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Epistemology and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is crucial part of epistemology which has traditionally dealt with the theory of interpretation. The importance and interrelation of epistemology and hermeneutics cannot be underestimated. A study of hermeneutics cannot be conducted without coming into contact with epistemic theories of meaning, justification and knowledge. My present paper will deal with epistemology and hermeneutics following Gadamer and Rorty. Gadamer holds that phenomenology, in its hermeneutical form, resolves the problems of epistemology. Rorty, on the other hand thinks that the problems of epistemology have not and cannot be solved. Rorty and Gadamer both agree that hermeneutics and epistemology are mutually-exclusive, polar opposites. But the purpose of the paper will be to argue that they are not polar opposites but compatible, since epistemology is a form of hermeneutics.

I

Rorty can best be described as a leading anti-epistemological skeptic. Rorty's approach can be understood within the decline of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy, developed as a reaction against British idealism to which certain key analytic thinkers, notably Bertrand Russell, were earlier committed. This movement took the form of a theory of knowledge elaborated independently by three Cambridge thinkers: initially Russell, G.E. Moore and then Ludwig Wittgenstein. Both Russell and Wittgenstein, but not Moore, were influenced by Gottlob Frege, the Austrian logician and philosopher of mathematics. The Vienna Circle represents an off-shoot of analytic philosophy that is strongly influenced by the early Wittgenstein. Those associated with the Vienna Circle and

those influenced by them have mainly contributed to analytic philosophy of science. Rorty, who began as a faithful member of the analytic movement, which he considered in his anthology on *The Linguistic Turn* as a revolution in philosophy. He later lost the faith. In an important book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* he became a severe critic of analytic philosophy and of philosophy in general. Here he recorded his disaffection with the analytic approach to epistemology and with the very idea of a theory of knowledge. According to Rorty, who earlier equated analytic philosophy with all that is best in the contemporary discussion, since analytic philosophy fails, philosophy as such fails and should be abandoned.

Rorty's argument can be quickly summarized as follows: First, he maintains that epistemology began in the seventeenth century with Descartes and continued with Locke and then Kant. He sees the problem of epistemology as centered on the view of the mind, as the mirror of nature, attributes to human beings the capacity, he says, to discover essences. This presupposes that there are essences and that the human mind is able to know them. Human being is defined in terms of this epistemological capacity. The notion that our chief task is to mirror accurately, in our own Glassy Essence, the universe around us is the complement of the notion, common to Democritus and Descartes, that the universe is made up of very simple, clearly and distinctly knowable things, knowledge of whose essences provides the master-vocabulary which permits commensuration of all discourses (Rorty 1979: 357). According to Rorty, the purpose of the invention of the modern view of the mind in the seventeenth century was to justify the idea of a theory of knowledge through privileged representations. Yet although there are representations, there are none that are privileged. In fact, the very idea that there might be such privileged representations is destroyed within analytic philosophy, which is committed to the same program, as in Dummett and Putnam, in Sellars' attack on the myth of the given and in Quine's attack on the two fundamental dogmas

of empiricism. "For these two challenges (i.e. Sellars' and Quine's) were challenges to the very idea of a 'theory of knowledge,' and thus to philosophy itself, conceived of as a discipline which centres on such a theory" (Rorty 1979: 169). In Rorty's view, it is not possible to solve the epistemological problem either in the classical form in which it was raised in the seventeenth century or more recently in analytic philosophy. In that spirit, sure of the demise of any reasonable hope for a theory of knowledge, he turns to hermeneutics that he regards, not as the successor to epistemology, but rather as its antithesis. Epistemology and hermeneutics have nothing in common. Where epistemology is concerned with commensurability, hermeneutics is no more than a way of coping. Epistemology tries to get it right in order to close the discussion, but hermeneutics tries to keep the discussion going by changing the subject. Rorty follows Sellars in holding that what we call knowing is not an empirical description but rather putting the description in an overall conceptual framework. What we call "'objective truth' is no more nor less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on"(Rorty 1979: 385).

II

Gadamer's thinking began and always remained connected with Greek thought of Plato and Aristotle. Under the influence of his early teachers namely Hartmann and Friedlander, Gadamer developed an approach to understand Plato's philosophy by analyzing the structure of Platonic dialogues. Under the influence of Heidegger, Gadamer took up the idea of Phronesis ('Practical Wisdom') as a central element in his thinking. For Heidegger, the concept of Phronesis is important, not only as a means of giving emphasis to our practical 'being-in-the-world' over and against theoretical apprehension, but it can additionally be seen as constituting a mode of insight into our existential situation, hence Phronesis constitutes a mode of self-knowledge. The concept of Phronesis can itself be seen as providing a certain

elaboration of the dialogic conception of understanding Gadamer had already found in Plato, and taken together, these two concepts can be seen as providing the essential starting point for the development of Gadamer's Philosophical   Hermeneutics.

Throughout his work, Gadamer weaves together two basic themes. First, dialogue is essential to human understanding. The general lesson of Plato's dialogues, as Gadamer innovatively reads them, is that the meaning of something, as well as its truth, can only come out in the course of a conversation. There is no higher authority than the agreement of partners in dialogue, no 'absolute knowledge' that stands above the process of conversational exchange. Human understanding is thus necessarily mediated by an 'other' (the conversation partner) and is in principle incomplete (like a conversation, it has no natural terminus). The finitude of understanding that follows from its dialogical, intersubjective character is a central principle of Gadamer's philosophy.

The second thought is that understanding is a primordial feature of human existence. We are, merely on account of being in the world, 'always already' engaged in tasks of understanding. Gadamer follows Heiddeger's lead in claiming that understanding is ontologically basic. We do not first neutrally experience the world and then try to understand or interpret that experience, rather experience is from the beginning disclosive of a world that concerns us. Moreover, the world we encounter is shaped by a historically unfolding language, culture and traditions that provide the 'horizon' of our actual and possible experience. Human understanding thus displays 'historicity' and in this sense, too, finitude.

Gadamer thus argues against the idea that understanding can be secured simply by following the correct method. The Philosophers of the Enlightenment and many since placed great weight on Epistemology, because they thought that truth would only be revealed to inquirers who methodically abstracted from their concrete historical situation. In Gadamer's view, such

an approach is deeply misguided. Like Heidegger, Gadamer maintains that Hermeneutics is not merely methodological, rather it is a feature of our very human existence. The pre-twentieth century Hermeneutics is criticized by Gadamer for its failure to recognize the positive role of prejudice in all understanding. The concept of prejudice is closely connected with the concepts of authority and tradition. An interpreter is always situated in a context or tradition which can be regarded as the basis of supportive prejudices.

In his *Reason in the Age of Science*, Gadamer discusses two kinds of prejudices which generally remain united in any act of interpretation while understanding a text. One has to master the grammatical rules, the stylistic devices, the art of composition upon which the text is based, if one wishes to understand what the author wants to say in the text – these are prejudices in the sense that they precede any judgement. Besides this, in all acts of interpretation there exists a meaningful relationship between the statement of the text and our understanding of the reality under discussion. In Gadamer we find a perfect fusion of constructivism and historicism. History does not in any way hinder the possibility of creative understanding. History and tradition are rather genuine partners in all communication, construction and interpretation. "Every renewed encounter with an older tradition now is no longer a simple matter of appropriation that un-self-consciously adds what is proper to itself even as it assimilates what is old, but it has to cross the abyss of historical consciousness" (Gadamer 1983:98). In the understanding of history, tradition, text or horizon, the role of language is of utmost importance. Language is necessary for all understanding, interpretation and communication. It establishes a link between the past and the present, the text and the reader, the event and the informer, the experience and the experiencer. The need of language was recognized by Schleiermacher and Humboldt, but Gadamer's treatment of language is different. Unlike his predecessors, Gadamer does not make any distinction between language, speech and linguisticality. Taking language as the reservoir of varied possibilities, Gadamer

directs our attention to its universal ontological structure. Though in our ordinary vocabulary we are used to make a distinction between the act of understanding and that of interpretation, Gadamer feels that in the history of hermeneutics they are conjoined with one another.

Inasmuch as understanding always occurs against the background of our prior involvement, so it always occurs on the basis of our *history*. Understanding, for Gadamer, is thus always an 'effect' of history, while hermeneutical 'consciousness' is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical 'being effected'—it is 'historically-effected consciousness'. Awareness of the historically effected character of understanding is, according to Gadamer, identical with an awareness of the hermeneutical situation and he also refers to that situation by means of the phenomenological concept of 'horizon'—understanding and interpretation thus always occurs from within a particular 'horizon' that is determined by our historically-determined situatedness. Understanding is not, however, imprisoned within the horizon of its situation—indeed, the horizon of understanding is neither static nor unchanging (it is, after all, always subject to the effects of history). Just as our prejudices are themselves brought into question in the process of understanding, so, in the encounter with another, is the horizon of our own understanding susceptible to change.

Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an 'agreement' about the matter at issue. Coming to such an agreement means establishing a common framework or 'horizon' and Gadamer thus takes understanding to be a process of the 'fusion of horizons'. The notion of 'horizon' employed here derives from phenomenology according to which the 'horizon' is the larger context of meaning in which any particular meaningful presentation is situated. Inasmuch as understanding is taken to involve a 'fusion of horizons', then so it always involves the formation of a new context of

meaning that enables integration of what is otherwise unfamiliar, strange or anomalous. In this respect, all understanding involves a process of mediation and dialogue between what is familiar and what is alien in which neither remains unaffected. This process of horizontal engagement is an ongoing one that never achieves any final completion or complete elucidation—moreover, inasmuch as our own history and tradition is itself constitutive of our own hermeneutic situation as well as being itself constantly taken up in the process of understanding, so our historical and hermeneutic situation can never be made completely transparent to us. As a consequence, Gadamer explicitly takes issue with the Hegelian 'philosophy of reflection' that aims at just such completion and transparency.

In contrast with the traditional hermeneutic account, Gadamer thus advances a view of understanding that rejects the idea of understanding as achieved through gaining access to some inner realm of subjective meaning. Moreover, since understanding is an ongoing process, rather than something that is ever completed, so he also rejects the idea that there is any final determinacy to understanding. It is on this basis that Gadamer argues against there being any method or technique for achieving understanding or arriving at truth. The search for a methodology for the *Geisteswissenschaften* that would place them on a sound footing alongside the 'sciences of nature' (the *Naturwissenschaften*)—a search that had characterized much previous hermeneutical inquiry—is thus shown to be fundamentally misguided. Not only is there no methodology that describes the means by which to arrive at an understanding of the human or the historical, but neither is there any such methodology that is adequate to the understanding of the non-human or the natural. Gadamer's conception of understanding as not reducible to method or technique, along with his insistence of understanding as an ongoing process that has no final completion, not only invites comparison with ideas to be found in the work of the later Wittgenstein, but can also be seen as paralleling developments in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science.

The basic model of understanding that Gadamer finally arrives at in *Truth and Method* is that of conversation. A conversation involves an exchange between conversational partners that seeks agreement about some matter at issue; consequently, such an exchange is never completely under the control of either conversational partner, but is rather determined by the matter at issue. Conversation always takes place in language and similarly Gadamer views understanding as always linguistically mediated. Since both conversation and understanding involve coming to an agreement, so Gadamer argues that all understanding involves something like a common language. In this sense, all understanding is, according to Gadamer, interpretative, and, in so far as all interpretation involves the exchange between the familiar and the alien, so all interpretation is also translative. Gadamer's commitment to the linguisticality of understanding also commits him to a view of understanding as essentially a matter of conceptual articulation. This does not rule out the possibility of other modes of understanding, but it does give primacy to language and conceptuality in hermeneutic experience. Indeed, Gadamer takes language to be, not merely some instrument by means of which we are able to engage with the world, but as instead the very medium for such engagement. We are 'in' the world through being 'in' language. This emphasis on the linguisticality of understanding does not, however, lead Gadamer into any form of linguistic relativism. Just as we are not held inescapably captive within the circle of our prejudices, or within the effects of our history, neither are we held captive within language. Language is that within which anything that is intelligible can be comprehended, it is also that within which we encounter ourselves and others. In this respect, language is itself understood as essentially dialogue or conversation. Like Wittgenstein, as well as Davidson, Gadamer thus rejects the idea of such a thing as a 'private language'—language always involves others, just as it always involves the world.

Gadamer claims that language is the universal horizon of hermeneutic experience; he also claims that the hermeneutic experience is itself universal. For communication and understanding, we have to rely on language. Language is dialogical. It always implies a relationship between the self and the other. The hermeneutic act of interpreting the text is not monological but dialogical, for the text as the 'permanently fixed expressions of life' may be treated as a partner which becomes united with the interpreter through language and dialogue, hermeneutic experience becomes one with human existence.

Gadamer and Epistemology: Gadamer regards hermeneutics as universal, but he does not have a firm enough grasp of epistemology to consider the problem of knowledge in general. Unlike Heidegger, who insists on authentic interpretation of the texts, Gadamer talks about textual interpretation and insists that there cannot be a single correct reading of the texts. Different readings are possible, and a choice among them cannot be made solely by appealing to the texts themselves. Thus it can be said that textual interpretation is an open-ended process, as anyone can legitimately claim to construe the texts differently. Moreover the texts, like the interpretations, are not stable, but constantly change. Since what we interpret is composed of the texts plus the history of their interpretation, the object of interpretation is constantly changing, never finally fixed. Having mentioned that, it may be pointed out that textual interpretation is a mere subset of the wider question of knowledge, or epistemology in general. It would be a mistake to equate one with the other.

III

Hermeneutics and Epistemology

Gadamer is correct to maintain the universality of hermeneutics, although he does not provide a convincing argument for this claim. He at best only demonstrates the need to take into account the historical dimension in the interpretation of anything that can be considered as a

text. A better argument than anything that Gadamer provides can be constructed by examining the history of epistemology.

Tom Rockmore in his paper "Gadamer, Rorty and Epistemology as Hermeneutics" points out that the main modern approach to epistemology can be loosely characterized as epistemic foundationalism. It is already present in Aristotle, who, in the *Posterior Analytics,* argues for a theory based on one or more principles, which neither can be demonstrated nor require demonstration, and from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced. Descartes restates the Aristotelian approach in the form of a theory resting on a single initial principle that can be rigorously demonstrated and from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced. Modern foundationalism, which can take many forms, typically includes an initial principle or principles known to be true, from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced, hence an emphasis on system, or knowledge beyond the possibility of doubt, a causal theory of perception, and a justification of the inference from the representation to the object.

Rockmore holds that it is easy to see that the epistemological problem, which runs throughout the entire later discussion, cannot be solved when formulated in this way. Suffice it to say that we cannot remain indifferent to the failure of epistemic foundationalism. If we choose not to return to Greek intuitionism featuring a different grasp of independent reality, and we desire to avoid skepticism, then the only alternative is to appeal to a form of hermeneutics, or a description of the process of knowledge not elaborated prior to and apart from but rather within experience. Following Rockmore it can be concluded that Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics does not resolve the epistemological problem but that it offers promising possibilities. Against Rorty, it can be said that in embracing hermeneutics we need not turn away from epistemology since after the decline of foundationalism, hermeneutics is our most promising approach to epistemology. Gadamer maintains, but does not demonstrate, the

universality of hermeneutics, which he describes but does not justify. Hermeneutics is not an alternative to epistemology. It is rather an alternative to a form of epistemology, which depends on normative interpretation of knowledge.

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