

PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT FOUNDATIONS

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Introduction: The Specter of Relativism

The issue of foundationalism is currently the subject of a great deal of discussion in philosophical circles. In particular, the stance taken by a number of “antifoundationalists” continues to provoke strong opposition. Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida are cases in point. When one pauses for a moment to reflect on this state of affairs, however, there is something rather curious about it. Surely, one is inclined to think, the issue of foundationalism is, in a sense, a dead issue. After all, foundationalism is an essentially Cartesian project, and who would seriously want any longer to hold up Descartes as a model for philosophical thinking? Is there still anyone who seriously believes that by means of philosophical speculation it is possible to discover a cosmic Archimedean point, an absolute foundation, a *fundamentum inconcussum*, on which all of our epistemic endeavors could be definitively “grounded”? Does anyone even believe that an absolute, unimpeachable grounding is necessary - and that, accordingly, it is a worthwhile goal for philosophy? The empirical sciences have long since renounced any such metaphysical quest for absolute, apodictic *certainty* -- and they are none the worse off for having done so. So why should “antifoundationalism” provoke such widespread opposition?

It seems to me that perhaps the crux of the matter is that while almost

no one is prepared to defend any longer a strong foundationalist position, *à la* Descartes, a great many people fear nevertheless that what appears to be the diametrical opposite of foundationalism, namely, antifoundationalism, can only lead to that great, unspeakable horror: *relativism*. Relativism is the object of a great deal of fear because it is thought to lead in turn (by "relativizing" them) to the loss of all meaning, all truth, and all value, i.e., to *nihilism*. Herein lies, I suspect, the main reason for the hostile reaction to such outspoken antifoundationalists as Rorty and Derrida.

For my part, while I would concede that the positions elaborated by both Rorty and Derrida are indeed relativistic and even nihilistic (protestations on their part to such a charge notwithstanding), I do not believe that antifoundationalism, as such, necessarily entails relativism. This is in any event the thesis I wish to argue for in this paper. One of the principal arguments of those who continue to defend some form of foundationalism (they could perhaps best be referred to as "anti-antifoundationalists") appears to be that if we give up all foundationalist conceptions of truth (truth as "correspondence to reality," capital-*T* truth), we are left with merely a discordant host of conflicting "opinions" on the part of individuals -- and thus with no truth at all, since if "truth" has any real meaning, it cannot be whatever one wants it to be, something purely "subjective;" there have to be, they say, "objective constraints." Similarly, foundationalists often argue that if one holds that ethical values cannot be "grounded" ontologically, one inevitably ends up advocating some form of ruinous "decisionism," i.e., a form of moral relativism which denies any sort of *universal* status to values, and thus any real moral force to them at all. These are of course arguments which have been bandied about in one form or another ever since the time of the Sophists (and the anti-Sophists). The specter of relativism, it must be said, has long been the preferred means whereby philosophical absolutists have sought to, as Montaigne would say, "*faire peur aux enfants*."

Perhaps, though, as a number of "postmodern" writers have suggested (William James being one of the first of these), it is time that a concerted effort be made to exorcise the ghosts of metaphysics from our philosophical discourse. If the examples of Rorty and Derrida are anything to go by, however, something more than pure and simple antifoundationalism seems to be called for if this is to be accomplished. For as the case of these two writers demonstrates, one can all too easily fall into the trap of perpetuating metaphysical ways of thinking in the very attempt at overcoming metaphysics. By that I mean perpetuating, if only in an unconscious way, the oppositional, either/or categories which are constitutive of the metaphysical enterprise itself. Foundationalists argue, in a typically metaphysical fashion, that *either* truth-claims must somehow

be “grounded” in reality *or* else everything becomes “relative.” When, accordingly, antifoundationalists like Rorty and Derrida simply reverse the priorities, substituting cultural “ethnocentrism” and *différance* (the indefinite deferral of truth and meaning) for the universal truth-claims of traditional philosophy (indeed, in announcing in one way or another the “end of philosophy”), they reinforce the worse fears of the foundationalists (their “Cartesian anxiety,” in Richard Bernstein’s very apt phrase)¹: The rejection of foundationalism can lead only to relativism. Thus the antiuniversalist glorification of “particularism” on the part of some antifoundationalists cannot be said to be a viable substitute for the metaphysical principle of identity (rightly deemed by them to be a source of oppression).²

Can one do away with metaphysical foundations - and yet still do philosophy, in some meaningful sense of the term (i.e., and not be reduced to entertaining, as Rorty says, “a merely ‘literary’ conception of philosophy”)?³ I would like to argue that one can, that in fact philosophy’s traditional claim to *universality* becomes a much more defensible claim when it is resolutely divorced from all appeals to “foundations.” In what follows I would like to sketch out some of the main features of what might most fittingly be called a *post* foundational approach to the issues of truth and value, i.e., a postmetaphysical position which is *neither* foundationalist *nor* relativist.

1. Truth

In general, *modern* philosophy (which was obsessed with modern science, considering it to be the indisputable paradigm of all genuine knowledge) was, as Rorty puts it, an “epistemologically centered” enterprise⁴, i.e., an attempt to discover those foundational items in consciousness (clear and distinct ideas, sense data, or whatever) which can be said to “refer” to the “real” world and on the basis of which an “objective” knowledge of the world can somehow be arrived at. By contrast *postmodern* philosophy (which considers that science is but one interpretation, among others, of the world and that whatever truth-value it may have stems not from its “correspondence to reality” but from its technological use-value) is language-centered, i.e., is an attempt to explore the linguistic dimensions of human understanding itself. The shift from “modern” to “postmodern” is thus a shift in paradigms, a shift from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language. For postmodern philosophy, to understand something is not, as modernism insisted, to form mental “representations” of it (the traditional correspondence notion of truth which, it may be noted, continues to live on as the guiding metaphysical

presupposition of AI research); understanding is, rather, a matter of actively *interpreting* our world experience -- by means, precisely, of language. For postmodernism, human understanding is linguistic and interpretive through and through. A good illustration of this is the position defended by philosophical (or phenomenological) *hermeneutics*.

"Why," Hans-Georg Gadamer asked in a famous essay of his, "has the problem of language come to occupy the same central position in current philosophical discussions that the concept of thought, or 'thought thinking itself,' held in philosophy a century and a half ago?"⁵ The answer: "Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world." Such could be said to be the basic premise of hermeneutics. For Gadamer, all human experience of the world is essentially linguistic.⁶ Human linguisticity is accordingly a "universal phenomenon," and hermeneutics, defined as the study of human understanding in all its modes, is a study of how what we call the world exists for us by means of language. For hermeneutics language is not simply, as modernism believed, a tool, "a mere means of communication."⁷ Rather, between word and object there exists an "intimate unity."⁸ Thus, as Gadamer provocatively stated: "Being that can be understood is language." Or, expressed somewhat differently: "that which comes into language is not something that is pre-given before language; rather it receives in the word its own definition."⁹

Rorty has expressed somewhat similar thoughts (at one point in his writing career he even used the term "hermeneutics" to refer to his own position). Speaking of "the anti-Platonist insistence on the ubiquity of language," Rorty in fact cites the remark of Gadamer quoted above: "Human experience is essentially linguistic." Objecting to the notion that language is a mere medium between Subject and Object or a tool whose "adequacy" can be assessed in some "objective" manner, Rorty says:

The latter suggestion presupposes that there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else. But there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language. . . . [O]ne cannot see language-as-a-whole in relation to something else to which it applies, or for which it is a means to an end.¹⁰

Like Gadamer, Rorty takes the ubiquity of language to signal the essential *finitude* of human experience. (It may be noted that a philosophy which takes seriously the finitude of the human condition cannot but be antifoundationalist - to which could be added a remark of Merleau-Ponty: "No philosophy can afford to be ignorant of the problem of finitude under pain of failing to understand itself as philosophy"¹¹)

However, unlike Gadamer, Rorty proceeds from this to conclusions of a relativistic nature (he in fact faults Gadamer for being a "weak textualist"¹²). Siding with Derrida (a "strong textualist") over against Gadamer, Rorty in effect endorses Derrida's notorious claim: *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, there is nothing outside of textuality, outside of language.¹³ This in effect amounts to saying: "There are no truths, only rival interpretations." This is precisely the sort of thing that has given antifoundationalism a bad name ("relativism") and has aroused the ire of the anti-antifoundationalists who mistakenly assume that the postmodern emphasis on linguisticity and interpretation necessarily entails the abandonment of any commitment to truth.

When in response to all this the anti-antifoundationalist objects that it is simply not possible to dispense with a belief in truth, the postmodern hermeneuticist is, as a matter of fact, inclined to agree. What the hermeneuticist *disagrees* with is the foundationalist idea that for truth to exist there must be some sort of "extralinguistic" reality that can be "accessed" and can thus serve as an "objective" criterion against which the "correctness" of our language can be measured. For such a notion presupposes that, as Rorty says, "there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else." But, as Rorty very correctly observes: "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language." One can no more step outside of language so as to compare it with what it supposedly "refers" to than one can step outside of one's own consciousness so as to compare it with the "reality" it is supposed to "mirror." This is as undeniable a fact of our experience as one could wish for (and one which emphatically underscores the finitude of our condition). It is, if you like, a *truth* - and a most basic one at that.

The foundationalist critic might retaliate however by saying: "There is one sense in which this is trivially true."¹⁴ It is not clear, though, just what dismissing the matter in this way is supposed to accomplish. Descartes' "I think" is also, in analytic jargon, "trivially true" - and yet, "trivial" though it may be, it is fraught with far-ranging consequences. Having in any event sought to skirt the issue in this way, the critic will then go on to assert that, although our theories about the world are (as he allows) expressed in language, they are nevertheless not about language, they are about things; so it does not follow (he argues) that the truth of our theories is human, something linguistic. In other words, what is important is not language but the reality language "refers" to. The message is clear: We must not allow ourselves to get caught up in language but must *instead* rely on the "real world," on "nature's own vocabulary" (to use Rorty's put-down expression).

To this the postfoundationalist can only reply: When in the ordinary

course of events we talk, by means of language, about things, we indeed do not suppose that we talking only about language. If anything is "trivially true," that most certainly is. But from that it most certainly does not follow that the truth of what we believe we are saying about things is determined by the things themselves, as the foundationalist would have us believe. Truth, as James would say, is something that "happens" to a proposition when it is verified by experience. Propositions, however, presuppose a speaker who proposes them, and the fact of the matter (unfortunate or not) is that things do not speak, and, *a fortiori*, do not "speak for themselves." Only humans can speak for them, and thus, were it not for human language, there is nothing in particular that things could be said to be in the first place. The foundationalist's argument for a language-independent criterion of truth amounts in the end to no more than what rhetoric or the theory of argumentation has traditionally referred to as *petitio principii* or begging the question (as Sextus Empiricus long ago pointed out, this is one of the stock tricks of the foundationalist trade).

Contrary to the impression created by antifoundationalists like Rorty and Derrida, the *post*-foundationalist thesis as to the *Sprachlichkeit der Welt* or the linguisticity of experience does *not* mean that we are imprisoned in language or that everything is *nothing but* language ("There is nothing outside of language"). A linguistic reductionism of this sort would indeed entail relativism. But relativism follows from the "linguistic thesis" only if, while maintaining it, one continues to subscribe to the metaphysical conceptuality of the foundationalists themselves, such that one feels obliged to opt *either* for language *or* for "reality." The postfoundationalist thesis is not that language is all there is but, rather, that all that is and can be for us is by means of language. There is a strict parallel here between language and consciousness, as phenomenology understands the latter. For phenomenology, consciousness is not one thing standing alongside or over against another thing called the "world," such that to be conscious would mean that one was conscious only of one's own consciousness and not of the world of which one was conscious; as Sartre pointed out, the essence of consciousness is that it is consciousness-*of-its-object*, *of-the-world*. So likewise for phenomenological hermeneutics, language, in the ordinary course of events, is not just about itself; it is about that *of which* it speaks, i.e., the "world." The world is what language *means*, it is the *meaning of language*. As Gadamer might say, between language and the world there is a mutual belonging. Or as I have remarked on another occasion, "language is the way in which, as humans, we *experience* what we call reality, that is, the way in which *reality* exists for us."¹⁵

The foundationalist demand that our theories or language be accurately

matched up with something extralinguistic in order to be deemed true is not only a demand that is impossible to realize (since there is no way to think about the world except by using our language), it is also meaningless (it is meaningless to prescribe as a criterion something which can never be realized in point of fact). Thus in its quest for unassailable *certainty*, foundationalism actually makes of truth a meaningless notion. On the other hand, a nonfoundationalist conception of truth cannot, if it is true, provide us with certainty in our interpretations of what is - but certainty, it insists, is not at all a necessary condition for truth (contrary to a long-standing Cartesian prejudice). For something to be true (or true enough for any legitimate purpose we might have in mind), it need not be eternally and unalterably True.

The point that I wish to make is that even if our theories about what is may be "groundless" *in the foundationalist sense of the term*, it does not follow that for that reason they are necessarily "arbitrary and tendentious," a matter of mere subjective preference, as, it must be admitted, many of the antifoundationalists so imply. Philosophy can be without-foundations and yet not be "free-floating," in a Derridean sense (a "bottomless chessboard"¹⁶). In other words, giving up on foundations doesn't have to mean giving up on *constraints*. John B. Thompson makes this point nicely in responding to those postmodernists who, having for good reason abandoned the quest for certainty, go on from there to assert that "there are no valid criteria of justification and that all we have are multiple interpretations, competing with one another, playing off against one another." He writes: "We can reject the quest for certainty without abandoning the attempt to elucidate the conditions under which we can make reasonable judgements about the plausibility or implausibility of an interpretation, or the justness or otherwise of an institution."¹⁷

Consider for a moment the example of quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics is one of the most rigorous of scientific disciplines, and it is supremely adept at doing what science is supposed to do, namely, make useful "predictions." And yet quantum physicists have accepted the fact that their discipline doesn't tell them anything about "reality," in the traditional, foundationalist sense of the term. As one writer remarks, speaking of the supporters of the standard ("Copenhagen") interpretation of quantum mechanics:

They . . . claim that the very precise formalism of the theory is not to be taken seriously as a picture of actual "reality." They often assert, accordingly, that the whole question of quantum reality is a nonquestion. One should not think of the theory as providing us with a picture of actuality, they argue, but merely as giving us a calculational procedure that accurately provides the correct mathematical probabilities for the different possible outcomes of experiments. This, they say, is all that we should ask of

a theory and not ask questions about "reality." We do not need an understanding of the "actual" nature of the world; it is amply sufficient for our theory to make accurate "predictions" - something that quantum mechanics is indeed supremely good at.¹⁸

Perhaps philosophers and the practitioners of the other human disciplines could learn an important lesson from the quantum physicists. If, in regard to any given discipline, a theory "works" (according to the criteria appropriate to that discipline), what more does one need? Is this not all that we should ask of the theory, and not, as the physicists say, "questions about 'reality'"? When, as in quantum mechanics, a theory works well, is this not sufficient grounds for deeming it "true"? Just what, exactly, does it add to say that in addition to being true in this sense, the theory also adequately "represents" reality?¹⁹ To be sure, philosophy and the human disciplines are not (or should not be) concerned mainly with providing calculational procedures capable of generating predictions in the natural science sense of the term. The criteria for truthfulness in these disciplines are of a different sort. Since (according to the hermeneutical postulate) these are *interpretive* disciplines, there must be - if relativism ("All interpretations are on a par") is to be avoided - means for determining which interpretive theories work better than other, conflicting ones. Before addressing this crucial question having to do with criteria or constraints, however, let me appeal to an analogy in order better to indicate what, as far as interpretive theories go, "workability" consists in.

The analogy I have in mind is that of *money*. A monetary system is a functional, effective system if the currency in question (dollars, say) can readily be *exchanged* for other things, such as goods and services, or, for that matter, other currencies and if, in addition, the currency retains its exchange-value over significant periods of time (i.e., is not prey to rapid inflation) and, when held, can generate more money through interest. If, like the dollar, a currency can do this, it has real value (it is a "hard" currency); if, like the ruble, it cannot, it has no or little value *qua* money. In the latter case, the currency is not something people will have any great interest in accumulating for its own sake (since it cannot be used for much of anything else), and thus it fails the crucial test for what is true money. Note that, as this example seeks to make clear, it is the exchange-value of money which constitutes its real value. There is no need for an effective, viable monetary system to be backed up by something "substantial," something "real," such as gold or silver.

Now linguistic entities like words and theories are functional equivalents, in the "marketplace of ideas," to money in the marketplace of goods (money, it should be noted, is itself a *semiotic* entity). The important question, in assessing the truth-value of a linguistic construct (such as a theory), is not whether it is backed up by "reality" but whether

it can be redeemed, cashed in, exchanged for other truth-values and whether it can generate increased truth-value, such that, as Merleau-Ponty would say, truth little by little "capitalizes on itself [*se capitalise*]." ²⁰ An effective, functioning "regime of truth" no more needs to rely on some sort of "gold standard" than does an effective, functioning monetary regime. ²¹ As James (who had a lot to say about the cash value of ideas) remarked: "Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them." ²² Of course, as James immediately went on to say, this system of credit works only so long as what he referred to as "verification" is possible somewhere, "without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever." What exactly does that mean?

For the most part we accept our truths on credit, as James says (or on "authority," as Gadamer would say), but at some point it must be possible to redeem ("verify" or "validate") these semantic bank-notes (the central postulate of Derrida's deconstructive enterprise is that they can *never* be so redeemed). This is where the matter of *constraints* comes into play. In order to count as valid (true), an interpretation must be such that it can be "cashed in." No ontological gold standard is necessary in this regard, however, only a sufficient "cash-basis." In other words, it is not the "reality" of the foundationalists that serves to underwrite the truth-value of our interpretations; it is, rather, our own *lived experience*. The crucial test for any interpretation is the degree to which it actually enables us to get a better purchase on our experience, come to a better understanding of it -- of the world, other people, ourselves -- and, likewise, the degree to which it enables us to get a better handle on our practices. In other words, an interpretation will be held to be true, i.e., have understanding-value, if it serves to *illuminate* our experience and helps us to *cope* with the world. To the degree that an interpretation performs these functions, to that precise degree it is *true*. Our lived, shared human experience (what Husserl called the lifeworld) is the universal measure (*metron, kriterion*) of what is true (which is why, as we shall see, truth is inseparable from solidarity). ²³

What is to be done, however, in the case where two or more rival interpretations present themselves as candidates for our epistemic adherence? Obviously, if relativism is to be avoided, something more is required; there must be criteria of one sort or another which can enable us to make a responsible choice among meaningful interpretations in such a way as to determine which among them is more nearly right, reasonable, appropriate, relevant, apt, etc. Such criteria do in fact exist, *and they are strictly nonfoundational ones*. The important thing to note in this regard is that in interpretational disputes no one can legitimately trump their

opponent by simply exclaiming: "My interpretation is the true one, because it corresponds to reality itself." That, indeed, is merely begging the question (and is thus not a legitimate argumentative tactic). When an interpretation is challenged, one cannot compare the interpretation with "reality itself," *since what that is is itself a subject of interpretation*. The most one can do is to compare the interpretation with *other interpretations*²⁴

And at any given time some interpretations will be better than others - not because they more nearly "correspond to reality" (whatever that might mean) but for the simple reason that, with regard to the modes of argumentation sanctioned in a given discipline, they are more persuasive, which is to say, more reasonable than others. Reasonableness is just what any community of scientists or interpreters is continually in the process of assessing. The argumentative rules of the discipline in question are what provide the constraints on discourse which are necessary if any utterance is legitimately to lay claim to truth, and these constraints are fully *objective* -- not, of course, in the naive foundationalist sense that they are "nature's own" but in the real sense that they are dependent on *intersubjective* consensus and not merely on personal whim. Interpretation, the act of searching for meaning in a text or a social or cultural order, is thus not an arbitrary affair. It is most definitely not the case that in interpretation "anything goes." As Gadamer insists: "meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. . . . Thus there is a criterion here also. . . . This places hermeneutical work on a firm basis."²⁵ Our interpretations can have a firm "basis" without for all that being "grounded," in the foundationalist sense. Why, as Gadamer asks, should we feel a need to justify in a foundationalist way "what has always supported us"?²⁶

An interpretation which successfully meets the kind of test I've described can legitimately be said to be *true* -- for the time being, at least. No interpretation can ever be said to be True in the mystical sense that foundationalists ascribe to this term (noumenal, ahistorical, unchanging, and so on) -- for the simple reason that it is impossible, in principle, to predict what rival interpretations might emerge in the future and what persuasive power they might have. A given interpretation or interpretational framework will nevertheless *remain* true if when confronted with new challengers it can successfully expand in such a way as to accommodate the objections directed against it, demonstrating thereby its superior comprehensive powers.²⁷

If on a "linguistic" or "interpretational" (i.e., postmetaphysical) account of things, nothing can ever be said to be True in the foundationalist sense of the term, I hope nevertheless that I have managed to indicate that our interpretations of things need not *necessarily* be "arbitrary and tendentious" -- and thus need be *neither* foundationalist *nor* relativist.

There is of course a sense, though, in which everything is relative, and what I have said so far is no exception to this (which doesn't make it any less true). If one adopts a weak definition of relativism, one which maintains that the statements (truth-claims) that people make are *relative* to their contexts (historical, cultural, etc.), then relativism is unquestionably true, since no one can say anything that is not "relative" to their time and place (or, to express the matter somewhat differently, one's time and place set limits to what one can say). It is after all inconceivable that Galileo, let alone Aristotle, should have come up with the General Theory of Relativity. And it would not have been possible for Augustine to have drawn from the use he made of the *Cogito* the subjectivistic sorts of conclusions that Descartes drew from his experiments with the *Cogito*.²⁸ This weak form of relativism does not, however, justify relativism in the strong sense of the term. By that I mean a theory which maintains, not only that all truth-claims are *context-relative* (which they are), but, in addition, that they are also *context-dependent* - such that the truth-claims of people from different cultures would be purely and simply "incommensurable."

Although Rorty engages in some convoluted verbal acrobatics in his attempt to shake off the "relativist" label, his position is effectively relativistic, for the simple reason that he *does* adopt a version of the "context-dependent" thesis. This is precisely why he will not allow a universal, critical role to philosophy (such that we could legitimately criticize other cultures for their failures to adhere to certain truths that we consider "self-evident", such as: "All men are created equal and are endowed...with certain unalienable rights," etc., etc.). The reason why Rorty, in escaping from foundationalism (or what he calls "realism"), does not for all that manage to escape from relativism is because, as I have already suggested, he still tends to think along metaphysical lines. This was already apparent in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.²⁹ The fact that he there managed to effect to some degree his "hermeneutical turn" did not prevent him in the end from adhering to a form of materialistic behaviorism which had all the appearances of being a kind of metaphysical opposite to the modernistic mentalism he so effectively criticized.

This sort of crypto-metaphysics persists in his treatment of language. As I have already indicated, Rorty tends to view language and "reality" as terms *between which* one must choose; Rorty's version of the "linguistic thesis" maintains (in a way similar to Derrida) that because we cannot escape from the realm of human linguisticity (textuality), for that reason we are forever cut off from "reality." This is most definitely not the position advocated by hermeneutics, which attempts to elaborate a decisively postmetaphysical position in this regard.

The analogy between language and consciousness (in the phenomenological sense of the term) can once again be of help in clarifying the hermeneutical position. In explicit opposition to the subjectivism of modern philosophy, phenomenology maintains that consciousness is *not* something inside of which the knowing subject ("the little man inside the man") is locked up. As I have already pointed out, for phenomenology, to be conscious is to be conscious-of-the-world (consciousness is a mode of being-in-the-world). Phenomenology explicitly seeks to overcome one of the most basic of metaphysical oppositions, the inside/outside opposition. One tactic it employs to this end is that of internally subverting the opposition itself. Thus, for instance, phenomenology maintains that consciousness is an absolutely unique mode of being (totally unlike natural being) in that consciousness is something *the inside of which is outside of itself* Sartre, in an early text on the phenomenological notion of intentionality ("consciousness is consciousness-of. . ."), interpreted this Husserlian notion to mean that:

Consciousness has been purified. It is light like a strong wind; there is no longer anything inside of it apart from a movement to escape from itself, a slipping outside itself. If, *per impossibile*, you were to enter "inside" a consciousness, you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown outside, next to the tree, in the dust. For consciousness has no "inside." It is nothing other than the outside of itself, and it is thus absolute flight, this refusal to be substance that constitutes it as consciousness. . . . Everything is outside, even ourselves -- outside, in the world, amid others. It is not in I know not what inner retreat that we discover ourselves; it is on the road, in the city, in the midst of the crowd, thing among things, man among men.³⁰

This is what led Sartre to say things like: "Consciousness is not what it is, and is what it is not" (a *façon de parler* which has been an endless source of sardonic delight for analytic types).

Now the situation is much the same in the case of language, as phenomenological hermeneutics views the latter. Unlike a material thing, language has no inside. It has no inside in that what is "inside" it, namely, its "meaning," is precisely what is supposed to be outside it, namely, "reality" (since "reality" is precisely what language "means"). This is what Gadamer means when he asserts that human language (as opposed to artificial languages -- to which Gödel's theorem applies) is *infinite*.³¹ Natural languages are infinite in that they have *no outer limits*, there is nothing that, with sufficient ingenuity, a natural language cannot be made to say (natural languages, in other words, are their own metalanguages).³² Being infinite in this sense, the language that we speak is thus not something that could possibly cut us off from other people (or cultures) or the world. This of course means that language is most definitely not a

prison (or, if you like, a “padded cell”) in which we are forever confined.³³ And it is precisely *for this reason* that Gadamer can assert that the “linguistic thesis,” as hermeneutics understands it, in no way entails relativism. As Gadamer writes:

Understanding is language-bound [or: language-relative]. But his assertion does not lead us into any kind of linguistic relativism. It is indeed true that we live within a language, but language is not a system of signals that we send off with the aid of a telegraphic key when we enter the office or transmission station [this, it may be noted, is the way that that modern form of metaphysics, AI theory, understands language, and, as can be seen, it is bound up with a very modernistic, nonphenomenological conception of consciousness]. That is not speaking, for it does not have the infinity of the act that is linguistically creative and world experiencing. While we live wholly within a language, the fact that we do so does not constitute linguistic relativism because there is absolutely no captivity within a language -- not even within our native language. . . . Any language in which we live is infinite in this sense, and it is completely mistaken to infer that reason is fragmented because there are various languages. Just the opposite is the case. Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we are.³⁴

This is a very rich text. Let us take particular note of a few of the things it says. One thing to be noted is how Gadamer insists that *reason* is not fragmented because of the undeniable fact of linguistic multiplicity. This, however, is precisely what Rorty effectively maintains. Not only does Rorty (rather scandalously) advocate “a conception of rationality as criterionless muddling through,” he also, and very emphatically, urges us “to throw out the last residues of the notion of ‘trans-cultural rationality.’” Hermeneutics, in contrast, most definitely does not believe that an antifoundationalist position obliges one to reject a belief in “trans-cultural rationality.”³⁵ The obligation that a genuinely postfoundationalist position *does* impose on us is that of redefining what it means to be “rational.” Rorty is quite right in rejecting (or, as he would say, “deconstructing”)³⁶ the foundationalist notion that to be rational means acting in conformity to some universal, self-same “essence” that all human beings are supposed to possess in common, like some kind of biological attribute, viz., that “faculty” called Reason. But this is not the only way to understand rationality. Hermeneutics maintains a more modest conception of rationality which more or less equates it with “reasonableness.”³⁷ To be rational in this sense (“communicative rationality”) designates the attempt to seek mutual understanding and possible agreement or consensus with others (and others from different cultures) by means of dialogue.³⁸ Hermeneuticists believe in “trans-

cultural rationality" precisely because they believe that such mutual understanding or agreement is always *possible*, given the requisite good will. People *can* be rational, if they so choose.³⁹ (It may be noted in passing how on this view of things the rational and the ethical are intimately related -- another instance of how hermeneutics, as a resolute form of postmetaphysical thought, seeks to overcome traditional oppositions.)

Another thing to be especially noted in Gadamer's text is his reference to "particularity." One of the most outstanding features of much postmodern thought is its emphasis on "particularism" (or "localism"). This, of course, is a prominent theme in Rorty, who unabashedly advocates a form of "ethnocentrism." And Rorty is again typical of a prominent strain in postmodernism in that he believes that a recognition of "particularity" necessarily entails a rejection of philosophy's traditional emphasis on *universality*. But, here again, hermeneutics refuses to let itself be drawn into the oppositional game. Hermeneutics sees no reason why a philosophical recognition of "particularity" ("relativity" in the weak sense) should oblige one to abandon a commitment to universalism (i.e., should oblige one to adhere to relativism in the strong sense). To do so, would, *ipso facto*, mean abandoning philosophy (the "end of philosophy"). It would mean the end of philosophy, since philosophy is, by its own definition, the theory and practice of *reason*, and reason (*logos, ratio*), as the defining trait of the human *qua* human (*zoon logon ekon, animal rationale*), is, by necessity, *universal*. As in the case of rationality, hermeneutics seeks, not to abandon, but to reconceptualize the notion of universality.

Both Rorty and Gadamer place great importance on the notion of *solidarity*. For Gadamer, solidarity "is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason."⁴⁰ Thus for him "solidarity" is the name for that form of postmetaphysical or postfoundationalist *universality* which is achieved by means of communicative rationality. Rorty, however, persists in conceptualizing solidarity in a typical metaphysical way, in that he opposes solidarity to universality. More specifically, he attacks the idea of the foundationalists ("realists," as he calls them) that solidarity has to be grounded in "objectivity," i.e., in something "universal."⁴¹ He quite correctly rejects the notion that "procedures of justification of belief" need to be "natural," but he goes on from this to assert that they are "merely local," "merely social." The key word here is, of course, "merely." Rorty, in a typically metaphysical, reductionist fashion, seeks "to reduce objectivity to solidarity" -- to reduce universalism to localism.

As in the case of rationality, hermeneutics, in contrast, seeks not to abandon philosophy's traditional commitment to universality but to reconceptualize it in a genuinely nonmetaphysical way. One of the earliest

attempts at this sort of reconceptualization can be found in the work of Merleau-Ponty, who was himself a most notable antifoundationalist.⁴² In opposition to the then received view, Merleau-Ponty insisted that the "germ of universality" (as it called it) lies not in some foundational nature underlying human being-in-the-world but "ahead of us. . . in the dialogue into which our experience of other people throws us by means of a movement not all of whose sources are known to us."⁴³ Because he saw no need to "ground" universality in metaphysical or foundationalist essentialism (i.e., in what Rorty calls "objectivity," an objective "nature" common to all human beings), he argued, accordingly, that universality need not be opposed to particularity. He was, in fact, quite insistent on this. Anticipating the hermeneutical emphasis on *communicative* rationality, Merleau-Ponty argued that universality does not have to do with "a pure concept which would be identical for every mind" but "is rather the call which a *situated* [emph. added] thought addresses to other thoughts, equally *situated* [emph. added], and to which each responds with its own resources."⁴⁴ In a decidedly postfoundationalist fashion, Merleau-Ponty asserted: "We do not arrive at the universal by abandoning our particularity."⁴⁵

The universality defended by hermeneutics is thus not "essentialist" or "foundationalist." To employ Merleau-Ponty's suggestive terminology, the universal in question is not an "overarching universal" but "a sort of lateral universal."⁴⁶ More recently, Calvin O. Schrag has referred to it not as a universality at all but as a *transversality*.⁴⁷ It is this sort of universality-within-relativity (particularity) that Gadamer alludes to when (in the text cited above) he says: "Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the *truth* [emph. added] that we are." Unlike the Rortyan antifoundationalist who "does not have a theory of truth" ("much less," he thus argues, "a relativistic one")⁴⁸ the hermeneuticist *does* have a theory of truth - and it is clearly a universalist one, though not, to be sure, of a foundationalist or metaphysical sort.

2. Values

It is perhaps not without significance that Merleau-Ponty accosted "the problem of philosophical universality" and defended "a sort of oblique universality" in the context of a discussion of the relation between Western philosophy and non-Western cultures.⁴⁹ For it is precisely the much debated issue of "other cultures" that has to a considerable extent fueled the recent antiuniversalist advocacy of relativism. "Cultural

incommensurability" is one thing that anthropological research is supposed to have clearly demonstrated. Because different belief- and value-systems are supposed to be "incommensurable," any adherence to universalism in the matter of values is held to be a form of cultural imperialism. Thus, although Rorty subscribes to the basic Western, Enlightenment values of liberalism, he refuses to grant these a universal status (let alone dignify them with the name of "human rights"), since to do so might give the appearance that he also endorsed that form of "cultural imperialism" which has now come to be called "Eurocentrism." Rorty's "frankly ethnocentric" stance,⁵⁰ his "lonely provincialism,"⁵¹ is the result of his attempt to be politically correct with respect to the antifoundationalist dogma of cultural incommensurability. Although Rorty believes in values such as freedom and tolerance, he is not about to recommend (as a philosophical principle, a "principle of reason," as Gadamer would say) that peoples in other cultures should be free and enjoy tolerance, lest he himself be accused of being culturally intolerant.

But just what does it mean to speak of incommensurability in regard to different cultures? If "incommensurability" is taken in a weak sense to mean that the beliefs people hold (as to what is true, what is of value) are *relative* to their time and place (their "culture") then, as I have already suggested, there is no issue here, since, in the weak sense of the term, *everything* is relative. This is something that is, as the analyst would say, "trivially true." Does it follow from this, however, that various cultural values cannot be compared in some significant sense ("trans-cultural rationality")? It does not necessarily so follow. It all depends on what one means by "commensurable." If to be commensurable is taken to mean that the values operative in different cultures can be measured or ranked according to some univocal, hierarchical standard of comparison, by means of some kind of epistemological algorithm (the foundationalist sense of "commensurable"), then commensurability (the philosophical search for "universal commensuration") must be rejected and incommensurability (antiphilosophy) defended in its place. But there is no reason, the hermeneutical postfoundationalist would argue, why the impossibility of commensuration in the algorithmic sense should serve as a warrant for relativism in the strong sense of the term and, in particular, for condemning as "Eurocentric" and hegemonic the attempt to defend the *universal* validity of liberal values (and the notion of universal human rights).

It seems to me that those who feel the need to defend incommensurability (in the relativistic sense of the term) do so under the influence of an unanalyzed presupposition which perhaps owes something to the former vogue of structuralism, viz., the assumption that, like Saussure's "*langue*," cultures are "wholes" that are defined solely in terms

of their own "internal relations." If cultures are "holistic" in this sense, then it would follow that the values held by one culture cannot meaningfully be compared with those held by another culture. Even more, it would follow that any attempt to criticize the practices of one culture or society in light of values held by another is fundamentally illegitimate. The notion that a culture, being "holistic," can be understood properly only on its own terms leads directly to a kind of relativism in that it rules out the legitimacy of a (philosophical) critique of cultural or societal practices in the light of universal values. If this is what understanding is taken to mean, then, as the French would say, *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. Incommensurability, on this view of things, rules out the possibility of any sort of philosophical critique of what effectively is.

The fact of the matter is, however, that a postfoundational hermeneutics finds illegitimate the idea at work here, namely, the idea that a critique must be *either* external (and thus illegitimate, according to the "holistic" view) *or* internal (and thus something much less than radical -- purely "relativistic," in point of fact). Relativism would be viable as a theory only if the traditional inside/outside distinction were itself valid or meaningful in regard to cultures, but hermeneutics insists that it isn't. Cultures no more have an "inside" and an "outside" than do other such *geistig* "things" as consciousness (subjectivity) and (natural) language. "Things" like subjectivity, language, and culture are essentially "relational entities." Like human beings in general (who, when need be, can communicate with any other human being), human cultures are essentially (as it were) related to all other cultures. There is no culture which cannot "communicate" with any other culture (which cultures communicate with which other cultures and how they do so is merely a matter of empirical fact). The exchange of ideas (as to what is true, what is of value) between cultures is at least as primordial a phenomenon as the exchange of material goods between them (and, if the record of world history is anything to go by, these two types of exchanges generally parallel one another).⁵²

Thus, while a given value may be said to have originated "within" a particular culture, it cannot be maintained that its validity is necessarily *limited* to that culture. Just as a given idea which first finds expression within a particular language can subsequently be taken up in another language and become in this way part of its own repertory, so likewise a value first articulated in one culture can be adopted as its own by, in principle, any other culture (again, the history of human kind demonstrates that the history of the various human cultures is nothing other than the history of their intermittent, ongoing, or delayed interactions with one another). Thus, when the members of one culture appeal to values taken over from another culture in order to criticize practices

current in their own, these values become, by that very fact, part of their culture (which they have thereby managed to expand). Consider the example of democracy. While democratic values may be said to be of Western origin and, in that sense, foreign to, say, Chinese culture (to its Confucian heritage), to the degree that they are appealed to in an attempt to effect far-reaching changes in Chinese society (as they have been by those active in the Chinese Democracy Movement) they become central values in an expanded and renewed Chinese culture. This is a perfect instance of what could be called *trans-cultural communicative rationality*.

Thus while values are *cultural-emergent* (and, in this sense, cultural-relative), they are not necessarily *cultural-dependent*. Perhaps the best example of a value which, although it may have first been articulated in one culture, nevertheless claims for itself universal (trans-cultural) validity is the value of *freedom*. A value such as this is most certainly not metaphysical or foundationalist, i.e., ahistorical or eternal; it is most definitely *historical*, in that it first emerged at a certain time and place (ancient Greece). And, like all things "historical," it is also *contingent* in that, as in the case of the Greek idea of democracy (the "Greek Enlightenment"), there was no "reason," in the nature of things, why it should have emerged in the first place. To say this is not, however, to say that it is "contingent" in Rorty's historicist sense of the term, i.e., *purely* arbitrary and "ethnocentric," limited in its validity to the culture and place of its origin, a *mere* "fortunate happenstance creation" ("sheer contingency").⁵³ The fact that the beliefs and values that people hold are cultural and historical doesn't itself preclude them from being also of *transcultural* and *transhistorical* significance.

It is in fact not *philosophically* (i.e., rationally) possible to maintain, like Rorty, that freedom is nothing more than a "story" (a "local narrative," as it were) that we in the West have been telling ourselves and which, as a matter of pure contingency, we happen to find congenial. Rorty's "frankly ethnocentric" position is frankly illogical. Sartre once very pertinently observed:

In wanting freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own. . . . I cannot aim at freedom for myself unless I aim at it equally for others.⁵⁴

Sartre's statement suggests a way of conceiving of *solidarity* which contrasts totally with Rorty's antiuniversalist way of viewing it. Solidarity *can* be viewed in a merely ethnocentric way, as the communality of those bound together by the pursuit of certain locally specific goals or by a common cultural or religious heritage. But there is also a way - a universalist way - of viewing it which makes it relevant to the postmodern,

global civilization which is now emerging throughout the world.⁵⁵ As regards freedom, one can say along with the Polish Solidarity activists: "There is no freedom without solidarity."⁵⁶ What, for our purposes (interpreting Sartre), this should be taken to mean is that if one desires freedom for oneself, one necessarily desires it for all others, since (as liberal theory has always maintained) *one can be free as an individual only by being a member of a social order (societas, "Gesellschaft") that has as its institutional (or constitutional) raison d'être the "equal freedom of all."* In this sense, solidarity designates a situation of mutual dependency wherein it is in the interest of *each* that a certain common way of life that benefits *all* ("the common good") be established and maintained. As a general principle of reason, this is a valid intra-culturally (for all the members of a given society) as it is inter-culturally (for all the peoples of the world). When solidarity is conceptualized in this universalist fashion (as designating something more than merely a shared ethos or *Sittlichkeit*), then, as Habermas observes, it "loses its merely particular meaning, in which it is limited to the internal relationships of a collectivity that is ethnocentrically isolated from other groups."⁵⁷

There is no freedom without solidarity: Once having been articulated in a particular culture, the value of freedom makes a claim on all other cultures. The only thing limiting the universal applicability (validity) of this value is the imaginative powers of those of other cultures who would seek to implement it in their own cultural customs and mores. (It should go without saying that since the universality of a meta- or transcultural value like freedom is "grounded" not in some metaphysical "human nature" but in the actual dynamics of intersubjective, communicatively rational praxis, the cross-cultural "application" of this value is always a matter of creative *interpretation*. There can be no single, algorithmic-like formula [universality, in the foundationalist sense] for the implementation of values like freedom and democracy -- which of course means that their achievement is, like the search for truth itself, a never-ending task.)

Not only is freedom in this way a universal value, there is also a sense in which freedom is an *absolute* value. It is absolute, not in any metaphysical or foundationalist sense, but in that, having once been recognized, it is impossible that it should thereafter ever be overtly denied (as a value). Freedom -- and, more specifically, freedom of speech and opinion -- cannot *rationaly* be rejected inasmuch as it is itself the operational presupposition of communicative rationality, such that it is necessarily, albeit implicitly, affirmed by anyone engaging in communicative rationality, anyone seeking genuine, uncoerced understanding and mutual recognition. This is to say that no one can deny communicative freedom without also sacrificing all claims to being rational on his or her own part, without, that is, cutting the argumentative ground out from under his or

her own feet. This is something that no one will willingly do in a discursive situation, indeed, something that one *cannot* do - so long, that is, as one seeks recognition as a dialogical partner (one can, of course, always choose to be a masochist, to not be so recognized). The denial of freedom is thus an argumentative impossibility. To put the matter somewhat differently, the validity of freedom as a *value* or norm stems from the *fact* that the demands of freedom are (as rhetorical theory has shown)⁵⁸ structural requirements of the communicative process itself and are thus binding on anyone seeking recognition through dialogue: no one can evade these binding requirements without retreating from the realm of discourse itself and without renouncing membership in the community of "all rational beings" (self-destructively abandoning thereby any hope of winning recognition from others of the rightness of his or her own position). Thus, although there is no reason why, in the nature of things, people *should* behave in a rational or reasonable fashion (as Protagoras, the first great advocate of democracy, insisted, it often takes a struggle against nature for people to realize what is best in their nature), to the degree that people nevertheless *do* act reasonably, to that very degree they are affirming -- in their practice (praxially) -- the supreme value of freedom, since freedom is both the presupposition and the implication of their behaving in a communicatively rational fashion.

In other words, although freedom can be (and often is) denied in fact (by means of violence), it cannot be denied by means of peaceful discussion or rational argumentation aiming at mutual understanding.⁵⁹ The point was put nicely and with admirable simplicity a number of decades ago by that outstanding liberal economist, Frank H. Knight. Observing that the essence of liberalism, i.e., the belief in the supreme value of freedom, "is the reliance on rational agreement or mutual consent for the determination of policy," he stated that the only "proof" required for the validity of the liberal position "is that we are discussing it and its acceptance is a presupposition of discussion, since discussion is the essence of the position itself." Thus, the validity of the value of freedom is, as Knight said, "undiscussable," i.e., indisputable, undeniable.⁶⁰

To conclude this discussion, I should perhaps respond to a question most likely to be raised at this point: If there are values which are *not* culture-dependent, just what *are* they dependent upon? From what I have said, it follows that a value such as freedom depends on nothing more than what Gadamer would call the "hermeneutical experience" itself, i.e., on the attempt on the part of people to arrive at mutual understanding by means of peaceful dialogue. Freedom can be argued for with all the necessary rigor, and can indeed be held to be universal and absolute, without there being any need to "ground" this value in "nature," in a

foundationalist fashion -- whether nature be conceived of in a modernist (mechanistic-causal) fashion or in a more traditional, Aristotelian way, as a hierarchical and teleological ordering of natural goods. The only "foundation" needed for this and other related values is human praxis itself. The ultimate basis for trans-cultural values is not some cosmic moral order but the simple fact that, as "speaking animals," humans are capable, when they put their minds to it, of engaging in communicative rationality and, in so doing, of entering into possible contact with any and all other humans.

A position such as this *neither* commits one to some form of provincial ethnocentrism *nor* does it require one, as Rorty says of the foundationalist position, "to detach oneself from any particular community and look down at it from a more universal standpoint."⁶¹ It only requires of us that we exist properly as *humans*, in accordance with the dynamics of communicative rationality, engaging in what Karl Jaspers (an early exponent of communicative rationality) referred to as "boundless communication."⁶² To the degree that we do so, to the degree, that is, that we seek mutual understanding with those from other cultures by means of dialogue, we are not imposing on them values which are merely our own but are acting in accordance with liberal values of universal relevance. For to recognize that freedom is a universal, cross-cultural value is to recognize that people everywhere have a right to their own opinions and a right to determine what is right for them (so long as they respect the reciprocally equal right of others in this regard). Freedom is something that belongs to no one or no culture in particular; if it is a value for some, it is a value for everyone. It is certainly not the private property of, as Rorty would say, (conflating different self-descriptions of his) "we Western, postmodern, bourgeois liberals."⁶³

Conclusion: Hermeneutical Liberalism

It might be objected that the position I have sought to outline in this paper is not politically correct in that it seeks to promote as *universal* values (such as rationality and freedom), values which are in fact merely *local*, peculiar to Western culture, and that it is thus but another form of "Eurocentrism." Talk of universality (so the objection goes) is not to be trusted, since it tends simply to generalize local, historical conditions. Such an objection would be misplaced. It is an objection that would more appropriately be addressed to various foundationalist attempts to ground universal norms and values in "nature" -- for what "nature" is is something that is relative to one's interpretations of it, and these are not only cultural-relative but cultural-dependent as well. It is an undeniable

fact of experience that people at different times and places entertain different ideas about what is "really real." However, the fact that people are self-interpreting and world-interpreting animals of this sort is *not* something that is merely relative. As Gadamer might say, "this thesis undoubtedly includes no historical relativity, but seeks absolute validity" -- even though "a hermeneutical consciousness [i.e., an awareness of the universality of interpretation] exists only under specific historical conditions."⁶⁴

If it is true, as hermeneutics maintains, that human experience is essentially linguistic, if, that is, the most basic, *experiential* fact about human beings everywhere is that they are "speaking animals," it is incumbent upon philosophical reflection to draw the appropriate, equally universal conclusions. The conclusions that concern us here are these: People from different backgrounds can relate to one another in, basically, one of two ways: either by the exercise of brute force or by specifically human means, by means, that is, of discourse, seeking to persuade rather than coerce. Now as Paul Ricoeur has insisted, violence and discourse are mutually exclusive: "Violence is always the interruption of discourse; discourse is always the interruption of violence."⁶⁵ Between violence and discourse it is necessary to choose. If one chooses to act in a properly human way, privileging discourse over violence, one is, by that very fact, committing oneself -- in actual practice -- to certain universal human values, to, in particular, the notion that it is by means of communicative rationality that conflicts of interest between persons and cultures *ought* to be resolved (i.e., to the idea that this is indeed the only properly *human* way to do so).⁶⁶ The philosophical attempt to explicate (lay out, interpret) the normativity that is embodied in communicatively rational praxis (the normativity that is both an implicate of and an emergent from this praxis) would, in this way, amount to the elaboration of what could be called a *postfoundational* or *hermeneutical liberalism*. Such a liberalism would itself amount to a *postmetaphysical humanism*, to, that is, a philosophical defense of universal human rights -- rights which would be "grounded" not in a metaphysical "nature" (as classical liberalism sought to do) but in human praxis itself, appealing to nothing more than the dictates of communicative rationality, that most human of all human activities.⁶⁷ Rationality is neither "tradition-bound" nor does it involve adopting a "neutral" standpoint of a super-cultural or super-historical sort. The actual locus of rationality is nothing other than what Frank Knight called the "discussion community"⁶⁸ or what Merleau-Ponty referred to as "the communicative world."⁶⁹ It is thus like the circle of Nicholas of Cusa whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is, indeed, both "decentered" and all-inclusive.

A postmodern liberalism of this sort would, I maintain, provide the only

viable alternative to metaphysical or foundationalist universalism, on the one hand, which always results in the marginalization of what is humanly or culturally other, and, on the other hand, antifoundationalist or ethnocentric communitarianism, which, in sacrificing the universal for the sake of the local, leads inevitably to the end of philosophy itself (and, as a direct consequence, to the end of that most distinctly philosophical of notions, the notion that there exists something like *a* humanity). A hermeneutical liberalism seeks (to borrow a phrase from Calvin Schrag) to chart a course "between the Scylla of a hegemonic and ahistorical universalism and the Charybdis of a lawless, self-effacing particularism and enervated historicism."⁷⁰ The task it sets itself is that of carrying on the liberal project of the Enlightenment, the "project of modernity" (as Habermas has referred to it) in a decidedly postmodern and postfoundationalist fashion -in such a way that it can assist in the current struggles of peoples everywhere throughout the world for greater freedom and democracy. Hermeneutical liberalism commits itself to, as Gadamer might say, awakening the "consciousness of solidarity of a humanity that slowly begins to know itself as humanity."⁷¹ It is, I think, no exaggeration to say that, in regard to the global civilization now taking shape, the fate of philosophy, of its claim to universality, and the fate of humanity, of freedom and democracy in the world, are inextricably bound up with one another. To despair of philosophy would be to despair of democracy, and, as Jaspers insisted: "To despair of the democratic ideal is to despair of man."⁷²

1. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

2. As Manfred Frank, among others, has pointed out:

[O]ne does not escape metaphysics and its unicity simply by inverting its premises and turning the privileging of the identity principle into the privileging of multiplicity. Such an abstract opposition is always already metaphysical and does not escape the dialectic of that irrevocable reciprocity that allows neither of the two moments to pose as the totality. Even multiplicity, conceived as an abstract contrastive concept to that of unity, would, if the thought were tenable, have the character of a principle and would be an idea (*Einbindung*) that would not understand itself (*What is Neostucturalism?* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989 p. 351]).

3. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 84.

4. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 315.

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" in

Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 3.

6. See "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 19. The following could be taken as a succinct statement on Gadamer's part of his "linguistic thesis": "language is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realised. The mode of realisation of understanding is interpretation. . . . All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language" (*Truth and Method* [New York: Seabury Press, 1975], p. 350).

7. See *Gadamer, Truth and Method*, p. 404.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 432.

10. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. xviii-xx.

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 38.

12. See *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 153.

13. See *ibid.*, p. 96.

14. The critic in question whose remarks I am here quoting or paraphrasing is Anthony Gottlieb, in his review of Rorty's *Philosophical Papers*, vols. 1 & 2, *The New York Times Book Review*, June 2, 1991, p. 30.

15. See my *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 165. Gadamer says: "Reality does not happen 'behind the back' of language; . . . reality happens precisely *within* language" ("On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," p. 35).

16. See Jacques Derrida, "Difference" in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 154.

17. John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 26-7.

18. Roger Penrose, "The Biggest Enigma," *New York Review of Books*, March 28, 1991, p. 37. As Penrose observes, the predictive power of quantum mechanics enables it to provide explanations for:

the stability of atoms and solid materials; for phase changes such as melting, freezing, and boiling; for the colors of heated materials, including a detailed description of the puzzling phenomenon of spectral lines; for low temperature superconductivity and superfluidity; and for the behavior of lasers, transistors, and television screens, not to mention the whole of chemistry and much of biology and genetics.

19. Cf. in this regard the following remarks of Donald McCloskey:

The very idea of Truth -- with a capital *T*; something beyond what is merely persuasive to all concerned -- is a fifth wheel, inoperative except that it occasionally comes loose and hits a bystander. If we decide that the quantity theory of money or the marginal productivity theory of distribution is persuasive, interesting, useful, reasonable, appealing, acceptable, we do not also need to know that it is True. Its persuasiveness, interest, usefulness, and so forth come from particular arguments. . . . These are particular arguments, good or bad. After making them, there is no point in asking a last, summarizing question: "Well, is it True?" It's whatever it is -- pervasive, interesting, useful, and so forth (*The Rhetoric of Economics* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], p. 46).

20. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 9.

21. In an attempt to elucidate what the truth-value of linguistic interpretation consists in, I have compared interpretive constructs with money; for a detailed analysis which proceeds in the opposite direction, seeking to clarify the nature of money by viewing it in a hermeneutical context, see Steven G. Horwitz, *The Private Basis of Monetary Order: An Evolutionary Approach to Money and the Market Process* (Ph.D. dissertation, George Mason University, 1989). Horwitz remarks:

The point of departure for the analogy between money and language is to recognize that both mediate social processes; money is the "medium of exchange" for Menger and many others, while language is the "medium of experience" for Gadamer and others in the Continental tradition. Just as language allows us to understand, through our prejudices, the linguistically-constituted thoughts of others, so does money allow us to draw out and interpret the tastes, preferences and values of others (pp. 167-68).

Horwitz also develops an analogy between *text* and *market* (the "the market is a text too"), showing how both are hermeneutical or interpretational entities - and thus how economics itself is a hermeneutical discipline (see pp. 185-89).

22. William James, "Pragmatism" in *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), pp. 576-77.

23. For an excellent, phenomenological account of how interpretations of lived experiences are "adjusted" to them in such a way as to constitute the truth of these experiences, see Eugene T. Gendlin, "Experiential Phenomenology" in M. Natanson, ed., *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Gendlin formulates the appropriate hermeneutical criterion for assessing the truth-value of textual interpretations (and of interpretations of that text which is experience) in the following suggestive way:

When one explicates a difficult text, it is not enough to take off from some line and spin interesting interpretation; one must return to the text and see if the interpretation sheds light on the other lines in the text, whether it solves or shifts difficulties. If it has no such effects, then the interpretation of the given line was simply a digression, interesting for its own sake perhaps, but not attributable to this text (p. 318).

For a complementary treatment of this hermeneutical issue from a psychoanalytical standpoint, see Roy Schaffer, *Language and Insight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

24. See in regard to this matter my "The Practice of Theory, the Theory of Practice: A Protreptic," keynote address to the seventh annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Philosophy, Kingston, Ontario, May 27-29, 1991. Forthcoming in *Critical Review*.

25. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 238. See also my "Method in Interpretation" in *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*. Gadamer's remark may be fittingly contrasted with the following remarks of Rorty: "[T]here is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them." "[T]here is nothing which validates a person's or a culture's final vocabulary" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 80, 197).

26. See *Truth and Method*, p. xxiv.

27. Cf. in this regard Lakatos' distinction between progressive and degenerative research programs.

28. It is impossible that Augustine should have elaborated a thoroughgoing form of subjectivism, since subjectivity, in the modern sense of the term (as a realm of self-subsistent being closed in upon itself), had not yet been invented (this was, precisely, one of the accomplishments of Descartes). See in this regard my "Flesh As Otherness" in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, Ill.: North-western University Press, 1990).

All truths are relative (in the weak sense) if, as hermeneutics maintains, understanding arises always in the form of answers to specific questions, as Jean Grondin remarks:

Hermeneutical truth always takes the form of a *response*, that is, to the question that perplexes the interpreter and that leads him or her to interpret a text. It goes without saying that the question is "relative" to its situation without being arbitrary. Relativity means here that the truth can be recognized as such only because it enlightens us, it illuminates us. The meaning discovered by interpretation is the one that comes to shed light on an obscurity, to respond to a question. The interpreter is constitutively invested in what is to be understood. There is no truth in itself if one means thereby a truth independent of the questions and expectations of human beings ("Hermeneutics and Relativism" in Kathleen Wright, ed., *Festivals of Interpretation: Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Work* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990], p. 48).

In his article Grondin goes on to argue that relativity in this weak sense does not mean that all truths need to be lacking in "objectivity".

29. Richard Bernstein has also criticized Rorty for failing to escape from the Either/Or's of traditional philosophy. He writes:

There is something fundamentally wrong with where Rorty leaves us. . . . Much of this book [*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*] is about the obsessions of philosophers and the pictures that hold them captive. But there is a sense in which Rorty himself is obsessed. It is almost as if he can't quite "let go" and accept the force of his own critique. It is as if Rorty himself has been more deeply touched by what he is attacking than he realizes. Rorty keeps pointing to and hinting at an alternative to the foundationalism that has preoccupied modern philosophy without ever fully exploring this alternative. Earlier I suggested that one way of reading Rorty is to interpret him as trying to help us to set aside the Cartesian anxiety -- the Cartesian Either/Or -- that underlies so much of modern philosophy. But there is a variation of this Either/Or that haunts this book -- Either we are *ineluctably* tempted by foundational metaphors and the desperate attempt to escape from history *or* we must frankly recognize that philosophy itself is at best a form of "kibitzing." . . . Rorty himself is still not liberated from the types of obsessions which he claims have plagued most modern philosophers. . . . He himself is obsessed with the obsessions of philosophers ("Philosophy In the Conversation of Mankind," in Robert Hollinger, ed., *Hermeneutics and Praxis* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985], pp. 77, 79, 85).

For her part Rebecca Comay observes: "In simply jettisoning the idea of universality -- instead of interrogating it and wresting it free of its essentialist trappings -- Rorty tacitly

accepts all the terms of classical rationalism" ("Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty" in Evan Simpson, ed., *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning: Conversations Between Hermeneutics and Analysis* [Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987], pp. 111, 113.

30. Jean-Paul Sartre, "*Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionnalité*" in *La Transcendance de L'ego* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1966), pp. 111, 113.

31. See *Truth and Method*, p. 363.

32. A "metaphilosophical" point. If "proof" is demanded for what I've said about the unlimited character of language, the fact that I've said it should be proof enough. The fact that one can, in and by means of a natural language, reflect on the limitations of that language demonstrates that that language can serve as its own metalanguage. To paraphrase Hegel, the act of speaking about the limits of what can be said is at once the act of going beyond those limits. (A further point. The prefix "meta" adds nothing to the word "philosophical," since "philosophy" means reflection on any possible thing whatsoever, including, therefore, itself. Metaphilosophy is not something "beyond" philosophy; what comes "after" philosophy is-- should one decide to reflect on it -- yet more philosophy. Like (natural) language itself, philosophy knows no outer limits. Indeed, philosophy is nothing other than consciousness that language has of its own infinitely reflexive, questioning power; it is language which knows itself *as* unlimited, *as* universal.)

33. Derrida speaks of "the padded interior of the 'symbolic.'" See his *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 86.

34. Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," pp. 15-16.

35. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," in John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 11, 15. Rorty's rejection of transcultural rationality and his endorsement of "ethnocentrism" amount to an effective "fragmentation of reason" since what "attach[ing] a special privilege to our own community" means for him is that only "one's *ethnos* comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible" ("Solidarity or Objectivity?," pp. 12-13). The attempt to engage in cross-cultural rationality is thus, for Rorty, a waste of time. The most he can allow for is that we might somehow manage to expand our own particular community in such a way as to absorb others into it. Rorty's ethnocentrism is "the ethnocentrism of a 'we' ('we liberals') which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an even larger and more variegated *ethnos*" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198).

36. See *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 172.

37. See in this regard my "*Pour une dérationnalisation de la raison*" in Theodore Geraets, *La rationalité aujourd'hui/Rationality To-Day* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1979). For an expanded presentation of the hermeneutical conception of rationality see my more recent *The Logic of Liberty* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), ch. 10.

38. Jean Grondin describes the matter thus:

It [hermeneutics] eschews the accusation of total relativism by taking into account the reliance of hermeneutical truth on communication. This openness to dialogue results from the recognition of human finitude. Conscious of the cultural and historical limitations of our beliefs, we engage in dialogue to share our experience and, at times, to seek orientation. In the unfolding of conversation, some of our opinions can be put to the test. Dialogical arguing is a central feature of hermeneutical rationality. This rationality is the one founded on the binding force that accompanies the better argument on some issue. The rationality of beliefs lies in the fact that they can be dialogically founded and that they remain open to

criticism. . . . This is why hermeneutical truth lays claim to universality ("Hermeneutical Truth and its Historical Presuppositions: A Possible Bridge between Analysis and Hermeneutics" in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, p. 56).

39. Thus, to say that human beings possess a *faculty* called "reason" should not lead us into hypostatizing reason in an essentialist, metaphysical fashion; it simply amounts to saying that humans can or are able to act in a reasonable way (i.e., to speak in more substantive terms, this is something that they have the ability or the "faculty" to do).

40. Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 87.

41. See "Solidarity or Objectivity?," p. 5.

42. See in this regard my "Merleau-Ponty Alive," paper presented at the seminar on "Sozialphilosophie und Lebenswelt, M. Merleau-Ponty," Inter-University Center, Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, March-April, 1991. Forthcoming in *Man and World*.

43. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H.L. Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 93.

44. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 8.

45. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 92. Speaking explicitly from a postmodern and postfoundational standpoint, Chantal Mouffe recently stated: "Universalism is not rejected but particularized; what is needed is a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular" ("Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern," in Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], p. 36).

46. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R.C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 120.

47. See Calvin O. Schrag, "Rationality between Modernity and Postmodernity" in Stephen K. White, ed., *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), as well as his book, *The Transversal Rationality of Praxis: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (forthcoming from Indiana University Press).

48. See Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," p. 6.

49. See Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 139.

50. See Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" in Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 166.

51. See Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," p. 12.

52. On the essential "openness" of languages and cultures to one another. see *Truth and Method*, p. 405:

The linguistic world in which we live is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being in itself, but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened. It is true that those who are brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition see the world in a different way from those who belong to other traditions. It is true that the historical 'worlds' that succeed one another in the course of history are different from one another and from the world of today; but it is always, in whatever tradition we consider it, a human, i.e., a linguistically constituted world that presents itself to us. Every such world, as linguistically constituted, is always open, of itself, to every possible insight and hence for every expansion of its own world picture, and accordingly available to others.

53. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 68, 22 (see also p. 189).

54. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1964), p. 83: "[E]n voulant la liberté, nous découvrons qu'elle dépend entièrement de la liberté des autres, et que la liberté des autres dépend de la nôtre....je ne puis prendre ma liberté pour but, que si je prends également celles des autres pour but."

55. In an earlier paper, "Philosophy and the Pursuit of World Peace," *Dialectics and Humanism* (Poland), 20, nos. 2 and 3, 1984, I sought to defend such a notion of solidarity by arguing that "there can be values which are ultimate and genuinely universal, values which, while not being suppressive of particular cultural and ideational values and conceptions as to what constitutes the 'good life,' would yet be independent of and, so to speak, transcendental in regard to them." I would now prefer to speak of these metavalues as being "transversal" rather than "transcendental," following in this regard the lead of Calvin Schrag who employs the term "transversality" to refer to "a convergence without coincidence, an interplay without synthesis, an appropriation without totalization, and a universalization that allows for difference" (see Schrag, *The Transversal Rationality of Praxis*, ch. 6, sec. 2).

56. *Nie ma volnosci bez solidarnosci* was a phrase serving as the masthead of the opposition Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

57. Jurgen Habermas, "Justice and Solidarity" in Michael Kelly, ed., *Hermeneutics and Critical Theory in Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 47.

58. I am thinking in particular of the "*nouvelle rhétorique*" of Chaim Perelman. For a detailed analysis of the relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric, see my "The New Philosophy of Rhetoric," *Texte: Revue de critique et de théorie littéraire* (Toronto: Editions Trintexte), 8/9, 1989, pp. 247-77.

59. This is not to say that people cannot, by means of seemingly rational argument, be tricked into surrendering their freedom for one reason or another. This (the perversion of rational discourse) is, in fact, generally the means by which socialist governments come into power (as opposed to authoritarian governments of a more traditional sort, which generally rely on intimidation and brute force).

60. Frank H. Knight, *Freedom and Reform* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1982), pp. 476, 474. For a presentation of Knight's views of communicative rationality, see my *The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 234-39.

The position I am here seeking to defend resembles to a considerable extent the one defended by Karl-Otto Apel (although it was arrived at by a quite different philosophical route than the one followed by Apel). Apel likewise maintains that the norms implicit in the communicative process cannot be denied by the participants in it without (as he calls it) "pragmatic [or performative] self-contradiction." My position, however, differs in important ways from that of Apel (and of Habermas as well). In particular, it eschews the kind of *transcendental foundationalism* pursued by Apel who seeks to "ground" (Apel speaks of *Letztbegründung*) communicative norms teleologically in an "ideal communication community." (The criticism that hermeneutics would address to this way of attempting to understand the actual -- in terms of an ideal end-state -- is that it perpetuates metaphysical and foundationalist [and thus, also, utopian] ways of thinking.) For a representative statement of Apel's position, see his "Is the Ethics of the Ideal Communication Community a Utopia?," in Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

61. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," p. 13.

62. See Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 221.

63. Rorty is the kind of self-contented Westerner that Alexander Solzhenitsyn, speaking in the name of the oppressed peoples of the world, was addressing when he admonished his fellow humans in the West in the following terms:

I understand that you love freedom, but in our crowded world you have to pay a tax for freedom. You cannot love freedom for yourselves alone and quietly agree to a situation where the majority of humanity, spread over the greater part of the globe, is subjected to violence and oppression. . . . No! Freedom is indivisible and one has to take a moral attitude toward it (*Warning to the West* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976], pp. 72, 111).

64. See *Truth and Method*, p. xxi.

65. Paul Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy* (New York: Holmes and Maier, 1979), p. 226.

66. It should be noted that, for these values to be effective and "real," it is not required that the participants in the communicative process share an explicit *agreement* as to just exactly what they consist in and how they are to be interpreted, i.e., they do not need to be *theorized* in order to be *operative*. While these values may have received a theoretical articulation in the course of Western civilization, the praxis of which they are the theory is not itself the exclusive trait of any one culture in particular. As with people, so with cultures: while some may not know *what* rationality is (how to articulate it theoretically), they all pretty much know how to *be* rational when they have to.

It may further be noted that there exists a means whereby someone may, *without self-contradiction*, "deny" the values (of mutual freedom and respect) that, I have argued, are necessarily implicated in the communicative process, i.e., may refuse to recognize the communicative demand to treat other human beings in a properly *human* way: This is by simply refusing to recognize that these others are indeed human (as, e.g., in the case of slaves -- *with* whom one does not *discuss* matters but *to* whom one merely issues *orders*, as one would with an animal). As Knight observed, the refusal of dialogue (and the ethical demands it carries with it) "is justified only to the extent that those subject to it [one sided control] are explicitly denied the full status of human beings" (*Freedom and Reform*, p. 266; see also my *The Logic of Liberty*, p. 223).

67. For a detailed argument to the effect that the structural implications of communicative rationality are, in and of themselves, fully sufficient to legitimate philosophically basic liberal values and human rights and that nothing outside of these discursive practices is needed to "ground" them in a "substantive" way, see my *The Logic of Liberty*, ch. 11.

68. Knight, *Freedom and Reform*, p. 255.

69. See Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 19.

70. Schrag, *The Transversal Rationality of Praxis*, Introduction.

71. *Reason in the Age of Science*, p. 86.

72. *The Future of Mankind*, p. 299.