Being that Can be Understood is (Not Simply) Language: How Rorty Misappropriates Gadamer

Shortly before Hans-Georg Gadamer’s death, Richard Rorty wrote a tribute piece on Gadamer’s famous dictum, “Being that can be understood is language,” in which he claimed Gadamer as an ally in his quest to motivate a pragmatic account of truth.¹ Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as he sees it, motivate us to abandon all ontological conceptions of essences and correspondence of our ideas with the ‘way things really are,’ and instead to adopt a strictly nominalist account of the meanings in our language and practices. Gadamer has taught us, Rorty suggests, to move beyond the epistemological presumption that the basis of knowledge and understanding, the foundation of a just community, the character of moral discourse, and our conceptions of self and world refer to a Being beyond our language accessible through rationality, where this is supposed to be the intellectual capacity to bracket all prejudices and subjective conceptions that distort or hide true essences, or whatever might otherwise be the object of universal agreement and progress. “[I]n a culture that took Gadamer’s slogan to heart,” Rorty suggests, rivalries between “bishops and biologists, or poets and philosophers, or fuzzies and techies[…] would not be thought of as controversies about who is in touch with reality and who is still behind the veil of appearances. They would be struggles to capture the imagination, to get other people to use one’s vocabulary.”²

Gadamer’s hermeneutics, then, enjoin us to see Being – encompassing concepts like Truth, the Good, Essence, and so forth – pragmatically, as entirely reducible to language; that is, it has no meaning outside the pragmatic use that it might put in service of our ends: ‘Being’ does not transcend our language in any way, at least not in any way that makes the slightest


² Ibid., 28
sense to talk about. In this treatment of Rorty’s and Gadamer’s thought, I will argue that while he can take Gadamer’s hermeneutics quite far in service of his position, in the final analysis one cannot engage in hermeneutics of a Gadamerian sort without maintaining a more robust conception of truth and Rorty allows. This will be both a criticism, then, of Rorty’s appropriation of Gadamer, but also an argument that Gadamer’s reasons for a more robust conception of truth stand as a critique of Rorty’s own position. The hermeneutical quest for understanding requires us to approach our subject matter with the initial presumption that what a text, a partner in dialogue, or any other subject of understanding brings before me is not simply a way of speaking, but a claim to truth that must be taken seriously. When we presume that language is more than a pragmatic coping mechanism but is the way that Being reveals itself to the understanding, then hermeneutics becomes an enterprise in legitimation, not simply justification. After explicating what we take to be the central arguments and claims in Rorty’s position and the way he finds support in Gadamer’s thought (section I), our argument will proceed by explicating the essential role of a conception of transcendent truth in Gadamer’s hermeneutics centering in what Gadamer calls the ‘fore-conception of completeness’ (II). Following this, we will see the implications of this in what Gadamer calls the ‘classical’ (III), to Rorty’s conceptions of ethics and politics, and for the relationship between the human and natural sciences (IV). We will conclude, finally, with some reflections on what Gadamer himself has said in discussion on Rorty in an interview shortly before his death (V).

To be fair to Rorty, at least the Rorty of (2004), he admits that he has not offered “an account of the real essence of Gadamer’s thought” (which we presume to be a somewhat ironic statement, since Rorty would consider such a claim senseless anyway), or an account that he thinks Gadamer would necessarily endorse. Rather, he seems to see his project as “a suggestion about how a few more horizons might be fused”—Gadamer’s, his own, and those “currently coming into use among analytic philosophers” (28). So my previous remark that Rorty is claming Gadamer as an ally should be read with this qualification: not an ally in the sense that the ‘essence’ of each of their thought is the same, but rather in the sense that a Rortian can find much that is useful in Gadamer’s hermeneutics toward his or her own project. The criticism I will defend, then, is that Rorty does a disservice to Gadamer’s thought by appropriating him for his own theory, when such a treatment denies one of the central and indispensable features of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.
The central claims of Rorty’s pragmatist position are that, first, “truth”, as the term normally functions in philosophical discourse, putatively refers to something that exists essentially as it is independent of any relation to the way that we conceive it. Put differently, it assumes that there are ways that things ‘really are,’ to which we aspire our words and representations to match up or ‘correspond.’ Second, he argues that we have been misled to suppose that the purpose of rational thought and discourse is to get at these essences. Rather, such ‘seeing of essences’ is a senseless endeavor: ‘essences’ are no more than our modes of conception, and have no externality or objectivity to them. The demise of logical empiricism and the rejection of the Cartesian rationality, as well as the arguments of Dewey and James, Quine and Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derrida, have all impressed upon us the absurdity in the supposition that we could get outside our own linguistic conceptions to things themselves, to see if they ‘match up.’ The ‘truth’ is not something we could ever attain, therefore we should not suppose that this is ever what we aim at in the sciences, philosophy, or any other field of inquiry and discourse. Third, there is a perfectly sensible alternative to this ‘epistemological’ conception, namely one in which all of our ways of talking are pragmatically related to the goals that we happen to have; that is, they are simply coping mechanisms for finding our way about in the world. Once we disavow all ambitions to find universal justification of knowledge claims, to apodictic metaphysical truths, to get in touch with ontological reality, and so forth, any of the terms once in the service of these claims are put to a different use within the limitations of pragmatic discourse, if they have any such use; otherwise, we jettison them. Inquiry and discourse thus become means of finding new and interesting ways of saying things, of coping. This pragmatic program avoids the absurdities of the alternative ‘truth-oriented’ projects, but actually better serves the ends that many of the proponents of these conceptual systems share: control and manipulation of the natural world,
building inclusivist democratic communities, even ends such as love and friendship. Or so Rorty maintains.

Two applications of Rorty’s pragmatist program have received particularly substantial criticism in the last few decades: the application to democratic politics and to the relationship of the natural sciences and the human sciences. In each case, Rorty has encountered objections by those who share much of the critique of modernist rationality, but refuse to draw the same ultimate conclusions about truth and language that he does. I will argue in section IV that Gadamer is in this camp as well with, but to prepare the ground we will till the soil of Rorty’s thoughts on these issues and how he responds to some of his critics.

In the first case, Rorty argues that the democratic ideal of a just society founded on a conception of individuals as free and equal has traditionally found its grounds and justification in the presumption that all rational beings desire truth, that this truth is universal, and that this truth is attainable in the sense of correspondence to reality.\(^4\) If this is so – if there is a universal truth that is the object of rationality – then we can, in principle at least, base our public institutions and practices on principles of justice that all rational beings can agree to. In this way we can have a society in which justice transcends the particular prejudices, conceptions and values of its members. A similar story might be told, and is told, regarding morality: moral truths – be they universal, apodictic, or both – are just those rules and principles that the truth-oriented faculty of reason can attend to.

Either way, underlying these philosophies, Rorty suggests, is a false contrast between truth and justification connected to a flawed conception of human rationality. Human rationality depends entirely upon the linguisticality of our concepts. We are all situated within ‘webs of significance’, and justification is a matter not of comparing the concepts within these webs to the external world, to supra-conceptual universal realities accessible

through some pure rational reflection, or to pure transcendental intuitions stripped of
prejudices. Rather, justification is a matter of relating these concepts to one another
according to certain contextually-determined justificatory standards. Following this, the
advocates of a contrast between truth and justification take the obvious fact that my beliefs
may not be justified in all possible contexts of inquiry to mean that I may have justified
beliefs that are not true. That is to say, there is a presumed ‘fact of the matter’ apart from the
contingencies of my linguistic context to which my beliefs may or may not correspond; given
the limitations of our present background knowledge, modes of discourse, theories of
justification, prejudices, etc., I may have a belief meets certain (contingent) standards for
justification, but may not satisfy that correspondence to which I aspire. Rorty considers this
contrast to be nonsensical. For one thing, how could I know that my belief is not only
justified but also true? If I claim that a belief is true, then I claim that it is eminently justified,
that no standards of justification will ever come along to challenge this. But how could I
possibly know this? Perhaps because I can somehow see a reality distinct from the grounds of
justification? Whatever we might consider this ‘seeing’ to be, it would only be further
grounds for justification. At any rate, this language of ‘seeing reality’ is just a circumscripive
way of moving about within our linguistic horizons, not transcending them as the term
implies. Rorty’s basic argument, then, is that all we do or can aspire to is to broaden our
context of justification for our beliefs to include more people, more traditions of inquiry, etc.;
adding some further element of ‘truth’ that we also want our beliefs to aspire to is absurd: we
can only aspire to that which is attainable. Since nothing more than justification is attainable,
then aspiring towards ‘truth’ should not be taken to mean anything more than aspiring
towards further justification, which is, as we have said, bringing others within our linguistic
horizons.

More precisely, Rorty argues that the only way in which we should use the concept
truth in a different sense than justification is a ‘cautionary’ one. When we say something like,
‘this belief may be justified, but it still may not be true,’ what we should mean is, ‘this belief may be justified here, now, but there may be other contexts in which it is not justified.’ Any further use of truth as ‘that which transcends all contexts of justification,’ which would encompass terms like ‘universal’, ‘necessary,’ ‘unconditional’ and so forth, since they putatively refer to a ‘reality’ beyond the reach of our horizons, have no use in political or moral theory and practice, or indeed any theory or practice whatever (save perhaps logic and mathematics, which I will leave aside here).

Critics such as Habermas agree that claims to justification are dependent on the norms embedded in the context of our linguistic practices, but that if we reduce validity claims to justification we have undermined the emancipatory possibilities of democratic societies. We cannot ground the claim that racism, sexism, homophobia and the like are not only unjustified, they would be unjust—unjustified in themselves—even if the norms and concepts of a particular context would seem to provide a justification for these practices and beliefs. When we make a claim like, ‘not only is racism unjustified…it’s wrong, period,’ Rorty would take this to mean, ‘…and I am willing to defend this claim against anyone anywhere;’ Habermas, on the other hand, thinks that this should mean something like, ‘even if a society managed to convince everyone that it is justified, they would still be wrong.’ There is a truth, a fact of the matter about who we are as human beings that preludes racist attitudes and practices, a truth that transcends the contingences of a particular society’s norms and conceptions. This is what we are referring to when we claim that racism is ‘wrong, period.’

Rorty simply responds by reiterating that such a claim only has meaning if this ‘fact of the

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5 Rorty often speaks of this as ‘future contexts of justification’, but I think this is a bit misleading. All that I think he means by that is to say that there may be contexts in which we attempt to justify our beliefs but fail (which would obviously be in the future to the one doing the justifying). But ‘future contexts in which justification fails’ can connote an Enlightenment conception of ‘progress’ which would be unfriendly to his position. That is, someone might take this to imply that our context of justification is ‘better’ than previous ones but not as good as future ones. But Rorty would point out that this only makes sense when we talk about ‘better’ with respect to some ideal context in which justification and truth are coextensive, rather like the picture Habermas has in mind. To avoid misunderstandings, then, Rorty should forego ‘future contexts of justification’ in favor of ‘other’ or ‘different’.

matter’ is something to which we can have access beyond our norms and conceptions—i.e., beyond the capacities for justification. Without such access, the claim remains empty, and we should instead seek to convince others to adopt our point of view on race relations. There’s simply no point in saying, ‘I think racism is wrong for these reasons…and I think “racism is wrong” is true.’ At best it is akin to the foot stamp (a la Arthur Fine); but most likely it is either empty or misleading.

A somewhat different but ultimately related argument leads Rorty to conclude that there is no fundamental split between the methodology of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). The heyday of logical empiricism found philosophers arguing that human behavior is subsumable under the methodologies, laws and formal languages that scientists use to uncover the secrets of the natural world, thus giving rise to such Geisteswissenschaften schools as behaviorism and rational choice theory. Critics came from all sides, but most important for our purposes were those who followed in the Dilthyian and especially the Heideggerian tradition, who maintained that since the subjects of the Geisteswissenschaften are beings embedded in a world of values and meanings internal to their thought and behavior – an embeddedness shared also by the scientist – objectification of a sort that would reduce them to ‘objects’ of analysis like rocks and cells to which we might apply a deductive-nomological model of explanation cannot be done without destroying the very meaning of the phenomena they wish to explain. Since the subjects of the human sciences ‘speak’ to us, their utterances must be interpreted. Thus, the human sciences must be hermeneutical in a way the natural science methodologies cannot be, and so there must be a fundamental disunity between the sciences.

Rorty reclaims the unity not through a return to the positivist foundations, of course, but by his own take on the universality of hermeneutics: the Naturwissenschaften are just as hermeneutical as the Geisteswissenschaften, and the disunity claim presupposes that the
former are still concerned with the knowledge of some external reality. In the post-Kuhnian theoretical landscape the claim of scientific ‘realism’ to a language that is value-free and thus corresponds to empirical reality is replaced by the recognition that the language natural scientists is just as theory-laden, just as constituted within a ‘web of meanings’ as that of the social scientists. So the fact that the objects of the social sciences are constituted within a web of conceptual interrelations does not set them apart from the objects of the natural sciences. Moreover, the point made by the disunity proponents that the subjects of the human sciences ‘talk back’, in a sense, ultimately makes no difference from Rorty’s point of view. What the subjects actually say would only be relevant if there was a ‘truth’ that coincided with what the person says. But since interpretation is not concerned with this, then it ultimately makes no difference whether the human scientist describes her subject matter in her own language or that of the subject. It may make a difference in practice, to be sure, since it might be more pragmatically useful to use the subject’s own language to explain what they do; but it does not make a difference to whether or not the human scientist is giving the true interpretation or explanation. And finally there is no sense in appealing to a difference in essence between natural subjects and human subjects: without the language of realist metaphysics, we can no longer appeal different essences as a ground of the distinction. Thus there is no fundamental difference between what the Geisteswissenschaften do as opposed to the Naturwissenschaften if we take the Rortian position that hermeneutics dispenses with the relevance of a truth beyond our language.

The previous discussions sought to give a sense of how Rorty’s rejection of truth as correspondence to something that transcends our language bears upon his views on morality and politics on one hand, and in the unity of the sciences debate on the other. In each case a critical point is that the ways we understand ourselves, our world and our practices revolve around language: they begin in the linguistically embedded concepts, norms and modes of

discourse, and only develop as we “tie together the various things previously said in new and perspicuous ways.” He calls this sort of practice a ‘fusing of horizons’ (Horizontverschmelzung), a term by which he betrays his affinity for Gadamerian language. Indeed the reading that he gives to Gadamer’s slogan, “Being that can be understood is language,” in the article of the same title as well as elsewhere, suffuses the ideas above with hermeneutical glosses. Once we realize that “the notions of real essence and of truth-as-correspondence stand or fall together […] Gadamer’s slogan gives us a way of sweeping both aside. […] It is a suggestion about how to redescribe the process we call ‘increasing our understanding.’” Again, in this process, the struggle to understand is a struggle to develop more pragmatically useful languages, to redescribe what another person says to me or I to her in a way that allows us to reach agreement, and ultimately to find new and better ways of coping with the world; it is not to understand a ‘thing’ (Sache) better, understood as “something separated from us by an abyss.” This way of conceiving the object of our understanding holds onto the “metaphysical dross” that we should think of Gadamer as throwing out. The Gadamerian conception of the Sache, according to Rorty, is “forever up for grabs, forever to be reimagined and redescribed in the course of an endless conversation.” If Rorty is right, that the Sache is not to be thought of as something transcendent that has pertinence to our hermeneutical practices, then the process of understanding, of redescribing and Horizontverschmelzung, is not a question of “whether the relations expressed in a new vocabulary are really there,” as the metaphysician asks; rather, “the Gadamerian will as only whether they can be woven together with the relations captured by previous vocabularies in a helpful way.”

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8 Rorty (2004) 24
10 Rorty (2004) 24
11 Ibid. 29
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid. 27
II

So we have seen that Rorty reads and appropriates the Gadamerian language as basically supporting the pragmatist position on truth and objectivity outlined above. Before we sort out the wheat from the chaff, however, and offer up a critique of Rorty from the Gadamerian perspective, we will briefly examine the development of the history of hermeneutics as Gadamer recounts it in *Truth and Method*, paying particular attention, naturally, to the first of the title characters.

Gadamer reckons Schleiermacher to be the first to really bring hermeneutics out from under the confines of Biblical studies into a broader concern with understanding and interpretation in general. Yet he did this by giving a somewhat radical twist on Biblical hermeneutics. Schleiermacher addresses that problematic by insisting on the centrality of the personal encounter with scripture—letting the text address the individual believer as if it was written specifically to him. The goal was to discover the faith experience that produced this text, amounting to a sort of divination process whereby the interpreter makes the text intelligible by a ‘re-creation of the creative act.’ This characteristically Romantic move involves a bracketing of the ‘truth element’ in favor of the pure understanding of a singular experience—the experience of life—thus marking a break from the Hegelian concern with Absolute Reason becoming transparent to itself. However, he maintains Hegelian residues by suggesting that hermeneutics essentially aims to ‘understand a writer better than he understood himself,’ perhaps by revealing what had been unconscious in the original producer. For Schleiermacher (unlike Hegel), this is ultimately an understanding not of the Absolute Truth or even the subject matter itself (pace the Rationalists and Empiricists) but of

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15 TM 187.
16 TM 192. Gadamer notes that the idea of understanding better than the author was present in Kant and Fichte as well, but in their writings it carried the sense of having a greater clarity into the content of the author’s insights themselves. This ideal, Gadamer notes, has occupied philosophy for ages before Kant, so Schleiermacher can be seen as offering a rather radical sort of take on this idea compared with his predecessors.
the creative expression; indeed, the claim to understand better is only possible because of the independence of hermeneutics from the knowledge of such things themselves. This has to do with the inherent freedom in a creative expression, indeed a kind of “divine productivity,” which he saw as rising above the content of the text itself.

Schleiermacher’s influence on Gadamer included the broadening of hermeneutics beyond Biblical or even textual interpretation to the more general mode of interpreting other people and the world, as well as acknowledging the limitations of rationality in interpretation, and the turn to ‘life’. Gadamer’s critique of Schleiermacher centers, though, on the problem of historical understanding. He argues that the ideal of ‘con-geniality’ (recreating the experience of the author, getting into his mind) ignores the differences of interpretive frameworks whenever there is historical distance (which Gadamer will extend to any distance at all: cultural, linguistic, etc.). In questioning the Romantic ideal, however, Gadamer does not reject their basic critique of Hegel; that is, human finitude precludes a return to the notion of the Absolute Truth as the object of shared or superior understanding. However, in a move critical for our purposes, neither will Gadamer with not accept the bracketing or subordination of truth in understanding to the pure creative expression. We must see the hermeneutical life as one that is finite and historically conditioned, and yet in spite of – or more precisely, because of this – it must nevertheless approaches the subject matter with a presumption that what it says is true, part of what Gadamer calls the foreconception of completeness. The discussion of what this is and how it helps us address Rorty’s concerns, however, needs to be preceded by a brief turn to Dilthey, in whom the emphasis on the historical effect takes shape, but in whom Gadamer also sees all the dilemmas of historicism brought out.

Dilthey sought the structure of historical understanding in ‘life’, in collective lived experience. This involved a transference of Hegel’s Geist from the level of a mental, rational construct to the concrete—i.e., to the ‘lived’. In this way he also goes beyond
Schleiermacher’s ‘mind knowing mind’, which retains inherent individualism and idealism. Dilthey emphasized the continuity or homogeneity of historian and history in the shared lived experience of history: the history which the historian attempts to understand is one in which he himself participates. Gadamer’s main criticisms, though, have to do with Dilthey’s insistence on developing a methodology of historical science. Indeed, Gadamer finds in this a lingering remnant of Cartesianism: the methodological enterprise still presupposes that the historicist can stand outside or beyond the subject-matter, from which he forms and applies the methodology—hence historicism’s dilemma. “Understanding,” Gadamer maintains, is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of a tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method.¹⁹

This statement reveals two more aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that will be crucial later on, especially as we address the unity of the sciences issue. First, the de-emphasis on methodology aligns him with those who reject the positivist construal of the unity of the sciences, and, more generally, those who take methodology as a means to knowledge of things-in-themselves. The second point, however, is that he is quick to point out that this entails a rejection of a subject-centered hermeneutics which takes insufficient account of the conception of history as a narrative in which we participate as we attempt understand it. When seen in the light of further details of his hermeneutics, this will entail a concern to preserve and refine the truths of these traditions in which we participate.

To move on, we have already seen that Gadamer’s critique of Schleiermacher involved the neglect of historical distance, and Dilthey’s problem involved the neglect of historical effect. The problem, then, is more fundamental: hermeneutics cannot begin in the detached subjectivity; rather, following Heidegger, hermeneutics begins in Dasein’s fundamental facticity, which is to say that it cannot begin with any assumptions about the sort

¹⁹ TM 290, his emphasis.
of being that Dasein is—conscious, rational, historical, and so forth. For Heidegger the Being that is given to this Dasein is temporality, which for Gadamer will, along with Dasein’s finitude, provide the conditions for the possibility of understanding.

Gadamer inherits from Heidegger the tripartite scheme of understanding, corresponding to the three modes of Dasein’s temporality. The first dimension of the scheme, fore-having (vorhabe), is the frame of reference from which hermeneutics proceeds: I interpret something into an existing structure of prejudices and preconceptions. Second, fore-sight (vorsicht) is the dimension where I apply my understanding in such a way that I recognize the object of understanding as an object of a certain sort: I see it in a certain way. The third dimension of understanding is the fore-conception (vorgrift), where I articulate it in such a way that can be understood or make sense to others. These three dimensions are involved in the ‘hermeneutic circle’: in terms of textual interpretation, understanding always begins from somewhere with certain prejudices and expectations as to the meaning of a text as a whole; we project these prejudices onto the text, but when the text does not validate our projections, we find that we have to return and revise our preunderstandings in light of what we find there. So hermeneutics is circular in the sense that it always moves from whole to part and back to whole again, never escaping our prejudices but never wholly bound to them either: our prejudices are able to be corrected in light of what we encounter in the text. For Gadamer, as we noted before, all the world is a text in this way; that is, all experience is hermeneutical. Like Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer agree that our prejudices color our understandings such that so long as they are operative, we can never get to the essential reality of things. But unlike Husserl, they do not think that the solution is to bracket our prejudices so as make essences available before pure reflective intuition. Rather, all understanding must be structured by prejudices in some way for it to be possible at all; we can never attain a ‘view from nowhere’, or pretend to theorize from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ to find some neutral,

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20 See especially ¶32 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time.*
universal common ground for knowledge. Understanding, then, can never be, for Gadamer, a matter of seeing things ‘as they really are’.

To state the point a bit differently, the facticity of being-in-the-world means that our idea of understanding must recognize the finitude of Dasein. Dasein’s finitude precludes the ability to step outside the conditionedness of lived experience to take a universalistic perspective on the world. The universalistic perspective and the grasping of what is real, eternal, or apodictic, the correspondence of our language and thought to what transcends it—all of this requires Dasein to overcome its finitude and direct its mind to something beyond it. Yet for an essentially finite being, this is an absurdity. Dasein can no more transcend the limitations of its finitude than it can become something that it is not. Thus are the possibilities for understanding limited by finitude. Understanding can never be completed, as that which we may seek to understand will always lie beyond our finite capabilities, and thus any claim to a correspondence of what we understand to what is real or true or universal can never be validated.

So far, then, our discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics has tended to agree with much of Rorty’s claims regarding it. He has agreed that understanding cannot involve escaping from one’s horizons of meaning and significance, by seeing the essences of things, getting into another’s mind, or discovering truths provided by the exercise of pure rationality. The methodology of Dilthey, moreover, Rorty also finds dubious, for a method presumes to have a truth or essence as its goal. But this cannot be attained unless the historian can somehow detach himself from his own biases to objectively apply the methodology and examine the reality that one finds there. Instead, they both seem to agree that our finitude and the inescapability of the hermeneutical circle mean that hermeneutics cannot be a method to arrive a truth-as-correspondence, to break free, as it were, from the circle of understanding, which leads to the universality of the hermeneutical problem. Rorty concludes from this,

21 Rorty (1980)
again, that the best we can do is to find new and useful ways of speaking, attempting to fuse
our horizons with those of our partners in discourse if that helps; but given the confines of the
hermeneutical circle, it no longer makes any sense to ask if our interpretations are ‘right’, our
language capture the ‘way things are’, if there is a ‘truth’ beyond the circle of understanding
that I or the text bring to the conversation. I suggest, however, that in coming to these
conclusions Rorty has misunderstood the nature of the hermeneutical circle, at least as
Gadamer sees it.

The consequences of finitude and historical effect, and the rejection of truth-as-
correspondence by Gadamer do not entirely dissolve the importance of truth, as we saw in his
critique of Schleiermacher’s truth-bracketing hermeneutics; and in fact it necessitates that we
maintain a central role for it. This idea gets articulated in what we briefly alluded to earlier as
the fore-conception of completeness. Contrary to a hermeneutics in which we always
approach a text with the suspicion that something in its meaning is hidden from us, and
contrary to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics which is no longer about content but about
expression, the fore-conception of completeness assumes that what the text—what
confronts us directly—is complete, and we initially project meaning with this presumption.
That is to say, we project a meaning on the text as a whole based on what we encounter in its
parts. Uncovering hidden meanings, trying to recreate the mind of the author—these only
take place when on the basis of the projections the presumption of completeness “proves
mistaken—i.e., the text is not intelligible.”22 We then return to the parts and see them in a
different way, and from there return to the whole—the hermeneutical circle, once again. But
Gadamer goes on to emphasize that the initial presumption regards the content as complete
not merely internally—that is, not simply as internally coherent; that is, “not only does the
reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the

22 TM 294, my emphasis.
constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said.”

Here we have the first substantial indication that Gadamer distances himself from Rorty. In Rorty’s perspective, for instance, it would make little sense to make a distinction between the content of what is said as ‘opinion’ and content that is ‘true’, in the sense that the latter transcends opinion. And yet Gadamer maintains, on the contrary:

It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’ the text, psychologically or historically, as another’s opinion. The prejudice of completeness, then, implies not only this formal element—that a text should completely express its meaning—but also that what it says should be the complete truth.

I hope to show that this prejudice of truth is about, in an interesting and relevant way, a reality that transcends our conceptions, language, and modes of justification—viz., it is more like those conceptions of truth that Rorty thinks should be rejected than his own (merely) cautionary conception. The difference between Gadamer and Rorty, I suggest, largely comes down to a difference between a conception of truth that we attain versus a conception of truth that affects us. To explain: Rorty thinks that for considerations of truth to be relevant to our theories and practices, it must be something that we would in principle be able to rationally achieve; put differently, to say that a theory or practice should be concerned with truth is to say that it is supposed to enable us to attain positive correspondence of our ideas, representations, beliefs, linguistic terms, or whatever, to this reality. Of course, since Rorty thinks that this correspondence is not possible, nor does that matter, ‘truth’ is not a relevant notion beyond the weak cautionary gloss he gives to that term. Gadamer, on the other hand, agrees that this positive achievement of correspondence is not possible, but does think it makes a difference. This is because the relevance of truth is not, as Rorty thinks, limited to something with which we can bring ourselves into correspondence. Rather truth is something that affects us; as Edward Tingley says, quoting Gadamer, the “‘miracle of

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23 TM 295
24 TM 297
language’ [is] the miracle of a presence that ‘asserts its own truth in being understood.’ We are talking about the ‘great experience in which what is reveals itself.’” 25 There’s a difference in directionality involved in these two conceptions—the one Rorty rejects and the one Gadamer endorses. Rorty rejects a conception in which the truth stands passively outside of us, and we have to direct ourselves towards it; Gadamer endorses a conception in which the truth outside of us is active, directing itself towards us; hermeneutics is thus an openness to the ways in which the truth might reveal itself. This, as we will see, is crucial to hermeneutics: without maintaining a robust conception of a transcendent truth, the fore-conception of completeness changes its meaning, as does the central requirement of openness, and thus hermeneutics itself.

III

We will flesh out and defend these claims by first looking at one way in which this conception of truth makes a difference specifically to textual hermeneutics through the phenomenon that Gadamer calls the Classical; 26 this application of the role of truth in hermeneutics should clarify it in such a way that we can see how it makes a difference to the critique of Rorty’s position on ethics and politics and to the unity of the sciences.

The concept of the classical brings together the critiques of Schleiermacher’s neglect of historical effect as well as the critique of historicism’s emphasis on methodology in a way that acknowledges Rorty’s concerns but also responds to them in this alternative way that we have been exploring. The ‘classical’, in Gadamer’s sense, does not refer just to a particular period of aesthetic history, nor a particular literary style. They are neither texts that we approach nostalgically in such a way that we try to ‘re-experience’ the thought and spirit of a by-gone age, endeavoring towards a kind of self-forgetting and unconcern with a truth beyond the experience of con-geniality with the past. This is the Romantic ‘nostalgia’ that Schleiermacher succumbs to. Nor are they texts that exemplify a literary or artistic ‘style’,

26 See TM 285-290 for Gadamer’s treatment of this subject.
models of a kind of methodology that we could in principle reproduce. Again, this latter position would be a concern not with the content of what is said through these texts, rather the manner in which the classical artists expressed their values, norms and ideas. Gadamer instead sees the classical as a phenomenon wherein a text incorporates a kind of ‘perennial truth’\textsuperscript{27} that survives the contingencies of historical distance. As Gadamer explains, it epitomizes a general characteristic of historical being: preservation amid the ruins of time…The classical preserves itself precisely because it is significant in itself and interprets itself; i.e., it speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past…rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it.\textsuperscript{28}

The classical claims an authority to speak to us regardless of whether we want to hear it; i.e., regardless of what use its words might have to our purposes or the prejudices and norms of the audience to which it speaks. In this way it resists reduction to linguistic convention or to the proclamations of historical criticism: the “binding power of the validity that is preserved and handed down precedes all historical reflection and continues in it.”\textsuperscript{29}

We have been concerned here to explicate what it would mean for transcendent truth to reveal itself once we’ve rid ourselves of the possibility of correspondence. The ‘classical’, as something “raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes” shows us something of this:

When we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time—a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.\textsuperscript{30}

Its importance lies both in revealing that there is something transcendent that can bring itself to bear on our understanding by overcoming the limitations of language and historical effect, as well as impressing upon us the importance of a hermeneutics that opens itself up to this
truth, not in order to passively observe it, seeing it ‘as it is in itself’, but rather allowing it to speak and transform our horizons.

More generally, what this means is that through the presumption of truth we open ourselves up hermeneutically to the transformative effect that this truth can have on our prejudices, and thus our understanding. To be sure, this prejudice does not entail that we can fully recognize the content of the text as the truth; such a claim would lapse back in a correspondence claim that cannot be substantiated. Nevertheless, neither does this concession entail that the truth is irrelevant to our understandings; rather it is the openness to the truth of what being said that allows that which transcends our capabilities to draw us closer to itself through the conversation with the text—in this case, the conversation with the classical.

Through the notion of the presumption of truth and the discussion of the classical, we have already seen that Gadamer holds to a notion of truth that is more than just a set of descriptions. In this way, understanding—and by extension, the concern to justify our beliefs and values—must be open to the effect of something beyond the “norms of justification (for assertions and for actions) we find about us.” However, in an earlier writing from which the foregoing quote was taken, Rorty maintains that this very concern with something outside of ‘sets of descriptions’ is “self-deceptive.” So if I am right that the presumption of truth and the example of the classical reveal that Gadamer is indeed concerned with this ‘something more’, then it seems that Rorty’s appropriation of Gadamer misses something rather central to his hermeneutics. We will now see how this leads to different attitudes regarding the debates in ethics and politics and those of the social sciences.

IV

As a preliminary remark, we should remember that one of the lessons taken from Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics—as well as Dilthey and Heidegger—was the broadening of the problem of hermeneutics beyond textual interpretation. Indeed, the whole world is a text

31 Rorty (1979) 361
in Gadamer’s thought, but perhaps the most important ‘text’ is the voice of the other person. With this in mind, recall Rorty’s argument that the most we can attain in our ethical or political life is justification, which is a sort of coherence or agreement based on received linguistic meanings, norms, and modes of discourse. It would thus be nonsensical and fruitless to ask whether the ethical or political values and conceptions that I or a person I may disagree with bring to the table are ‘true’: the most they could possibly be is justified, but that would depend on one or the other of us in the disagreement convincing the other to see things in a certain way. The ‘truth,’ here, is just an empty concept devoid of pragmatic utility beyond its cautionary use.

Gadamer, as we have seen, thinks, rather, that we do have to approach the text with a presumption that it has something true to say to us. There are two ways in which this will challenge Rorty’s position. First, the notion of the *Sache* will no longer be ‘forever up for grabs,’ as we quoted Rorty at the end of section I. According to Gadamer, Rorty’s sense of nominalism gives us too much control over meanings. We have to allow that there is in the *Sache* a power to constrain us and to overcome the ‘vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes’, as in the truth that the Classical brings down to us. But this can only be so if there is being or reality to meanings, values, and the other objects of ethical and political discourse. To be sure, Rorty does seem to allow for a sort of constraining power of the ‘external world’: “although understanding is always of objects under a description,” he admits, “the causal powers of objects to hurt or help us are unaffected by the way they are described.”

The causal power of the world can certainly affect our ability to ‘cope’ through language, and so constrain this language, especially as it has to do with the world in which we move about. But Rorty would not think that this has anything to do with our concepts corresponding to the world or, along the same lines, that we seek to bring our language closer to reality. It seems, for him, more of a linguistic ‘natural selection.’ Moreover, this would

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32 Rorty (2004) 27
not seem to have anything to do with values, norms, meanings or anything contaminated with ‘metaphysical dross’: it’s not a ‘truth’ that is affecting our abilities to cope though our language and concepts. But for Gadamer, we must enter the ethical or political dialogue not simply with the intention of finding better ways to cope with the world, but with the expectation that there are normative truths that my prejudices and assumptions have distorted, which the partner in the dialogue brings to me, truths that transcend mere ‘getting by.’ We see in the classical these normative truths thrusting themselves upon us even as history and culture finds its own coping mechanisms, through the paradigm changes within the sciences, through the different ways in which cultures may even try to subvert or reduce them. And so it is the concern of the hermeneutically engaged consciousness to open ourselves and allow them to speak into our own horizons.

Unlike Habermas, however, the task is not to distinguish the ‘ethical’ in which norms and values are bound up in our horizons and prejudices, from the ‘moral’ in which rationality seeks to uncover these universals which can form the foundation for a conception of justice. Rorty is right to point to the absurdity and impossibility of this ‘uncovering’ method. But while Habermas, in his critiques of Gadamer, worries that the latter claim will make the critique of prejudices underlying racism and homophobia, for instance, a matter of domination, the non-racists attempting to impose their ideologies on the racists and homosexuals without any transcendent justification for their critique, Gadamer could retort that through this hermeneutical openness to truth, the truth of value and humanity that the homosexual or person of a different race brings to bear will (hopefully) thwart the racist or homophobic projections I may make out of my prejudices. Thus, the real menace to ethics and politics lies on the extremes: the presumption that truth and the grounds of justification

33 To be sure, this may sound a bit naïve and idealistic. However, I think that Habermas is right to be concerned that the alternative seems to risk domination, and that if we can avoid this risk while having rejected Habermas’ own solution, then the naïve and idealistic is at least worth pursing. In the end, perhaps it comes across as naïve and idealistic simply because much the history of ethical and political discourse has itself been operating under a false ideal. In the end, though, a Gadamerian could maintain that at the more local level, these sorts of prejudices are affected all the time, and that’s where broader change must begin.
must be rationally accessible by escaping one’s prejudices, or that there are no ethical or political truths at all that can speak against our prejudices.

If we accept Gadamer’s road between these extremes, then ‘truth’ is not simply that which can be justified in all contexts, for that still places too much of the burden on ourselves to effect that justification by manipulating our language or changing minds; rather, even in that ideal (and rather un-human) world of universal justification, it is still justification on the basis of prejudices, so we would still have to remain open to a transcendent truth that stands beyond them. Basically, Gadamer’s position regarding these issues takes the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, a kind of practical wisdom, to be vital. Through phronesis we are constantly mediating between the ethos in which are ethical and political attitudes are embedded, and the practical knowledge of how to act in a particular situation. But in Gadamer’s thought, Aristotle must be read alongside Kant, who reminds us that the ethical phenomenon includes obligation that is not reducible to inclination. So phronesis must be open to the demands of the situation, a requirement unfulfilled if all that we have an eye towards is what is useful according to my own purposes.

Regarding Rorty’s position on the unity of the sciences, much has been said already that would agree with this analysis of truth in Gadamer. The basic line in these critiques is not to contest the assertion that the natural sciences are just as interpretive as the human ones. The issue, that is, is not whether the positivists, though wrong about the objectivity of human sciences, were nevertheless right when it came to the possibility of an objective, non-theory-laden natural science. In fact, such a position is often what Rorty attributes to his critics: he assumes that they advocate the disunity of the sciences because the Geisteswissenschaften

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deal with values and norms whereas the Naturwissenschaften do not; and because we cannot break out of our own normative prejudices, the former must be treated hermeneutically; but because prejudices (i.e., theories) to not distort the objectivity possible for the latter, the sciences are fundamentally different. If this was their claim, he would be right to object that for the natural sciences to be fundamentally different than the human, it would have to be ‘objective’ as opposed to hermeneutical; for it to be this way, it would have to operate prejudice-free, as it were; but this is impossible, and so there is no disunity.

But this is a distortion of their position, reading into them his own misconception of what hermeneutics is. His reading of hermeneutics begins with the assumption that there is no truth outside of our language relevant to our theories and practices. So the only thing relevant to any science is the fact that our methods and interpretations involve webs of meaning embedded in the vocabulary of the scientific community. Thus, they are both hermeneutical in that all that either science is ultimately concerned with is finding new, more interesting ways of thinking and speaking. But this is a limited hermeneutics, lacking the presumption of truth that is integral not only to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, but functions in some way or another in the theories of those that maintain the disunity of the sciences. This presumption of truth affects the human sciences in a way that it does not affect the natural sciences because the latter, as Warnke observes, involves one ‘web of meaning’ whereas the former involves two: that of the scientist and that of the subject. The web meaning relevant to studying rocks and roaches is simply that of the scientific community, and Rorty rightly eschews the myth that “nature has its own vocabulary which it is the task of natural science to decode.” 35 However, Warnke argues that the human sciences do deal with subjects that have their own vocabularies, and thus “the scientific vocabulary must retain some connection with this vocabulary because it is partially constitutive of what the actions and practices under

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35 Warnke (1985) 346
study are.” This is to say that the subjects of the natural sciences do not speak their own truths into the scientists’ vocabulary in the way that the subjects of the human scientists do when the researchers remain open in the way Gadamer’s hermeneutics implore, by challenging and revising their interpretive horizons. Once again, when we are dealing with subjects that have their own norms, values and conceptual meanings, it is only by approaching them with the presumption that what they say might be ‘true’ (as opposed to merely interesting as a particular community’s way of coping) that we have a standard for revising one’s own initial prejudices.

To generalize the points made regarding ethics, politics and the sciences, each of these contexts is hermeneutical, which is to say that it involves a mediation between different historically effected consciousnesses. But in Gadamer’s thought, this mediation is in reference to a transcendent truth, so that the conversation that is these practices must involve a presumption that through the dialogue, truth will be active in revealing itself, challenging and changing the horizons. This is a different sort of hermeneutics than one which sees the task merely as changing and expanding one’s linguistic horizons according to what is most pragmatically useful, as Rorty exemplifies.

V

We will conclude by reflecting on some remarks that Gadamer has made regarding Rorty’s pragmatism from a published conversation with Riccardo Dottori in light of what we have uncovered in Gadamer and Rorty’s thought. Dottori summaries Protagoras’ self-defense in Plato’s Theatetus in a way that makes him remarkably prescient of a Rortian pragmatism, unconcerned with the ‘good in itself’ or ‘what is true or false,’ rather wanting to convince the other of what would be better for them and the polis. Dottori suggests that “we could look at this self-defense of Protagoras…as the first elaboration of a pragmatic position

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36 Ibid. 347
38 Ibid., 41-52
that’s being accepted and defended once again by Richard Rorty. Politics isn’t a question of the good in itself but of the better…Protagoras often repeats that one cannot persuade the other of what is true or false, but only of what is more useful to him or of what is better for him.”39 When asked how he would respond to this position, Gadamer admits that Rorty is right to a certain extent: “in our search for the good we will, at best, hit upon the better, never the good in itself.”40 Thus Rorty is correct that when we engage in discourse we aren’t trying to hit upon the true or the good ‘exactly,’ and so the practical wisdom involved in the sorts of issues we have been focusing on will no doubt be oriented with a view to the pragmatic. But Gadamer goes on to say that,

if in doing this, however, [we] limit [ourselves] to just this—without referring it back to the good—then [we] won’t be able to recognize what the better is in relation to the good, that is, what the better actually is. One really must recognize that the better is actually only the better in relation to a final end. The question is always whether it’s simply a matter of what’s better or whether it is really a matter of what lies beyond every particular purpose.41

The basic presupposition of dialogue, the presupposition of the truth claim, is what distinguishes these two sorts of pragmatisms: the one that pursues the better in relation to my subjective goals and intentions, and the pursuit of the better in relation to something ‘beyond.’ Moreover, like Plato’s Protagoras, Rorty’s attitude towards persuasion mistakenly supposes that the fact that we can never recognize the truth-as-such means that persuasion involves a ‘renunciation of the truth as such.’ Gadamer, however, argues that this attitude, far from being the necessary consequence of historical conditionedness, actually dispenses with the historical horizon. This is because “we are all historically conditioned, and our effective-historical consciousness contains a truth claim…toward which we all strive, even if we never reach it.”42 Hermeneutics is a dialogue in which the Being that lies beyond my norms, concepts and historical horizons, and the language in which they are embedded, nevertheless reveals itself, not by forcing us out of our language, but entering into it through

39 Ibid., 41-42
40 Ibid., 42
41 Ibid., 42-43
42 Ibid., 49
the practicality of the conversation. With an eye and an openness towards Being—to truth beyond justification—we come to understand it as it affects our linguistic horizons. This, I submit, is the essential claim that Gadamer makes in his remark with which we began.