



## Gadamer, Rorty and Epistemology as Hermeneutics

Tom Rockmore

Volume 53, Number 1, février 1997

L'herméneutique de H.-G. Gadamer

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/401043ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/401043ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

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

## GADAMER, RORTY AND EPISTEMOLOGY AS HERMENEUTICS

Tom ROCKMORE

*RÉSUMÉ* : J'entends faire valoir contre Gadamer et Rorty que l'herméneutique et l'épistémologie ne s'opposent pas, mais sont compatibles car, en effet, l'épistémologie est une forme d'herméneutique. Je montrerai ensuite pourquoi il faut développer l'herméneutique au-delà de Gadamer pour enfin résoudre les difficultés épistémologiques dont il s'agit.

*SUMMARY* : Against both Gadamer and Rorty, I will argue that hermeneutics and epistemology are not polar opposites, but compatible, since epistemology is a form of hermeneutics. I will further argue that hermeneutics needs to be developed beyond Gadamer as a way of resolving the epistemological problems.

---

The choice of this title, which is not accidental, is not intended to support, but rather contradict both Gadamer and Rorty. Gadamer maintains that phenomenology, in its hermeneutical form, resolves the problems of epistemology. Rorty, who in part relies on Gadamer, disagrees with Gadamer, since he thinks that the problems of epistemology have not and cannot be solved. Rorty and Gadamer agree that hermeneutics and epistemology are mutually-exclusive, polar opposites. Against both Gadamer and Rorty, I will argue that hermeneutics and epistemology are not polar opposites, but compatible, since epistemology is a form of hermeneutics. I will further argue that hermeneutics needs to be developed beyond Gadamer as a way of resolving the epistemological problems.

In making this argument, I will be trying to rescue hermeneutics from both Gadamer and Rorty, from Gadamer since he thinks that he has solved the epistemological problem that he does not directly address, and from Rorty since he thinks that this problem cannot be resolved by hermeneutics or any other means. Like Rorty I will be appropriating Gadamer's insights for my own purposes. Yet there is nothing exceptional in that. For where is it written that our relation to other thinkers must be restricted to faithful reproduction of their ideas within the context of the questions that

they themselves raise? Gadamer, who is interested in the problem of textual interpretation, borrows insights from the entire hermeneutical tradition, including, say, Heidegger, who is concerned with so-called authentic metaphysics, in elaborating his own theory. Like Gadamer, then, I will be using his insights for a project somewhat different than his own.

## I. RORTY'S ATTACK ON EPISTEMOLOGY

Since Rorty relies on Gadamer, I turn first to Rorty and only then to Gadamer. Rorty, who defies easy categorization, can best be described as a leading anti-epistemological skeptic. He differs from someone like Donald Davidson, who also thinks that there is nothing interesting to say about knowledge, in that Rorty further denies that there is knowledge or even truth. Davidson, who is anything but a skeptic, merely holds that we can dispense with epistemology, since we get along fine without a theory of knowledge. Rorty, who agrees with Davidson, thinks that we cannot have anything called knowledge, so that when someone brings up the question of epistemology the best thing to do is to change the topic.

Rorty's approach can be understood within the decline of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy, which is still the main philosophical current in the English-speaking world, developed as a reaction against British idealism to which certain key analytic thinkers, notably Bertrand Russell, were earlier committed. This movement took the form of a theory of knowledge elaborated independently by three Cambridge thinkers: initially Russell, G.E. Moore and then Ludwig Wittgenstein. Both Russell and Wittgenstein, but not Moore, were influenced by Gottlob Frege, the Austrian logician and philosopher of mathematics. The Vienna Circle represents an off-shoot of analytic philosophy that is strongly influenced by the early Wittgenstein.<sup>1</sup> Those associated with the Vienna Circle and those influenced by them have mainly contributed to analytic philosophy of science.

Rorty, who began as a faithful member of the analytic movement, which he hailed in his anthology on *The Linguistic Turn* as a revolution in philosophy,<sup>2</sup> He later lost the faith. In an important book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he became a severe critic of analytic philosophy and of philosophy in general. Here he recorded his disaffection with the analytic approach to epistemology and with the very idea of a theory of knowledge. According to Rorty, who earlier equated analytic philosophy with all that is best in the contemporary discussion, since analytic philosophy fails, philosophy as such fails and should be abandoned.

Rorty's argument can be quickly summarized as follows: First, he maintains that epistemology began in the seventeenth century with Descartes and continued with Locke and then Kant. He sees the problem of epistemology as centered on the view

1. See, e.g., Victor KRAFT, *Der Wiener Kreis. Der Ursprung des Neopositivismus. Ein Kapitel der jüngsten Philosophiegeschichte*, Wien, Springer-Verlag, 1968.

2. See Richard RORTY, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, 1992.

of the mind as the mirror of nature that attributes to human beings the capacity, as he says, to discover essences. This presupposes that there are essences and that the human mind is able to know them. Human being is defined in terms of this epistemological capacity.

The notion that our chief task is to mirror accurately, in our own Glassy Essence, the universe around us is the complement of the notion, common to Democritus and Descartes, that the universe is made up of very simple, clearly and distinctly knowable things, knowledge of whose essences provides the master-vocabulary which permits commensuration of all discourses.<sup>3</sup>

According to Rorty, the purpose of the invention of the modern view of the mind in the seventeenth century was to justify the idea of a theory of knowledge through privileged representations. Yet although there are representations, there are none that are privileged. In fact, the very idea that there might be such privileged representations is destroyed within analytic philosophy, which is committed to the same program, as in Dummett and Putnam, in Sellars' attack on the myth of the given and in Quine's attack on the two fundamental dogmas of empiricism. "For these two challenges [i.e. Sellars' and Quine's] were challenges to the very idea of a 'theory of knowledge,' and thus to philosophy itself, conceived of as a discipline which centers around such a theory."<sup>4</sup>

In Rorty's view, it is not possible to solve the epistemological problem either in the classical form in which it was raised in the seventeenth century or more recently in analytic philosophy. In that spirit, sure of the demise of any reasonable hope for a theory of knowledge, he turns to hermeneutics that he regards, not as the successor to epistemology, but rather as its antithesis. Epistemology and hermeneutics have nothing in common. Where epistemology is concerned with commensurability, hermeneutics is no more than a way of coping. Epistemology tries to get it right in order to close the discussion, but hermeneutics tries to keep the discussion going by changing the subject. Rorty follows Sellars in holding that what we call knowing is not an empirical description but rather putting the description in an overall conceptual framework. What we call "'objective truth' is no more nor less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on."<sup>5</sup>

## II. RORTY AND GADAMER

Many things could be said about this controversial argument. Rorty's view of epistemology is obviously severely fore-shortened, with strong echoes of the views of certain key figures. He uncritically tends to utilize these views for rather different purposes than those for which they were formulated. Like Foucault, who thinks that a certain idea of man came into vogue in the modern period, Rorty thinks that epistemology is a recent invention. Yet since concern with the problem of knowledge is at

3. Richard RORTY, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 357.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

least as old as Parmenides, at best a new form of epistemology arises, say, with Descartes. The early Wittgenstein thought that knowledge required a picture of reality. Like the later Wittgenstein, who abandoned that view, Rorty thinks that there cannot be a picture of reality, since the mind is not a mirror of the world. The result is skepticism about the possibility of knowledge.

To the best of my knowledge, the term "skepticism" does not occur in Gadamer's writings. Rorty enlists Gadamer in his argument against knowledge. His approach to Gadamer recalls Hirsch, a prominent critic. Hirsch regards Gadamer as offering a polemic against the nineteenth century preoccupation with objective truth and correct method represented, say, by Boeckh on the grounds that interpretation cannot be a science. According to Hirsch, truth cannot reside in recognizing the author's meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Rorty simply applauds what Hirsch rejects. He thinks that he uses "hermeneutics" in a way that links up with the use of this term in writers such as Gadamer, Apel and Habermas. Yet this is certainly questionable. As I read Gadamer, Rorty simply turns Gadamer inside out in claiming that his theory is not a method for attaining truth,<sup>7</sup> that *Truth and Method* is a tract directed against commensuration,<sup>8</sup> that so-called effective history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is less concerned with what is in the world than how to use it for our own purposes,<sup>9</sup> that Gadamer wants to get rid of the distinction between fact and value,<sup>10</sup> etc.

Gadamer is not entirely innocent in the matter. He invites this kind of misreading through the title of his book that clearly recalls the Cartesian impulse running throughout the modern concern with epistemology — although as an anti-Cartesian he holds that there is no method that necessarily yields truth through its correct application. He further invites this misreading through his suggestion, which is the title of a section in the book, about "The overcoming of the epistemological problem through phenomenological research."

### III. GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

Gadamer regards hermeneutics as a form of phenomenology, in the sense that phenomenology, like Dilthey research, depends on explication rather than on explanation.<sup>11</sup> Gadamer has no discernible method, certainly none if compared, say, with Husserl, with whom he wishes to be compared. The suggestion that he offers a method leading to truth can only be intended ironically. For if taken literally or in, say, a Cartesian sense, it invites the kind of reading that Rorty presents but that is

6. See E.D. HIRSCH, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale, 1967, 1979.

7. See RORTY, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 357.

8. See *ibid.*, p. 358, fn. 1.

9. See *ibid.*, p. 359.

10. See *ibid.*, p. 360.

11. See "Kant and the Hermeneutical Turn," in Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley, Albany, SUNY Press, 1994, p. 51.

very far from his intention. Although he claims that hermeneutics is universal, hence arguably part of or even a replacement epistemology, or perhaps a type of epistemology, he does not argue for this claim. He does not, for instance, show that hermeneutics or phenomenology in general "solves" the epistemological problem.

Gadamer's main concern is not general epistemology. He is mainly concerned with hermeneutics as providing a general philological approach to textual interpretation. His starting point is, as he says, the human sciences. He asks the Kantian question: how is understanding possible? Rejecting the Diltheyan distinction between the human sciences and the natural sciences, he maintains that hermeneutics is universal in scope. According to Gadamer, a distinction cannot be drawn between a text and its influence, or effective history, since, as he puts it, "understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood."<sup>12</sup> He claims that this thesis is valid across the board, hence universal, but only in specific historical conditions. "My thesis is that the element of effective-history is operative in all understanding of tradition [...]."<sup>13</sup>

Gadamer, who is concerned to rehabilitate the tradition, has deep traditional roots in Aristotle, in the entire hermeneutical tradition, and in Heidegger. From Aristotle, he borrows the idea of *phronēsis* that he applies to the human sciences and then, beyond them, to all interpretation. Aristotelian *phronēsis* is a practical concept concerning action. According to Aristotle, *phronēsis* is a form of moral intelligence. The man who possesses practical wisdom knows how to deliberate. Practical wisdom is neither a science, nor an art, but a capacity to act well concerning good and evil for man.<sup>14</sup>

Gadamer, who correctly reads Aristotelian *phronēsis* as a practical concept,<sup>15</sup> changes the subject in appropriating the concept for his hermeneutical research.<sup>16</sup> In his discussion of hermeneutics, he does not have in mind practical action in the Aristotelian sense but rather the interpretation of texts. On this point, he follows Dilthey, according to him the originator of modern hermeneutics. If Aristotle provides the idea of *phronēsis* that he then applies to the human sciences, Heidegger offers the view of understanding on which Gadamer relies.

Heidegger loosely follows Schleiermacher, who was the first to formulate a general theory of the understanding that underlies interpretive rules. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops a theory of *Dasein*, or human being, as situated understanding (§ 31) that develops through interpretation (§ 32). According to Heidegger, all interpretation presupposes a prior idea (*Vorhabe*) which it elaborates.

Heidegger's problem is the metaphysical problem of the question of the meaning of Being. Gadamer appropriates Heidegger's theory of understanding for different ends. His most important move is to accentuate the idea of history in order to reha-

12. Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garret Barden and John Cumming, New York, Crossroads, 1989, p. XIX.

13. *Ibid.*, p. XXI.

14. See ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 5, 1104a.

15. See GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 278-289.

16. See *ibid.*, p. 490.

bilitate the notion of tradition. Heidegger, who emphasizes tradition with respect to personal authenticity, rejects it with respect to textual interpretation. His view of the destruction of the history of ontology (§ 6) is intended to return behind the metaphysical tradition in order to take up the question as it was originally raised in ancient Greece.

There is an obvious tension in Heidegger's theory between the idea that textual understanding is hindered by tradition and the view of interpretation as based on a prior understanding. It is as if tradition, correctly, hence selectively appropriated, were central to being or becoming an authentic human being, who needs to authentically reenact the tradition, but a basic obstacle to the correct understanding of the metaphysical problem.

Gadamer exploits this tension for his own hermeneutical purposes. He reinterprets the idea of a prior understanding of a text as prejudice (*Vorurteil*) and then as tradition. He points out that we cannot separate what is being interpreted from the history of its reception. In reading Gadamer, one should never overlook the fact that he was Heidegger's student and that he intends to remain faithful to his teacher to whom he has an almost reverential attitude. Yet, despite his intentions, he is one of Heidegger's severest and most penetrating critics.

We see this, for instance, with respect to textual interpretation. Heidegger is persistently interested in distinguishing between what he calls the vulgar, or inauthentic, and the authentic interpretation of texts. His view that we can return behind the tradition to understand ideas as they were originally expressed resembles the Protestant view of textual interpretation, summarized in the slogan *sola scriptura*. Flacius, for instance, denies the authority of tradition, hence the authority of the Roman Church with respect to the authorized interpretation of the texts. We recall, for instance, the counter-attack launched after the Council of Trent against Flacius by Cardinal Bellarmine in order to show that we cannot correctly interpret texts out of the historical context of their reception.

In denying that what is to be interpreted can be separated from the history of its interpretation, in characterizing interpretation as based on the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), Gadamer turns Heidegger's view of situated understanding against him. If we can only interpret from where we are, then we can never return behind the tradition to take up again the questions posed in the early Greek discussion as they were originally raised. For the distinction between a vulgar form of textual interpretation, influenced by the tradition, and one that is authentic, because free of traditional influences, totally collapses. If this is the case, then one can no more provide an authentic reading of an author, say, Nietzsche, than one can understand the original way that the early Greeks raised the metaphysical question. In this way, Gadamer simply undermines the entire project of fundamental ontology.

## IV. GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

According to Hegel, all claims to know belong to the historical moment in which they are formulated. Gadamer, who is closer to Hegel on this point than to Heidegger, is only dimly aware of the epistemological consequences of this idea. Although he properly draws the implications of his view for textual interpretation, he does not do so for epistemology in general. He is hampered in this regard in that, although he regards hermeneutics as universal — indeed that is the official thesis of the book — he does not have a firm enough grasp of epistemology even to begin to go beyond textual interpretation to consider the problem of knowledge in general.

Heidegger continually insists on authentic interpretation of the texts, meaning his own reading as opposed to any other. Gadamer, who is mainly interested in textual interpretation, is concerned to show that there cannot be a single correct reading of the texts. If we always and necessarily interpret from our present position within the historical flux, which is constantly subject to change, then we can never exclude alternative readings, except obviously those that are not grounded in the texts. Different readings are always possible, and a choice among them cannot be made solely by appealing to the texts themselves. It can only be made through importing further criteria, such as explanatory richness, as an interpretive framework for construing texts.

One consequence is that textual interpretation is an open-ended process, since each generation can legitimately claim to construe the classical texts differently. A further consequence is that the texts, like the interpretations, are not stable, but constantly change. Since what we interpret is composed of the texts plus the history of their interpretation, the object of interpretation is constantly changing, never finally fixed. For Gadamer, the interpretive process resembles the process of experience that Hegel describes in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In principle, for Hegel our view of the object and the object of the view can coincide, bringing the process to an end, whereas for Gadamer the process is literally endless.

This view is controversial precisely because it suggests that the interpretive process is endless. Critics such as Betti<sup>17</sup> and Hirsch have charged that in rehabilitating the interpretive tradition, Gadamer transforms interpretation into simple relativism. Against Gadamer, Betti urges that the text is autonomous, so that the interpreter can know what the author intended to say in the text. The idea is that meaning can be determined from the text itself. According to Betti, who employs Kantian terminology, Gadamer limits the discussion of hermeneutics to the *quaestio facti* and disregards the *quaestio iuris*. In response, Gadamer argues *ad hominem* that Betti is hostile to phenomenology.<sup>18</sup> Yet this response misses the point, to which Gadamer should have responded that the justification is that the text cannot be isolated from its reception.

Hirsch, who is committed to objective textual interpretation on an essentialist model, maintains that Gadamer grounds his theory in Heidegger's so-called radical

17. See, e.g., Emilio BETTI, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1972.

18. See GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 466.



historicism. He sees Gadamer as maintaining a radical skepticism with regard to historical knowledge. Although Heidegger stresses the historical dimension, it is, however, questionable to regard his commitment to authentic interpretation as radically historicist. It rather seems anti-historicist, since Heidegger is committed to something like absolute interpretive objectivity through authentic textual interpretation despite the historical flux. Heidegger is, then, close to the essentialist model that Hirsch defends. Yet, if Gadamer is right, this model cannot be maintained, since we can never know a text other than as it appears within the interpretive tradition.

The consequence for textual interpretation is clear and important. So far so good. But textual interpretation is a mere subset of the wider question of knowledge, or epistemology in general. It is a mistake to equate one with the other, as certain French writers, notably Ricœur and Derrida sometimes seem to do. The textual approach is interesting, but also intrinsically limited. It is no more plausible to maintain that everything in the world can be reduced to a text than it is, following the Vienna Circle approach to physicalism, to argue that all the sciences can be re-expressed within the language of physics. Language can always be reduced to a text, but much of the human world is not linguistic in form and cannot be expressed as a text without doing violence to it. A description, for instance, of an athletic contest is not the contest itself but merely a representation of it. To deny this point is to deny that there is a distinction between the object and its representation.

## V. HERMENEUTICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Gadamer is correct to maintain the universality of hermeneutics, although he does not provide a convincing argument for this claim. He at best only demonstrates the need to take into account the historical dimension in the interpretation of anything that can be considered as a text. A better argument than anything that Gadamer provides can be constructed by examining the history of epistemology.

The main modern approach to epistemology can be loosely characterized as epistemic foundationalism. By epistemic foundationalism I shall understand a peculiarly influential analysis of the relation of the representation to the object pioneered in the modern philosophical tradition by Descartes and reformulated by a large number of later thinkers.

Epistemic foundationalism arises much earlier. It is already present in Aristotle, who, in the *Posterior Analytics*, argues for a theory based on one or more principles, which neither can be demonstrated nor require demonstration, and from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced. Descartes restates the Aristotelian approach in the form of a theory resting on a single initial principle that can be rigorously demonstrated and from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced. Modern foundationalism, which can take many forms, typically includes an initial principle or principles known to be true, from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced, hence an emphasis on system, a claim for apodictic-

ity, or knowledge beyond the possibility of doubt, a causal theory of perception, and a justification of the inference from the representation to the object.

Stated in this general way, modern epistemic foundationalism is obviously illustrated by numerous theories, including those of Descartes, who introduced its most influential modern form, and Kant. The latter, of course, rarely has anything positive to say about his French predecessor, whom he frequently criticizes, often unjustly, as when he accuses Descartes of denying the reality of the external world.

Kant's critical attitude toward Descartes should not be allowed to hide the deep similarities in their epistemological views, including the emphasis on presuppositionless system that is only extended in Kant, and the concept of the subject as the highest principle from which everything else is deduced. It is hardly an accident that the original synthetic unity of apperception, or "I think [*ich denke*]" that Kant famously claims is able "to accompany all my representations [*Vorstellungen*]"<sup>19</sup> is the exact translation of the Cartesian *cogito*, from *cogitare*. For Kant — as he notes in an important letter from the critical period to Marcus Herz — as for Descartes, the problem of knowledge comes down to justifying the inference from the representation to the object.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to see that the epistemological problem, which runs throughout the entire later discussion, cannot be solved when formulated in this way. If this inference holds, then it must be possible to show that the representation corresponds to the object, or, as Descartes says, that his image of the sun corresponds to the sun. On a causal theory of perception, it can be shown that, if there are ideas in the mind, there must be an external world. Yet there is no way to demonstrate that the image of the sun corresponds to the sun, since there is no way to get outside the subject to compare its representation to the object. In more technical language, we cannot show that the correspondence theory of truth holds.

In the space we have available, it is not possible to develop this argument in detail. Suffice it to say that we cannot remain indifferent to the failure of epistemic foundationalism. If we choose not to return to Greek intuitionism featuring a different grasp of independent reality, and we desire to avoid skepticism, then the only alternative is to appeal to a form of hermeneutics, or a description of the process of knowledge not elaborated prior to and apart from but rather within experience.

The failure of epistemic foundationalism provides a strong argument, perhaps as strong as can be supplied, not, as Rorty would have it, for the alternative to epistemology, since there is no reason to endorse skepticism, but rather for a revised form of epistemology as hermeneutics. For after the conceptual demise of foundationalism, hermeneutics has become the epistemology of our time, the best hope if we are not merely to abandon theory of knowledge. Epistemology is not the polar opposite of

19. See Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith, New York, St. Martin's, B 131, p. 152.

20. See letter to Marcus Herz, February 21, 1772, in Immanuel KANT, *Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-1799*, trans. Arnulf Zweig, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 71.

hermeneutics, or interpretation, since it is merely one, particularly strong, or rigid, interpretation of knowledge.

## VI. HISTORICISM AND COGNITIVE OBJECTIVITY

Gadamer, of course, does not make anything like this argument, in part because (even if his instincts are good) he is neither concerned with nor aware of the wider epistemological debate that surpasses his concern with textual interpretation. I believe that the hermeneutical approach must be carried beyond the point at which Gadamer leaves it to show its promise as an approach to knowledge in general. With that in mind, I want now to consider briefly two issues that Gadamer addresses but that require further discussion, including historicism and cognitive objectivity, and the relation of language and thought. In both cases, my aim will be to give these issues an epistemological formulation that goes beyond what Gadamer has in mind.

By historicism I shall understand the doctrine that human knowledge is irreducibly historical and that there can be no ahistorical perspective. Hegel, whom many writers accuse of favoring an absolute view of knowledge, is in fact a historicist. He restricts claims for knowledge to the perspective of the historical moment that one contingently happens to inhabit. Gadamer is a historicist in the Hegelian mold, since he also denies that we can have claims that surpass the view from where we are. The difficulty, if we cannot claim to intuit an independent real, nor to perceive essences, nor to reason from a principle or principles known to be true to the way world must be experienced, is to reconcile claims for historical contingency and cognitive objectivity.

Gadamer has no way to handle this difficulty since he has no general conception of epistemology, hence of such epistemological questions as the justification of claims to know. Betti is correct to object that Gadamer limits the hermeneutical question to a *quaestio facti* while avoiding the *quaestio iuris*. Gadamer, who points to phenomenology as description, provides two disparate, but unsatisfactory responses to this difficulty. On the one hand, he answers the question of how to justify claims to know if as if description counted as a cognitive justification. Yet description no more counts in this regard than does causality within a naturalistic framework. Epistemological foundationalism, which proposes a justification, fails since it cannot demonstrate the inference from the representation to the object.

On the other hand, Gadamer points to the authority of tradition. Yet obviously tradition is not itself a guarantee of anything. To accept tradition as such would oblige us, say, to accept such traditional practices as anti-Semitism as a valid social criterion merely because it is traditional. Obviously, this won't do. We cannot accept merely any tradition, but only some traditions or perhaps only parts of some traditions. The problem then becomes which tradition or part thereof is acceptable, which only raises the question of cognitive justification in another form.

From a hermeneutical perspective, the answer to this difficulty lies in a reinterpretation of cognitive objectivity that no longer depends on a one to one relation be-

tween the perception and reality or on an inference from a fixed framework of inquiry to the way the world is. The alternative is a view of the social justification of claims to know, where what counts as an explanation is what the best informed people at a given point in time are able to agree on. Gadamer is correct that the only justification we can give is social, but he is wrong to think that tradition as such justifies anything at all.

Unlike Aristotle, I do not claim that our theory requires no justification. Unlike Kant, I do not claim that we can deduce a fixed framework that necessarily holds for all experience. I claim no more than to say that we know merely means that whatever it is that we claim to know agrees with the standards we currently happen to hold. I believe that there have never been stronger epistemic criteria and that we do not in fact require stronger criteria for knowledge.

## VII. LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

There is a further question about relation of language and thought. Gadamer, who is interested in language, maintains that it is where the world and the subject meet. According to Gadamer, when we understand, we understand in language. His view of language includes three claims: 1) to utilize a word, any word, already prejudices the discussion;<sup>21</sup> 2) language opens up an infinity of discussion since it is not, say, a pre-schematism;<sup>22</sup> and 3) hermeneutic discussion guarantees truth, since "what the tool of method does not achieve must — and effectively can — be achieved by a discipline of questioning and research, a discipline that guarantees truth."<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Davidson, who suggests that language must refer to a common world since we understand each other,<sup>24</sup> as speakers of Tagalog understand others speakers of Tagalog, Gadamer is making a rather different claim that what we know we know in language. If this is correct, then we can construe 1) and 2) as follows: 1) suggests that words are like explanatory frameworks; whereas 2) suggests that such frameworks have no limits. To maintain both theses simultaneously, we have to hold that words form an explanatory matrix within which there is no limit to further discussion. The obvious question is why or how this framework guarantees truth, as Gadamer claims.

If by truth we mean anything like getting it right, then hermeneutics obviously abandons this possibility, although perhaps it offers what we can mean by truth after the failure of foundationalism. For if we cannot know the way the world is by linking up our language with the world, say through a semantic theory of reference, we can at least discuss it in language. Gadamer's difficulty is that he apparently does not notice the difference between words, which shape our thoughts, and explanatory matri-

21. See GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 496.

22. See *ibid.*, p. 498.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

24. See, e.g., "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in Donald DAVIDSON, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, New York, Oxford, 1984, p. 199-214.

ces, between natural languages, say Chinese, and a conceptual framework, such as relativity theory.

I believe that Gadamer's view of language is too general to describe our actual practices that consist in formulating general, or holistic, views that we then test, and if necessary revise, in piecemeal fashion, against experience. The hermeneutic process only yields truth if what we mean by this term is agreement around a general view, subject to change, that, as Sellars says, provides us with "the logical space of reasons of justifying and being able to justify what one says."<sup>25</sup> Language is not itself a conceptual scheme about the nature of reality formulated through a hermeneutical process, although such schemes are indeed formulated in this way in language.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

I come now to my conclusion. Against Gadamer, I have argued that hermeneutics, as he understands it, does not resolve the epistemological problem but that it offers promising possibilities. Against Rorty, I have argued that in embracing hermeneutics we need not turn away from epistemology since, after the decline of foundationalism, hermeneutics is our most promising approach to epistemology. Gadamer maintains, but does not demonstrate, the universality of hermeneutics, which he describes but does not justify. I have attempted to supply some of the arguments lacking in Gadamer through a brief remark on the history of modern epistemology. I have also sought to suggest revisions in the understanding of hermeneutics with respect to historicism and language.

Hermeneutics is not an alternative to epistemology. It is rather an alternative to a form of epistemology, which depends on normative interpretation of knowledge. This interpretation has led to an epistemological approach which has long dominated the discussion from Descartes to recent analytic philosophy, which has been persistently committed to making out an impossible Cartesian dream. The interest of hermeneutics is that when we awake, as awake we must, from this dream, we see that it is not an alternative to, but rather a viable approach to epistemology.

---

25. See Wilfrid SELLARS, *Science, Perception and Reality*, London, Routledge, 1963, p. 169.