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**Alternative Epistemologies and  
Normative Directionality**

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## **Alternative Epistemologies and Normative Directionality**

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### **Abstract**

The contemporary critique of the 'language of dichotomous' which secures a privileged position for philosophy and is, at the same time, the reason for its demolition, discards the 'metaphor of foundation' and hence knowledge in favor of hope. The direction is normative insofar as the idea of social solidarity takes the centre-stage than the search for the antecedent reality. The paper examines how analytic, pragmatic and hermeneutic epistemologies, crisscrossed over anti-Platonism, revisit the notions of truth, knowledge and rationality and reconstruct the face of Philosophy. In this reconstruction, we find the revival of the humanist tradition and the utopian hope for the democratic institutions in which the philosophical wisdom gets a new meaning.

**Keywords:** Alternative Epistemologies, Normativity, Social Solidarity.

## Introduction: Core vs. Peripheral

Taking Rorty's metacritique of the Platonic legacy of the Western philosophy as a benchmark of anti-dualist, anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist discourse, the paper examines how various philosophical traditions are participative of this discourse. The binding thread is the radical reconstruction of the vocabulary of binaries, bivalences and boundaries which assign primacy to one enterprise over the other. Philosophy and, for that matter science, enjoy privileged status as something 'fundamental' is being claimed to have emerged in their searches about the reality. The binary oppositions of reality/appearance, core/peripheral, stable/precarious, essence/accident, absolute/history, found/made, *theoria/praxis*, in which the philosophical wisdom supposedly prevails, come under a subversive attack from various philosophical quarters. This generally destructive and deconstructive discourse, the 'end of philosophy' in Heidegger and demolition of 'metaphysics of presence' in Derrida, also echoes constructive tones. The anti-foundationalist stance toward the denial of the absolute, the *a priori* or the universal standards in matters of rationality and morality (as attempts to salvage the marginalized and the excluded from the coercive language of binary), which also face the charges of relativism and social constructivism, results into reconstructing faith in human's capacity to communicate. Strawson's claim that 'there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history'<sup>1</sup>, Habermas's idea of communicative rationality, Gadamer's faith in the 'good will' for the dialogical encounter and Rorty's constructivism to cure us from the rhetoric of 'systematic' and 'edifying' are some practical efforts in this direction though they themselves succumb to the internal burdens for seeking some metaphysical comforts.

Rorty remarks "...the real question about the utility of the old Platonic dualisms is whether or not their deployment weakens our sense of human solidarity",<sup>2</sup> and Gadamer expresses concern that "what man needs is not a persistent asking of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now."<sup>3</sup> These two statements provide a backdrop against which the paper examines this discourse around the Platonic legacy of the western philosophy from various epistemological stances and how the normative angle gains ascendancy. The post-philosophical movement of the exorcisation of what Bernstein calls the 'Cartesian anxiety'<sup>4</sup> allows interaction between the rather antithetical Anglo-American and Continental traditions. What emerges commonly is the belief that the unique capacity of humans is not to make apparent what is antecedently real but to cherish the idea of good. Derrida's ten plagues of New International, Taylor's idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Strawson, P.F. 1959. *Individuals*, London: Methuen, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, p. xv

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1982. *Truth and Method*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, p. xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, Richard J. 1983. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 180.

‘hypergood’, Rorty’s idea of hope, Popper’s idea of liberal open society are such normatively grounded projections which shape the contemporary discourse.

### **Voices of Dissent in Analytic, Pragmatic and Hermeneutic Traditions**

The logical positivists who took the Fregean attempt to free logic from psychologism and Wittgenstein’s assertion that the truths of logic and hence of mathematics are vacuous tautologies as an advantage to reject metaphysical propositions as pseudo-propositions as they neither fall in the analytically analyzable nor empirically verifiable categories. Although the program of early logicians Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein results into giving a metaphysical portrayal of reality in the truth-functional logic, it is within this enterprise we can see that both the rejection and inclusion of metaphysical claims are happening. There is a clear distance from the classical metaphysics subsisting upon the Aristotelian two-valued logic of substance and the ultimacy of the subject term, which provides the basis to all doctrines of idealistic monism and pluralism, in terms of replacing essences with the logic of facts and their relations in Wittgenstein. But, while the logical-formal language considers that philosophy sets the limits to the world and must describe or elucidate what is given and not explain through theory-constructions, there is undeniably an uneasiness experienced both by Russell and Wittgenstein about the vacuous rational account of mathematics. As Schwartz says, “the rationalist is left holding an empty bag. Granted, mathematical propositions are not based on experience or observation, but they are not the results of pure rational insights into the ultimate nature of reality either.”<sup>1</sup> This uneasiness about the ‘unsayables’, the intelligibles led Wittgenstein to move from the formal-logical structure of language to language-games, each holding its own normative rules, to include the ideas of religion and mysticism.

So, while metaphysics is rejected and rebuilt in the programs of early logical analysts, it was in Quine, Putnam and Davidson, the postpositivist analytic thinkers the trend of securing knowledge, or that there is a rational foundation to be *found* by the reflective mind, to put it in Rorty’s view, is over. The persistence to the Kantian analytic-synthetic distinction and the vocabulary of *noumena* and phenomena is made revisionary in the web of experiences by Quine. There is nothing like pure, *a priori*, formal-linguistic knowledge which is not amenable to revisions or adjustments from verification, falsification or pragmatic standards. The underlying principle of revision is the utility of experiences and science becomes the model of supplying tools to cope with reality. Thus, Quine’s holistic, naturalized epistemology gives a way to pragmatism.

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz, Stephen P., 2012. *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy: From Russell to Rawls*, Wiley-Blackwell, p.16-17

To view this scenario from Rorty's standpoint, it is a claim about the story of re-pragmatization. In his words, "The logical empiricists had, with the help of Frege and Russell, linguified all the old Kantian distinctions which Dewey thought Hegel had helped us to overcome. The history of the re-dissolution of those distinctions by the neopragmatists, under the leadership of Quine, is the story of the re-pragmatization – and thus the de-Kantianizing and the re-Hegelianizing – of American Philosophy."<sup>1</sup> This blurring of the distinction, further, according to him is, "...a way of replacing the task of justifying past custom and tradition by reference to unchanging structure with the task of replacing an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future, thus replacing certainty with hope."<sup>2</sup>

Couched in the Darwinian anti-Cartesian frame, Peircian pragmatism that the beliefs are 'the best habits of actions for gratifying our desires'<sup>3</sup> and Deweyan faith in the value of democratic institutions, Rorty's anti-Platonic, anti-essentialist stance replaces the inquiry into truth with a hope for a better future. The Platonic quest for the foundation, the intrinsic truths which snaps ties with the doxastic realm and man's relation with it, to him, is no longer a useful, viable position of philosophy (though this does not mean that philosophy is socially useless). Lamenting over the ocular defects and linguistic impediments to cross the veil of ignorance, Rorty says, is a 'less useful description of the world'<sup>4</sup> and is to be replaced with a 'more useful description of the world.'<sup>5</sup> The pragmatic stance is that the vision and language are not to be seen as the mediums to mirror the reality but as tools serving some specific purposes. The new vocabulary finds values of things in our pragmatic concerns and demolishes all epistemic privileges.

And, moreover beyond the linguistically mediated social construction the search for the intrinsic nature of things is an impossibility. For Rorty this constitutes a meeting ground for the convergence between analytic and continental philosophy. 'Everything is a social construction' characteristically a European slogan, and Wilfrid Sellars' American slogan that 'all awareness is a linguistic affair' unify the two philosophy against the anti-doxastic Platonic realism.<sup>6</sup> The convergence brings the disillusionment with the leisurely, contemplative cognitive gazing devoid of praxis and productive alliance with a more rigor.

Gadamer's hermeneutics exhibits this rigor and moves beyond boundaries. In the context of his difference with Kantian subjectivization of aesthetics, Gadamer argues that an art-experience is a hermeneutic encounter with truth (which assigns it a cognitive value) which is neither a free play of imagination nor a methodologically governed act. It is only in the ideas of 'aesthetic consciousness' or 'historical consciousness' that we see the neutrality of

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<sup>1</sup>Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, p.31

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.32

<sup>3</sup> Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, p.xxiv

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.48

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

understanding and the need for a methodological program. Following Heidegger's onto-phenomenology, he concedes, that understanding is a universal phenomenon which begins with our prejudices to be critically tested in the dialogical settings as against the Enlightenment project of negating the role of tradition and authority. "Prejudices are biases to our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we express something – whereby what we encounter says something to us."<sup>1</sup> Gadamer here sounds like Peirce who says, "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us *can* be questioned."<sup>2</sup> All understanding, in this sense, is to come into the 'being of meaning', an 'I-thou' dialectical encounter where the object, be it an art-work, a text or action participates and elicits itself in the buoyancy of play in the being of which the players lose their particularities and emerge as more than that in the event or happening of truth, analogically.

Gadamer's dialogical understanding or 'effective-historical-consciousness', as he terms it, allows him to bring the age-old methodological debate between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* into a new light. Hermeneutics, to him, is not a methodology but 'but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world.'<sup>3</sup> Built upon the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis*, as distinguished from *techne*, Gadamer's notion of interpretive understanding is inclusive of the idea of application (*subtilitas applicandi*) or appropriation of meaning. Each hermeneutic phenomenon involves an *application* (not the rule-following) of the universal in the light of the particular, an interpretation of the situation which places oneself within it. Taking the example of legal hermeneutics, Gadamer explains, "...our knowledge of law and morality is always supplemented from the individual case, even productively determined by it. The judge does not only apply the law in concreto, but contributes through his every judgment to the development of the law ('judges' law)."<sup>4</sup> Every understanding, by virtue of this intellectual-practical virtue, is entering a horizon which not only is self-corrective but also that of venturing into new possible-worlds. In this sense, all understanding is self-understanding.

It is in Gadamer's idea of hermeneutics and Rorty's idea of hope that we capture epistemology directs itself normatively. In what follows, the paper articulates some of these angles in pragmatic and hermeneutic philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1976. "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David E. Linge (trans.), Berkeley: University of California press, p.9

<sup>2</sup> Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931-35. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 5.265, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.156

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, 1982, p. xiii

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, 1982, p.37

## Normativity

On this post-philosophical ground of the blurred boundaries and a move beyond, the contempt toward the leisure class, the search for the antecedent reality, One Way the World is and the absolute tribunal of reason has resulted into seeing Philosophy as an instrument of change rather than of conservation. The pragmatism of Peirce, James and Dewey and neo-pragmatism of Quine, Davidson, Goodman and Putnam (though they differ with respect to the shift from experience to language and the use of scientific methods to overcoming the difference between science and non-science) open up the more useful question of social solidarity. In the pragmatic spirit of Dewey “growth itself is the only moral end”<sup>1</sup> where growth and freedom symbolize free democratic societies and conceive of the intellectuals at the service of the labor class, theory an aid to practice in shaping the present into a better, but an indeterminate, future. But for Rorty, “What matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness. This goal is not written in the stars... It is a goal worth dying for, but it does not require backup from supernatural forces.”<sup>2</sup> The democratic ideals that the pragmatists conceive of have the fuzziness about them like Derrida’s idea of ‘democracy to come’, but they attribute this fuzziness to the nonconformity to any plan, a teleology.

On the hermeneutic front, Gadamer’s universal program emphasizes upon the restoration of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Roman humanist tradition of Herder, Vico and Shaftesbury to draw attention to the practical-moral character of the human sciences eclipsed by the objective, disengaged reasoning. Bernstein describes Gadamer’s philosophy ‘...as an apologia for humanistic learning. Gadamer, throughout his long career, has sought to show that the humanistic tradition, properly understood, is an essential corrective to the scientism and obsession with instrumental technical thinking that is dominant today.’<sup>3</sup> Following Schiller, Gadamer’s hermeneutic aestheticization considers a moral demand, the cultivation of consciousness in an aesthetic attitude to rise to the universal and distancing from the particularity of immediate acceptance or rejection. The same demand continues in his notion of *bildung*, the self-formation, the cultivation of consciousness to embrace universality or generality, a universal sense necessary for the historical sciences.<sup>4</sup> Herder’s idea of ‘reaching up to humanity’ and Vico’s *sensus communis* to which wit and humor were added by Shaftesbury are the same line of thinking. Vico’s idea of *sensus communis* or common sense helps us to understand that the faculty of judgment has a universality about it; it founds the sense of community. Gadamer explains Vico

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, John. 1982. *Reconstruction in Philosophy, The Middle Works of John Dewey*, Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) Vol. XII, Southern Illinois University Press, p.181.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, 1999, p.xxix

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, 1983, p.180

<sup>4</sup> Bildung is the preservation of everything rather than building skills and talents for some specific ends.



here, “Everyone has enough “sense of the common” (gemeinen Sinn), i.e. judgment, that he can be expected to show a ‘sense of community’ (Gemeinsinn), genuine moral and civic solidarity, but that means judgment of right and wrong, and a concern for the ‘common good’.”<sup>1</sup> The inherent moral direction, an element of social and moral being, disregards its intellectualization in some transcendental reason. Instead, “what gives the human will its direction is not the abstract generality of reason, but the concrete generality that represents the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race. Hence, development of this sense of the community is of prime importance for living.”<sup>2</sup>

The shift from the disengaged reason to the engaged participative reason from the transcendent plane to the ‘effective history’ is a normative shift in epistemology. The Greek-Roman humanist tradition exemplified by Gadamer in the notions of *phronesis*, *bildung* and *sensus communis* express their inherent social solidarity and we need to turn to them of which the human sciences are true heirs. Charles Taylor, in his *The Ethics of Authenticity*, expresses a great distress about the disengaged perspective, central to the industrialized-technological world which rather desires that ‘we shouldn’t have recourse in our explanations to such things as moral ideals...’<sup>3</sup> The present atmosphere is assertive of what he calls the ethic of authenticity, the freedom of choice for each individual without its place in the larger horizon of meaning. To him, the ‘modern malaises’ the loss of meaning, instrumental reason and the loss of political freedom are responsible for the depletion of the sense of solidarity. But mapping one’s place in the public moral horizon is constitutive of what is a good life.

## Conclusion

That the search for the Archimedean point starting from Plato’s attack on the sophists and Protagoras’s alleged relativism is not a useful one and is to be given up gets manifested in different traditions in different ways. There is a clear rejection of metaphysics in verificationists’ program but the early analytic philosophers too repudiate the classical metaphysics. Predominantly, it is the pragmatic turn, that intensifies the rejection of the ‘metaphor of foundation’ and insists on replacing it with a more viable vocabulary of improving human conditions in democratic ways, though utopian in demands. Hermeneutics, especially of Gadamer, not only rejects the subject and object binary oppositions but also sees hope in the *sensus communis* toward social solidarity in which lies the understanding of human-historical phenomena. In demystifying the rational search for the foundation that antedates history and in favor of the hope for a good social life epistemology turns normative. To

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, 1982, p.31

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Charles, 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, p.21

conclude with Rorty “Controversies between foundationalists and anti-foundationalists on the theory of knowledge look like sort of merely scholastic quarrels... But quarrels about the character of moral choice look more important. We stake our sense of who we are on the outcome of such choices.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty, 1999, p. xxvii