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What is the Difference that Makes a Difference?

Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty

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If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole preferred--there is no other truthful word--as one's best working attitude.

William James, A Pluralistic Universe
(p. 20-21)

There are many ways to characterize what we are talking about when we speak of modernity and post-modernity. But one description--as it pertains to philosophy--might go something like this. The "core problem" for philosophy in the modern world has been to resolve what Michael Dummett has called the "scandal" of philosophy--"the scandal caused by philosophy's lack of a systematic methodology." Characterizing this scandal, Dummett tells us:

... it has been a constant preoccupation of philosophers to remedy that lack, and a repeated illusion that they had succeeded in doing so. Husserl believed passionately that he had at last held the key which would unlock every philosophical door, the disciples of Kant ascribed to him the achievement of devising a correct philosophical methodology: Spinoza believed that he was doing for philosophy what Euclid had done for geometry; and before him, Descartes supposed that he had uncovered the one and only proper philosophical method. I have mentioned only a few of the many examples of this illusion; for any outsider to philosophy far the safest bet would be that I am suffering from a similar illusion by making the same claim for Frege. To this I can offer only the banal reply which any prophet has to make to any skeptic: time will tell. (1977, p. 458).

Dummett expresses a primary concern of modern philosophy that has persisted from Descartes until the present--to turn philosophy into a "rigorous science", to discover its real foundations, its proper object, its systematic methodology, to overcome the situation where philosophy appears to be the endless battleground among competing opinions (doxai) and finally becomes a legitimate form of knowledge (episteme). This search to discover some basic constraints is not only characteristic of philosophy but pervades the entire range of the cultural disciplines. Hovering in the background of this pursuit is what might be called "the Cartesian Anxiety"--the fear or apprehension that if there are no such basic constraints, no foundations, no determinate "rules of the game", then we are confronted with intellectual and moral chaos where anything goes. But recently there has been another analysis of the "scandal" of philosophy--that the real scandal is that we are still taken in and mesmerized by the very conception of philosophy that Dummett embraces: where we presuppose, that there is a "proper object" of philosophy; that there are philosophic problems which are to be solved once and for all; and that there is a "systematic methodology" for doing this. If we really want to overcome the scandal of philosophy, then what is needed is a form of philosophical therapy which will rid us of the illusion and the self-deception that philosophy is or can be such a foundational discipline. What characterizes so much of what is sometimes called post-modernity is a new playful spirit of negativity, deconstruction, suspicion, unmasking. Satire, ridicule, jokes and punning become the rhetorical devices for undermining "puritanical seriousness". This esprit pervades the writings of Rorty, Feyerabend, and Derrida. Where an earlier generation of philosophers like Sartre were telling us that the human predicament is one of unhappy consciousness with no possibility of overcoming it, it almost seems as if we are now being told that our condition is one of "absolute dialectical unrest" which Hegel took to be the essence of skeptical self-consciousness.

Using an older positivist and emotivist terminology, we might say that those who take a "pro-attitude" toward this new phenomenon (one which bears a strong affinity with a domesticated Nietzsche), think of it as a liberating spirit which releases us from the tyranny of Western metaphysics--what Heidegger called "the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics." And for those who have an "anti-attitude" toward this destruction and deconstruction, they think of it as opening the flood-gates to nihilism, irrationalism, subjectivism, and rampant relativism.

Frequently the opposing poles that I am sketching have been characterized by traditional binary oppositions: rationalism/irrationalism, objectivism/subjectivism; absolutism/relativism. But we are increasingly coming to realize that these traditional dichotomies obscure more than they illuminate, and that they gain their seductive power from an entire mode of thinking, acting and feeling which is itself being called into question. There is an almost desperate attempt to break out of, and move beyond, the dichotomies that have characterized modern

thought together with an enormous amount of confusion and uncertainty about what this even means.

It is against this background that I want to take a close look at some of the characteristic themes and emphases in the work of Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty. What initially strikes us are the crucial and consequential differences among them--the hard and fast barriers that seem to separate them. At one extreme there is Habermas, who some may think of as the "last" great rationalist. Habermas has attempted to resolve the scandal of philosophy by showing us that the legacy of the philosophic tradition is redeemed in a new reconstructive science--a comprehensive theory of rationality that focuses on the centrality of communicative action and discourse, and which can serve as a ground for a critical theory of society. At the other extreme is Rorty, who mocks the very idea of such a "theory" and thinks that it is just another misguided variation of the discredited foundational project of modern philosophy.

Although Rorty appropriates the term "hermeneutics", he tells us "it is not the name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sorts of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of the hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled--that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt." (1979, p. 315). From Gadamer's perspective this is a very strange sort of hermeneutics. For what Gadamer takes to be basic for philosophical hermeneutics is that it points the way to an "entirely different notion of knowledge and truth" (1963, p. 113) that is revealed and realized through understanding. So from Gadamer's perspective, Rorty's hermeneutics is mutilated or castrated, for it is a hermeneutics without the claim to knowledge and truth.

The thesis that I want to play out is that when we take a closer look at what is going on here, then what at first appear to be dramatic and consequential differences begin to look more like differences of emphasis. I am not saying that the three of them are really saying the same thing, or that the differences that divide them are unimportant, but I will try to show how different these differences look once we start probing. I want to show this by focusing on the themes of praxis, practice, practical truth and discourse as they appear in their thinking. Let me begin with Gadamer and then move on to Habermas and Rorty in order to show the interplay--the Spiel that takes place here.

The most intriguing and most central theme in Gadamer's understanding of philosophical hermeneutics is the fusion of hermeneutics and praxis. In the context of Wahrheit und Methode this becomes evident when Gadamer takes up the issue of "application" and argues for the relevance of Aristotle's Ethics in order to clarify "the rediscovery of the fundamental hermeneutic problem." Against an older tradition of hermeneutics that sought to divide it into three distinct subdisciplines: subtilitas intelligendi (understanding); subtilitas explicandi

(interpretation); and subtilitas applicandi (application); Gadamer argues that these are three moments of the single process of understanding (1965, pp. 274ff.). They are internally related so that all genuine understanding involves not only interpretation but also application. What Gadamer means is revealed through his own interpretation and appropriation of phronesis, which is to be carefully distinguished from theoretical knowledge or episteme on the one hand, and technical skill or techne, on the other hand. Phronesis is a form of reasoning and practical knowledge in which there is a distinctive type of mediation between the universal and the particular where both are co-determined. It is not the application of Method or the subsumption of particulars under fixed determinate rules or universals. Furthermore, what is distinctive about such practical knowledge is that it involves "the peculiar interlacing of being and knowledge, determination through one's own becoming, Hexis, recognition of the situational Good, and Logos." (1963, p. 107).

Gadamer claims that Aristotle's analysis of phronesis and the ethical phenomenon is a "kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics." (1965, p. 289). For as he tells us:

We, too, determined that application is neither subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning. Here too application was not the relating of some pre-given universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with a traditional text seeks to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given to him as something universal, that he understands it as such and only afterwards uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal thing, the text, i.e. to understand what this piece of tradition says, what constitutes the meaning and importance of the text. In order to understand that, he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to his situation, if he wants to understand at all. (1965, p. 289).

Most of the fundamental themes in philosophical hermeneutics are implicit in this passage, or can be related to it. Gadamer's major critique of nineteenth century hermeneutics is that it neglected the positive role that forestructures, prejudgments, and prejudices play in all understanding. He claims that it was only with Heidegger that the positive enabling role of forestructures was fully appreciated, and this ontological insight requires a new understanding of the famous hermeneutical circle. This is the basis of Gadamer's apologia for prejudice against the "Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudices." Prejudices which are constitutive of our being and our historicity are not only unfounded, negative, and blind. They can also be "justified" and enabling, they open us to experience (Erfahrung). We are always being shaped by effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte); consequently to understand is always to understand differently. Because all understanding involves a dialogical encounter between the text or the

tradition that we seek to understand and our hermeneutical situation, we will always understand the "same thing" differently. We always understand from out situation and horizon, but what we seek to accomplish is to enlarge our horizon, to achieve a fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung). Gadamer stresses that horizons--whose medium is language--are not self-enclosed; they are essentially open and fluid. Against subjectivist, relativist, and historicist misinterpretations of our hermeneutical situation, Gadamer stresses the need to situate our horizon within a larger horizon; to open ourselves to the claim to truth that works of art, texts, and tradition make upon us; to allow them to "speak to us." Gadamer tells us, "The best definition for hermeneutics is: to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distanced by cultural or historical distances speak again." (1980, p. 83). All of this can be taken as a commentary on the meaning of our finitude and historicity. For there is no Archimedean point, no transcendental position, no theoretical perspective that lies outside of our historicity. Consequently there can never be absolute knowledge, finality in understanding, or complete self-transparency of the knower. We always find ourselves in an open dialogical or conversational situation with the very tradition and history that is effectively shaping us.

If we closely examine Gadamer's writings since the publication of Wahrheit und Methode, we can discern a subtle but important shift that has taken place--a change of emphasis that marks a return to concerns of his earliest writings. For in Wahrheit und Methode Gadamer introduces phronesis and praxis in order to elucidate the character of philosophical hermeneutics. Ethics and politics are not thematic in the book. The interpretation of works of art, texts, and history is thematic. But since the publication of Wahrheit und Methode Gadamer has been increasingly concerned with moving in the other direction, with exploring the consequences of hermeneutics for praxis. He claims that "hermeneutic philosophy is the heir to the older tradition of practical philosophy", that "practical and political reason can only be transmitted dialogically", that the "chief task of philosophy is to justify this way of reason and to defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based on science. That is the point of philosophical hermeneutic. It corrects the peculiar falsehood of modern consciousness; the idolatry of scientific method and the anonymous authority of the sciences and it vindicates again the noblest task of the citizen--decision-making according to one's own responsibility--instead of conceding that task to the expert." (1975, p. 316).

Gadamer, in the spirit of dialogical encounter that is so central to his thinking, has sought to learn from and appropriate the "truth" from his critics and dialogical partners. Indeed, in his writings during the past twenty years, Gadamer begins to sound more and more like Habermas. Fundamental to both of them has been the categorial distinction between the technical and the practical (Habermas even acknowledges that in part it was Gadamer's work that made him sensitive to the importance and centrality of this distinction). Gadamer, like Habermas has been critical of the deformation of praxis, where praxis is taken

to be exclusively the application of science to technical tasks. Gadamer too tells us that "in modern technological society public opinion itself has in a new and really decisive way become the object of very complicated techniques--and this, I think, is the main problem facing our civilization." (1975, p. 316). The theme which is so central for Habermas--that there is a categorial distinction between purposive-rational action and communicative action, and that there are different types of rationalization processes corresponding to the different levels of action and rationality is echoed in Gadamer. There is in fact a latent radical strain--a supplement--in Gadamer's thinking which at times he fails to realize. This becomes evident when he tells us that "genuine solidarity, authentic community, should be realized" (1974, p. 80), or when in answering the question "What is Practice?" he declares "practice is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity. Solidarity, however, is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason." (1974, p. 87). There are even passages in Gadamer that sound like the echoes of the older Frankfurt School. For example, he describes Hegel's legacy as follows:

The principle of freedom is unimpugnable and irrevocable. It is no longer possible for anyone still to affirm the unfreedom of humanity. The principle that all are free never again can be shaken. But does this mean that on account of this, history has come to an end? Are all human beings actually free? Has not history since then been a matter of just this, that the historical conduct of man has to translate the principle of freedom into reality? Obviously this points to the unending march of world history into the openness of its future tasks and gives no becalming assurance that everything is already in order. (1972, p. 37).

I am fully aware of the nuances that separate Gadamer and Habermas even when they use the same expressions--"dialogue", "solidarity", and "freedom". But that is just the point that I want to make--that what at first appears to be so extreme and confrontational begins to look more like differences of emphasis. The fundamental thesis that I want to advance is that despite Gadamer's manifest (and real) conservative strain, his fear of the "dogmatism" and the potential "terror" of what he calls "planning reason", there is a powerful latent radical strain in his thinking that is constantly pulling us in a different direction. Gadamer's entire project of philosophical hermeneutics can be read as an attempt to recover what he takes to be the deepest and most pervasive theme in Western philosophy and culture--that the quintessence of our being is to be dialogical. This is not just the "mode of being" of the "few", but is a real potential of every person--a potential that ought to be actualized. It is this dialogical character of what we truly are that is deformed and threatened by modern technological society. A cardinal principle of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that when we seek to understand a text the vital question is what the text says, its meaning --this meaning is not to be confused or identified with the psychological intentions of the author. If we apply this principle to Gadamer's own texts, then we detect a tension or conflict between what the texts "mean" and what he has "intended". This tension is even

exhibited in Gadamer's self-conscious integration of Aristotelian, Platonic, and Hegelian motifs. The appeal to phronesis as a model of practical wisdom has traditionally had elitist connotations from the time of Aristotle through Burke right up to the contemporary vogue of neo-Aristotelianism. Aristotle himself never thought of phronesis as an "intellectual virtue" that could be ascribed to all human beings; but only to the few, only to those rare and gifted individuals (men) who had been properly educated. Gadamer softens this elitist aura of phronesis by blending it with his understanding of dialogue and conversation which he appropriates from Plato. When this is integrated with the Hegelian "truth"--"the principle that all are free never again can be shaken"--then the implicit "radicalization" of phronesis becomes evident. It is Gadamer who tells us that "the point of philosophical hermeneutics" is to vindicate "the noblest task of the citizen--decision-making according to one's own responsibility." (1975, p. 316).

There is an implicit telos here, not in the sense of what will work itself out in the course of history, but rather in the sense of what ought to be realized. So if we take the theme of application or appropriation to our historical situation concretely, then this sets a task for us which can guide our practical lives, i.e., to attempt to realize that type of society in which the idea of open authentic dialogue and conversation becomes a concrete reality in which all have the real opportunity to participate. Considering the fragility of the conditions required for such dialogue, it would be a gross perversion of Gadamer's phenomenological insight to think that such an idea can serve as an organizational principle of society. Nevertheless, the very idea of such a dialogical rationality is a regulative ideal that can and ought to orient our praxis.

This is why I think that if we want to get at the important differences that still separate Gadamer and Habermas, it is more important to focus on the meaning and role of truth and criticism for each of them, rather than on the slogan: "hermeneutics versus critique of ideology." But even here the differences turn out to be different from what at first seems so apparent. Consider the concept of truth which is not only the most central theme in Gadamer's work, but also the most elusive. At first it looks as if what Gadamer means by "truth" is a blending of motifs that he has appropriated from Hegel and Heidegger. Like them, Gadamer rejects and criticizes the dominant conception of truth as adequatio intellectus et rei--at least when it comes to understanding the type of truth that pertains to hermeneutical understanding. But Gadamer also carefully distances himself from both Hegel and Heidegger. He categorically rejects what Hegel took to be the ground of his own understanding of truth, that the "true is the whole" which is realized in Wissenschaft. The following passage is typical of Gadamer's distancing himself from Hegel.

For Hegel it is necessary, of course, that the movement of consciousness, experience should lead to a self-knowledge that no longer has anything different or alien to itself. For him the

perfection of experience is "science," the certainty of itself in knowledge. Hence his criterion of experience is that of self-knowledge. That is why the dialectic of experience must end with the overcoming of all experience, i.e., in the complete identity of consciousness and object. We can now understand why Hegel's application to history, insofar as he saw it as part of the absolute self-consciousness of philosophy, does not do justice to the hermeneutical consciousness. The nature of experience is conceived in terms of that which goes beyond it; for experience itself can never be science. It is in absolute antithesis to knowledge and to that kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always contains an orientation towards new experience The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself. (1975, p. 319).

It is also evident that Gadamer draws back from Heidegger's "radical" thinking about the meaning of alethia. In his published work, Gadamer is usually respectful and cautious in his comments on Heidegger. But occasionally he indicates his strong disagreements with Heidegger. See the Forward to the second edition of Truth and Method. (1965, p. xxv.). But what is even more important and revealing is that when Gadamer appeals to the concept of truth to justify what he has to say about the relevance of Aristotle, phronesis, and the tradition of practical philosophy to our hermeneutical situation, he is implicitly appealing to a concept of truth which (pragmatically speaking) comes down to what can be argumentatively validated by a community of interpreters who open themselves to tradition.

If we focus on the meaning of "criticism" for Gadamer, he tells us "it is a grave misunderstanding to assume that the emphasis on tradition which enters all understanding implies an uncritical acceptance of tradition and sociopolitical conservatism In truth the confrontation of our historic tradition is always a critical challenge to this tradition Every experience is such a confrontation." (1963, p. 108). But however sympathetic one may be with Gadamer's critique of objectivism, foundationalism, and the search for an Archimedean point that lies outside of our historicity, there is a question that he never adequately answers for us. All criticism presupposes some principles, standards, or criteria of criticism, no matter how open, tentative, and historical these may be. Tradition itself is not a seamless whole, and what is most characteristic of our hermeneutical situation is that there are conflicting traditions making conflicting claims upon us. We need to gain some clarity about what are and what ought to be the standards for "a critical challenge" to tradition. It may be true, but it certainly is not sufficient to tell us that there are no fixed rules or determinate universals that can serve as standards for criticism. If reason is "social reason"--or is genuinely inter-subjective--then we need to elucidate the intersubjective principles that can guide our individual criticisms and decisions. Furthermore, to insist, as Gadamer himself does, that the principles, laws, nomoi are themselves

"handed down" to us from tradition and require concrete application does not help us to resolve questions concerning the conflict of these nomoi, or questions that arise when traditional nomoi no longer seem to "bind" us. (For a more detailed development of these criticisms of Gadamer, see (Bernstein 1982)).

The perspective that I think is most illuminating for understanding the differences that make a difference between Gadamer and Habermas is one which emphasizes how much they share in common in the "application" theme. Already, in Habermas' initial review of Wahrheit und Methode, he declared, "I find Gadamer's real achievement in the demonstration that hermeneutic understanding is linked with transcendental necessity to the articulation of an action orienting self-understanding." (1970, p. 351). It is instructive to see how this is worked out and transformed in Habermas' own attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of communicative action and rationality. For Habermas, no less than Gadamer, we cannot escape from our own horizon in seeking to understand what appears to be alien to us. This has crucial significance for the entire theory of rationality, for Habermas too argues that it is an illusion to think that we can assume the position of disinterested observers and theoreticians when it comes to understanding other forms of life and what purport to be other standards of rationality. One never escapes the situation of taking an evaluative stance toward the validity claims made by others. If we want to "describe" other forms of life, or earlier stages of our social development, then one can only do this by adopting a "performative" attitude of one who participates in a process of mutual understanding.

It is important to distinguish different roles or types of evaluation in this context. Habermas' main point is that "classifying" or "describing" speech acts (whether such speech acts are made in our own or an alien language) presupposes that we understand the types of validity claim that they make. An interpreter must have the ability to make clear to himself or herself the implicit reasons that move participants to take the positions that they do take. In order to understand an expression, the interpreter must bring to mind the reasons with which the actor would under suitable circumstances defend its validity. Consequently the interpreter is drawn into the process of assessing validity claims. But this process of determining that a validity claim has been made is not yet to make an evaluative judgment about the soundness of the validity claim. Habermas' point can be illustrated by appealing to the now famous example of Zande witchcraft. We could not even begin to understand Zande witchcraft unless we had the ability to discriminate what the Azande consider to be reasons for acting in one way or another. To do this requires a preunderstanding on our part of what it means to make a validity claim. This is the sense in which describing or understanding the meaning of what the Azande are doing requires assessing validity claims. But it is a different (although related question) to evaluate whether the reasons given by the Azande are good or bad reasons, and even here we need to make an important distinction. For understanding the practice of Zande witchcraft requires that we can discriminate what the Azande themselves consider

good or bad reasons for acting. (Presumably the Azande themselves can make mistakes.) This judgment can also be distinguished from a judgment whether (and in what sense) the types of reasons that the Azande give are adequate. Habermas is, of course, aware of the ever present danger of ethnocentrism, of unreflectively imposing alien standards of judgment and thereby missing the point or meaning of a practice. But it is an illusion to think that we can escape from ethnocentrism by thinking that we can describe alien linguistic practices without assessing the validity claims that are implicitly made in speech acts. (For one of the clearest statements of this point about the internal relation between understanding meaning and assessing validity claims, and its significance for a theory of rationality see Habermas 1981, pp. 152ff.)

The theme of our historicity in which we are always applying or appropriating what we seek to understand to our historical situation is no less fundamental for Habermas than it is for Gadamer. But for Habermas, unlike Gadamer, the primary problem becomes how can we reconcile this performative participation with the type of intersubjective understanding that makes the claim to objectivity. When Habermas seeks to develop a comprehensive theory of communicative action, a universal pragmatics, he is not claiming that we do this sub species aeternitatus, or that we assume the position of an "infinite intellect". Rather he is claiming that from within the horizon of our hermeneutical situation, we can seek to elucidate the "unavoidable" conditions and principles of communicative action, discourse, and rationality. We aspire to universality recognizing that any such claim is clearly fallible. If one were to translate Habermas' project into Gadamerian terms, it might be put like this: Gadamer, you yourself have argued that all understanding involves application, and furthermore that our hermeneutical horizon is limited but not closed. Indeed you emphasize the very openness of language that is the condition for all understanding. So the question becomes, what is it about the linguistic medium within which we participate that allows for such appropriation and understanding? How are we to account for the fact that we can in principle always understand that which strikes us as alien and strange? What is it about the very character of language and rationality that enables us to grasp the possibility of the type of dialogue, conversation and questioning that you yourself have so penetratingly elucidated?

Now it might seem as if what I am trying to show is that if we press Gadamer's claims and insights we are led to the very concerns that are central for Habermas. I do think this is true, but it needs to be carefully qualified because it can suggest a misleading asymmetry whereby an "immanent critique" of Gadamer inevitably leads to Habermas' project. But I also think that such a critique can be reversed, that we can use Gadamer to highlight some of the latent tensions in Habermas' project. But before turning to what I take to be internal conflicts within Habermas, let me try to pin down the way in which the differences between Habermas and Gadamer now appear. Habermas can be interpreted as highlighting difficulties and lacunae in what Gadamer

has accomplished--difficulties concerning the question of truth, especially as it pertains to practical discourse; and difficulties concerning the practice of criticism, whether it be the criticism of the traditions that have formed us or the criticism of present society. Furthermore, Habermas can be used to highlight some of the difficulties in the very appeal to phronesis. For Gadamer himself has stressed that phronesis involves a mediation and codetermination of the universal and the particular. In the context of ethical and political action, by the "universal" Gadamer means those principles, norms and laws that are funded in the life of a community and orient our particular decisions and actions. Gadamer stresses how all such principles and laws require judgment and phronesis for their concrete application. This makes good sense when there are shared nomoi that inform the life of a community. But what happens when there is a breakdown of such principles, when they no longer seem to have any normative power, when there are deep and apparently irreconcilable conflicts about such principles, or when questions are raised about the very norms and principles that ought to guide our praxis? What type of discourse is appropriate when we question the "universal" element--the nomoi--that is essential for the practice of phronesis? These are the issues that Habermas pursues, and they are not just Habermas' questions but ones which Gadamer raises for us.

But now let me turn directly to Habermas and explore how a hermeneutical perspective can sharpen our perception of the tensions that stand at the heart of his thinking. In this context, I want to discuss the very idea of a theory of communicative action. What kind of theory or intellectual endeavor is it, and how is it to be justified or warranted? Habermas speaks with "two voices" which might be called the "pragmatic" and the "transcendental". Alternatively, I can clarify what I mean by employing a distinction that Charles Taylor makes in his book on Hegel between "strict dialectics" and "interpretative dialectics". Taylor distinguishes two ways in which a dialectical argument can command our assent. "There are strict dialectics, whose starting point is or can reasonably claim to be undeniable. And, then there are interpretative or hermeneutical dialectics, which convince us by the overall plausibility of the interpretation they give." (1975, p. 218). This is a most unHegelian type of distinction because Hegel's claim to truth, system and Wissenschaft depends ultimately on the validity of "strict dialectics". Yet I agree with Taylor that Hegel's most valuable and enduring contribution is what he revealed through interpretative or hermeneutical dialectics. Precisely how is this distinction relevant to Habermas?

At times, especially during the period when Habermas was writing Erkenntnis und Interesse, he slips into the language of "strict dialectics" or "strict transcendental argument". This is apparent in the original discrimination of the three "quasi-transcendental" cognitive interests, and is also evident in his earlier attempts to argue that there are four types of validity claim implicit in communicative action. Habermas' constant use of "necessity", what "must be presupposed", what is "unavoidable", easily lead one to think that he is

advancing a transcendental argument in the tradition of Kant, even when he stresses his differences with Kant. But in the years since the publication of *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Habermas has qualified his project to disassociate himself from this strong transcendental strain--and with good reason. Not only have there been powerful objections pressed against the possibility of transcendental arguments or strict dialectics, Habermas has seen more clearly that a theory of communicative action is not intended to be a transcendental apriori theory. In stating his reasons for abandoning the expression "transcendental", Habermas tells us that "adopting the expression transcendental could conceal the break with the apriorism that has been made in the meantime. Kant had to separate empirical from transcendental analysis sharply." (1976b, p. 24). It is just this dichotomy that a reconstructive theory of communicative action is intended to overcome. This is why Habermas now prefers to speak about the logic of reconstruction or reconstructive analysis, and to argue that within the domain of scientific theories we must distinguish between empirical-analytic theories and reconstructive theories--the latter type illustrated by the work of Chomsky, Piaget, and Kohlberg. A theory of communicative action is intended to be a scientific reconstructive theory of this type. There is still a crucial ambiguity here that needs to be resolved. Even if we accept this distinction between empirical-analytic and reconstructive analyses, how are we to understand this distinction? Habermas emphasizes--and this is vital for his entire project--that the distinction is one of alternative research strategies within the domain of scientific knowledge. Questions concerning empirical evidence, confirmation, and falsification (when properly formulated) are just as central for validating reconstructive hypotheses and theories as they are for empirical-analytic disciplines. If we turn to the critical literature concerning those reconstructive disciplines that Habermas takes to be paradigmatic, we find extensive discussion of whether the empirical and experimental evidence does or does not support the hypotheses advanced by Chomsky, Piaget, and Kohlberg. From a methodological perspective it is still an open issue whether in the long run reconstructive strategies or empirical-analytical strategies will prove scientifically more fruitful. I agree with Habermas that there are no apriori or conceptual reasons that are sufficient to rule out the viability of scientific reconstructive analyses. But there are also no apriori reasons for ruling out the possibility that such analyses might be replaced or displaced by new sophisticated empirical-analytic approaches. The important point here is that insofar as we are concerned with advancing scientific knowledge, it is methodologically prudent to be open to different types of research strategy. Habermas can draw support from the post-empiricist philosophy of science--that it is important to keep ourselves open to alternative research programs or traditions, especially in the early stages of the development of a new research program. I am stressing what Habermas himself emphasizes when he defends the claim that a theory of communicative action, or a universal pragmatics is a scientific theory, one in which "the distinction drawing on apriori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge becomes blurred." (1976b, p. 24). But, when we turn our attention to the details of the theory of

communicative action, and in particular to some of the strong claims that Habermas makes, the scientific status of such a theory becomes dubious and questionable. Consider some of the key claims that Habermas makes about practical truth and normative validity. The idea of practical truth is intended to be the analogue to the idea of theoretical truth; and both sorts of truth can be redeemed and warranted through appropriate forms of substantive argumentation. When questions concerning the appropriateness and legitimacy of claims to universal normative validity are raised, no matter how these questions and potential conflicts are resolved, the participants are unavoidably committed to the idea that such claims can be resolved by argumentative discourse. However sympathetic one may be to this as a regulative ideal which ought to be approximated, it is not clear in what sense this is an "unavoidable" or "necessary" presupposition that is somehow grounded in the very nature of intersubjectivity. Certainly someone who denies it is not involved in a logical contradiction, nor is it clear in what sense, if any, there is an "existential" or "pragmatic" contradiction.

Sometimes it seems as if what Habermas is doing is surreptitiously defining "practical discourse" in such a manner that while one can always opt out of such discourse, once we commit ourselves to it then we are already committed to the discursive redemption of normative validity claims. But Habermas has not established that such a commitment is "built into" the very nature of practical discourse. It is not helpful to say, that however counterfactual the ideal speech situation may be, it is anticipated and presupposed in every appropriate speech act. There is, of course, nothing objectionable about the appeal to counterfactuals in scientific theories; establishing them is just as central to empirical-analytic sciences as they are to reconstructive sciences. But there is something very peculiar about Habermas' counterfactual claim; for it is not at all clear what type of scientific evidence is relevant for supporting or refuting such a claim. In this context the Popperian demand for refutability or falsifiability is perfectly appropriate. If we are dealing with a scientific theory, one wants to know what could possibly count as a falsification or a refutation of the theory. What evidence would be relevant to refute the counterfactual claim that despite all signs to the contrary, every speaker who engages in communicative action is committed to the presupposition of the discursive redemption of normative validity claims?

One can also criticize Habermas from the opposite point of view. If a universal pragmatics is intended to be a genuine scientific theory which is hypothetical, fallible, and refutable, then what would be the consequences--especially concerning the redemption of universal claims of normative validity, practical truth, and practical discourse--if it turned out to be the case that such a theory is refuted or falsified? Does this mean that the issue of the type of communicative ethics that Habermas advocates and the decisionism that he opposes is a scientific issue to be decided by the success of rival research programs? Habermas gets himself into these and related aporias the more he insists on the scientific status of a theory of communicative action.

From Rorty's perspective it looks as if Habermas is guilty of the temptation that Rorty so brilliantly exposes in another context--to come up with a "successor discipline" to traditional epistemology which claims to do better what epistemology has failed to accomplish. (See [Rorty 1979, chaps. 5 & 6].)

I have suggested that there is an alternative reading of Habermas when I referred to his pragmatic voice and to interpretative dialectics (which are to be contrasted with his transcendental voice and to strict dialectics). What is fascinating and confusing about Habermas are the ways in which these two voices are superimposed on each other. To explain what I mean about this other voice in Habermas--this other way of reading him--let me cite a passage from Thomas McCarthy's judicious study of Habermas. He opens his study by telling us:

... his contributions to philosophy and psychology, political science and sociology, the history of ideas and social theory are distinguished not only by their scope but by the unity of perspective that informs them. This unity derives from a vision of mankind, our history and our prospects, that is rooted in the tradition of German thought from Kant to Marx, a vision that draws its power as much from the moral-political intention that animates it as from the systematic form in which it is articulated. (1978, ix.).

When McCarthy speaks of a vision that draws its power from "the moral-political intention that animates it", he comes very close to what William James means by vision in the passage that I cited at the beginning of this essay. The reading of Habermas that I am suggesting is one that emphasizes this aspect of his thinking, that sees his work not as another (failed) attempt of strict dialectics, transcendental argument, or even as proposing a rival scientific theory and research program. Rather, it is a perspective that emphasizes that what he is really doing is interpretative dialectics which seeks to command our assent "by the overall plausibility of the interpretation that they give." Whether we focus on Habermas' early reflections on the relation of theory and praxis, his delineation of the three primary cognitive interests, his probing of the question of legitimacy, or his most recent attempts to elaborate a reconstruction of historical materialism and a theory of communicative action, these analyses can be viewed as stages in the systematic articulation and defense of "a vision of mankind, our history and our prospects." For the interpretations that Habermas develops in each of these different but interrelated problematics is animated by the same "moral-political intention"--to show us that there is a telos immanent in the forms of life that have shaped us and the forms of communication in which we participate. This is not to be understood as a telos which represents the march of world history, one which must and will be realized, but rather as a "gentle but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason, a claim that must be recognized de facto whenever and wherever there is to be consensual action." (1976a, p. 97).

To argue, as I have been doing, for a reading of Habermas that stresses his pragmatic voice and his practice of interpretative dialectics is not yet to make a judgment about how plausible his interpretations and narratives really are. I do not think there is any wholesale way of doing this. For this requires that we actually work through the several interrelated problematics and show precisely what are the strengths and weaknesses of his interpretations. Here too there is an important lesson to be learnt from Gadamer. It is all too frequently assumed that if we cannot come up with universal fixed criteria to measure the plausibility of competing interpretations, then this means that we have no rational basis for distinguishing better and worse, more plausible or less plausible interpretations--whether these be interpretations of texts, actions, or historical epochs. One does not have to neglect the tangled problems that arise when confronted with evaluating conflicting or competing interpretations to appreciate that in concrete cases we can and do make comparative judgments, and seek to support them with arguments and the appeal to good reasons.

The reading of Habermas that I am advocating can be stated in a slightly different manner. Returning to Gadamer, we can see how he is always pulling us back and reminding us of the inescapability of understanding and interpretation from our historical and hermeneutical horizon. We know, of course, that there are always dangers in doing this; we can be guilty of ethnocentrism, of subtly rewriting history from a Whiggish perspective, of being insufficiently self-critical and reflective about "our standards of rationality". But as Hegel reminds us, sometimes we need to be mistrustful of the very fear of falling into error. For a typical reaction to this fear of falling into error because we are always understanding from the perspective of our hermeneutical horizon is to imagine that we can assume the position of an "infinite intellect" (Gadamer 1978, p. 10) or the type of disinterested transcendental point of view that deceives itself into thinking that it is "outside" of history. Both Gadamer and Habermas see through the speciousness of these flights from our historical situation. Both, although in different ways, have argued that we can take our historical situation and the practices that are constitutive of it seriously, and at the same time we can develop a critical perspective on it that is at once informed by an understanding of our history and is oriented to an open projective future. Both reject the thesis that Popper calls "The Myth of the Framework"--that we are prisoners caught in the framework of "our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language" where there is no possibility of overcoming these limitations. (Popper 1970, p. 56). But this commonness between Gadamer and Habermas points to a double irony. For I am claiming that we can employ Gadamer's analysis of what constitutes hermeneutical understanding, which includes the moments of interpretation and application, to get a clearer grasp of what Habermas is actually doing (as distinguished from what he sometimes says he is doing); and I am also suggesting--although I cannot adequately substantiate it here--that Habermas elaborates a more comprehensive, plausible, and powerful interpretation of our historical hermeneutical situation than does Gadamer. There is even a further twist here. For in the interpretation of Gadamer that I have

developed, we see that there is a latent radical thrust or telos in his thinking which points to the demand for the type of society in which every citizen has the opportunity to engage in the open dialogue, conversation, and questioning that he takes to be constitutive of what we are. Gadamer's own analysis and interpretation of modern society, and the main problems confronting it, can be used to support the vision of a society in which there is a practical attempt to overcome the forms of systematically distorted communication that block authentic dialogue. Shortly I will try to show how we can also use Rorty to clarify and support the readings of Habermas and Gadamer that I have been adumbrating. But once again what initially strikes us are the sharp differences between Rorty, on the one hand, and Habermas and Gadamer, on the other.

Rorty has dropped enough hints in his published writings to know how he would "go after" both Habermas and Gadamer. There is a dazzling brilliance in Rorty's deconstructions of what he takes to be the misguided pretensions of philosophical discourse. He is certainly sympathetic with Habermas' plea for undistorted communication, but scornful of what happens when "Habermas goes transcendental and offers principles." (1980, p. 736). By constantly leading us to think what we really need is some sort of theory in order to ground communication and conversation, Habermas is making the same sorts of mistakes that philosophers have always made in their desperate (and failed) attempts to discover real constraints and foundations. Habermas is a victim of the illusion which has haunted modern thinkers--that they must dignify the contingent social practices which have been hammered out in the course of history with something that pretends to be more solid and substantial. I suspect that he might even accuse Habermas of being guilty of the "mistake" that Habermas ascribes to so many other thinkers--of being caught in a "scientific misunderstanding" of what he is doing. Underlying Habermas' "new" scientific theory of communicative action is nothing more and nothing less than a "moral-political vision". What is perhaps even more misguided from Rorty's perspective is that the constant emphasis in Habermas on consensus and the expectation of the redemption of validity claims through argumentation is really retrogressive. When this is unmasked, it turns out to be only another version of what has been the primary bias of modern epistemology, i.e., the assumption that "all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable." "Hermeneutics" as Rorty uses this polemical expression, is "largely a struggle against this assumption." (1979, p. 316). If Rorty is right about what characterizes the Conversation of the West, then we should not fool ourselves into thinking that there are any apriori limitations or any hidden constraints on the invention of new vocabularies and new forms of abnormal discourse. It is the very appeal to something like the idea of a rational consensus that has always been used to block, stifle, or rule out "revolutionary" turns in the conversation. To speak of the argumentative redemption of validity claims through the appropriate level of discourse is either potentially stifling or sheer bluff. It either becomes a glorification and reification of what are our existing contingent social practices and forms of life or a pious and vacuous generality. We do not have

the slightest idea--before the fact--of what "rules" of argumentation (if any) will be applicable to new abnormal modes of discourse. Habermas fails to realize that he is just giving expression to the old positivist hope that we can come up with determinate rules which will once and for all tell us (in principle) what will count as legitimate and illegitimate (or meaningless) discourse.

Rorty's major complaint against Habermas can be put in still another way which becomes prominent in Rorty's apologia for a neo-pragmatism (shaped more by his reading of James and Dewey than Peirce and Mead). The heart of this neo-pragmatism is a "defense" of the Socratic virtues--"willingness to talk, to listen to the people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people." (1980, p. 736). The point for Rorty is that these "are simply moral virtues", and there is no metaphysical or epistemological guarantee of success. "We do not even know what 'success' would mean except simply continuance" of the conversation which is "merely our project, the European intellectual's form of life." (1980, p. 734). What Nietzsche has helped us to see is that there is no "metaphysical comfort" to be found that grounds or secures these moral virtues--and we must resist the temptation to find such comfort. The anti-pragmatist (and in this respect Habermas would be seen as an anti-pragmatist) thinks that the question of "loyalty to our fellow human beings presupposes that there is something permanent and unhistorical which explains why we should continue to converse in the manner of Socrates, something which guarantees convergence to agreement." (1980, p. 733). As Rorty tells us, "For the traditional, Platonic or Kantian, philosopher [and he would include Habermas in this tradition] the possibility of grounding the European form of life--of showing it to be more than European, more than a contingent human project--seems to be the central task of philosophy [or a new reconstructive science of communicative action]." (1980, pp. 734-735). And, while Rorty concedes that he has not presented an "argument" for pragmatism or answered the deep criticism that "the Socratic virtues cannot as a practical matter, be defended save by Platonic means, that without some sort of metaphysical comfort nobody will be able not to sin against Socrates" (1980, p. 737), he leaves little doubt that no one from Plato on has even come close to "succeeding" in grounding these virtues. So what has been Habermas' main preoccupation ever since the publication of Erkenntnis und Interesse (and seems to be his project from his earliest writings), to show that we can "ground" critical theory, is only another version of the old Platonic urge to "escape from conversation to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations." (1980, p. 737).

Rorty is no less devastating in his critique of Gadamer. He would find all the talk of "an entirely different notion of truth and knowledge" that is revealed by hermeneutic understanding a form of mystification. Despite Gadamer's own incisive critiques of epistemology and the Cartesian legacy which he claims has infected and distorted even nineteenth century hermeneutics, Gadamer himself is unwittingly a victim of the Cartesian persuasion that he is reacting against. For Gadamer is constantly playing on the idea that it is really

philosophical hermeneutics and not epistemology, Method, or science that can achieve what philosophy has always promised us--some profound access to "truth" that is not available to us by the limited and normal methods of science. Gadamer fits right into the tradition of metaphysical idealism whose principal legacy is "the ability of literary culture to stand apart from science, to assert its spiritual superiority to science, to claim to embody what is most important for human beings." (1981, p. 165). The trouble with Gadamer is that he is only a "half-hearted pragmatist",--what Rorty calls a "weak textualist". "The weak textualist--the decoder--is just one more victim of realism, of the metaphysics of 'presence'. He thinks that if he stays within the boundaries of a text, takes it apart, and shows how it works, then we will have 'escaped the sovereignty of the signifier', broken with the myth of language as a mirror of reality, and so on. But in fact he is just doing his best to imitate science--he wants a method of criticism, and he wants everybody to agree he has cracked the code." (1981, p. 167). Despite Gadamer's claim that the essential problem of philosophical hermeneutics is not a problem of method at all, and despite Gadamer's claim that to understand and to interpret is always to understand and interpret differently, he too wants the "comforts of consensus"--even if it is only the comforts of the consensus of the community of interpreters within the same historical horizon who have the proper Bildung.

Rorty, too, would "go after" the central and all important distinction in Gadamer between Method and Truth. For again, despite Gadamer's claims that he never intended to play off Method against Truth, and that he wants to acknowledge the legitimacy of science when it is limited to its proper domain, nevertheless the very dichotomy of Method and Truth is suspect. For Rorty would claim that when we take a close look at what goes on in science and what goes on in hermeneutic understanding we discover that the distinction here is only a pragmatic distinction of differences of degree (or a difference in what is contingently taken to be normal and abnormal discourse). Science itself is more like hermeneutical understanding than Gadamer realizes, and disputes about rival hermeneutical interpretations are more like "Method" than Gadamer acknowledges.

I have sought to put Rorty's critique of Gadamer and Habermas in the strongest and most vivid way because here we really seem to have some differences that really make a difference. Rorty's "strong" criticisms would no doubt be matched by an equally "strong" rebuttal. Both Gadamer and Habermas would see Rorty as expressing a new sophisticated version of a very old form of relativism--the type of relativism that each has sought to expose and defeat. And, if they wanted to get really nasty, they might accuse Rorty of failing to realize the unintended consequences of what he is saying. They might draw on their own respective appropriations of Hegel to accuse Rorty of failing to see how easily a playful relativism which seems so innocent in "civilized" discourse turns into its opposite in the practical realm--how the restless esprit of unrestrained dialectical negativity becomes a potent force for unrestrained destruction. Rorty's "techniques" of

deconstruction can be turned against himself. For when decoded, his celebration of relativism is perhaps more honestly revealed by Feyerabend when he tells us:

Reason is no longer an agency that directs other traditions, it is a tradition in its own right with as much (or as little) claim to the centre of the stage as any other tradition. Being a tradition it is neither good nor bad, it simply is. The same applies to all traditions--they are neither good nor bad, they simply are. They become good or bad (rational/irrational; pious/impious; advanced/'primitive'; humanitarian/vicious; etc.) only when looked at from the point of view of some other tradition. 'Objectively' there is not much to choose between anti-semitism and humanitarianism. But racism will appear vicious to a humanitarian while humanitarianism will appear vapid to a racist. Relativism (in the old simple sense of Protagoras) gives an adequate account of the situation which thus emerges. (Feyerabend 1978, pp. 8-9).

In the conflict between Rorty on the one hand, and Gadamer and Habermas on the other, we really seem to have differences that make a difference. There appears to be no way of reducing the gap between what Rorty is telling us and what Gadamer and Habermas are saying. If Rorty is right, then Gadamer and Habermas must both be wrong. One might even be inclined to say that both Gadamer and Habermas are representatives of modernity--at least insofar as they believe that philosophy (when properly reconstructed) still holds out the promise of knowledge and truth, even when all the necessary concessions are made to the realization of human finitude, fallibility, openness, and historicity; while Rorty is a post-modern thinker who seeks to root out the last buried vestiges of the "metaphysics of presence". Or using Rorty's terminology, we might say that both Habermas and Gadamer are "weak textualists" while Rorty sides with the "strong textualists" who try to live without "metaphysical comfort". The strong textualist "recognizes what Nietzsche and James recognized, that the idea of method presupposes that a privileged vocabulary, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself opposed to those which we read into it. Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth--that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want." (1981, pp. 167-168). But, is this yet the "last word"? Are we simply faced with an irreconcilable and incommensurable opposition? I think not, and I now will show that when we probe what Rorty is saying, we will see once again how different the differences begin to look.

In order to decode what Rorty is saying, let me introduce a rough but important distinction between Rorty's metacritique or therapeutic analysis of philosophy and his rhetorical apologia for pragmatism. Thus far I have been stressing Rorty's metacritique of the projects of both Gadamer and Habermas. This type of metacritique has become something of an obsession in Rorty. But there is also a subtext, something of what Derrida calls a "supplement" in his work. Rorty has

attempted to block any suggestion that he is laying the foundations for a new type of philosophy, a new constructive program. His deliberate use of such vague distinctions as the normal and abnormal, the familiar and unfamiliar, or even systematic and edifying philosophy are rhetorical devices employed to cure us of the expectation or belief that philosophy must be "constructive". Still one keeps asking where does Rorty really stand? What is the basis for his metacritique? Is he an "epistemological behaviorist"? a "holist"? a "pragmatist"? Are not these really substantive philosophic positions that need to be defended? Rorty is acutely aware that these are the type of questions that will be raised about his project. Every time we think we can really pin him down, he nimbly dances to another place.

"Epistemological behaviorism" and "holism" are not to be taken as names of new philosophic "positions", but rather as expressions that are intended to call epistemology and the project of modern philosophy into question. (See my discussion of "epistemological behaviorism" and "holism" in (Bernstein 1980).) He even tells us that "pragmatism is, to speak, oxymoronically post-philosophical philosophy." (1981, p. 159). One of the deepest aspirations of thinkers since Hegel--including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Derrida has been to "end" philosophy (and the meaning of the end of philosophy has been played out in its multifarious variations). Rorty places himself in this tradition with a further ironical twist about the meaning of the "end of philosophy". (See Rorty's discussion of the "end of philosophy" in the Introduction to (Rorty, 1982).) This also helps to make sense of what can be called his crypto-positivism which he ironically employs for rhetorical shock value. This becomes manifest when Rorty, for example, tells us "physicalism is probably right in saying that we shall someday be able, 'in principle', to predict every movement of a person's body (including those of his larynx and his writing hand) by reference to microstructures within his body," (1979, p. 354) or when he says about Hegel that "under cover of Kant's invention, a new superscience called 'philosophy', Hegel invented a literary genre which lacked any trace of argumentation" (1981, p. 162). After all these are just the claims that positivists have always made. I do not want to suggest that Rorty does not mean what he is saying. He means precisely what he is saying, but the irony becomes clear when we realize that whereas the positivists made the sorts of claims against a background where the "tough-minded" natural scientist is taken to be the cultural hero of our time, Rorty is sympathetic with those strong textualists who, without denigrating science, seek to replace the scientist with the poet and the literary critic as the new cultural heroes. In short, Rorty wants to show us how little is said when, to use the positivist turn of phrase, we extract the "cognitive content" of what the positivist is saying. Science is nothing more nor less than a very effective vocabulary for coping, one which is likely to win out over philosophy or any other cultural discipline when it comes to matters of prediction or following relatively clear patterns of argumentation. The point is not to get trapped into thinking that it is the only vocabulary available to us, or getting seduced into thinking that

somehow philosophy or any other cultural discipline ought to be able to beat science at its own "game".

But, let me turn directly to what I have called Rorty's subtext, his rhetorical apologia for pragmatism. I speak of it as a rhetorical apologia because Rorty does not want to claim that one can argue for it, if we mean by argument what goes on in science or what the positivists sought to reify as the standards for all "genuine" argumentation. The content of this pragmatism can be characterized as a defense of the Socratic virtues, "the willingness to talk, to listen to the people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people." It means taking conversation seriously (and playfully) without thinking that the only type of conversation that is important is the type that aspires to put an end to conversation by reaching some sort of "rational consensus", or that all "genuine" conversations are really inquiries about "truth". It means not being fooled into thinking or feeling that there is or must be something more fundamental than the contingent social practices that have been hammered out in the course of history. It means resisting the "urge to substitute theoria for phronesis", and appreciating that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones and that even these conversational constraints "cannot be anticipated". One of the possible consequences of this type of pragmatism would be a "renewed sense of community". (1980, p. 724). "Our identification with our community--our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage--is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature's, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right." (1980, p. 727). It would be a mistake and a slander to think that such a meditation on human finitude entails or leads to an acceptance of the status quo. The critical impulse in Rorty is no less strong than it is in Habermas or even Gadamer. Rorty is constantly criticizing what he takes to be the spectre of prevailing illusions and self-deceptions, and he provides "a hint of how our lives might be changed." (1980, p. 738). There is a profound moral-political vision that informs his work and suggests what our society and culture may yet become. Rorty's deepest sympathies, as well as his tentativeness, are expressed when he draws a distinction between two types of "strong textualists".

Pragmatism appears in James and Bloom as an identification with the struggles of finite men. In Foucault and Nietzsche it appears as contempt for one's own finitude, as a search for some mighty inhuman force to which one can yield up one's identity I have no wish to defend Foucault's inhumanism, and every wish to praise Bloom's sense of our common human lot. But I do not know how to back up this preference with argument, or even with a precise account of the relevant differences. To do so, I think, would involve a full-scale discussion of the possibility of combining private fulfillment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice. (1981, p. 173).

Now if one brackets Rorty's metacritique and pays close attention to his own "preference" and "vision", there is something very remarkable about it when we compare what he is saying with Gadamer and Habermas. For there is a significant overlap or family resemblance in these respective visions. This, of course, does not diminish the significance of the differences between Rorty on the one hand and Gadamer and Habermas, on the other. But once again, these differences now begin to look very different.

We can even find suitable translations for Rorty's key points in Gadamerian and Habermasian terms. For we can say that as Rorty interprets the "application" theme to our hermeneutical situation, this means that we accept the radical contingency of the social practices that define what we are. To say that they are radically contingent does not mean that they are arbitrary if by this we mean that we can somehow leap out of our historical situation and blithely accept some other set of social practices. Rorty is calling for an honest recognition of what constitutes our finitude and historicity, and for giving up the false "metaphysical comfort" that these practices are grounded in something more fundamental. We can appreciate the extent to which our sense of community is threatened and distorted not only by the "material conditions" that characterize our lives but by the faulty epistemological doctrines that fill our heads. The moral task of the philosopher or the cultural critic is to defend the openness of human conversation against all those temptations and real threats that seek closure---to keep open the "cultural space left by the demise of epistemology." Even Rorty's neo-pragmatism has undergone a subtle shift in the course of his intellectual development. Rorty's first published article was a defense of Peirce and an attempt to show the family resemblances between Peirce and the post-positivist musings of the later Wittgenstein. (Rorty 1961). In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, it is Dewey as the critic of foundationalism that replaces Peirce as the hero of pragmatism. And, in some of Rorty's most recent writings, it is James' humanistic pragmatism that he emphasizes. The line of development here is one in which there is "breaking with the Kantian epistemological tradition." (1980, p. 719). There is a certain strain or tension in Rorty's appropriation of the views of the pragmatists. For Peirce, Dewey, and even James, it was still the scientist that was their cultural hero. They sought to imbue philosophy with what they took to be the quintessence of the scientific experimental spirit. But unlike them, Rorty's deepest affinities are with what he calls "literary culture". The narrative that he unfolds is one where representatives of literary culture such as Bloom, Foucault, and Derrida replace professional philosophers as the dominant voice in the present conversation of mankind. Dewey is one of Rorty's heroes but Rorty does not follow Dewey in his socio-political critiques of the "problems of men". But although Rorty himself has not practiced the type of socio-political critique that became so central for Dewey, he expresses deep sympathy with it. Rorty, too, is an apologist for those very democratic virtues that were so central for Dewey and which he sought to make concrete. There is an important difference of emphasis here between Rorty and Habermas---one which also reveals the

common ground that they share. For Rorty's descriptions of what characterizes the social-political practices of our time are rather "thin" when compared with the "thick" descriptions of Habermas (or even with the highly illuminating analyses of micro-practices by Foucault). If, as Rorty tells us, the legacy of the pragmatists is to call for a change of orientation on how we can best cope with the world, how to live our lives so that we can "combine private fulfillment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern with justice" then this demands a critical analysis of the conflicts of the social and cultural practice that shape our lives. Further, this change of orientation requires confronting the practical tasks for achieving what Dewey once delineated as the primary task of democracy--"the creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute." (Dewey 1940, p. 394). I suggested earlier that we can use Rorty to get a clearer "fix" on what Habermas is really doing. In Rorty's terms, Habermas' importance is to be found in his "vision of mankind, our history and its prospects." Habermas is a "cultural critic" who has helped to clarify what is our human project and who has developed a "moral-political vision" that highlights the demand for the concrete achievement of the very Socratic virtues that Rorty himself defends.

It may be legitimately asked, where does this Spiel of Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty leave us? Let me first emphasize what I take to be the wrong conclusions to draw. It would be wrong to say that I am suggesting that all three are basically saying the same thing: they are not. It would be a mistake to think that there are no differences among them that make a difference. And, it would be just as faulty and misleading to think that their respective voices can be aufgehoben into a grand synthesis. Drawing on the central notion of a conversation that is so vital for all three of them, we can say that we must do as much justice to their differing emphases as to what they share in common. The appeal to the "model" of a conversation can be illuminating. For in any living vital conversation (which is not just the babble of incommensurable opinions), there will always be important differences among the participants; it behooves us to listen carefully to what each is saying to catch the nuances of their inflections. What I have tried to show is how different these differences appear once we start probing, and listen carefully. But the other side of differences is the common ground that emerges. In this final section, it is this common ground that I want to highlight. For I think it tells us something important about our hermeneutical situation and the agon between modernity and post-modernity.

Labels in philosophy and cultural discourse have the character that Derrida ascribes to Plato's pharmakon (Derrida 1968): they can poison and kill, and they can remedy and cure. We need them to help identify a style, a temperament, a set of common concerns and emphases, or a vision that has a determinate shape. But we must also be wary of the ways in which they can blind us, or can reify what is fluid and changing. The label that I would use to name the common project of Rorty, Habermas, and Gadamer is "non-foundational pragmatic humanism", and I

want to comment on each of the expressions in this label. I do not think that much needs to be said about the expression "non-foundational". For here we find a convergence in the major traditions of contemporary philosophy. One line can be drawn that runs from Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and Rorty. "Non-foundational" is perhaps too weak a term to characterize this movement of thought because it is essentially "anti-foundational". Already in his famous papers of 1868, Peirce laid down the main lines of the contemporary attack on the Cartesian legacy. He had the perspicacity to see that carrying out this project would lead us to a revolutionary understanding of human inquiry, signification, and the human condition. This attack on the Cartesian legacy and persuasion is echoed and deepened in the sustained critique of "modern subjectivism" in the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer. Of course, Rorty so presses this anti-foundationalist motif that Habermas (and even Peirce) begin to look like foundationalists from his perspective. But I think that a fairer and more generous interpretation of Habermas would emphasize that he too has been motivated to root out this tendency in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition with which he identifies. Although there are still some rear guard skirmishes, I think we can say, using James' phrase, that the "choice" between foundationalism and non-foundationalism is no longer a "live option"; it is a "dead option".

Both Rorty and Habermas would feel comfortable with the appellation, "pragmatic", although I suspect Gadamer would not. It is to Habermas' credit that he has been one of the few German philosophers who (along with Apel) has been able to break out of those blinding prejudices which have been a barrier for continental philosophers to appreciate the vitality, esprit, and relevance of what is best in the American pragmatic tradition. It is not just that Habermas has creatively drawn on the work of Peirce and Mead in developing his own understanding of communicative action, discourse, and rationality, but the American pragmatist with whom Habermas shares the deepest affinity is John Dewey; indeed I think that Habermas is closer in spirit to Dewey than Rorty is. Habermas pursues what Dewey took to be the aim of the reconstruction of philosophy which enables us to cope with the concrete "problems of men" in their socio-political context.

For all Gadamer's erudition, there is no evidence that he has ever grappled with the American pragmatic tradition. He seems to share Heidegger's prejudice about this tradition. But this "blindness" need not get in the way of seeing the affinity between the best of Gadamer and the best of American pragmatism. Of course, the pragmatists have always been more sympathetic with the promise of science in helping us to cope with human problems. But one can find in pragmatism a similar highlighting of what Gadamer calls phronesis--practical knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, there are structural parallels between Gadamer's attack on the Cartesian legacy and that of the pragmatists. But the affinity is more profound than the attack on a common enemy. For just as Gadamer seeks to overcome the misleading epistemological associations of the subject-object distinction that pervades modern thought, this is also true of the pragmatists. Gadamer's suggestion that the

"mode of being" of play provides a more penetrating understanding of the way we are in the world corresponds to Dewey's analysis of the dynamic to-and-fro transactional character of "situations". And, what Gadamer tells us about the meaning of human finitude, the fallibility of all understanding, and the essential openness of experience to the future are themes which are just as central to the pragmatic tradition.

"Humanism", the third term in the label I am proposing, has become something of a dirty word in recent times. It has been used by its critics to identify everything that they think is wrong in the modern world. The locus classicus for the contemporary critique of humanism is Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," but the attack on humanism has been helped along by the way in which "humanism" has become a "whipping boy" for Levi-Strauss, Althusser, and Foucault. From Foucault's perspective, "humanism" which the modern world takes to be its greatest contribution to culture turns out to be the pharmakon that kills--it names everything that is wrong, stolid, self-deceptive and bleak in the modern world. When unmasked it seems to be the ideology of the new regime of power/knowledge--the ideology of the "disciplinary society", "the age of bio-power", the "carceral archipelago". In the new post-modern, post-structuralist Manichean theology, "humanism" seems to function as the name for the Kingdom of Darkness. Given the bad press that humanism has received recently from such diverse sources, it might seem best to drop this sign altogether in favor of something that does not evoke such strong emotive reactions. But it is more than a matter of perversity to hold on to this sign and not to abandon it in the face of such varied criticisms. One does not have to believe in the deification of man (or woman) to be a humanist, or to be guilty of the hubris that neglects the limitations of human finitude, or to be an apologist for the "carceral archipelago" to be a humanist. This is not the place for a scholarly disquisition on the history and vicissitudes of the meaning of "humanism". But one can recognize with Rorty that it is a fitting expression for the "Socratic virtues", or with Gadamer that it signifies the essential dialogical, conversational, questioning character of what we are. One can agree with Habermas that it is a "fiction to believe that Socratic dialogue is possible everywhere and at any time" and be alert to the material conditions that distort and deform such dialogue and prevent its actualization in society. Such a humanism points to the urgency of the practical tasks that confront us in trying to make the world a bit more humane, where our social practices actually become practices where we can engage in rational persuasion and phronesis, rather than manipulation and strategic maneuvering: where we seek to root out all hidden forms of domination. It directs us to what Rorty calls a "renewed sense of community" and to working toward a society in which the type of dialogue and phronesis that Gadamer celebrates are not mere abstractions. It provides no blue prints for how to accomplish this (for there are none), and it eschews all forms of false "metaphysical comfort". It means seeking to eliminate the real obstacles that stand in the way of distorted communication--whether these come from the secret police or more subtle and frequently more effective forms of power/knowledge. The common ground that emerges in the play of Rorty, Gadamer, and Habermas--their non-

foundational pragmatic humanism--may yet serve as a vision that can move us, "a mode of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life" that can enable us to cope with the darkness of our times and orient our praxis.

Notes

¹For a discussion of the complexities involved in evaluating conflicting and competing interpretations see (Taylor 1971) and (Ricoeur 1971). One of the primary reasons why critics of hermeneutics have been suspicious of its claim to "cognitive legitimacy" is that the decision or choice among competing interpretations has been contrasted with science where there are presumably clear determinate rules or criteria for choosing among rival theories or paradigms. But despite internal disputes among post-empiricist philosophers and historians of science, there has been a growing rational consensus that this is a myth. Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, Toulmin (and many others) have emphasized the essential openness and indeterminacy of the criteria in choosing among rival theories, paradigms, or research programs. All of the above would agree with Kuhn's famous claim that "there is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision." (Kuhn 1970, p. 200). Kuhn himself realizes how the claims that he has been making bear a close affinity with those which have been central to contemporary hermeneutics. See the preface and essay, "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice" in (Kuhn 1977).

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