy would only enhance this impression that from the perspective of such a dominant philosophy the practical philosophical investigations can gain a secure theoretical foundation and methodological orientation, and our specific existential problems can be soon resolved.

Thus, in the case of modern philosophy, its “application” raises the problem of how a philosophical system of presuppositions, which has been worked out theoretically, can be applied for the investigation of a specific individual problem, viz. how a problem that does not present direct philosophical relevance can be drawn into the universal horizon of a philosophical conception that is at our disposal. From a methodological perspective, these problems have culminated in the debate of universality vs. particularity, or the question of how far problems investigated in their specificity can have pretensions to philosophical, i.e. universal relevance. *Professionalized* philosophy, devoted to scientific reasoning, still progresses further in this direction, since it effectively promotes the universal philosophical perspective as a readymade methodological framework that has to be filled with content by specific, thematic and empirical investigations. The result is so-called “science” practiced as a kind of applied philosophy, which nowadays also publicly assumes its scientific status in its designation (e.g. cognitive philosophy – cognitive science). This endeavour, however, calls into question precisely the *philosophical* character of the so-called “applied philosophical investigation”.

## 6.

In a *postmodern* context, it is not only the way on philosophizing that changes but also discourse that conveys the self-definition of philosophy and the way in which philosophy views itself. At the level of this new discourse, the epistemological paradigm of modern philosophy is articulated as a self-liquidation and loss of self of philosophy. According to the opinion of both Lyotard and Rorty, this new culture which organizes itself within the medium of the dialogue (*culture conversationnelle*) is a post-philosophical culture.<sup>4</sup> In this cultural context, there are no more specifically philosophical problems, and philosophy does not have a “proper” field that would belong only to it, and the philosopher can also not lean upon a comprehensive method that would secure a basis for the legitimation of her or his investigations.

The sinister image that announces the end of philosophy is the result of the partial break with the epistemological view of philosophy. Philosophy that is subjected to the formal criteria of scientific reasoning has nowadays entered into a “post”-philosophical

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Manuel Maria Carrilho, *Rhétorique de la modernité*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1992, p. 20.

epoch in which it becomes necessary to critically review the epistemologically imposed demands. However, this also only means that the problem of the dissolution of philosophy practiced as science presents itself as a *philosophical* problem that contributes to the survival of philosophy.

The metamorphosis of philosophy, far being destructive, only brings to the surface its genuine characteristics. The critical “turning away” of philosophy from the epistemological tradition of modernity also means a “turning toward” its own genuine nature, its original essence, and a more correct understanding of its role within European culture.

One of the most important characteristics of the post-philosophical state of contemporary culture manifests itself through the fact that – borrowing a description from György Márkus – philosophy has entered a novel, post-“system” phase.<sup>5</sup> Not only do the encompassing, global philosophical systems disappear in this period, but also those characteristics of the practice of philosophy change, which have carried its systematic character in the past. It seems that contemporary philosophy wants increasingly less to do with a fragmented world that is falling to pieces and is put together again into different arbitrary configurations. At the same time, a new tendency clearly emerges within the philosophical thinking of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – inspired by, among other sources, the perspective of the Heideggerian fundamental ontology. This approach views philosophy more as an existential attitude than an epistemological construction. Philosophy does not appear anymore within culture as a preliminary and universal self-positing of readymade meaning that is prior to any specific experience but much more as lifelike interpretative attitude and investigation. In this approach, philosophy when practiced as the interpretation and understanding of being, is also application in the sense in which we can view application as the mode of being of that which is applied.

With the postmodern turn, the philosophical problem of application and the issue of applied philosophy is also being put into a new light. Nowadays, nobody attempts anymore to create an encompassing and dominant philosophical theory that could offer a universal explanation of the world and interpretation of being, or that could deliver the methodological premises for such an endeavour. Instead, we have multiple philosophical approaches, orientations, and paradigms. These can coexist and also open up different possibilities for conceiving the essence of applied philosophy. Nevertheless, neither does the choice between them does rest upon chance, nor is it a question of ideological options, but it is rather existentially motivated. The characteristics and specific expressions of existential occurrences themselves determine the philosophical horizons in which certain philosophical endeavours can most readily find themselves. In this perspective, the effective practice of philosophy cannot be anything else than *application*, and philosophy itself according to its essence cannot be otherwise than *applied*.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Márkus György, *A „rendszer” után: A filozófia a tudományok korában*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1994, p. 16.

## 7.

Among all the contemporary philosophical orientations, the characteristic mode of being of philosophical tradition, which manifests itself in application, is most thoroughly explored by *philosophical hermeneutics*. I shall emphasize here two aspects of the hermeneutical conception of H.-G. Gadamer in order to support this point: the hermeneutical sense of *Bildung*, and the speculative nature of philosophy.

Gadamer's break with the philosophical conception based on the epistemological paradigm can be presented by expanding upon the meaning of *Bildung* (*formation*). In its Gadamerian sense, *Bildung* carries an opening toward a new type of thinking, speaking, and acting, based on the principle of the historicity of human existence. The historical horizon of our human existence fits into the horizon of a world that is in constant motion and change, and any attempt to fixate this universe into a final, unchanging and hierarchical form has lost its meaning today. The hermeneutical attitude is not oriented toward the possession of "the truth" or to the realization of "the moral law", but toward the fulfilment and perfection of our own human being, so that we can fulfil better and better the requirements of a world which we can imagine and which is possible for us. Instead of the epistemological focalization on "the truth", *Bildung* means the *formation* of the modes of sensibility to these different possible worlds and of the various modes in which we can relate to our world. All this is associated with the rehabilitation of the senses and with the development of our faculty to discern between good and bad, right and wrong, i.e. the faculty of judgement. These faculties furnish us with a continuously renewed and ever-accumulating practical knowledge that can be successfully employed in each novel life situation as the medium of our self-understanding. *Bildung* does not substitute for the "knowledge aimed at in reflection", but explores the limits of a certain type of knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of facts, which is modelled on the natural sciences. Similarly, *Bildung* also shows the limits of the lifestyle enclosed in the narrower circle of personal interests and based upon the primacy of egoistic concerns. An individual who is formed according to the ideals of *Bildung* is capable to step out of the magic circle of egoism in any direction, toward the reception of plurality and variety, otherness, and openness for dialogue. She or he is capable of forming and experiencing the fully-fledged human community, i.e. *communion*, which is also a community of being and meaning.

Philosophical hermeneutics presents the application of philosophy as an emergence of meaning in our individual and community lives. Ultimately, *Bildung* means our preparedness for philosophy. It is a perpetual self-building process in which we are engaged in with others and that is connected with the construction of a possible meaningful world. In this approach, philosophy is not merely the implementation of methods which help meaning to emerge but an existential attitude that opens up the questioning and seeking of wisdom. This is the road taken in our dialogical togetherness with things, texts, tradition, other persons or even our own self.



## 8.

The exposition of the *speculative character* of philosophy is yet another aspect through which Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics sheds light upon the existential entanglements of philosophy, which are manifested within and as application. The speculative character of philosophy reveals itself within reflection, i.e. in the fact that the philosophical idea genuinely lives as philosophy in its ungraspable, mirror-like (or image-like) quality, or in the floating state of pure representation. Philosophical thought and reflection never entrusts itself on the “fixed determination” of ideas, but rather *reflects*, i.e. it moves along with the idea within its own movement, and these two elements reciprocally form each other as the components of the same occurrence of meaning. When the speculative thesis affirms something – as Gadamer, who is drawing here on the Hegelian tradition, maintains –, it also reveals the unity of the concept. Within the unity of the concept, the thing and the idea coexist as the inseparable unity of that which reflects and that which is reflected. When relying on the power of reflection we grasp the thing conceptually, ultimately, it is the thing itself which manifest itself from its own side and does not let take over those elements that are already determined or self-evident from the perspective of intuition and opinion.<sup>6</sup>

This speculative unity of the thing and the concept stands in a double relationship to the connection between philosophy and application. On the one hand, Gadamer points out that the form of the thesis destroys itself within the speculative unity of the thing and the concept, since here it is not the case that the thesis would express the truth of the subject in the form of a predicate. In fact, it is the duality of the attributive relationship that is abolished here, i.e. the basis of the possibility for the “practical application” of the “theoretical” philosophy. On the other hand, the speculative unity of the thing and the concept reveals the speculative structure of the occurrence of being as an existential process, i.e. the way in which the existential occurrence and the emergence of being, the series of existential events and the reflection related to it accompany and reciprocally form each other as the associated sides of the same occurrence.<sup>7</sup> Thus, philosophy becomes not some kind of an instrument for solving problems, and it is not even some special and exotic possibility to raise problems, but proves to be an existential medium in itself, viz. the speculative side of human existence. Philosophy – and especially contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gadamer: *op. cit.* p. 323. (*Warheit und Methode*, p. 469.)

<sup>7</sup> The organic interrelationship between philosophical conceptualization and existential occurrences also becomes evident from another angle of approach of this issue. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari also view the true task of philosophy as consisting in the *creation* of new concepts. Also, according to them, the creation of philosophical creation of concepts is an existential occurrence which effectively plays into the separation of things and events, viz. into the formation of conceptual entities. – Cf. Gilles Deleuze–Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1991, pp. 10, 36.

philosophy – rather holds up a mirror to existential events – a mirror that organically belongs to that which it mirrors –, in which human problems appear, and in which they can be seen and reflected upon.

## 9.

By trying to restore the philosophical dimension of human life and action, philosophical hermeneutics offers a kind of *way out* of our unphilosophical state, which is at the same time a way that leads back to the essential nature of philosophy, i.e. being on the road toward meaning. This is also the road that reveals the true meaning of applied philosophy, which lies in the manifestation of the authentic character of practical knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, our knowledge that organizes itself in abstract and general forms, or in well-grounded theoretical constructions, is a part of our life and a building block of our world. Its true essence is shown in the way in which it can confront the challenges of specific problems and answer our existential questions.

Thus, according to its nature, hermeneutics can never realize itself as a philosophy that encloses itself into an epistemological framework. It can never remain simply a theoretically worked-out methodology of interpretation and understanding, because the philosophical content that is inherent in it does not manifest itself in theoretical constructions but rather in the perspective, attitude and way of life that are characteristic to it.<sup>9</sup> This philosophical content is not artificially produced within speculative reflection, but represents an unfolding of the philosophical character that is naturally inherent in our life-world.

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<sup>8</sup> This also entails the revival of the older tradition of practical philosophy, according to which the validation of knowledge does not exhaust itself in indicating the conditions of their validity, but also entails the clarification of the ways in which the different forms of knowledge correspond to the different human needs. Hermeneutics does not simply revive this philosophical tradition but places it within the historical horizon of our current understanding of being and thereby integrates it as its organic element. – Cf. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer. Herméneutique, tradition et raison*, Édition Universitaires, De Boeck Université, Bruxelles, 1991, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer – similarly to Rorty – refuses the reduction of philosophy to epistemology and confers on it a novel function, i.e. the function of dialogue and construction. Like Habermas and Apel, Gadamer also views as the main danger of an epistemology which imposes the conditions of scientific knowledge that it obscures the political and practical dimension of social life. This epistemology transforms every issue into a technical one and dismisses knowledge in favour of expertise. The development advocated by it is not guided by human consensus, but by the possibilities and requirements of technology. By following this road, humanity loses its identity. Accordingly, Gadamer sees as the task of philosophy to synthesize our knowledge into a coherent whole that could be integrated into the conduct of the individual who is capable of communication and into the conduct of the responsible citizen, thus facilitating our common orientation and the creation of consensus, making it possible for the ideal human community, based on mutual solidarity, to discern and develop the conditions of a better life. – Cf. Warnke, *op. cit.* pp. 203–206.

Therefore, I do not think that “application” is necessarily the right word to use in the case of philosophy. It is not simply an instrument for possessing truth and dominating being, which one could improve and develop. If we still want to use the term “application”, then we should use it in a sense in which the application of philosophy is an *opportunity* for the development of *competence*. Philosophy is not a technique for mastering things but a way in which we can participate in the truth of things and in the occurrence of truth. Through philosophy, our human nature can get closer to its authentic mode of being.

#### 10.

Nowadays, *globalization* has already begun to reproduce the alienating mechanisms of system structures based on the principles of rationality, which are aimed at gathering and weaving into a single web the dispersed elements of rationality.

Against this dominance of the principle of generality as it is commonly accepted within the culture of rationality, hermeneutics reflects and furthers the principle of the proprietary, the particular, and the specific. Thus, in an era of the dispersion of rationality, hermeneutics attempts to reconstruct meaning, meanwhile leading a novel kind of dialogue with the tradition of modernity. Within this hermeneutical perspective, the limits of the increasingly stronger globalization process also become apparent. In any web – be it even worldwide –, humans can only exist continuously struggling. As opposed to this, hermeneutics sees the meaning of practicing philosophy in the intensive construction of our own world as a world of meaning, starting from the specific and the particular. It is in this way that it brings philosophy again closer to life and to us, humans.