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**Rorty's Metaphilosophy and the  
Critique of Epistemology**

**Abstract**

*Richard Rorty is a contemporary philosopher of analytic philosophical tradition who shifted his career to a metaphilosophical critique of epistemology. The basis for Rorty's critique lies in his rejection of Cartesian dualism, which leads him to a conclusion that every attempt at achieving truth by the way of knowing essences is destined for failure. Instead, Rorty argues for a search for understanding via conversation – a process which he called edification – and which would lead to the elimination of the epistemological problem of knowledge altogether. His metaphilosophical endeavor wants hermeneutics to supplant epistemology and become the fundamental philosophical approach. However, Rorty underemphasizes the importance of truth for hermeneutics, a deficiency of his which the paper will try to amend in order to show that Rorty's skepticism regarding truth makes it problematic for his position to claim rapport with hermeneutics. After detailing Rorty's metaphilosophical programme, which was mainly established in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, the paper will explore the (in)compatibility of his position with hermeneutics, most notably with Gadamer's. This leads to the conclusion that it would be a mistake to consider Rorty's (meta)philosophy as an offshoot of hermeneutics or being completely compatible with it, considering he gives primacy to social problems over truth.*

**Keywords**

Richard Rorty, metaphilosophy, hermeneutics, epistemology, edification, truth

**Introduction**

Richard Rorty is a contemporary American thinker who originated from the so-called analytic philosophical tradition. Rorty's approach to criticizing philosophy and philosophical tradition is primarily a metaphilosophical endeavour stemming from his neopragmatism and anti-Platonism. With his most prominent and, by some interpreters, the most controversial work titled *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, first published in 1979, Rorty had turned against the tradition he came from, which granted him the title of “anti-philosophical philosopher” among his critics. Rorty's main thesis is that knowledge is ultimately unattainable, especially within epistemology which grew on the foundations of Cartesian dualism. His criticism is twofold: Rorty first tries to prove that there is no such thing as mind as the “mirror of nature”, and then he tries to show that there is no such thing as universal language which functions as a conduit for knowledge. Such premises impose a conclusion that any attempt at attaining knowledge should be discarded and then supplanted by a search for *understanding* as the man's fundamental mode of interaction. In this regard, Rorty considers hermeneutics as the counterpart to epistemology and an ally because it has, since its very beginning, been careful when discussing the problem of knowledge, placing primacy on understanding in-

stead. As Rorty notices and mentions in favour of his argumentation, the hermeneutic tradition had distanced itself from discussing truth as knowledge, and has shifted its attention to the problem of understanding, taken in the most general sense. Hermeneutics, which was originally a sort of methodology of understanding and interpreting texts, had gained an ontological component with Heidegger's and Gadamer's theorems. Thus, it became a theory of explaining the relationship between man and the world as a perpetual process of understanding and interpretation. Following the same path, Rorty will shift his focus from knowledge to the phenomenon of understanding of man and the world. Finally, Rorty will claim that one should not postulate the existence of isolated essence and neutral language when discussing man's cognition, which would lead to what he called "edification" as a constructive process of understanding self and others.

The paper thus consists of two parts. The first part presents Rorty's philosophy as a form of metaphilosophy and his general aim of supplanting epistemology with hermeneutics. Next, the paper provides an overview of Rorty's arguments against epistemology, focusing on his critique of the Cartesian mind as the "mirror of nature". At the end of the first part, Rorty's notion of *edification* is presented as a dimension of his metaphilosophy and social theory, something he owes to his roots in American pragmatism. The second part of the paper explores the (dis)similarities of Rorty's (meta)philosophy and hermeneutics and why Rorty found hermeneutics so appealing. The approach focuses on antiscientism as a common denominator of these two positions, which Rorty developed under the idea of "incommensurability of discourse". Subsequently, it is argued that Rorty's antiscientism, developed as an anti-epistemology, is essentially different from Gadamer's because the former is ready to abandon the pursuit of truth, while the latter finds it indispensable. Despite an original and effective critique of epistemology, Rorty's theory and arguments owe much to the theoretic groundwork laid out by the hermeneutic tradition itself. The hermeneutic struggle of Heidegger and Gadamer against scientism predates analytic postpositivism by half a century. By combining the two traditions using Kuhn and Gadamer, Rorty offered an original angle of attack against one aspect of scientism and gave it his social touch. However, the problem of truth proves itself as an insurmountable difference that makes it impossible to equate hermeneutics and Rorty's philosophy.

## Rorty's Metaphilosophy

Originally educated and profiled within the analytic tradition, in 1967 Rorty edited a collection of papers under the title *The Linguistic Turn* which confirmed his public image as "a rising officer in the advancing army of analytic philosophy",<sup>1</sup> as one commentator puts it. This image would change in 1979 when Rorty published a book titled *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in which he turned against epistemology and wholeheartedly embraced historicism. Because of his comprehensive historiographical and problem approach, Rorty's philosophy is often described as metaphilosophical, which it certainly is considering that his attempt is to unveil the problems of contemporary philosophy, and then direct it to another path. This is evident in almost every work he has written, and especially in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which Rorty describes in its introduction very modestly, as an attempt to "undermine the reader's confidence in 'the mind'".<sup>2</sup> However, Rorty soon

sharpens his rhetoric and shifts to the root of the problem which he sees in misconceptions regarding the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, exclaiming that he does “not think there is a problem” at all.<sup>3</sup> To eschew possible criticism of advocating the end of philosophy, although Rorty does advocate for the end of epistemology, at least in its contemporary fashion, he pleaded that the book was conceived “not as a contribution to the end of philosophy, but as a contribution to its liberation, as well as an attempt at protecting philosophy from turning it into an obsolete and outdated discipline”,<sup>4</sup> concluding that the book, along with the arguments contained within, is of “therapeutic” rather than constructive nature. Rorty’s palliative attempts had not, however, prevented strong reactions, with one critic describing him as “fragrantly *anti-philosophical*”<sup>5</sup> and the other as “anti-philosophical philosopher”.<sup>6</sup>

Rorty defined his positions clearly in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as anti-Cartesian and anti-Platonic, invoking to his line of thinking philosophers such as Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, praising them as the “three most important philosophers of our century” who shed Descartes’, Locke’s, and Kant’s notion of mind and philosophy as foundational.<sup>7</sup> Dewey, who was considered a prominent member of American philosophical pragmatism, was a friend of Rorty’s father and greatly influenced young Richard with his anti-authoritarianism and opposition to Platonic metaphysics that sees knowledge and cognition as the ultimate societal goal,<sup>8</sup> and which was the incitement for Rorty to supplant the goal of cognition with “aesthetic enhancement”,<sup>9</sup> just like Dewey did. Susan Haack, a keen critic of Rorty wrote a short play ironically titled “We Pragmatists” in which Rorty and Peirce lead an imaginary dialogue that consists solely from the quotes and notes of the two authors, and with which Haack tried to demonstrate that Rorty does not belong to the pragmatist tradition,<sup>10</sup> while Rob Reich claims that Dewey would never agree with Rorty’s educational ideas,<sup>11</sup> i.e. with what Rorty called “edification”. But

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Mark Migotty, “Rorty and His Critics”, *Dialogue* 41 (2002) 1, pp. 208–213, p. 208, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0012217300013810>.

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Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979, p. 7.

3

Ibid.

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Richard Rorty, *Filozofija i ogledalo prirode* [*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], translated by Zoran Mutić, Amela Simić, Nebojša Kujundžić, Veselin Masleša, Sarajevo 1990, p. 10. It is interesting to note that Rorty wrote a special introduction for the Serbo-Croatian edition which contains extra information on his treatment of the problems in question, alongside this quote.

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Tracy A. Llanera, “Shattering Tradition: Rorty on Edification and Hermeneutics”, *Kritike* 5 (2011) 1, pp. 108–116.

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Rob Reich, “The Paradoxes of Education in Rorty’s Liberal Utopia”, in: Frank Margonis (ed.), *Philosophy of Education*, Philosophy of Education Society, Urbana 1997, pp. 342–351.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 5–6.

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Cf. Danko Plevnik, “Dewey kao Rortyjeve filozofski i demokratski orijentir” [“Dewey as Rorty’s Philosophic and Democratic Anchor”], *Filozofska istraživanja* 31 (2011) 1, pp. 11–16.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 13.

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Cf. Susan Haack, “‘We Pragmatists...’, Peirce and Rorty in Conversation”, *Agora* 15 (1996) 1, pp. 53–68.

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R. Reich, “The Paradoxes of Education in Rorty’s Liberal Utopia”, p. 349.

it is inappropriate, and maybe impossible to pigeonhole Rorty into any school of thought or tradition exactly because he aims at diversifying philosophy with his metaphilosophical approach, and considers supporting one 'side' or the other as counterproductive for the philosophical project of universality via conversation. However, except for the two of Rorty's anti-positions mentioned above, it is a fact, which he stated himself, that he is a staunch anti-essentialist.<sup>12</sup> Rorty thinks that from the beginning of philosophical tradition there persisted a fallacy that "man's essence is to be a knower of essences",<sup>13</sup> a clear anti-essentialist and anti-Platonic position that will serve as the foundation for building his criticism against epistemology.

In an article titled "Recent Metaphilosophy" and published in 1961, almost two decades before *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty had already laid out the new direction he wants for philosophy to take. If we abandon truth, or at least if we declare the search for 'truth' a futile attempt, and instead say that philosophy is "a game of changing the rules" we get a new form of metaphilosophy which would supplant the old notion of philosophy embodied in "epistemology", "metaphysics", or "axiology",<sup>14</sup> concludes Rorty by introducing us with his solution. If we abandon truth, continues Rorty (who does not call himself a metaphilosopher explicitly, although he constantly advocates this approach),<sup>15</sup> that would open the door to metaphilosophers' effort to rethink philosophy as a continuing endeavour of reaching and maintaining a communicative process in which 'truth' or agreement (lat. *adaequatio*) would not be desired goals, but communication itself. However, Rorty is not satisfied simply with implications, so he develops a solution which he sees in hermeneutics as a discipline that emphasizes this communicative aspect,<sup>16</sup> invoking thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer to prove his claim.

Rorty thus wants to remove the paradigmatic function from epistemology and give it to hermeneutics, but it is important to note that he does not want for hermeneutics to take over the problems of epistemology because for him "hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled".<sup>17</sup> This is where the therapeutic nature of the book, mentioned in the introduction, comes into play – his aim is not to offer an alternative science or method that would solve the problems of epistemology. Instead, he aims to remove the need for philosophy to deal with the problem of knowledge and truth altogether, and to create space for communication and understanding of the Other. This very effort of understanding the Other Rorty will call "edification", and that will be his last and the most original phase of his elaboration of the new philosophical order, and also the topic of the last chapter of this paper.

### Rorty's Critique of Epistemology

While he devoted less than a third of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to hermeneutics, Rorty gave his attention to criticizing epistemology and Cartesian dualism as its backbone in the rest of the book by historiographical scrutinizing the modern conception of the 'mind', trying to provide arguments for the claim that the existence of Cartesian non-spatial substance – *res cogitans* and all mental entities related – was based on intuitive reasoning that has little persuasive strength in contemporary discussions. The problem has two implications stemming from a common premise of a special, non-spatial substance, and Rorty attacks both of them. First, there is the idea of a neutral, objective

and immutable human capability. Second, there is the idea of mental objects as objective, immutable, and thus knowable. Rorty's critique of both these ideas does not start with recent problems or theories. Instead, he shifts his focus to the very root and basis, the foundation of what is called the theory of knowledge as a project of attaining reliable knowledge, truth, and cognition, and which he identifies in Cartesian dualism. "The mirror of nature", which can be found in the very title of his book, denotes the Cartesian mind which is presumed to be able to reflect nature within itself, clearly and distinctly, and thus objectively grasp it with the method of correspondence (*adaequatio*):

"The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods."<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the second implication, Rorty considers it faulty to conceive and describe e.g. pains and beliefs in speech as if they were objects, particulars that are elevated to the level of universals. Moreover, Cartesian criterion of non-spatiality cannot be the *differentia specifica* of mind and mental entities because they rely on the human condition – when there is no pain or belief in a man's body, there is no 'pain *per se*', or 'belief *per se*' concludes Rorty in a clear anti-Platonic manner. It is thus evident that he is a materialist, which is a fact he often asserted with sentences such as the one that the dichotomy of mind and nature should be abolished.<sup>19</sup> More precisely, Rorty's position is a form of eliminative materialism because he aims at abolishing dualism by pointing out lingual fallacies that are based on intuitive and uncritical conclusions regarding the nature of the mental – a position he often discussed and continuously defended.<sup>20</sup> As Rorty points out, it is more and more evident that what is called mental is actually a set of phenomena that have "family resemblance".<sup>21</sup> Besides, why are mental entities with phenomenal properties, such as pain – which can be located *inside* the human body with modern tools – classified in the same group as entities without phenomenal properties, such as beliefs? Descartes' criterion of non-spatiality, i.e. immateriality, is unsatisfactory and our conception of the mind is "blurry" at best, argues Rorty in another article of his.<sup>22</sup> The problem in question is a lingual, and then a con-

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R. Rorty, *Filozofija i ogledalo prirode* [*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], p. 9.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 367.

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Richard Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy", *The Review of Metaphysics* 15 (1961) 2, pp. 299–318.

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Cf. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 370, where Rorty interprets his original concept of edification as a form of metaphilosophy.

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*Ibid.*, p. 318.

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*Ibid.*, p. 315.

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*Ibid.*, p. 12.

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*Ibid.*, p. 353.

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Cf. Richard Rorty, "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism", *The Review of Metaphysics* 24 (1979) 1, pp. 112–121, as well as his "Contemporary Philosophy of Mind", *Synthese* 53 (1982) 2, pp. 323–348, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00484908>, in which Rorty attacks intuitive grasping and explanation of the mind.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 23.

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R. Rorty, "Contemporary Philosophy of Mind", p. 323.

ceptual fallacy which was started by Descartes who “lumped” the intentional and phenomenal together as ‘the mental’ to reduce them under immutable and indubitable, under what philosophy calls ‘the universal’. However, one other question that bothers Rorty is “why anyone had taken them [these assumptions] seriously, and how they came to seem relevant to discussions of the nature of personhood and of reason”<sup>23</sup> until today? Even the Greeks had considered the senses as an inadequate medium of attaining objective knowledge and thus truth because of the subjective and contingent nature of the sensual. Instead, they believed that knowledge is attained by comprehending *universal*, eternal and immutable truths that are grasped with equally eternal and immutable intellect, the mind, or *νοῦς*.

To locate this fallacy, Rorty delves into a lengthy historiographical analysis by portraying the main philosophical ideas of Descartes, Locke, and Kant. The revolution in comprehending the ‘mind’ happened after Descartes inaugurated a new usage of this notion. What Greeks considered as an integral part of the mind Descartes took as the object of thought processes – that which the mind can re-*present* and objectify. With his “invention of the mind” Descartes opened the gates to studying inner states, the knowing subject, and the mental entities which could now be comprehended clearly and certainly with the help of the new method. The next phase of the perpetuation of the fallacy Rorty pinpoints in Locke’s understanding of the ‘idea’ as anything that can be thought, as that which the mind can re-present to itself.<sup>24</sup> However, the theory of knowledge could not yet become an independent discipline dealing with objective knowledge because Locke tried to anchor it in sensualism, something that the Greeks had already dismissed. The end of this process of establishing epistemology as the foundation for any further research Rorty finds in Kant whom he describes as “both the first professionalized philosopher and the last great philosopher who thought that philosophy might be put ‘on a secure path of science’”.<sup>25</sup>

Philosophy was not the same after Kant, and Rorty sees this transitional period as a dilemma in philosophy whether we, meaning philosophers, should “anachronistically impose enough of our problems and vocabulary on the dead” to *make* them contemporary conversational partners, or we should appreciate our interpretative ability by “placing them in the context” of their time and thought.<sup>26</sup> The former choice was the path the analytic philosophy took, Rorty continues, by plucking the intellectuals out of their historical and lingual context and trying to assimilate them into a contemporary one. For Rorty the solution is simple – the dilemma is nonexistent, and we should implement both approaches when analyzing historical texts and thinkers, a solution which also tacitly inaugurates hermeneutics as the stepping stone towards a more successful philosophical method. With this move, Rorty made his linguistic turn by shifting the focus from epistemology toward the linguistic and cultural context of discovery and the human lifeworld. The innovations that the philosophy of language brought into analytic philosophy in 1960s by studying the deeply intertwined relationship of language and action, which can be found in later Wittgenstein, can be traced even further to Gadamer, Heidegger and the rest of the hermeneutic tradition – a fact which Rorty recognized and emphasized. For this reason, his metaphilosophy always discusses the wellbeing of ‘philosophy’, instead of talking about ‘analytic’ or ‘continental’ tradition. Rorty thus attempts unifying what was never supposed to be polarized by claiming that philosophy has always had the

problem of language and understanding looming over it, and he does so with great ease by invoking philosophers such as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida alongside Dewey, Austin, Kuhn, and Quine.

## Edification

The term *edification* comes from the Latin word *aedificatio*, which means ‘building’, and also ‘construction’ in the sense of constructing oneself. The term is very close to the German word *Bildung* as self-development through education. However, Rorty considers the word *education* too shallow for his needs, while *Bildung* sounds “a bit too foreign”, which led him to the decision to use the word *edification* to denote the “project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking”.<sup>27</sup> What Rorty calls edification represents his most original contribution. It is also the climax of his previous argumentation which enriches his philosophy with a social and practical dimension – something he always strives to achieve by relying on pragmatism. In accordance with his liberal ideas and the idea of liberal utopia, Rorty sees edification and a form of liberation through self-development.

Rorty describes edification as unsystematically as he described hermeneutics and epistemology. Edification is thus “the love of wisdom [which seeks] to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into a research program”;<sup>28</sup> edifying discourse is always abnormal because it “takes us out of old selves (...) to aid us in becoming new beings”,<sup>29</sup> and, finally, edification is “the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline”.<sup>30</sup> The edifying process and edifying conversation are a consequence of Rorty’s rejection of epistemology and acceptance of the hermeneutic process of understanding, which is evident in another attempt to make an argumentative ally out of Gadamer by stating that Gadamer tried to “prevent abnormal inquiry from being viewed as suspicious solely because of its abnormality”,<sup>31</sup> which is a valid and plausible interpretation.

He also extends his metaphilosophy through edification in which tensions between epistemology and hermeneutics continue. Edification is not possible under epistemological premises because epistemology positions itself as having a special understanding of knowledge and the mind, an understanding which other disciplines and cultures should build upon. This is unacceptable

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 69.

University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 49–77, p. 49.

24

Ibid., p. 137.

27

Ibid., p. 360.

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Richard Rorty, “Derrida on Language, Being and Abnormal Philosophy”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977) 11, pp. 673–681, p. 679.

28

Ibid., p. 372.

29

Ibid., p. 360.

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Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres”, in: Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Cambridge

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Ibid.

31

Ibid., p. 363.

for Rorty and represents a form of Western scientific hegemony that requires submissiveness and not a conversation of equals. This kind of approach Rorty called “systematic philosophy” which stands in opposition to “edifying philosophy”. Edifying philosophers, such as Rorty, express “distrust” towards the Platonic idea that “man’s essence is to be a knower of essences”.<sup>32</sup> They are also distrustful towards ‘progress’, they cannot stand the thought of their vocabulary being institutionalized, they are cynical, and they deplore commensurability; they communicate poetically, through satire, parodies, and aphorisms; they “know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over” so they “destroy for the sake of their own generation”; they are abnormal and they reject the search for objective truth.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, systematic philosophers are mainstream philosophers, they are constructive and offer arguments, they want to “put their subject on the secure path of science”, they rely on knowledge and truth, they “build for eternity”.<sup>34</sup> Edifying philosophers, whom Rorty thinks share his agenda, and the list contains some notable names, have realized the impossibility of objective truth and abnormality (contingency) of language for one reason or another. Only after we accept that the rigidity of essence does not bound us, claims Rorty, can we start the process of “self-description”, or edification. In that sense, as Arcilla points out, edification could also be called “autobiography”.<sup>35</sup> Rorty contributed to the construction of this theoretical wall by placing a brick of criticism of Cartesian dualism and epistemology into it, and this represents his most original contribution.

However, Rorty is not as original as it may seem in this regard. The new title of ‘edification’ guises an old idea of the hermeneutic dialogue and similar notions. Rorty himself discusses similarities between Heidegger’s notions of *Dasein* and *authenticity*, and his description of Heidegger’s philosophy is also a good portrayal of what Rorty considers under edification:

“For Heidegger (...) what one is is the practices one engages in, and especially the language, the final vocabulary one uses. (...) It [Dasein] is guilty because its final vocabulary is just something which it was thrown into – the language that happened to be spoken by the people among whom it grew up (...) ‘what does Heidegger mean by the word ‘Dasein’?’ is ‘people like himself’ – people who are unable to stand the thought that they are their own creations (...) such people are ‘authentic Dasein’ – Dasein that knows it is Dasein, that it is only *contingently* where it is, speaking as it does.”<sup>36</sup>

It could be said that Rorty not only continued Heidegger’s thought with his critique of epistemology and the mind, but that he also deepened the term ‘Dasein’ which denotes man as a being that has no limiting essence, but is a myriad of possibilities which can be realized through self-awareness of those possibilities. This Heideggerian self-awareness of one’s possibilities Rorty depicted somewhat differently, as an insistence that there is no internal mirror and that language is contingent. And, finally, Rorty’s edification is very similar to Heidegger’s idea of authenticity, as a re-description of oneself by way of this new awareness.

### **Rorty on Primacy of Hermeneutics over Epistemology**

Definitions or, more precisely, characteristics of epistemology and hermeneutics as he perceived them Rorty listed dispersedly while describing the practical role of hermeneutics or criticizing epistemology. He explains that the contrast between epistemology and hermeneutics can be seen as a con-

trast between “normal” and “abnormal” discourse.<sup>37</sup> Rorty generalized these notions from Kuhn’s differentiation between normal and revolutionary science<sup>38</sup> but, unlike Kuhn, Rorty will use these notions to characterize a type of discourse, not scientific practice. The normal discourse is rational and takes place within “agreed-upon set of conventions”<sup>39</sup> which determine acceptable methodology, problems, solutions, and vocabulary, and the result of such discourse is knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*). Epistemology, says Rorty, presupposes that every rational individual is capable of normal discourse because it rests on those neutral foundations of the mind which took centuries for epistemology to ‘discover’ and establish.<sup>40</sup> Epistemology is based on the idea that rationality is achieved via an agreement among individuals, and that idea is a precondition to the epistemological attempt at attaining objective knowledge. Analytic philosophy tried to make this agreement possible by analyzing language, and by logical atomism which would reveal (in reality, create) the neutral vocabulary matrix which would communicate equally neutral cognitive matrix. Doubting this common ground means doubting rationality, Rorty will point out, and deny this rationality of discourse by introducing the notion of “commensurability” of discourse.

“Abnormal” discourses are incommensurable because of lingual and conceptual differences, and they are more common than it is thought. Abnormal discourse “happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside”.<sup>41</sup> The somewhat soft and vague definition of abnormal discourse is wide enough to encompass a large number of lingual expressions, which conveniently works for Rorty’s goal. He wants to convey that a lack of agreement is normal and acceptable, and the product of an abnormal discourse can range from nonsense to an intellectual revolution.<sup>42</sup> Because hermeneutics deals with abnormal discourse, as Rorty attributes it, it has a primacy over epistemology which resides on the fallacious assumption that discourses can be commensurable. He defines the commensurability of discourses as the ability “to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict”.<sup>43</sup>

32  
Ibid., p. 367.

33  
Ibid., pp. 367–370.

34  
Ibid.

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Cf. Rene V. Arcilla, “Edification, Conversation, and Narrative: Rortyan Motifs for Philosophy of Education”, *Educational Theory* 40 (1990) 1, pp. 35–39.

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Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, p. 109.

37  
R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 346.

38  
Ibid., p. 11.

39  
Ibid., p. 320.

40  
Ibid., pp. 316–317.

41  
Ibid., p. 320.

42  
Ibid.

43  
Ibid., p. 316.

The term 'incommensurability' is well known within the philosophy of science and already mentioned Kuhn introduced it as well as Feyerabend, although independently and with a somewhat different meaning. Rorty's use of the term is different from Kuhn's or Feyerabend's, and he points this out by stating that Kuhnian understanding of the notion as "assigning the same meaning to terms" is too narrow for his needs.<sup>44</sup> However, this statement may or may not be taken as true. As Petit points out, Rorty *did* interpret and use 'incommensurability' in such a way because he did not discuss incommensurability of methods, principles, and problems, but of words and vocabularies.<sup>45</sup> However, this is not Kuhn's but Feyerabend's use of the term. The confusion is possible because both thinkers started using the word at the same time, although with a different understanding of it. For Kuhn, incommensurability means that, after a scientific revolution has happened, the perception of problems, procedures, concepts, and the world changes within a certain scientific community.<sup>46</sup> Feyerabend, however, understood incommensurability as a shift in interpreting language and terminology which takes place after a scientific revolution,<sup>47</sup> and this understanding is the one Rorty utilizes. Feyerabend ascribes the incommensurability of languages to different ontologies, or backgrounds of conversational partners, which is almost identical to Rorty's use of the argument. For Rorty, incommensurability of discourses is an insurmountable fact which hermeneutics recognizes, accepts, and builds its theory of conversation as a process of understanding upon.

At this point, it is viable to mention Haack's criticism of Rorty's idea of conversation as an end in itself. She credits such a view of conversation as paradoxical and *a priori* doomed to failure because if "the various discourses which constitute Western culture really are incommensurable", as she interprets Rorty's position, then reaching mutual understanding is not possible.<sup>48</sup> In Rorty's defence, it is necessary to differentiate his distrust of commensurability through the mind, which would lead to *knowledge*, and his belief in incommensurability (contingency) of language which is based on *understanding*. Regarding the former, Rorty sees no solution out of the problem and thus, the aim of conversation is not and cannot be knowledge because such a request cannot be ever fulfilled. Regarding the latter, the holistic, i.e. contingent nature of the language is not a hindrance, but a precondition to even starting a conversation and the process of understanding – something that hermeneutics also emphasizes. Rorty himself stated that, for him, hermeneutics is a "discourse about as-yet-incommensurable discourses";<sup>49</sup> they are as-yet incommensurable because the possibility of eventual understanding is always open.

Rorty also discussed abnormality and incommensurability of discourses in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, but under a different name. In this work, Rorty used the term "contingency of language" which encompasses both abnormality and incommensurability, and with which he radicalized his position by claiming that all languages, or discourses, are contingent. Rorty defines contingency of language as "the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways judging and feeling".<sup>50</sup> At this point, Rorty again invokes his sharp claims that the search for truth and knowledge is a failed project which philosophy took over from the Enlightenment, bringing over from science the "old struggle between science and religion, reason and unreason" and making it the key

component of philosophy.<sup>51</sup> The contingency of language thus makes commensurability impossible, rendering the very dichotomy between rationality and irrationality meaningless. The book is mainly an overview of Rorty's political, liberal attitudes and he uses contingency of language as a presupposition for the argument that the contingency, alongside the inability of finding the universal criterion of truth, should make humans humbler, i.e. it should help people realize that no language, no form of life has more value over the other. This, in turn, should lead to less cruelty in human societies and to more solidarity – hence the title of the book. This work again reveals Rorty's practical tendencies because its aim is to develop the idea of a society in which contingency of language is accepted, and the conclusion of it similar to that of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – that the consciousness of the inability of attaining truth and knowledge should, and would lead to more dialogue and more understanding. The hermeneutic notion of understanding pertains mostly to texts, but Heidegger's and Gadamer's 'understanding' is a broader concept that incorporates the process of understanding man's environment and other people, and this is how Rorty used the term.

### Shared Antiscientism, Divergent Goals

We will begin with what we concluded Rorty got right about hermeneutics. There are three characteristics of hermeneutics that were the reason why Rorty chose this discipline as an adequate heir to epistemology. First of all, hermeneutics, quite simply, anteceded postpositivism by half a century. Second, hermeneutics not only recognizes subjective elements in cognition, most notably tradition, but it also deems them a necessary component of scientific progress. Since 'knowledge' is always carried over by tradition, it retains a form of interpretation. This interpretation is made through language as a medium between traditions. Considering that language and worldview are inseparable, this interpretation is always a type of understanding that is open to revision. Similar conclusions regarding language and the world we find in Wittgenstein, Quine, and Kuhn, and this inspired Rorty to develop the idea of the 'incommensurability of discourses' and, consequently, edification. To reiterate, commensurability of discourse denotes the possibility of assigning value to different discourses according to the criteria of rationality, which is unacceptable for a pragmatist such as Rorty, who sees 'rationality' as a human

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Ibid., in the footnote.

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Cf. Philip Pettit, "Philosophy After Rorty", in: Allan J. Holland (ed.), *Philosophy, Its History and Historiography*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht – Boston 1985, pp. 69–83.

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Paul Hoyningen-Huene, "Three Biographies: Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Incommensurability", in: Randy A. Harris (ed.), *Rhetoric and Incommensurability*, Parlor Press, West Lafayette 2005, pp. 150–175.

47

Ibid., p. 171.

48

Susan Haack, "Vulgar Pragmatism: an Unedifying Prospect", in: Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville – London 1995, pp. 126–148, p. 139.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 343.

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R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. XVI.

51

Ibid., p. 3.

convention. And he would be right, according to hermeneutics. The third is hermeneutic antiscientism as a consequence of previous conclusions. Hermeneutic thinkers had abandoned the problem of knowledge, declared science as one among many modes of cognition, and directed their research towards multiple modes of understanding. However, one major component of hermeneutics, which Rorty conveniently eschewed, is its insistence that understanding is ultimately about truth. This notion is strongly present in Heidegger's thought and was carried over and further developed by Gadamer who wanted to show that the human sciences, although different in method than natural sciences, nevertheless provide a unique and irreplaceable contribution towards understanding truth in its whole.

As the first characteristic of hermeneutics is straightforward, we turn to the second one – the shared idea of ‘incommensurability’ of discourse. As it was mentioned earlier, epistemology seeks to reach rationality by achieving commensurability of matrices that are within people engaged in a conversation. Epistemology, Rorty reiterates, presupposes the existence of such commensurability, while hermeneutics is “a struggle against this assumption”.<sup>52</sup> Further description can be found in the claim that “hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts”.<sup>53</sup> Rorty also considers hermeneutics as “the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse”.<sup>54</sup> If we remember Rorty's claim that the abnormal discourse can result both in nonsense, and in a scientific revolution, it does not surprise that he once again invokes Kuhn in order to corroborate his argumentation. Rorty notices that Kuhn's notion of “revolutionary science” encompasses what hermeneutics had already taken up as its research domain – an abnormal discourse that seems “silly” in normal practice. Kuhn considered scientific revolutions as the product of “abnormal” discoveries, to express it in a Rortian jargon, that dissolve the established practice with a new way of thinking and doing science. Kuhn calls this established scientific practice the ‘normal’ science by which researchers do not seek to discover anything revolutionary, but to confirm the established paradigm (Heidegger and Gadamer would call it ‘pre-judgement’). Kuhn, and even more Feyerabend, whom Rorty seldom mentions, tried to emphasize the role of irrational elements, such as personal beliefs, persuading opponents, and religious factors which were catalysts of new discoveries. It is necessary to mention this to understand Rorty's claim that “Kuhn's lessons from the history of science suggested that controversy within the physical sciences was rather more like ordinary conversation”<sup>55</sup> and conflict of different worldviews, and not a result of empirical research only. Critics like Kuhn have revealed various contributions of revolutionary (Rorty would say abnormal) science, which leads Rorty to conclude that studying abnormal discourses is beneficial, and that they are more widespread than it is thought. Rorty thus wants to use his metaphilosophy to restore universality to philosophy, a characteristic that accompanied it since its origination, until the scientific ideal imposed itself in the form of epistemology. Universality, both methodologically and in the knowing process, is not standard in epistemology because epistemology considers irrelevant historical elements such as culture, and historical and lingual situatedness of the knowing subject. To understand the man and the world completely, and Rorty here takes over from hermeneutics, one needs

to apply the method of dialogue and discourse which serves as a medium of collecting all those subjective elements under the umbrella of universality.

For hermeneutics, Rorty continues, “to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology” and to “pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one’s own”<sup>56</sup> – which is identical to Gadamer’s request to use conversation to reveal the *interlocutor’s* experience of the world, and not to impose one’s own. This context also demonstrates the theoretical application of the hermeneutic circle, which Rorty parallels with other holistic claims. As an illustration, Rorty states that to understand other and exotic culture, we have to understand its particular parts, such as its customs, manners, language, and similar – its worldview. The problem of the relationship between language and thought is aptly formulated in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as “[t]he limits of my language are the limits of my world”,<sup>57</sup> otherwise found in Sapir, Whorf, and Quine, among others, is a fundamental assumption of both hermeneutics and Rorty. To understand the whole, we have to understand the parts, and to understand the parts, we have to know the whole – as the hermeneutic circle dictates. In this point converge Rorty’s insistence to leave the problems and the method of epistemology aside with Gadamer’s insistence on understanding others via dialogue. Where and when we do not understand, we should act hermeneutically, we should be honest about it and not “blatant”, Rorty argues by pointing out the ‘blatancy’ of epistemological rationality that imposed itself as a paradigm to other modes of human existence, such as culture or religion.<sup>58</sup>

Thus far, and for the most part, Rorty correctly interprets Gadamer’s anti-scientism and finds it similar to his metaphilosophical agenda. However, the problem becomes evident when one turns attention to what Rorty leaves out when discussing hermeneutic universality. The universality Gadamer talks about is about maximizing the number of interpretations of the world to get a more and more complete picture of reality and truth. The Gadamerian insistence on dialogue, on the inclusion of different interlocutors, and on rejecting epistemology aims at universality not for the sake of a better society, less cruelty, or more social freedom, but for the sake of truth. It is true that hermeneutics, like Rorty, rejects any type of ‘commensurability’ because it rejects confirmation of the intellect and the thing-in-itself (essence). Even if such a thing were possible, we would be unable to confirm it definitely because there is no way to step outside the human condition, including perception, thought, and language. The holistic approach to confirmation found in hermeneutics coincides with Rorty’s critique of truth as a convention. However, Rorty is satisfied with truth as a conventional justification because he is ultimately interested in social improvement, while hermeneutics is not. This will be elaborated in two subsequent chapters.

52  
R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 316.

53  
Ibid., p. 318.

54  
Ibid., p. 320.

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Ibid., p. 322.

56  
Ibid.

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Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung”, *Annalen der Naturphilosophie* 14 (1921) 3–4, 5.6.

58  
Ibid., p. 321.

Finally, regarding the third characteristic of hermeneutics, Rorty, entirely correctly, sees Gadamer's *Truth and Method* as a work which offered a successful repudiation of a type of scientism that elevates the idea that only *one* method, namely the empirical, is successful enough to lead to truth – hence the title of Gadamer's book. As mentioned earlier, Rorty's metaphilosophical attempt categorically rejects the search for absolute truth and essences of beings. With this approach, Rorty wants to eliminate the imperialism of *one* method which builds its theoretical structure in the form of epistemology, its empirical structure in the form of scientific practice, and which is aggressively imposed upon other forms of research as a paradigm of heuristic efficacy. The struggle against scientism includes not only possible argumentative and logical deficiencies of various epistemological and scientific explanations, but also the broader task epistemology took upon itself after Kant's Copernican revolution. Kant's philosophy placed epistemology as the stepping stone to any further research, be it ethical or aesthetic, and this role extended to other modes of human life and culture. This consequence has led to the situation in which anything that had not been scrutinized by epistemology, such as art or religion, is simply dismissed as unscientific and inadequate, Rorty warns. In this vein, Rorty and Gadamer share an agenda in rejecting any form of scientism, although with a different aim. Again, the same problem emerges. While hermeneutics rejects scientism to preserve as many interpretations of reality as possible, Rorty rejects scientism to maximize freedom of thought.

### The Truth Will Take Care of Itself

Rorty was never much interested in truth for two reasons. Firstly, because it was a notion that, in his view, could not be verified by appealing to an external or internal criterion of objectivity. However, the reason he often brings out the topic of truth is his frustration that philosophers spend, or waste so much time on an essentially unsolvable problem. Secondly, the problem for Rorty is not so much in whether there is truth or not; even if the truth were somehow attainable, it has little importance for every day social struggles. But Rorty did not think of it as attainable, especially after refuting Cartesian epistemologies, and even more after demonstrating language as a closed system of interpretation. In this vein, it is hard to imagine Rorty agreeing with hermeneutics even if he would agree that truth is eventually possible by the process of the hermeneutic circle. The process of the hermeneutic circle develops on the personal, as well as historical level – the interpretations accumulated and carried over by tradition means that it takes generations for any 'progress' to be made. Even after accepting such a possibility of truth, it is easy to presume that Rorty would reject its importance for philosophy and individuals, considering the historical scale of the change. Thus, philosophy should devote more attention to democracy, freedom, justice, solidarity etc.

This position is summarized in Rorty's recipe:

"Take care of freedom, truth takes care of itself."<sup>59</sup>

The idea has remained in Rorty consistently – from his "Recent Metaphilosophy" article in which he advocates for philosophy to abandon truth and become therapeutic, and "a game of changing the rules", to 'later' Rorty and his essays developed until his death. For example, a paper of his, titled "Universality and truth", which would probably attract a reader keen on learning more

regarding edification, hermeneutics, and truth, in the very first sentence turns into the question “Is the topic of truth relevant to democratic politics?”<sup>60</sup> to which he answers negatively. He also gives an emphatical ‘no’ towards his own question “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?”. ‘Truth’, taken as a convention in Rorty, means that he considers it the same as justification – a definition of his that, once again, makes a compromise between the real and the social. The philosophers and scientists have wrongly thought to have attained truth because what they discovered always amounted to what they predicted and anticipated with their criteria of justification. He takes *true* as corresponding to objective reality, and as such it cannot be attained. For a pragmatist such as he, “truth” is a useful word that masks the pragmatic nature of science – a set of practices that seem true because they set up their criteria. Although relativistic and sceptic, Rorty’s view of truth is perfectly compatible with his goal. In this regard, he deliberately positions himself in opposition to ‘mainstream’ philosophy, or all those seeking truth (including, tacitly, hermeneutics) and concludes that “the topic of truth cannot be made relevant to democratic politics, and that philosophers devoted to such politics should stick to that of justification”.<sup>61</sup> By the same criterion of democracy, when deciding between truth and ‘social justice’, later Rorty is still adamantly associated with Dewey’s pragmatism. Although he concludes that Dewey and Heidegger have similar, pragmatic ideas, Rorty sides himself with Dewey because they share an interest in “social hope”. On the other hand, he leaves out hermeneutics as a “nostalgic” endeavour that fails to let go of archaic philosophical ideas because Heidegger and Gadamer were interested in metaphysics, i.e. discovering the reality.<sup>62</sup>

### Gadamer and Truth as a Goal of Inquiry

The implications of Kuhn’s postpositivism developed in the 1960s and after led to the proliferation of social studies of science, many of which concluded that the criteria of ‘rationality’ and ‘method’ are the result of convention, that the criteria of ‘objectivity’ or justification of knowledge are also conventional, and thus that truth is out of man’s reach. Rorty accepts all three conclusions, impregnates them with his pragmatism, and concludes that the question of social justice is far more important than truth. Hermeneutics would agree with the first two conclusions, but rejects the scepticism towards truth. The influence of tradition has been known to hermeneutic thinkers half a century before the postpositivistic turn in analytic philosophy. In Husserl, we find the idea of *Vorwissen* (*foreknowing*), in Heidegger of *Vorstruktur* (*forestructure*), and Gadamer of *Vorurteil* (*prejudgement*). These notions encompass the idea

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Richard Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, p. 58.

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Cf. Richard Rorty, “Universality and Truth”, in: Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000, pp. 1–35.

61

*Ibid.*, p. 2.

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Cf. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others (Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 47. This position is repeated in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress (Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 288.

that understanding – a mean of approximating truth – is ontologically antecedent to human existence.

Although subjective, tradition and understanding are not, according to hermeneutics, a consequence of the social dimension. Instead, it is an ontological relationship between man and the world, and thus it is inescapable. However, considering it is ontologically necessary, a tradition not only hinders progress, but it also enables it by carrying over the understanding to posterity. This was of special importance to Gadamer who discussed the need to “rehabilitate authority and tradition” and “prejudice as a precondition of understanding”.<sup>63</sup> Kuhn's, and other postpositivists' inability to see that the irrational and subjective elements in science trace their roots beyond the social, to the ontological and fundamental and thus that they also have a positive and necessary function made them incapable of defending against the accusations of relativism and conventionalism. True, the validity of these interpretations can never be objectively proved, considering that a metacriterion is not possible either through language or truth – and this is what Rorty appreciated in hermeneutics. The situation is thus of a closed system of reference and justification, developed in Heidegger as a ‘hermeneutic circle’. But hermeneutics still considers it progress towards truth because each interpretation reveals another mode of beings. By way of the hermeneutic circle, the image of the truth is continuously updated with new interpretations. This circular, or coherentistic, or holistic model of understanding is not a vicious circle, as Heidegger warned and elaborated on in §32 of his *Sein und Zeit*. The aim is not to ‘step out’ of the circle, because this would nullify the possibility of interpretation at all. To avoid the circle is also factually impossible, for that would mean avoiding the human condition altogether. Unaware of this ontological fact of being locked in one's point of view, many philosophers throughout history tried to ‘step out’ of the circle and attain detached and thus objective knowledge of the world. We find this also in Descartes who thought he discovered a new way for the ‘mind’ to circumvent the limitations of the human existence and embodied perception. This attempt, carried over into epistemology, is what both hermeneutics and Rorty find futile, and it is strongly criticized in Dewey as an idea of what he called ‘the spectator theory of knowledge’.

The problem with Rorty is that he too easily represents Gadamer as an ally who shares his rejection of knowledge *and truth*. In fact, he rarely, if ever discusses hermeneutics and truth. Rorty recognizes that Gadamer did not attempt to offer an alternative to scientific method because hermeneutics is not “a method of attaining truth”, Rorty quotes Gadamer.<sup>64</sup> And he is right. Gadamer never wanted to provide *the* method of truth, lest his whole work would be pointless. Instead, Gadamer is eager to emancipate the human sciences with the natural sciences by demonstrating that they, too, alongside art, provide insight to the truth – qualitatively different, but by no means less important. To allow scientism would be to allow a limited number of perspectives towards reality, and this goes against the hermeneutic universality. Gadamer is quite clear about this, at the beginning of his *Truth and Method* and in its final sentences:

“Thus, surely there is no understanding free of any prejudice, however strongly the will of our understanding is directed towards avoiding their bounds. During the entirety of our examination it has been shown that the certainty provided by the scientific method is not enough to guarantee truth. This is especially true for the human sciences. However, this is by no means a depreciation of their scientific status; on the contrary, it legitimizes their claim for a special, humane significance that they have always exalted. The fact that their understanding brings into play the

knower's own being represents a real limit of 'methods', but not of science. What the method as a tool does not accomplish has to be, and can be, accomplished by a discipline that poses questions and inquires, the one that guarantees *truth*.<sup>65</sup>

These words encompass Gadamer's antiscientism, its danger to the possibility of universality, his idea of hermeneutics as the discipline of inquiry towards truth, and prejudice as a vehicle of expanding understanding towards truth.

Many commentators focused their criticism on Rorty's interpretation of Gadamer, seeing it, justifiably, as the weakest point of his metaphilosophical system. Nuyen thus offers a theory that, after Rorty rejected Platonism and foundationalism, he used hermeneutics to escape relativism, but with the consequence of radicalizing hermeneutic and Gadamerian claims to corroborate his arguments.<sup>66</sup> This radicalization is evident even from cursory reading of *Truth and Method*. In the very introduction of the work, Gadamer does admit that his aim is not to create a theory of knowledge according to the recipe established by the scientific method, which Rorty interpreted correctly, but in the very second part of the sentence, left out by Rorty, Gadamer claims that "yet it too is concerned with knowledge and with truth".<sup>67</sup> Rockmore also observes that Rorty "turns Gadamer inside out" by claiming that Gadamer rejects truth and commensurability.<sup>68</sup> Gadamer does reject commensurability, but only that commensurability which seeks to conform human sciences to natural sciences, and not its relativistic connotation regarding truth: the phenomenon of 'man' is much too complex, so it is necessary to find out what "the truth in human sciences" is for them to remain methodologically independent and keep providing their unique insights.<sup>69</sup>

Rorty correctly interprets and implements general claims of hermeneutics and Kuhn's incommensurability. However, it is evident that Rorty, knowingly or unknowingly, modifies Kuhn and Gadamer to fit his needs. While Gadamer sees value in the aesthetic "in that through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalize it away",<sup>70</sup> Rorty is ready to reject the possibility of attaining truth. Despite the similarities, while Gadamer sees art as one of the ways of reaching truth, Rorty sees it as an end in itself, something that helps with the act of self-description and re-description. The same goes for conversation – while Gadamer believes that

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*Prejudice* is taken as a *pre-judgement*, from latin *praeiudicium*. Not in a negative, but in a neutral, and even positive aspect. Prejudice is thus the vehicle of tradition, similarly to Kuhn's *paradigm* or Ludwik Fleck's *Denkstil*.

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R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 357.

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Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke. Band 1. Hermeneutik I. Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1990, p. 494. Italics added.

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Cf. Anh Tuan Nuyen, "Rorty's hermeneutics and the problem of relativism", *Man and*

*World* 25 (1992) 1, pp. 69–78, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01250444>.

67

H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 1.

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Tom Rockmore, "Gadamer, Rorty, and Epistemology as Hermeneutics", *Laval théologique et philosophique* 53 (1997) 1, pp. 119–130, doi: <https://doi.org/10.7202/401043ar>.

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H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 4.

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*Ibid.*, p. 2.

the purpose of conversation is (mutual) understanding for the same truth, Rorty values it for its own sake. Finally, although Rorty and Gadamer share their views on epistemology, it is evident that Rorty's 'edification' and Gadamer's 'understanding' have different goals. While Rorty considers the question of truth irrelevant to the human condition, hermeneutics is very much invested in it, and not the social.

## Conclusion

The aim of previous sections was to elucidate the fundamental characteristics of Rorty's philosophy, which can be rightfully taken as a form of metaphilosophy. His metaphilosophy traces the problems of contemporary philosophy to epistemology and finds the solution in hermeneutics and its theory. Rorty did not offer any original ideas in requesting dialogue, accepting existential factors and man's historical situatedness because he draws the inspiration for these ideas from the hermeneutic tradition, mainly by invoking Heidegger and Gadamer. Above else, the question of truth proves to be a crucial difference which makes it a mistake to identify Rorty's philosophy as hermeneutics. However, Rorty's contributions and originality are in providing validity to hermeneutics by providing new arguments, which is mainly due to his knowledge of analytic philosophy. Continental philosophy never embarked on a project of the magnitude that epistemology, the philosophy of language, or the philosophy of mind aim to achieve in order to reach objective knowledge. Instead, continental philosophy presupposes what, in Rorty's opinion, the analytic tradition is yet to arrive at. This is by no means a conflict between analytic and continental philosophical traditions, a division which Rorty sees as pointless and unproductive. Instead, it is a new, metaphilosophical redefinition of *philosophy* and the direction it should face, or, if we will, the direction it should return to. And this endeavour also brings many possible benefits to society with it.

To secure its future, Rorty rightfully concludes, philosophy should not be naturalistic or positivistic sciences will "push it aside"; if it becomes too historicist, literary criticism and similar human sciences will "swallow it up".<sup>71</sup> Rorty's critique of epistemology and Cartesian dualism is aimed mainly against the former, naturalistic tendencies. As Rorty elaborated in length, philosophy tried to achieve certainty and objectivity that characterize science by focusing on the foundation and possibility of knowledge, an attempt that was misguided since its inception in the premises of Cartesian dualism. Rorty considers such attempts futile, and insights from the disciplines such as hermeneutics, the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science, among others, indicate the contingent and uncertain nature of man's cognitive capabilities. Rorty thus argues that it is time for philosophy to finally throw away the weight of Cartesian dualism and scientism, to acknowledge its limits, and to return to probing the principles of practical activities that are relevant to human life – all of which is already postulated by hermeneutics. The practical aspect, which was the backbone of life in the Antiquity, Rorty tried to reestablish through edification, which he considers as the best way of achieving better and liberal society.

Readers inclined towards the so-called continental tradition will hardly be surprised by Rorty's conclusions, however, his argumentative attempts are noteworthy, and it is questionable whether somebody could have done them

without a background in both continental and analytic philosophy. One would expect strong reactions from staunch proponents of the analytic tradition, which indeed happened and caused a lengthy discussion and criticism of Rorty's ideas. Although the analytic tradition successfully defended itself from the implications of postmodernism, it can hardly defend itself from the arguments that aim to shake its tradition and argumentative foundations. Rorty identified the criticism against the historically oriented continental philosophy, which regularly and attentively reevaluates its tradition, as a fatal deficiency of contemporary epistemology. And while contemporary epistemology generally focuses on the foundation and possibility of knowledge, it took a much-needed thinker, such as Rorty, to reevaluate the foundation and possibility of epistemology itself. His work revealed the weaknesses in those foundations which would eventually call in question the stability and construction of the whole 'pyramid' of epistemology.

**Boško Pešić, Mislav Uzunić**

### **Rortyjeva metafizofija i kritika epistemologije**

#### **Sažetak**

*Richard Rorty suvremeni je filozof analitičke filozofijske tradicije koji je svoje karijerno usmjerenje skrenuo na metafizofijsku kritiku epistemologije. Osnova Rortyjeve kritike leži u njegovu odbijanju kartezijanskog dualizma, što ga dovodi do zaključka da je svaki pokušaj doseganja istine putem znanja o bitima osuđen na propast. Umjesto toga, Rorty argumentira u korist traženja razumijevanja putem razgovora – postupka koji zove eidifikacija – koji bi vodio do potpunog uklanjanja epistemologijskog problema znanja. Njegov metafizofijski poduhvat želi hermeneutikom zamijeniti epistemologiju i time je uspostaviti kao temeljni filozofijski pristup. Međutim, Rorty nedovoljno naglašava važnost istine za hermeneutiku. To je manjak koji će ovo istraživanje pokušati nadoknaditi da bi pokazalo kako je Rortyjeve skepticizam po pitanju istine problematičan za njegovu vlastitu poziciju bliskosti s hermeneutikom. Nakon opisivanja Rortyjeve metafizofijskog programa, temeljno uspostavljenog u Filozofija i ogledalo prirode, rad istražuje (ne)kompatibilnost Rortyjeve pozicije s hermeneutikom, prvenstveno s Gadamerovom. Dolazimo do zaključka da bi pogrešno bilo smatrati Rortyjevu (meta)filozofiju izdankom hermeneutike ili potpuno kompatibilnu s njome, uzimajući u obzir da prednost pred istinom daje društvenim problemima.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

Richard Rorty, metafizofija, hermeneutika, epistemologija, edifikacija, istina

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## **Rortys Metaphilosophie und die Kritik der Epistemologie**

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Richard Rorty ist ein zeitgenössischer Philosoph der analytischen philosophischen Tradition, der seine berufliche Ausrichtung auf die metaphilosophische Kritik der Epistemologie richtete. Das Fundament von Rortys Kritik liegt in seiner Ablehnung des kartesischen Dualismus, was ihn zu der Schlussfolgerung führt, dass jeder Versuch, durch das Wissen über die Wesen zur Wahrheit zu gelangen, zum Scheitern verurteilt ist. Stattdessen argumentiert Rorty dafür, durch Konversation nach Verständnis zu suchen – ein Prozess, den er als Edifikation bezeichnet – der zur vollständigen Beseitigung des epistemologischen Problems des Wissens führen würde. Sein metaphilosophisches Bestreben ist es, die Epistemologie durch die Hermeneutik zu ersetzen und sie damit als grundlegenden philosophischen Ansatz zu etablieren. Allerdings betont Rorty die Wichtigkeit der Wahrheit für die Hermeneutik nur unzureichend. Dies ist ein Nachteil, den diese Studie auszugleichen sucht, um aufzuweisen, wie problematisch Rortys Skeptizismus in puncto Wahrheit für seine eigene Position der Nähe zur Hermeneutik ist. Nach der Darlegung von Rortys metaphilosophischem Programm, das in Der Spiegel der Natur gründlich verankert ist, erforscht die Arbeit die (In-)Kompatibilität von Rortys Position mit der Hermeneutik, in erster Linie mit der von Gadamer. Wir kommen zu dem Fazit, dass es unzutreffend wäre, Rortys (Meta-)Philosophie als Ableger der Hermeneutik zu betrachten oder sie als vollständig damit kompatibel einzuschätzen, wenn man bedenkt, dass er den gesellschaftlichen Problemen den Vorrang vor der Wahrheit gewährt.*

### **Schlüsselwörter**

Richard Rorty, Metaphilosophie, Hermeneutik, Epistemologie, Edifikation, Wahrheit

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## **La métaphilosophie de Rorty et sa critique de l'épistémologie**

### **Résumé**

*Richard Rorty est un philosophe contemporain de tradition analytique qui a orienté sa carrière professionnelle vers une critique philosophique de la métaphilosophie. Le fondement de la philosophie de Rorty repose sur son rejet du dualisme cartésien, ce qui le mène à la conclusion que toute tentative d'atteindre la vérité par la connaissance des essences est vouée à l'échec. Au lieu de cela, Rorty argumente en faveur d'une recherche de la compréhension par le biais de la conversation – procédé qu'il nomme édification – qui serait censée complètement remédier au problème épistémologique de la connaissance. Son entreprise métaphilosophique se donne pour ambition de remplacer l'herméneutique par l'épistémologie et ainsi de l'instituer en tant qu'approche philosophique fondamentale. Cependant, Rorty ne met pas suffisamment l'accent sur l'importance de la vérité pour l'herméneutique, insuffisance que cette recherche va tenter de pallier en vue de montrer que son scepticisme, pour ce qui est de la vérité, est problématique en ce qui concerne la relation d'affinité qu'entretient sa propre position avec l'herméneutique. Après avoir décrit le programme métaphilosophique de Rorty, clairement établi dans La philosophie et le miroir de la nature, ce travail examine la (non) compatibilité de la position de Rorty avec l'herméneutique, principalement avec Gadamer. Nous arrivons à la conclusion qu'il serait fallacieux de considérer la (méta)philosophie de Rorty comme une branche de l'herméneutique, ou de penser qu'elle serait complètement compatible avec elle, tout en gardant en vue qu'il donne la priorité aux problèmes sociétales et non à la vérité.*

### **Mots-clés**

Richard Rorty, métaphilosophie, herméneutique, épistémologie, édification, vérité