Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue

Toward a Viable Postfoundationalist Account of Rationality

Paul Healy
RATIONALITY, HERMENEUTICS AND DIALOGUE

What is rationality and how are we to conceive of it today given the major theoretical changes that have profoundly altered our philosophical self-understanding? *Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue* develops a systematic response to these questions, defending an approach to rationality that can meet the demands of a postfoundationalist and pluralistic era.

Engaging critically with the work of Habermas, Gadamer and Foucault, Healy makes the case for a dialogical approach to rationality as a fitting response to postfoundationalist needs. As well as advancing existing scholarship on these theorists, this book contributes to filling a significant lacuna in the literature on rationality, as prefigured by Richard Bernstein and others. By showing how the dialogical approach can resolve two challenging contemporary problems for rationality, it demonstrates how critical engagement with the Continental tradition can facilitate the resolution of aporias arising within the Analytic tradition. It thereby sets the scene for a productive and potentially provocative debate about rationality in the twenty-first century.
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This study is the culmination of a philosophical journey dating from my undergraduate days, when I first became apprised of the problems to which I here attempt to formulate a dialogical response. In a more immediate way, it represents the culmination of almost a decade of sustained research. The development of these ideas has taken a considerably longer time to reach maturity than I originally envisaged not only because of the numerous, multifaceted demands of contemporary academic life but also because, notwithstanding its everyday familiarity, there are relatively few existing works to draw on in which the concept of dialogue attains centre stage. But while the challenge of systematically unearthing the constitutive features of a dialogical conception of rationality and vindicating its merits through engaging with the work of a number of notable recent contributors to this debate has proved to be a more arduous and time-consuming endeavour than I originally envisaged, it has been a correspondingly productive, enlightening and rewarding undertaking. For as well as meeting the pressing need for forging a viable ‘middle way’ between the polarized alternatives of ahistorical theorizing and radical contextualism, I believe the emergent approach has a substantial contribution to make in underwriting a conception of hermeneutic inquiry which can overcome the more telling limitations of existing conceptions. Moreover, as I seek to establish, the dialogical approach can underwrite a cogent response to two long-standing problems in the contemporary literature on rationality, viz. the challenge of elucidating the rationality of paradigm disputes and of cross-cultural communication and inquiry. In addition, the dialogical model also has demonstrable advantages in its application to a number of related areas. For example, as work in progress attests, its credentials are very strong as a productive template for elucidating the rationality of policy debate, for clarifying the conditions necessary for a worthwhile cross-cultural dialogue about human rights and for promoting transformative learning rather than reinforcing fragmentation in the domain of interdisciplinary research.

Since the background to the present study, the rationale for the particular choice of thinkers and issues dealt with are adequately outlined in the introductory chapter along with a chapter-by-chapter overview of the development of key themes, I will confine myself here to a few brief acknowledgements. My thanks are due in the first instance to the dedicated and inspiring teaching staff of the Philosophy Department at University College Cork for originally instilling in me, not just a love of philosophy, but also a nascent desire to tackle the sort of philosophical problems dealt with here in a way that is both intellectually rigorous and practically worthwhile. My thanks are likewise due to the Philosophy Faculty at the Pennsylvania State University who nurtured me intellectually throughout my postgraduate studies. In this regard my special thanks are due to Joseph J.
Kockelmans who, as my thesis supervisor (on a different project), fulfilled the role of mentor—both in virtue of his acute philosophical insight and personal example of a philosophical life well lived—in a way that has had an inestimable influence on my philosophical development ever since. My thanks are also due to Professor Kockelmans for his ongoing friendship, as well as his support for the present project especially in its early stages, when this support was most needed. I also extend my thanks to colleagues and students in the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, the forum wherein these ideas have developed over the past several years. I would also like to thank the School’s Research Committee for its financial support for assistance with the editorial tasks needed to prepare the manuscript for publication, and Michael Dix for his willing and insightful editorial assistance which included compilation of the Bibliography. My thanks are also due to the editorial staff at Ashgate, especially Paul Coulam and Sarah Charters, for their support for this project and their ready assistance in facilitating its timely publication.

Finally, a heartfelt word of thanks to my partner, Margaret, for her love, emotional support, and intellectual encouragement throughout the extended, and at times all-consuming, period during which these ideas were brought to fruition. The effective completion of this work has only been possible with the support and encouragement of all these people, and indeed of numerous others who facilitated its development in more indirect ways.
The intertwinement of philosophy and reason is long-standing and deeply rooted. Indeed, as one commentator has aptly put it: ‘philosophy is, by its own definition, the theory and practice of reason’. Hence in the wake of far-reaching developments that have profoundly altered the philosophical landscape, there is a pressing need to reappraise our operative conception of rationality. In particular, we need to reassess what it means to be rational in terms commensurate with what has been variously termed our ‘postmetaphysical’ or ‘postfoundationalist’ situation. Here, I undertake to vindicate the merits of a specifically dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem. To motivate the case for such a response, it will be productive to review briefly the philosophical paradigm shift that has given rise to our postfoundationalist status.

As Thomas McCarthy reminds us, traditional foundationalist philosophy was defined by ‘the Cartesian paradigm of the solitary thinker’. As is well known, this ‘monological approach’ was characterized by its commitment to a search for secure foundations, by a subject-object divide and a representational theory of knowledge. More specifically, the traditional foundationalist stance was characterized by core tenets of the following sort:

The idea of a basic dichotomy between the subjective and the objective; the conception of knowledge as being a correct representation of what is objective; the conviction that human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice, and tradition; the ideal of a universal method by which we can first secure firm foundations of knowledge and then build the edifice of a universal science; the belief that by the power of self-reflection we can transcend our historical context and horizon and know things as they really are in themselves.

As is also well known, however, since Hegel the tenability of these foundationalist tenets has been severely challenged, resulting in a profound loss of faith in the belief that the monological subject constitutes the indisputable fulcrum in our quest for knowledge and understanding. The long reign of the ‘philosophy of the subject’ has instead come to be displaced by the recognition of the centrality of language in the constitution of the world of our experience. As Madison puts it, the shift from foundationalism to postfoundationalism ‘is thus a shift in paradigms, a shift from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language. For [postfoundationalist] philosophy, to understand something is not, as modernism insisted, to form mental “representations” of it … understanding is, rather, a matter of actively interpreting our world experience—by means, precisely, of language’.

Correlatively, a long-standing belief in atemporal truths and unconditioned knowledge has had to give way to acknowledgement of the inherent finitude and situatedness of human understanding and recognition of our irrevocable embeddedness in socio-
historically constituted language communities. And while this disenchantment with belief in atemporal truths and indubitable foundations has liberated exciting new possibilities for knowledge and understanding, it correspondingly raises the spectre of relativism and indeed irrationalism. As Madison again reminds us, this is essentially because the ‘linguistic turn’ spells the demise of the foundationalist tenet that ‘for truth to exist there must be some sort of “extralinguistic” reality that can be “accessed” and can thus serve as an “objective” criterion against which the “correctness” of our language can be measured’. The problem is exacerbated because postfoundationalism valorizes the legitimacy of a plurality of standpoints and interpretations over an absolute or acontextual conception of knowledge or truth, while seemingly failing to provide a means of reliably adjudicating between these competing interpretations and standpoints. The resultant state is aptly epitomized in the postmodernist belief that ‘There are no truths, only rival interpretations’, with no principled means of adjudicating between them. As a corrective, we need to keep firmly in mind the realization that: ‘The postfoundationalist thesis is not that language is all there is but, rather, that all that is and can be for us is by means of language’. Consequently, as Madison goes on to contend, ‘[p]hilosophy can be without foundations, and yet not be “free-floating”’. Clearly, however, the passage from foundationalism to postfoundationalism ‘imposes’ on us ‘the obligation’ of ‘redefining what it means to be “rational”’. It is to the discharge of this ‘obligation’ that the present study is devoted. But then, just how are we to respond to this challenge?

As already intimated, the aim of the present project is to vindicate the merits of a specifically dialogical response to the aporias generated by the demise of the philosophy of the subject. In so doing, I defend the contention that a dialogical response is especially well suited to the defining characteristics of our postfoundationalist situation, beginning with our acknowledged situatedness and finitude. Importantly, it can do justice to the emerging recognition that intersubjective criticism and debate hold the key to the rigorous critical appraisal of proffered knowledge claims following the eclipse of a sovereign conception of subjectivity. Notably too, the tenability of a dialogical response to our postfoundationalist situation has been foreshadowed by a number of prominent contemporary commentators, and especially by Richard Bernstein. In this connection Bernstein perceptively draws our attention to ‘a new conversation’ about human rationality that ‘is now emerging among philosophers’ and that ‘has important ramifications for both theoretical and practical life’. Moreover, the ‘contours’ of this renewed conversation about rationality have, he tells us, ‘recently taken on a new and exciting shape’. In particular, when we think through what the major contributors to this debate are saying and try to discern a common theme running through this ‘new conversation’, ‘we are led back to the fragile, but persistent “ideal” of dialogical communicative rationality’. But while Bernstein has thus highlighted the need for a specifically ‘dialogical’ account of rationality, he has not himself undertaken its systematic development. Hence the motivation for the present study, wherein I undertake to carry through on the challenge of systematically developing a dialogical conception of rationality, which can do
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justice to the possibilities and constraints inherent in the ‘new and exciting shape’ assumed by the contemporary philosophical conversation.

To this end, in the chapters that follow I engage critically with the work of Jurgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Michel Foucault, theorists who are widely recognized as major contributors to the new conversation informing our contemporary philosophical self-understanding. These theorists have been selected over other possible candidates not only because of their demonstrable relevance to the contemporary debate about rationality but also because, notwithstanding significant differences in the texture and structure of their philosophical outlooks, there are numerous, though frequently concealed, points of interrelation, and overlap, in their respective approaches. In particular, through sustained analysis it is possible to uncover a strong dialogical undercurrent in their thinking, not evident at first sight but constituting a potent connecting thread between them, even if an element of ‘destructive retrieve’ is needed to liberate these implicit possibilities. Through thus becoming acquainted with aspects of these philosophers’ work that tend to remain overlooked or underdeveloped in other studies, we stand to gain invaluable insight into the constitutive features of a specifically dialogical conception of rationality fully commensurate with contemporary postfoundationalist needs. As a propaedeutic to the detailed analysis in the chapters that follow, let us now briefly take stock of what these theorists have to offer in terms of advancing the case for a specifically dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem and elucidating its constitutive features.

Given his sustained involvement with the contemporary rationality problem, I first engage critically with the work of Jurgen Habermas. Engagement with Habermas is especially productive in reinforcing the need to sever completely our ties with the ‘philosophy of the subject’ in favour of an explicit recognition of the inherent intersubjectivity of our claims to knowledge and truth, deriving from their irrevocable embeddedness in language. Habermas is also especially insightful in diagnosing the threats to rationality to which our embrace of the ‘linguistic turn’ gives rise. In particular, he is acutely aware of the extent of the contextualist threat that eventuates in virtue of the diverse and allegedly sui generis character of the paradigms, linguistic formations, and worldviews that the break with foundationalist thinking both supports and serves to legitimate. Thus his acute awareness of the intellectual paralysis engendered by a rampant postmodernism makes him a committed advocate of the urgent need to formulate a non-relativistic conception of reason and truth with the capacity to serve as a bulwark against the contextualist threat brought about by our unavoidable break with the presuppositions of the ‘philosophy of consciousness’. As constituting the most effective response to both challenges, Habermas vigorously defends the need for a distinctively ‘communicative’ approach to rationality, grounded in an intersubjective exchange of validity claims. But while Habermas’s core intuitions about the inherently intersubjective and discursive character of contemporary rationality are sound and set the scene for the formulation of a viable postfoundationalist response to the rationality problem, it is nonetheless the case that his contribution to ‘redefining what it means to be “rational”’ for our times remains demonstrably flawed. From our perspective, the most telling limitation is
Habermas’s embrace of a set of ‘idealizing presuppositions’, which he insists are necessary as bulwarks against radical contextualism and relativism in the wake of the linguistic turn. The core problem here is that his continued invocation of these idealizations is profoundly at odds with the reality of our status as irrevocably situated inquirers, something he also acknowledges to be definitive of our postfoundationalist situation. Indeed, his embrace of these idealizations is all the more problematic given his explicit repudiation of the possibility that we can approximate ‘the extra-mundane perspective of a God’s-eye view’, and his correlative cautions about the dangers of falling prey to what he terms ‘the objectivist fallacy’.16 As I contend, clear awareness of the irrevocable situatedness of contemporary reason enjoins us to engage in a systematic critique of the main idealizing presuppositions with a view to generating a more defensible, detranscendentalized alternative which can preserve rationality and truth while doing full justice to our inherent situatedness and the other characteristics definitive of our postfoundationalist status. This critique serves to confirm the merits of a specifically dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem, while enabling us to begin to gain insight into its constitutive features. But valuable as is his contribution in this regard, it becomes clear that the further development of our core theme requires us to have recourse to core hermeneutic insights largely neglected, or downplayed, by Habermas himself.

In chapter 2, then, we turn to the consideration of key aspects of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s contribution to this debate. In response to critics who focus one-sidedly on his ontological concerns, I begin by vindicating Gadamer’s epistemological relevance. Thereafter, I contend that because his philosophical hermeneutics is especially well attuned to the defining characteristics of our postfoundationalist situation, it constitutes an indispensable ‘substantive foundation’ (sachliche Grundlage) for the development of a viable postfoundationalist conception of rationality commensurate with contemporary needs.17 In particular, I undertake to show that engagement with Gadamerian hermeneutics can serve as a corrective for Habermas’s idealizing proclivities, and thereby shed considerable further light on the constitutive features of a specifically dialogical response to the rationality problem. Critics notwithstanding, then, I argue that philosophical hermeneutics has a number of distinctive attributes conducive to securing the ‘nondefeatism’ of critical reason in a postfoundationalist context, even if an element of ‘destructive retrieve’, informed by the debate with Habermas, is needed to liberate the possibilities inherent in his thinking with regard to our core topic. Thus for example, I contend that, far from reinforcing contextualism, the prejudgments, or ‘prejudices’, which Gadamer posits as an indispensable feature of our engagement with the world, have a productive role to play in facilitating the advancement of understanding by principled means. Likewise, Gadamer’s active embrace of an intrinsically interrogative conception of inquiry and his valorization of openness support a situated learning process with the ability to underwrite the potentially transformative advancement of understanding by principled means, without recourse to the problematic Habermasian idealizations. In particular, in embracing the model of Platonic dialectic, Gadamer provides indispensable guiding clues as to the structure, dynamics and logic of an intrinsically dialogical mode of inquiry.
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capable of underwriting the situated advancement of understanding, without the need for untenable idealizations of the Habermasian variety. On this developmental conception of inquiry, the attainment of each new level of understanding opens up new horizons to be further investigated, as does each shift in historico-cultural perspective. On the debit side, however, I also conclude that the recurring charge of ‘conservatism’ is not altogether misplaced when applied to Gadamer, so that it requires engagement with the views of a more radical contributor to this debate to round out our investigation into the constitutive features of a viable dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem. Accordingly, in concluding Part I, I seek to ascertain how Michel Foucault might contribute to advancing the understanding of our core topic.

Foucault’s inclusion here is especially appropriate given his frequent identification as an important dialogue partner with both Habermas and Gadamer in the debate about contemporary reason. However, in engaging with Foucault in chapter 3, it is not his treatment of power relations, predominant in much existing critical commentary, that achieves prominence in the present study, but rather his problematizing, transgressive conception of critique, dedicated to ‘testing limits’ and hence to pressing the boundaries of what we are currently inclined to accept without question. In this connection I seek to show that, his anarchistic reputation notwithstanding, Foucault does have a decisive contribution to make to advancing the contemporary debate about rationality. Thus I contend that in championing a problematizing approach which can serve as a corrective for a Habermasian preoccupation with validation, Foucault performs the important service of radicalizing a trend implicit in Gadamer’s embrace of an intrinsically interrogative mode of inquiry oriented primarily toward the advancement of understanding. In particular, in his embrace of a thoroughgoing problematizing approach, Foucault does much to enhance our understanding of the structure, dynamics and logic of an inherently situated conception of rational critique capable of facilitating the potentially transformative advancement of understanding. In addition, going beyond both Habermas and Gadamer, he brings to the fore the crucial role that the encounter with difference has to play in promoting the transformative activity of thought by serving as a ‘contrastive foil’, with the potential to alert us to beliefs and presuppositions we were not aware of holding and apprising us of alternatives we may never have considered possible. Equally importantly from a dialogical perspective, Foucault has important lessons to teach us about the constitution of contemporary forums of intersubjectivity and about the process whereby our knowledge claims can be tested under postfoundationalist conditions. Reflection on these features enables us to round out our account of the conditions needing to be fulfilled if the emergent dialogical conception is to be capable of underwriting the advancement of understanding by principled means in a manner commensurate with our postfoundationalist status. But these distinctive merits notwithstanding, I conclude that to make a decisive contribution to the formulation of a viable dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem, Foucault needs to assimilate some important lessons from the theorists with whom we have engaged in the earlier chapters. Thus in particular, he needs to take greater account of the fact that the claims we make and proposals we put forward embody criticizable
epistemic and moral claims for which we remain accountable to others. He also needs to acknowledge explicitly the importance of a regulative conception of truth capable of giving impetus and direction to our problematising endeavors, and to incorporate a rule-governed procedure for the principled comparative evaluation of inputs from diverse standpoints, which allow for reflective position modification in light of sustainable objections. Accordingly, I conclude that although Foucault’s established reputation in some quarters as an irrationalist is misplaced, his contribution must be read in conjunction with that of the other theorists considered here if his work is to achieve its full potential in helping to define what it means to be rational for our times. The present study thus reinforces the importance of reading these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional, as has typically been the case.

Having thus developed a clear understanding of the main constitutive conditions underwriting a viable dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem, in Part II I go on to test, refine and extend this working conception by applying it to two pressing contemporary problems for rationality. First, I undertake to show that the emergent dialogical conception can shed new light on the rationality of scientific inquiry in the wake of Kuhn’s vindication of its paradigm-based character. Thereafter, I demonstrate its ability to make a significant contribution to elucidating the dynamics and logic of cross-cultural communication in a post-Winchian context, characterized by an acute awareness of the need to do justice to the richness and integrity of other cultural traditions and ways of life. In each case, I argue that a dialogical approach represents a significant advance on existing accounts of rationality, predicated on more traditionalist assumptions. Thus in the case of paradigm disputes I contend that the dialogical approach has a significant advantage in virtue of its ability to overcome both the problem of circularity and the limitations of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy, while reinforcing the transformative orientation intrinsic to Kuhn’s thinking. In this connection, the new approach builds on and extends Kuhn’s commitment to the logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’ in a way that can accommodate the ‘hermeneutico-dialogical’ (Ginev) dimensions of paradigm debate mostly overlooked, or underdeveloped, by Kuhn himself. To this end, I show how hermeneutico-dialogical thinking can provide an integrating framework for a number of important recent contributions to the analytic literature on this topic, which in turn serve to provide independent confirmation for the tenability of dialogical insights in this domain. Proceeding thus, I defend the importance of ‘transformative learning’ as a guiding orientation for paradigm-based scientific inquiry, notwithstanding the fact that the valorization of this goal calls for a deconstruction of the postulated Kuhnian dichotomy between ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science. In short, I vindicate the merits of dialogical thinking in its application to this domain by demonstrating how it builds on the strengths inherent in Kuhn’s stance, while overcoming some telling limitations besetting Kuhn’s original formulation.

Finally, in applying the dialogical template to the debate about cultural rationality, I undertake to show how dialogical thinking can provide an effective response to the problem of ‘invidious comparison’, which has dogged this debate
since its inception. As a corrective, the dialogical approach vigorously enjoins our embrace of the postulates of ‘dialogical equality’ and ‘comparable validity’. The former serves to ensure that as rich, complex, and integrated conceptual frameworks that have conferred significance on the whole way of life of a people over an extended period of time, other cultures can claim to rival our own as legitimate repositories of knowledge and morality. The latter enjoins that instead of presupposing our ability to step in and speak for others, we need to acknowledge our lack of real understanding and our willingness to learn by allowing other cultures to represent their positions in their own terms. Together, as I go on to show, acceptance of these postulates argues the need for a conception of intercultural inquiry oriented, not toward the assertion of ideological superiority, but toward the advancement of intercultural understanding and learning, underpinned by an awareness of the merits of a multidimensional approach to cultural rationality. In so doing, I demonstrate how the dialogical approach can correct for the limitations of other notable contributions to this debate, while building on their strengths. In the process, we refine our appreciation of its core attributes, while reinforcing its claims to meet postfoundationalist needs.

In sum, then, through progressively delineating the contours of a hermeneutically inspired dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem, the present project seeks actively to contribute to completing the break with the ‘philosophy of the subject’, and thereby finally dispelling a burdensome ‘Cartesian anxiety’.\(^{18}\) In the process, it also aspires to contribute to the development of a viable ‘dialogical hermeneutics’, via an inclusive approach which incorporates Habermas and Foucault alongside a theorist like Gadamer, whose hermeneutic credentials are more typically recognized.\(^{19}\) Enriched by constitutive features of the sort identified here, the resultant conception of hermeneutic inquiry would be much better positioned to secure its critical efficacy. As such, it would have the ability to respond effectively to recurring criticisms besetting more established conceptions, including charges that contemporary hermeneutics lacks the resources needed: to secure the rationality and objectivity of its outcomes,\(^{20}\) to assume the critical distance needed to enable it to gain an evaluative perspective on its own tradition-based inheritances,\(^{21}\) and to engage productively with otherness and difference,\(^{22}\) as our postfoundationalist status requires. Indeed, it is contended that, in virtue of this ability to underwrite an enriched, nonfoundationalist conception of hermeneutic inquiry conducive to the pursuit of truth and the advancement of hermeneutic understanding, the emergent dialogical approach can do justice to the ideal of a ‘discipline of questioning and inquiring’, as valorized by Gadamer at the conclusion of *Truth and Method*.\(^{23}\) In this way, the present project aspires to provide a productive, and potentially provocative, starting point for the debate about rationality in the twenty-first century.\(^{24}\)
Notes

2 For reasons outlined in his Postmetaphysical Thinking (trans. William M. Hohengarten, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, see especially chs 1, 3 and 6), the former phrase is favoured by Jürgen Habermas. In one sense the term ‘postmetaphysical’ is an apt designator for the contemporary philosophical era given that, as Grondin observes, ‘there is perhaps no common denominator which has characterized the philosophy of the last two centuries more than its urge to surpass metaphysics’ (Sources of Hermeneutics, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 16). Yet, contra Habermas the present study endorses the contention defended by Gadamer and other hermeneutic theorists that, as Grondin again puts it, ‘through hermeneutics, a differentiated, more subtle, and more dialogical understanding of metaphysics can be brought about’ (Sources of Hermeneutics, p. 17). Accordingly, to avoid the suggestion that the parameters of our contemporary situation are such as to necessitate a transcendence of metaphysics, in what follows, pace Madison, I favour the designation ‘postfoundationalist’ (see ‘Philosophy without Foundations’, especially p. 17).
7 As epitomized by Jürgen Habermas, the problem is that: ‘Today, many areas are dominated by a contextualism that confines all truth claims to the scope of local language games and conventionally accepted rules of discourse and assimilates all standards of rationality to habits or conventions that are only valid in situ’ (Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 49). In this essay entitled ‘Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking’, Habermas gives a succinct overview of the contemporary developments here under consideration, with a view to vindicating the need for a communicative approach to rationality. These themes are elaborated at much greater length in his Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).
11 ‘Philosophy without Foundations’, p. 27.
13 The New Constellation, p. 52; see too pp. 48-50, 337; also Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, pp. 77-8, 172, 229-30.
14 A similar point could be made with regard to Madison’s assessment of the appropriateness of a dialogical response to our postfoundationalist situation (‘Philosophy without Foundations’, especially p. 27).
15 As intended here, essentially this term connotes a reinterpretation of a thinker’s position in accordance with its constitutive features with a view to liberating possibilities inherent in that position which are not sufficiently developed nor perhaps explicitly highlighted by the thinker in question, while at the same time taking care to ensure that this reappropriation remains faithful to the original. For a systematic elucidation of this Heideggerian concept, see Joseph J. Kockelmans, ‘Destructive Retrieve and Hermeneutic Phenomenology’,
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16 Postmetaphysical Thinking, pp. 145, 139.


19 It is noteworthy that in a recent essay Richard Palmer confirms both the tenability and value of incorporating theorists like Habermas and Foucault in a revitalized conception of hermeneutics along with philosophers like Gadamer whose reputation in this area is already well established. As Palmer contends, the point of so doing is to enrich and extend the reach of hermeneutic thought to enable it to respond more effectively to contemporary needs; see Richard Palmer, ‘What Hermeneutics Can Offer Rhetoric’, in Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time, eds Walter Jost and Michael Hyde (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 108-131.

20 As aptly characterized by James Bohman, the problem here at issue is that: ‘Many theorists of interpretation today express doubts about the possibility of answering the question of the rational justification or “correctness” of interpretations, and even argue that correctness may not be the proper goal of interpretive procedures at all’; see ‘Holism without Scepticism: Contextualism and the Limits of Interpretation’, in The Interpretive Turn, eds D. Hiley, J. Bohman and R. Shusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 129-54.


22 In a perceptive essay, Robert Bernasconi crystallizes the problems that Gadamerian hermeneutics faces in coming to terms with otherness. As epitomized by Bernasconi, the problem is that, it could be contended that ‘theory works to deprive alterity of its otherness’ in that ‘the other is always my other, my Thou; the text always belongs to the tradition to which I too belong; if it speaks to me at all it is in a language which has been established in advance in a common accord which unites us from the outset’; ‘You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal’, in The Spectre of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue and Pronymosis in Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 193. Similarly, as Bohman notes, it has been a frequent criticism of contemporary hermeneutics (with which he himself takes issue) that: “[O]ur interpretations are inevitably ethnocentric. It is impossible to understand others as they understand themselves: we understand them only according to “our own lights”’ (‘Holism without Scepticism’, p. 131).


24 In work in progress I have already started to explore the strengths of the dialogical approach in its application to related areas, for example, as a template for elucidating the rationality of policy debate, for clarifying the conditions necessary for productive cross-cultural dialogue about human rights and for promoting transformative learning rather than reinforcing fragmentation in the context of interdisciplinary research.
PART I
Chapter 1

Habermas: Rationality, Communication, and Dialogue

Given the extent of his contribution to redefining for our times what it means to be rational, the work of Jurgen Habermas presents itself as a natural starting point for the present study. The impact of Habermas’s work in this area derives from his sustained efforts to formulate a defensible response to the philosophical developments definitive of the contemporary era. In particular, he has grappled with the effects of the ‘linguistic turn’ as a prerequisite for forging a viable response to the rationality problem in the wake of the break with the ‘philosophy of the subject’. While postmodernists and other radical contextualists have all but abandoned a concern with reason, Habermas has consistently sought to defend a ‘nondefeatist’ conception of rationality, one, that is, that can lay claim to securing its own grounding even in the absence of incontrovertible foundations. Nonetheless, in predicking his communicative conception of rationality on a set of ‘idealizing presuppositions’, its distinctive strengths have been bought at too high a price.

As I will contend, the problems arise because the idealizations invoked to underwrite the nondefeatism of communicative reason—in particular, the ideality and unconditionality of validity claims, the anticipation of an ideal speech situation and of a rationally motivated consensus achievable under such conditions—are at odds with Habermas’s explicit acknowledgement of our situated status as rational inquirers. As well as straining the logic of Habermas’s position, these idealizations have the effect of masking the situated, and indeed dialogical, learning process, integral to Habermas’s innovative approach to rationality. As a corrective, in the present chapter I underscore the need for developing an appropriately detranscendentalized alternative which, by liberating the dialogical potential implicit in Habermas’s thinking, can serve as the starting point for formulating an altogether situated, nondefeatist conception of rationality, fully commensurate with postfoundationalist needs. The need for a detranscendentalized reading of the problematic idealizations is reinforced by Habermas’s own recent repudiation of the possibility of an appeal to ‘the extra-mundane perspective of a God’s-eye view’, and his corresponding caution about the ‘objectivist fallacy’ that results when we lose sight of our finitude and fallibilism. Moreover, while continuing to endorse the strong idealizations, in his more recent writings Habermas gives clear...
indications as to the basis for a suitably detranscendentalized alternative. In undertaking a systematic critique of these ‘idealizing presuppositions’, I build on these guiding clues with a view to delineating the contours of a thoroughgoing dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem which can preserve the strengths of Habermas’s communicative approach while overcoming its weaknesses. To this end, I contend that while Habermas valorizes idealized ‘discourse’ as the communicative medium wherein rationality is to be realized in our postfoundationalist era, an explicit acknowledgement of its inherently dialogical basis is needed to liberate its true potential. From this starting point, in the chapters that follow I go on to refine and extend the core insights thereby generated through our engagement with Habermas with a view to progressively delineating the envisaged dialogical conception.

As a first step in this direction, it will be productive to review Habermas’s motivation for introducing the problematic idealizations. In so doing, I restrict myself to a brief overview focused sharply on setting the scene for a systematic critique of the problematic idealizations.

Communicative Rationality: A Nondefeatist Response to Postfoundationalist Needs

As is well known, Habermas develops his theory of communicative rationality in response to the philosophical paradigm shift generated by the demise of the ‘philosophy of the subject’, definitive of modern philosophy since Descartes. This ‘autonomous rational subject’ was construed as ‘atomistic and autonomous, disengaged and disembodied, potentially and ideally self-transparent’, and as such, it was held to provide an inviolable foundation for our epistemological endeavours. But as documented by Habermas, since at least the time of Hegel this atemporal, sovereign conception of subjectivity has undergone an increasingly penetrating and far-reaching critique aimed at establishing that ‘[s]ubjects of knowledge are embodied and practically engaged with the world’, and that such temporalized and embodied subjects cannot provide an inviolable foundation for reason and knowledge. As a result, it is now widely accepted that belief in an Archimedean foundation which can serve as a guarantor for the pronouncements of an ahistorical and disembodied reason needs to give way to recognition of the irrevocable embeddedness of reason and thought in language and history and hence of their inherent finitude, temporality and intersubjectivity. But while these developments usher in productive new possibilities, they are not without their dangers. In particular, the demise of a sovereign conception of subjectivity threatens to undermine our claims to objective knowledge and truth unless an alternative means can be found for underwriting our operative conception of rationality. Moreover, as Habermas is concerned to point out, these relativistic threats are all the more acute in the wake of the linguistic turn—essentially because the emergent awareness of the centrality of language in the constitution of our worldview facilitates the proliferation of a multiplicity of linguistic frameworks,
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each pressing its own claim to legitimacy. Severely challenging postmodernists and other strong contextualists who celebrate plurality and difference for their own sake, Habermas has undertaken to defend the potential of contemporary reason to secure its own critical efficacy in a way that can forestall this relativistic threat. Let us now briefly review just how Habermas aspires to fill the gap left by the demise of the ‘philosophy of the subject’.  

In a distinctive variation on the ‘linguistic turn’ undertaken by other influential contemporary philosophers, he focuses attention on the structures of ‘communicative interaction’. In so doing, Habermas seeks to do justice to the praxical, situated and intersubjective nature of contemporary reason by arguing that reason must find its ground, not in some a priori transcendent realm (such as the structures of consciousness), but in actual communicative exchanges—attempts at communication—that ‘real people’ engage in day by day. It is on this basis that he aspires to formulate a ‘nondefeatist’ response to the contemporary rationality problem. In particular, Habermas’s point is that whenever we attempt to communicate with one another and express a point of view, we inevitably make claims about the natural and social worlds as well as about our own inner feelings. In the process, we necessarily raise claims to truth, rightness, and personal sincerity. Of course, such claims are not self-justifying, and so stand in need of argumentative justification. Proceeding thus, Habermas seeks to ground his communicative approach to rationality in the intrinsic interconnection between the very attempt to communicate with one another, the (implicit) raising of validity claims, and the promise to redeem these in appropriately constituted forums of discourse, as the need to do so arises. The problematic idealizations enter the picture as a means of delineating the requirements that must be fulfilled to ensure that validity claims remain open to critical scrutiny by argumentative means in diverse forums of discourse. Reduced to essentials, the key contention is that, once raised, validity claims—in particular, claims to truth and moral rightness—must be capable of being justified through a process of rigorous intersubjective argumentation in a diversity of forums. And in the absence of incontrovertible foundations, the test of acceptability is defined ultimately in terms of a ‘rationally motivated consensus’ achievable under idealized, counterfactual, conditions. In particular, what Habermas has in mind here is that proffered claims ‘must be capable in principle of meeting with the rationally motivated approval of everyone affected under conditions that neutralise all motives except that of cooperatively seeking the truth’. Given that these conditions are never fully satisfied in everyday communicative contexts, Habermas maintains that the specification of the requisite conditions necessitates the invocation of the notion of an ‘ideal speech situation’, wherein, famously, no force holds sway but ‘the unforced force of the better argument’. Readily acknowledging their ‘counterfactual’ status, Habermas is aware that these idealizations might seem to fit uneasily with the inherently situated character of his theory of communicative rationality. Nonetheless, he defends them as integral to his position in virtue of the critical and emancipatory powers with which they endow communicative reason. Thus it is precisely the ‘tense interconnection of the ideal and the real’ that secures the critical efficacy, and hence nondefeatism, of communicative reason. In short, then, on Habermas’s
account, following the demise of foundationalist thinking, these idealizations are indispensable for grounding our claims to reason and truth. Indeed, as prefigured above, for Habermas, the idealizations are all the more necessary to enable us to respond effectively to the contextualist threat that looms large in the wake of the linguistic turn. To complete the scene setting for our critique of the ‘idealizing presuppositions’, let us reflect further on this aspect of Habermas’s thinking.

As noted, the linguistic turn is characterized by an acute awareness that ‘language forms the medium for the historical and cultural embodiments of the human mind’. While this realization paves the way for a liberating break with the ‘philosophy of consciousness’, it is not without its dangers. For Habermas, chief among these is the radical contextualism that threatens in virtue of a proliferation of competing worldviews. Here, the concern is that, following the linguistic turn, it has become all too easy for radical contextualists to contend that each of these multiple linguistic worldviews is legitimate in its own terms and does not need be held accountable to any superordinate authority. On this view, then, any given truth claim ‘only mirrors a particular construction of reality that inheres grammatically in one of various linguistic worldviews’, and so lacks any context-transcendent status. In short, in a postmetaphysical context there is a widespread tendency to assume that particular social groupings or contexts of inquiry represent incommensurable ‘worlds’ which are answerable, if at all, only to their own criteria and standards. Or, as Habermas has it, for many the operative assumption today is that: ‘There are no standards of rationality that point beyond the local commitments of the various universes of discourse’. As an antidote to the groundlessness engendered by this radical contextualism, Habermas is committed to defending a conception of rationality that can serve as ‘a limit concept with normative content, one which passes beyond the borders of every local community and moves in the direction of a universal one’. Or as he puts it in a related formulation, his avowed intent is to defend the possibility of ‘a postmetaphysical and yet nondefeatist concept of reason’ which, while deriving ‘its normativity out of itself’, embodies an idealized standard which ‘bursts every provinciality asunder’.

It is in this connection that he perceives the need to introduce his ‘strong idealizations’. As discussed further below, the intent of these idealizations is essentially to ensure that while a validity claim ‘is always raised here and now, in specific contexts, and is either accepted or rejected with factual consequences’, ‘the validity claimed for propositions and norms’ nevertheless ‘transcends spaces and times, “blots out” space and time’. In response to the criticism that these idealizations are ill suited to the requirements of a situated theory of knowledge, which he explicitly intends his communicative approach to be, Habermas rejects the alleged inconsistency by asserting that it is precisely the ‘tense interconnection of the ideal and the real’ that gives communicative reason its critical and emancipatory thrust.

Unfortunately, however, it is far from clear that the tensions generated in Habermas’s position by his introduction of the ‘strong idealizations’ can be so easily dispelled. Indeed, as we shall see, on closer analysis these idealizations embody assumptions that cannot pass muster in the context of a situated theory of knowledge, and must instead be replaced by detranscendentalized procedures.
which can secure the critical efficacy of contemporary reason in a manner more compatible with our situated status. In particular, given their uneasy fit within a situated theory of knowledge, there are good reasons why Habermas’s ‘idealizing presuppositions’ should give way to the specification of a fully situated, dialogical procedure for the rigorous critical appraisal of validity claims in diverse situated forums of inquiry—an outcome that, as we shall see, can be satisfactorily achieved without recourse to the problematic idealizations. Indeed, as we shall also see, despite Habermas’s unwillingness to break with the strong idealizations, in his more recent writings he provides us with some valuable guiding clues as to how the latter outcome might be effectively achieved.

The Idealizing Presuppositions: A Dialogical Critique

For many critics, the core problem with Habermas’s communicative approach is epitomized by his enshrining of the concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’ as a pivotal feature of his epistemology. For, as discussed further below, embrace of this and the related idealizations seems to connote the possibility of attaining an idealized standpoint from which we could test the epistemic credentials of proffered knowledge claims by idealized means. But as a prelude to embarking on a critique of the specific idealizations, it is important to reiterate that, while making a virtue of their ideality, Habermas has always readily acknowledged their counterfactual status. Indeed, in his more recent writings, he has himself alerted us to the threat of (what he terms) an ‘objectivist fallacy’, which arises when we assume that we can transcend our situatedness in the direction of assuming an ideal standpoint. More specifically, as Habermas has it, this fallacy arises when we proceed on the assumption that:

[W]e could take up the extramundane standpoint of a subject removed from the world, help ourselves to an ideal language that is context-free and appears in the singular, and thereby make infallible, exhaustive, and thus definitive statements which, having neither the capacity nor the need for a commentary, would pull the plug on their own effective history.18

Noteworthy, then, is the consideration that while Habermas deems the strong idealizations necessary to secure nondefeatism, he is also emphatic in warning us about the error of assuming that we can actually attain an idealized standpoint from which to test and validate proffered knowledge claims. But the attempt to have it both ways—to insist on the need for postulating an ideal speech situation, while denying that we can actually attain such a standpoint—generates untenable tensions in his position. In addition, as our critique of the specific idealizations will confirm, his insistence on the strong idealizations has the equally undesirable consequence of masking the situated learning process which, on his own telling, is integral to the formulation of a viable postfoundationalist account of rationality.19

In fine, challenging Habermas’s presupposition that he can have it both ways, I
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contend that if we are to succeed in formulating an account of rationality truly commensurate with our postfoundationalist needs, we must abandon the problematic idealizations in favour of an altogether detranscendentalized procedure for the critical appraisal of validity claims. Importantly too, I contend that a sustained critique of the problematic idealizations allows the dialogical underpinnings of Habermas’s own stance to come to the fore in a way that prefigures their potential to preserve the core strengths of his communicative approach while transcending its limitations. Thereafter, in the chapters that follow we will refine and extend the dialogical insights thus generated through engaging with other key contributors to the contemporary debate about rationality.

The Postulated Unconditionality of Truth Claims

As in the case of the other ‘idealizing presuppositions’, an emphasis on the unconditionality of validity claims, and of truth claims in particular, has always been a distinguishing feature of Habermas’s position and, in somewhat attenuated form, continues to figure prominently in his recent writings. From the outset, however, the defence of this idealization has proved highly problematic and continues to do so. As prefigured above, the core problem is that the valorization of unconditionality conflicts sharply with the acknowledged situatedness of communicative reason, to the point where it threatens, unwittingly, to embroil Habermas himself in what he terms an ‘objectivist fallacy’. At a minimum, it constitutes what Thomas McCarthy terms ‘a potentially misleading hypostatization’, which serves to mask the real strengths of Habermas’s position. The aim of the present short critique is to help redress this imbalance with a view to liberating the dialogical potential inherent in Habermas’s position but concealed by his embrace of this idealization. Thus I contend that the postulation of unconditionality embodies a number of implications that are out of place in a situated theory of knowledge and that have the effect of masking the situated testing procedures whereby, given our acknowledged status as finite, situated inquirers, we must instantiate reason and pursue truth. The cogency of these criticisms will be further reinforced in the course of our critique of the related idealizations.

In the first instance the postulation of the unconditionality of truth claims is problematic because, Habermas’s disclaimers notwithstanding, it can hardly fail to connote the ideal of attaining a neutral, atemporal standpoint from which the unconditioned truth of the matter might be unequivocally ascertained and asserted. In so doing, it posits as an ideal a possibility that is simply not available to us as finite, situated inquirers. Furthermore, the postulation of unconditionality has the effect of masking the irrevocably conditioned status of the truth claims on which we must rely in practice and thereby conveys a very misleading impression of the resources available to us as situated inquirers for the critical appraisal of truth and other validity claims. As a corrective, Habermas himself has been increasingly at pains to affirm that, his valorization of unconditionality notwithstanding, as situated inquirers our concern must actually be with conditioned truth claims,
claims whose function it is to articulate our best current estimation of the truth of the matter. In effect, then, Habermas acknowledges that in practice our actual concern must be with claims that are ‘held to be true here and now’, or with ‘warranted assertability’ as it is sometimes termed. But in this event, it is difficult to understand why he does not break completely with the problematic idealization—especially since his erstwhile contention that unconditionality is integral to the very ‘grammar’ of the truth concept sounds increasingly hollow and unconvincing in light of his increasingly explicit acknowledgement that the critical efficacy of communicative reason can be secured by other, more detranscendentalized means.

Given that they conflict sharply with Habermas’s own increasingly explicit emphasis on the inherently finite, fallible, and corrigeble status of our knowledge claims, its connotations of immutability constitute a second, related problem for the postulation of unconditionality. Indeed, the conflict is even sharper than Habermas seems to recognize. For although a strong advocate of fallibilism, he does not take sufficient account of the other respects in which our knowledge claims are mutable in a postfoundationalist context. In particular, Habermas is less than forthcoming in acknowledging the inherently hypothetical, indeed interrogative, character of our truth claims and so fails to take due account of the extent of their potential for change and transformation as inquiry advances. In addition, he fails to take sufficient account of the potent role that the encounter with otherness and difference plays in motivating principled advances in understanding and learning. More specifically, as we shall consider further below, while Habermas does indeed acknowledge the inherent criticizability and hence mutability of our knowledge claims, he conceives the process at issue primarily in monological terms. Consequently, as we shall see, his approach cannot do justice to the processes of mutual learning that take place through dialogical exchanges between proponents of diverse positions, paradigms or cultural worldviews. Pending further elaboration later, then, the point at issue here is that the postulation of unconditionality is out of place in Habermas’s communicative approach to rationality because not only does it conflict with his avowed fallibilism, it also fails to do justice to the potentially transformative learning experiences we undergo through holding our knowledge claims open to critical scrutiny in diverse, situated forums of inquiry. In short, the problem is that in postulating unconditionality Habermas gives a misleading impression of the status of our truth claims and in so doing unintentionally deflects attention away from the investigation of the detranscendentalized procedures and conditions in accordance with which we, as situated inquirers, must test their epistemic credentials. As a corrective, what needs to be emphasized instead in a situated theory of knowledge is that while our truth claims reflect our best current estimation of the truth of the matter, they nonetheless articulate no more than a partial and provisional understanding of the subject matter under investigation, an understanding which will almost certainly need to be reconceptualized, if not transformed, in response to critical input from other sources as inquiry advances.

But as noted earlier, in response to criticisms of this sort Habermas remains largely unapologetic, instead simply reaffirming his defence of a ‘Janus-faced’
conception of truth, whereby the ‘tense interconnection of the ideal and the real’ is held to underwrite and sustain our ability to hold our proffered claims open to critical scrutiny in an ongoing way.\textsuperscript{28} In so doing, however, what he fails to realize is that the postulation of unconditionality as one of these poles threatens to undermine, rather than promote, the type of situated and fallibilistic learning process that our postfoundationalist status calls for. Importantly too, while he continues to defend unconditionality, seemingly in the belief that this is required by the ‘grammar’ of the truth concept, more recently he has in effect identified another ‘aporetic tension’ which would satisfy these critical aims while avoiding the untenable connotations associated with unconditionality, namely, ‘the possibility of distinguishing between what is true and what we hold to be true’.\textsuperscript{29}

Failure to build on the latter alternative represents a significant shortcoming because it fails to capitalize on the possibility of abandoning what is at best a ‘potentially misleading hypostatization’ in favour of a less idealized, and correspondingly more defensible, alternative, specifically, that of the context-transcendence of truth claims. As McCarthy notes, the embrace of this detranscendentalized alternative would have the advantage of bringing to the fore the intrinsically situated testing processes whereby proffered validity claims must have their evidential credentials critically appraised in a variety of intersubjective forums, while remaining true to core Habermasian insights.

Thus on reflection we can see that, far from connoting unconditionality, as McCarthy perceptively observes, the claim to validity issued with the assertion of a truth claim is no more than a ‘promissory note’, one which must be redeemed by ascertaining in ever-new, situated contexts how validity claims actually ‘stand up to the ongoing give-and-take of argumentative discourse’.\textsuperscript{30} When our attention is thus redirected to the ‘socio-logic of truth’—to ‘the internal connection between truth claims and rational acceptability that is built into our practices of truth-telling’—it becomes clear that ‘the redemption of truth claims, the establishment of their warranted assertability, is an intrinsically temporal, open-ended process’.\textsuperscript{31} Hence rather than anticipating idealized testing conditions, what is actually at issue is that the ‘intersubjective recognition of truth claims’ is ‘ongoingly accomplished through rationally persuading one audience after another that it is “reasonable” to accept them, that is, that there are good reasons for doing so, better reasons than for accepting any of the available alternatives’.\textsuperscript{32} In short, the strength of such an explicitly detranscendentalized approach is that it shows that the desired goal of underwriting the criticizability and revisability of truth claims can be achieved by replacing the presupposition of unconditionality with the significantly weaker—and correspondingly more defensible—appeal to the context-transcendence of truth claims. The decisive merit of this proposal is that, in dispelling the spectre of unconditionality, it enables us to redirect our attention to where it really needs to be focused in a postmetaphysical context, that is, on the specification of conditions needed to underwrite a nondefeatist approach to rationality in a manner fully compatible with our acknowledged status as situated inquirers.\textsuperscript{33} In the course of our critique of the related idealizations, the tenability of this assessment will be further reinforced and its implications elaborated with a view to establishing its
potential to support a situated learning process capable of advancing our understanding of contested issues by principled means.

The Presupposition of an Ideal Speech Situation

From its introduction as a core facet of Habermas’s stance, the notion of an ‘ideal speech situation’ has been a much commented on, and indeed much criticized, feature of the theory of communicative action;\(^{34}\) and criticism notwithstanding, it continues to figure prominently in recent statements of his position.\(^ {35}\) As in the case of the other idealizations, Habermas has repeatedly defended the presupposition of an ideal speech situation as indispensable for securing the nondefeatism of communicative reason, while at the same time emphasizing its counterfactual status. Here again, however, I will press the contention that given the problems it generates within a situated theory of knowledge, we should abandon this idealization in favour of a detranscendentalized specification of the conditions necessary for the discursive testing of proffered validity claims. Moreover, in so doing, I will seek to reinforce the dialogical potential inherent in Habermas’s thinking, but typically masked by his heavy emphasis on the idealizations. As the next step in this direction, let us now take a closer look at the tensions engendered in a situated theory of knowledge by an emphasis on the centrality of an ideal speech situation, thereby expanding and refining the critique initiated in the previous section.

Firstly, as in the case of the presupposition of unconditionality, Habermas’s disclaimers notwithstanding, the invocation of an ideal speech situation can hardly fail to connote the possibility of attaining an unconditioned, ‘God’s-eye’ standpoint from which the tenability of validity claims could be established once and for all, unaffected by any situational constraints that might condition their appraisal. Moreover, in the absence of a situated alternative the fact that Habermas explicitly repudiates the possibility of such a standpoint does little to diminish these potentially misleading connotations. A second related objection is that, notwithstanding Habermas’s own emphasis on the ‘diversity of voices’ as a defining feature of our postmetaphysical situation, the notion of an ideal speech situation can all too easily convey a sense of unalleviated homogeneity, capable of masking, if not negating, the diversity of standpoints legitimately occupied by the situated inquirers who engage in the appraisal and testing of validity claims. This is all the more the case when the impression of homogeneity is reinforced by the anticipation of an unlimited consensus about a postulated truth claim (as elaborated in the next section). This misleading, if unintended, impression of homogeneity is especially problematic given that, as we shall see, active embrace of the challenge posed by the encounter with otherness and difference is one of the most potent resources at our disposal for testing the cogency of our prejudices and prejudices. Since in addition to being an ineliminable situational constraint under which validity claims must actually be tested, the persistence of difference has a crucial role to play in the development of a more textured understanding of the subject matter under investigation, its legitimacy and value need to be explicitly
acknowledged instead of being negated or suppressed. A third problem is that the postulation of an ideal speech situation can all too easily connote the ideal of a meta-discourse with the in-principle capacity to resolve all the localized disputes that arise in situated contexts of inquiry. A further, related problem is that it can create the misleading impression that it might be possible to engage in a single mega-conversation in which all differences in perspective could be resolved at once.

As in the case of the other idealizations, to his credit Habermas has been at pains to dispel these impressions, while not, however, going quite far enough in repudiating the problematic idealization. Thus for example, he has been increasingly emphatic in affirming that, as inherently situated inquirers, not only do we lack the possibility of attaining an unconditioned standpoint, we cannot legitimately lay claim even to the attainment of a privileged standpoint for the discursive appraisal of validity claims. Likewise, he makes it clear that there neither is, nor could be, any legislative meta-discourse to which participants in a debate about validity claims could have recourse for the resolution of disputed claims. Further, it has become clear that Habermas harbours no illusions about the possibility of either a meta- or a mega-discourse capable of resolving contested issues all at once. Instead, he has come to acknowledge that whatever outcome is achieved will, as Simone Chambers perceptively puts it, inevitably be ‘the cumulative product of many crisscrossing conversations over time’. In addition, notwithstanding his continued endorsement of the strong idealizations, he has made it increasingly clear that what the rationality and objectivity of critique ultimately depend on is the availability of situated forums of discourse, wherein the cogency of proffered claims is rigorously tested through procedures tailored to regulating the argumentative appraisal of claim and counterclaim. But in this event, to render his position fully compatible with the requirements of a situated theory of knowledge, Habermas needs to abandon the problematic idealizations and to develop more fully the detranscendentalized alternative at which he has hinted. This is all the more the case since a critique of the problematic idealizations serves to liberate the dialogical potential inherent in his position with the capacity to underwrite such an alternative.

In this connection recall that Habermas has always made it clear that he envisages the ideal speech situation primarily as a shorthand summary of the conditions that must be satisfied for the critical appraisal of validity claims, if this process and its outcome are to count as impartial and well-grounded, and hence, as rational and objective. Moreover, he has always defended the need for recourse to the logic and dynamics of argumentation as the only viable basis for testing and redeeming validity claims in a postfoundationalist context. Thus, as he puts it in a recent formulation, in valorizing the notion of an ideal speech situation his intent has been to establish that:

At any given moment we orient ourselves by this idea when we endeavour to ensure that (1) all voices in any way relevant get a hearing, (2) the best arguments available to us given our present state of knowledge are brought to bear, and (3) only the unforced force of the better argument determines the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses of the participants.
In short, Habermas’s core contention is that as an ideal we must aim for conditions of free and open debate, wherein nothing would influence the assessment of claims except the appraisal of evidence directly related to the claims themselves, and where all informed participants—ideally, without regard to considerations of time or space—would have the opportunity to appraise critically the warrant for a given validity claim, and to raise objections to it as they saw fit on rational grounds. Clearly, the challenge is to secure these desiderata in a way that would avoid, or at least minimize, the sorts of problems outlined above. Moreover, in his more recent writings Habermas has here again given us a clear indication of the direction in which we might productively proceed. In particular, the answer resides in the specification of the constitutive/regulative ground rules for the situated argumentative appraisal of validity claims, that is, in the specification of a set of ground rules needed to regulate the exchange of good reasons in appropriately constituted situated forums of inquiry. But if so, on Habermas’s own telling, what the nondefeatism of communicative reason actually calls for is not the postulation of a set of problematic idealizations, but rather the specification of the ground rules that must be abided by by participants as a condition for entry into, and continued participation in, a forum of discursive inquiry that warrants the name ‘rational’. In essence, the core requirement is that participants agree (at least implicitly) to be bound by these rules, and commit themselves to implementing them as fully as possible in all actual forums of discourse. As such, these rules could also be regarded as (binding) commitments that participants in discourse accrue upon embarking upon a mode of inquiry that aspires to be rational. Should the actual conditions of inquiry not allow for the implementation of these rules to at least a reasonable degree, the ensuing debate could not be termed ‘rational’ (nor, of course, could the outcomes be regarded as impartial or objective). But in this event, notwithstanding his reluctance to complete the break with this problematic idealization, it transpires that, on Habermas’s own telling, the nondefeatism of critical reason can be secured by appeal to procedures that are fully compatible with our situated status, and which can be formulated without recourse to the notion of an ideal speech situation. In eschewing misleading connotations, this reformulation of the conditions for the discursive ‘redemption’ of validity claims has the advantage of redirecting our attention to the logic and dynamics of the situated learning processes that take place in appropriately constituted intersubjective forums, fuelled by the argumentative appraisal of proffered claims. As central to the specification of the parameters of a viable contemporary account of rationality, it is to the dynamics and logic of this process that we will need to return throughout this study. In concluding the present section, however, a couple of provisos need to be added regarding Habermas’s treatment of the latter theme.

First, while Habermas is emphatic that the specification of an appropriate theory of argumentation is central to the contemporary rationality project, he devotes only minimal attention to elucidating the argumentative procedures at issue. And to the extent that he does address this important issue, he directly endorses the Toulmin model as the template for the argumentative procedure
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whereby validity claims have their evidential credentials appraised, rightly contending that the Toulmin model is altogether more compatible with the requirements of our postfoundationalist situation than are more traditional models of argumentation. Moreover, the Toulmin model serves to underscore the inherently intersubjective nature of the processes of argumentative appraisal presupposed by a communicative approach. On the debit side, however, it needs to be noted that this model falls considerably short of what the logic of Habermas’s position actually calls for. This is primarily because the Toulmin model is intrinsically monological in its structure, and is thus severely limited in its ability to underwrite a truly dialogical exchange of views of the sort that the situated testing of validity claims actually requires. Consequently, if, as intended, Habermas is to complete the break with the ‘philosophy of subject’, he would need to reformulate the ground rules of the proffered model in such a way as to better reflect the inherently dialogical character of the process of argumentative appraisal at issue. Likewise, as contended in the next section, an unduly consensual orientation should be abandoned in favour of endorsing the potentially transformative advancement of understanding as its anticipated telos. Importantly too, to facilitate the latter outcome, the logic of dialogical argumentation requires that we must take due account not only of the procedural principles regulating the situated exchange of good reasons, but also of the situational factors conditioning the appraisal of evidence by participants occupying different hermeneutic standpoints. Accordingly, I contend that if we are to forge an account of rationality truly adequate to contemporary needs, we must complement Habermas’s communicative approach with core insights deriving from the hermeneutic tradition, as elaborated in the next chapter.

First, however, we need to complete the critique of the remaining ‘idealizing presupposition’ with a view to reinforcing the need for a detranscendentalized alternative which can build on the dialogical potential implicit in Habermas’s thinking, but typically masked by his idealizing predilections.

The Anticipation of Idealized Consensus

As in the case of the foregoing idealizations, the ideal of a rationally motivated consensus arrived at under ideal speech conditions achieved prominence in Habermas’s original formulation of the ‘logic of theoretical discourse’, that is, in his specification of the conditions that must be presupposed for the discursive redemption of contestable validity claims. As is well known, in embracing this idealization, Habermas was directly influenced by C.S. Peirce’s rendition of truth in terms of ‘the opinion which is fated to be agreed upon by all who investigate’. As transliterated by Habermas, consensus enters the picture on the presupposition that ‘the condition of the truth of statements is the potential agreement of all others’. While Habermas’s unequivocal endorsement of consensus has undergone modification, often in response to criticism, it continues to figure prominently in recent works, albeit in a more qualified form. As in the case of the other idealizations, Habermas still defends this idealization as integral to securing the
nondefeatism of communicative reason. In response, I will defend the priority of reaching understanding over that of consensus as the primary telos of situated rational inquiry, contending that, notwithstanding Habermas’s heavily consensual proclivities, a move in this direction is actually called for by the logic of his own thinking. Since problems deriving from presumptions of ideality and unconditionality as such have already been dealt with at some length in the foregoing sections, in critiquing this idealization I will largely refrain from commenting further on problems of this sort, emphasizing instead the rationale for preferring growth of understanding.

Recall first that in valorizing consensus Habermas’s commitment has always been to the ideal of a rationally motivated or unforced consensus (i.e. one that depends only on the rigorous assessment of the balance of good reasons deriving from their critical scrutiny in appropriately constituted intersubjective forums). Since the possibility of principled disagreement (of giving a ‘no’ rather than a ‘yes’ response to a proffered validity claim) is intrinsic to the definition of a rationally motivated consensus, it is clear that the valorization of consensus cannot be taken to exclude the possibility of disagreement. The untenability of unqualified consensus even as an ideal is further reinforced when the pervasiveness of diversity and difference—features explicitly identified by Habermas as constitutive of our postmetaphysical situation—is fully factored into the equation. This is all the more the case since, as Habermas seems willing to acknowledge in his more recent writings, it would represent something of a betrayal of the core ideals underpinning a communicative approach to ignore, or suppress, the very real differences in viewpoint that exist between inquirers occupying different discursive standpoints and that call for our explicit recognition. Moreover, in a postfoundationalist context it cannot easily be assumed that disagreement will, or even should be, eliminated in the ‘long run’ of inquiry (assuming that good sense can be made of this problematic Peircean concept). And far from being an obstacle to the advancement of inquiry, as we shall see, there are good grounds for maintaining that the very progress of inquiry beyond its initial starting point depends in large part on the impetus provided by the existence of principled disagreement. But if so, it seems that Habermas’s own epistemic commitments call for a shift away from a heavily consensual orientation in a direction that can do more to accommodate the situated learning processes that he acknowledges as integral to an account of rationality commensurate with contemporary postfoundationalist needs. Indeed, on closer analysis, we can again see that Habermas’s own writings contain intimations of a more defensible, and correspondingly more productive, alternative, one which builds on the dialogical potential inherent in his position.

Thus from early on, alongside his consensual proclivities, Habermas has always placed considerable emphasis on the ideal of ‘reaching understanding’ with one’s dialogue partners. Indeed, his disclaimers notwithstanding, he often seems to use these concepts—that of ‘agreement’ (Einverstandnis) and that of ‘understanding’ (Verständigung)—almost interchangeably. Importantly however, although undoubtedly interlinked, these concepts have distinctly different connotations, which need to be carefully distinguished. Pending further elaboration in the chapters that follow, the distinction that warrants specific
attention here is that, unlike consensus, a commitment to reaching understanding presupposes neither a univocal framework of commensuration nor the elimination of disagreement as a *sine qua non* for rationality. Instead, what is required is a commitment to forging a common interpretive framework to which all parties to the debate can subscribe as best articulating the parameters of the problem situation (or subject matter) in question to the extent possible under current discursive conditions, without however believing themselves compelled to accepting precisely the same set of claims about it, still less to giving these the same weighting, as do other participants. Importantly then, even ideally, reaching understanding need not entail the presupposition that a specific set of claims asserted within a given discursive framework will compel the assent of all rational inquirers despite real differences in their discursive standpoints. Moreover, there is no expectation that such differences in perspective will give way to outright agreement even in the long run. On the contrary, far from seeking to negate legitimate differences in perspective in the push toward consensus, an orientation toward mutual understanding explicitly acknowledges the epistemic advantages of preserving them. Hence instead of anticipating agreement on claims as initially asserted, it calls for the modification of initial positions with a view to forging an enlarged and enriched framework of understanding. More specifically, what reaching understanding as telos ultimately calls for is that through an ongoing exchange of supporting reasons, each side progressively comes to better understand the stance adopted by the other and seriously considers its strengths. In fine, far from seeking to enforce consensus, it presupposes a genuine openness to learning from difference.

For these reasons, then, it is contended that reaching understanding is a more defensible telos for rational inquiry than is an unqualified commitment to consensus, especially given Habermas’s explicit acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of disagreement and difference as defining features of our postmetaphysical situation. Moreover, as noted, this shift in orientation allows dialogical features implicit in Habermas’s stance but concealed by his emphasis on idealized consensus to begin to come to the fore. Thus for example, while a heavy emphasis on consensus tends to mask the need for position modification, the telos of reaching understanding through a principled exchange of good reasons allows the significance of Habermas’s concern with the fallibilism and revisability of validity claims to achieve greater prominence. Likewise, although typically masked by a preoccupation with the validation of knowledge claims, this shift in regulative orientation allows the significance of the criticizability of validity claims to come to the fore as presupposing their openness to reappraisal on the basis of objections forthcoming from a diversity of points of view, as valorized by Habermas himself. In these and related respects, reaching understanding of *telos* can do greater justice to the kind of situated learning processes that Habermas envisages as integral to a viable contemporary account of rationality. As noted, essentially this is because it holds open the possibility of achieving a more textured, and better grounded, appreciation of a given subject matter through the critical exchanges that take place about it in well structured forums of intersubjective debate oriented toward position modification in light of sustainable
objections. Of course, in thus defending the relative priority of reaching understanding over consensus we should be clear that the two are by no means mutually exclusive. On the contrary, as Habermas’s own usage serves to confirm, there is an inevitable intertwining between these goals, since certain levels and degrees of agreement are necessarily presupposed as integral to the process of reaching understanding. Nonetheless, despite Habermas’s ongoing emphasis on consensus, as well as being more consistent with the logic of the situated testing procedures he envisages, the endorsement of reaching understanding as the primary *telos* of situated rational inquiry fits altogether better with the requirements of our postfoundationalist situation.

With our critique of the problematic idealizations now completed, let us briefly review what we have learned from our engagement with Habermas about the requirements for a viable postfoundationalist account of rationality. This will provide us with a productive basis on which to build in the chapters that follow.

**Communicative Rationality: Toward a Dialogical Reappropriation**

As noted at the outset, in thus engaging in a sustained critique of the “strong idealizations”, the aim has been to advance the task of delineating the constitutive features of a situated conception of rationality fully commensurate with postfoundationalist needs by building on the strengths of Habermas’s communicative conception of rationality while correcting for its weaknesses. Proceeding thus, I have sought to liberate the potential for mutual learning through dialogical interaction that lays at the heart of Habermas’s proposal, but which remains masked by his preoccupation with the idealizing presuppositions. A brief review of the main findings will pave the way for their further elaboration and refinement in the chapters that follow.

As noted early on, a decisive strength of Habermas’s stance is that in the face of challenges from postmodernists and radical contextualists, he performs an invaluable service in defending the possibility of a ‘nondefeatist’ response to the contemporary rationality problem. In so doing, he highlights the importance of intersubjectivity as a corrective for the limitations of an earlier misplaced emphasis on the ‘philosophy of consciousness’. Unfortunately, however, the efficacy of his contribution is marred because, in grounding his approach in a set of ‘strong idealizations’, he defends a set of requirements which are at odds with the constitutive conditions for a situated theory of knowledge, especially one that valorizes a situated learning process as integral to rationality. Thus, on the one hand, Habermas performs an important service in defending the need for a robust regulative conception of truth as a condition of the possibility for a mode of rational inquiry that can avoid falling prey to radical relativism. Yet on the other hand, in postulating unconditionality as a prerequisite, Habermas overstates his case in a manner that threatens to undermine his commitment to defending a situated theory of knowledge. This criticism is all the more telling since, as his own more recent writings come close to acknowledging, all that is really needed to
ensure nondefeatism is the endorsement of a context-transcendent conception of truth, with the ability to ensure that proffered validity claims are held open to critical appraisal in an indefinitely extended array of situated forums of inquiry. In the first instance, then, our critique establishes that the presupposition of unconditionality is altogether too strong to be compatible with the requirements of a postfoundationalist theory of knowledge. Instead, given our status as finite and fallible inquirers, the valorization of a context-transcendent conception of truth is all that is needed to secure nondefeatism in the context of an approach to rationality commensurate with contemporary postfoundationalist needs.

In a similar vein, I have challenged the tenability of postulating an ideal speech situation as a prerequisite for rationality in a postfoundationalist context. As a corrective, building on guiding clues that come to the fore in Habermas’s own more recent writings, I have argued that this idealization could, and should, be replaced by the specification of a set of ground rules for regulating the argumentative exchange of good reasons in situated forums of inquiry. But even in the latter respect, there is a need for reassessment. In particular, I have contended that, since a commitment to interactive learning is at the heart of his communicative conception of rationality, in endorsing the Toulmin model as the template for the learning process here at issue, Habermas endorses a conception of argumentation that is inadequate for his purposes. In particular, because of its inherently monological character, this model cannot adequately reflect Habermas’s own increasing emphasis on the inherent criticizability of proffered validity claims and the consequent need for position modification in response to sustainable objections—and hence, it cannot do justice to the interactive learning process that the communicative approach demonstrably presupposes. Instead, this model needs to be replaced by a thoroughly dynamic and dialogical conception of argumentation capable of supporting the situated learning process that Habermas rightly valorizes as central to rational inquiry in a postmetaphysical context. In addition, as we shall consider in some detail in the next chapter, there is a pressing need to make good Habermas’s neglect of the tradition-based factors that inevitably come into play in the raising and testing of validity claims once we acknowledge the irrevocably situated character of the testing processes at issue (but which can only be given their due once we have abandoned the problematic idealizations). On related grounds, in critiquing the third main idealization, I have defended the need to give priority to the telos of reaching understanding over that of consensus as the primary regulative ideal for a conception of rational inquiry which takes seriously its commitment to a situated learning process underwritten by an interactive exchange of good reasons. As noted, the need to forego a heavy emphasis on consensus as the anticipated outcome of rational inquiry is all the greater given Habermas’s own increasing emphasis on pluralism and difference as defining characteristics of our postmetaphysical situation.

Importantly too, although it necessitates a break with the problematic idealizations, I have sought to make it clear that, rather than constituting an extraneous imposition on Habermas’s thinking, the dialogical alternative defended here represents the liberation of a potential inherent in it from the outset. Thus for example, although masked by an undue emphasis on the problematic idealizations,
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it becomes clear on reflection that, as oriented toward the inclusiveness, on an equal basis, of multiple, diversely situated participants and toward the uncoerced appraisal of proffered claims through an interactive process of free and open inquiry, the idea of an ideal speech situation is itself an intrinsically dialogical concept. By the same token, a similarly interactive and dialogical process is presupposed by a commitment to coming to an agreement—or better, reaching understanding—through the exchange and comparative appraisal of competing viewpoints and their supporting reasons. Hence we can see that, while Habermas himself continues to valorize idealized discourse as the communicative medium wherein rationality is to be realized in a postfoundationalist era, what the contemporary vindication of critical reason actually calls for is the liberation of its inherently dialogical potential. Indeed, the foregoing critique directly supports the contention that such a dialogical reappropriation is necessary to complete the break with ‘philosophy of the subject’, which, on Habermas’s own telling, motivated his embrace of the ‘communicative turn’ ab initio. Accordingly, once we get beyond the barriers posed by his defence of the problematic idealizations, it becomes clear that not only does Habermas provide us with a strong impetus for the development of a specifically dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem, but also with important guiding clues as to its main constitutive features. On this assessment, then, what needs to be brought to the fore in particular as integral to the formulation of an adequate postfoundationalist account of rationality is the centrality of a situated learning process, fuelled by a dialogical exchange of good reasons. At the heart of this reformulation is the idea of a fully situated and thoroughly interactive conception of rational inquiry, grounded in an exchange of good reasons and oriented toward position modification in light of sustainable objections forthcoming from diverse points of view. From this starting point we are now well positioned to direct our attention in the chapters that follow to gaining a more textured appreciation of the constitutive features of the envisaged dialogical approach through testing, refining and extending the core insights thus generated through our engagement with Habermas.

As the next step in this direction, we need to take stock of the hermeneutic dimension of inquiry as articulated and defended by Hans-Georg Gadamer, with a view to ascertaining how it might contribute to advancing our core project, given Gadamer’s sensitivity to the ways in which our historico-cultural situatedness inevitably conditions our ability to engage in an interactive learning process oriented toward the situated advancement of understanding along the lines prefigured in the foregoing.

Notes

1 While both the specific list of idealizations and the terms used to designate them vary somewhat depending on Habermas’s particular priorities in different writings, these idealizations are those especially relevant to the concerns of the present study.
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3 See Thomas McCarthy’s Introduction to Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. ix. For a succinct overview of the developments which have given rise to our contemporary philosophical self-understanding as detailed at length by Habermas in this work, see his *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William M. Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), especially ch. 3.

4 McCarthy, Introduction to Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. ix.

5 Habermas’s communicative approach to rationality builds on his philosophical explorations during the 1970s and early eighties, culminating in his development of a ‘universal pragmatics’. From the perspective of present concerns, the following works are especially important in this regard. For an early formulation of his communicative conception of rationality, see in particular, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), especially ch. 1. For notable further elaborations which have a direct bearing on the core concerns of the present chapter, see *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, especially Lecture XI; ‘A Reply’, in *Communicative Action*, eds A. Honneth and H. Joas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), especially pp. 214-50; and *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, especially chs 1, 3, and 6.

6 As McCarthy aptly puts it (‘Introduction’ to *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. x):

The key to Habermas’s approach is his rejection of the ‘paradigm of consciousness’ and its associated ‘philosophy of the subject’ in favour of the through-and-through intersubjectivist paradigm of ‘communicative action.’ This is what he sees as the road open but not taken at the crucial junctures in the philosophical discourse of modernity.

7 Cf. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 314-15; ‘A Reply’, especially pp. 223, 227-33; also *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, e.g., p. 22, where Habermas epitomizes the core of the communicative approach as follows:

Rationality is understood to be a disposition of speaking and acting subjects that is expressed in modes of behaviour for which there are good reasons or grounds. This means that rational expressions admit of objective evaluation. … Any explicit examination of controversial validity claims requires … argumentation.
Given that our focal concern here is with the preservation of ‘nondefeatism’, as Habermas terms it, and in particular with the role of the idealizing presuppositions in securing this outcome, I forego elaborating on other features of Habermas’s position, such as the several types of validity claims and the ‘worlds’ to which they relate. Furthermore, since our concern here is with rationality in its ‘epistemic’ sense, in what follows I focus attention sharply on what Habermas has to say about our claims to truth (as distinct from, say, normative rightness), on the related idealizing presuppositions, and on the procedures whereby such claims are ‘redeemed’. For a detailed exposition of other aspects of Habermas’s position, the interested reader is referred to the commentaries cited above.

8 The Theory of Communicative Action, p.19.
9 See, e.g., The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 323: ‘Once participants enter into argumentation, they cannot avoid supposing, in a reciprocal way, that the conditions of an ideal speech situation have been sufficiently met’.
10 See, e.g. The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 323.
11 Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 134.
12 Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 135.
13 Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 135. As McCarthy points out (‘Introduction’, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, pp. viii-ix), this is a manifestation of a misjudged and overly strong reaction in some quarters to the demise of the presuppositions of subject-centred reason, whereby:

To the necessity that characterizes reason in the Cartesian-Kantian view, the radical critics typically oppose the contingency and conventionality of the rules, criteria, and products of what counts as rational speech and action at any given time and place; to its universality, they oppose an irreducible plurality of incommensurable lifeworlds and forms of life, the irremediably ‘local’ character of all truth, argument, and validity …

14 Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 136.
15 ‘A Reply’, p. 222; The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, pp. 7, 322.
16 The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 323, italics in original.
17 The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 323.
18 Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 139.
21 For Habermas’s acknowledgement of the situated status of communicative reason, see, e.g., The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 322: ‘There is no pure reason that might don linguistic clothing only in the second place. Reason is by its very nature incarnated in contexts of communicative action and in structures of the lifeworld’. See too Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 146; also ‘Discourse Ethics’, in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 92.
22 Hoy and McCarthy, Critical Theory, p. 76.
24 Postmetaphysical Thinking, pp. 6, 137.
26 Thus while Habermas does, on occasion, refer to the hypothetical status of validity claims (e.g. The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 323), he does so in a manner that takes
account only of their revisability in the (limited) sense just noted, and not in the stronger sense which presupposes growth and/or transformation of understanding, as discussed further below.


31 *Critical Theory*, pp. 73, 76.

32 *Critical Theory*, p. 76.

33 However, a limitation of McCarthy's stance on this issue is that he continues to defend a residual idealization in the form of an appeal to the notion of a ‘universal audience’ (see *Critical Theory*, especially pp. 76-7) as necessary to secure the nondefeatism of critical reason. But as discussed in chapter 3 below, on dialogical premises, even this, less problematic, idealization can, and should, be dispensed with in a genuinely postfoundationalist theory of knowledge.


35 See, e.g. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 323; see too ‘Discourse Ethics’, 88-9, where Habermas affirms that ‘the intention of my earlier analysis [of the ideal speech situation] still seems correct to me’; cf. also *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, pp. 25, 26, 42.


38 See, in particular, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, ch. 6.

39 *Justification and Application*, p. 163.

40 See, e.g. ‘Discourse Ethics’, p. 88, where Habermas defends the postulation of an ideal speech situation in terms of its function as a ‘reconstruction of the general symmetry conditions that every competent speaker who believes he is engaging in argumentation must presuppose as adequately fulfilled’.

41 Habermas outlines some of the main ground rules in ‘Discourse Ethics’, pp. 88-9. For a succinct discussion of the constitutive/regulative status of these rules, see ‘Discourse Ethics’, pp. 91-2; for a more far-ranging discussion of what is at issue here, see ‘Discourse
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In his commentary on the ‘rules and forms of practical discourse’, conceived along explicitly Habermasian lines, Robert Alexy gives a brief indication of what is at issue here under the heading of the ‘rules of the burden of argumentation’. See ‘A Theory of Practical Discourse’, in The Communicative Ethics Controversy, eds Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), especially pp. 167-9. But notwithstanding its merits, this proposal stands in need of further elaboration and refinement. In particular, provision must also be made for factors such as the need to successively open up for critical appraisal all aspects of one’s position, including underlying presuppositions, in the light of challenges forthcoming from other points of view; and correlative to modify any aspect of one’s position in the light of sustainable objections forthcoming from other viewpoints, as well as on the basis of demonstrated inadequacies in the evidential support for a proffered claim in its own terms. Although an extended treatment of the logic of dialogical argument—as yet an underdeveloped facet of the theory of argumentation—is beyond the scope of the present study, these issues will receive further discussion in the next section and in the chapters that follow, especially chapter 4.

For the background to, and rationale for, this idealization, see the references cited in the foregoing section in relation to the ideal speech situation and, in particular, McCarthy, The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas, especially pp. 299-310.


See, e.g. Justification and Application, pp. 164-5.


See, e.g. his ‘Universal Pragmatics’ in Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1979), p. 1: ‘I take the type of action aimed at reaching understanding to be fundamental’; see too The Theory of Communicative Action,


'The use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the original mode of language use'.

As David Hoy comments, the link 'is easier to see in German because of the verbal similarity between 'understanding' (Verstandigung) and 'agreement' (Einverstandnis). As Hoy also observes, 'the verbal similarity that Habermas hears in German is not an argument for making agreement the paradigm of understanding' (Hoy and McCarthy, Critical Theory, pp. 180, 181). For a focused attempt to discern the interlinkage between these concepts from a Habermasian perspective, see Cooke, Language and Reason, pp. 110-12.

Accordingly, as prefigured above and as will receive further consideration as we proceed, endorsement of the goal of reaching understanding calls for a modification of the Toulmin model of argumentation explicitly endorsed by Habermas, in the direction of an appropriately dialogical and dynamic conception of argumentation fully commensurate with postfoundationalist needs.

It is noteworthy that while in his more recent writings, Habermas goes some ways toward relaxing his insistence on consensus in favour of giving greater prominence to the situated learning processes involved, he still continues to emphasise the need for all parties to embrace 'the common reference point of a possible consensus'. See especially Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 138; cf. his earlier valorization of the concept of forging a common 'situation definition' (The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1, pp. 98-101). In so doing, he does not go far enough in the direction of valorizing a commitment to reaching understanding in a sense that would presuppose neither a univocal framework of commensuration nor the elimination of disagreement as a sine qua non for rationality (a theme to be further elaborated in the chapters that follow).
We next engage with the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, with a view to building on the conclusions arrived at through an internal critique of Habermas’s idealizing presuppositions. My aim here is to show that, although a concern with rationality has been less to the foreground in Gadamer’s writings, philosophical hermeneutics has a major contribution to make to the development of a revitalized dialogical conception of rationality adequate to postfoundationalist needs. In particular, engagement with Gadamer’s hermeneutics serves to underscore the intrinsically situated and contextual character of human understanding and hence of rational critique, thereby correcting for the shortcomings of Habermas’s ‘highly abstract concept of coercion-free discourse which totally loses sight of the real conditions of human praxis’. In addition, it highlights both the inherently interrogative character of critical inquiry and its developmental orientation whereby the attainment of each new level of understanding opens up new horizons to be further investigated, as does each shift in historical perspective. In so doing, as we shall see, hermeneutic thinking does much to legitimize a conception of inquiry oriented more toward the transformative advancement of understanding than toward the attainment of consensus as such. But if philosophical hermeneutics thus has a significant contribution to make to the development of a viable postfoundationalist conception of rationality, it remains the case that the liberation of this potential requires making explicit themes which remain largely implicit in Gadamer’s own statement of his position and hence, as prefigured earlier, an element of ‘destructive retrieve’, informed by the debate with Habermas, is needed to advance this goal. We will also need to respond to critics who have expressed scepticism about the ability of hermeneutic inquiry to secure its own grounding.

Indeed, we will need to counteract a still more debilitating prejudice to the effect that, whatever its other merits, philosophical hermeneutics cannot really contribute to the development of a viable contemporary account of rationality given that, as indicated by his much-vaunted critique of method, Gadamer is inherently antipathetic to Enlightenment thinking and, by implication, to all epistemological concerns. On some versions, it represents a misunderstanding, if not a distortion, of the core ontological thrust of Gadamer’s project to appropriate it for epistemological ends, especially those pertaining to problems of legitimation or grounding. In response, I will seek to vindicate a dialogical reading of
Gadamer’s work which challenges this anti-epistemological assessment. On this reading, notwithstanding his anti-methodological stance, Gadamer is by no means antipathetic to Enlightenment thinking. Rather, he actively endorses the spirit of critical inquiry that animates the Enlightenment tradition, while calling for a reappraisal of the terms in which it is construed to ensure that it continues to do justice to its original impulses. On this basis the present chapter seeks to vindicate the contention that instead of treating these two dimensions of hermeneutic inquiry, the ontological and epistemological, as antithetical, “either/or” endeavours, we are well advised to adopt a more productive “both/and” approach, recognizing them as complementary rather than as oppositional. This is all the more the case since, as we shall soon see, notwithstanding the centrality of Gadamer’s ontological concerns, philosophical hermeneutics has important, and unavoidable, epistemological implications which need to be explicitly addressed.

Of course, in keeping with our core project, the overall aim here is to bring to the fore the distinctive contribution that philosophical hermeneutics can make to the development of a viable dialogical conception of rationality, especially by way of complementing and extending the findings of the previous chapter. With this end in view, let us begin by reviewing how the problem of grounding might be recast in hermeneutic terms, given Gadamer’s sensitivity to the inherent historicality of understanding and the role of prejudgments in the constitution of our hermeneutic situation.

Historicity, Prejudgments and the Problem of Grounding

While, as just noted, the present study is convinced of Gadamer’s epistemological relevance, it clearly recognizes that to the extent that epistemological problems are of concern to Gadamer, he is committed to refashioning them and setting them on a new footing. In particular, while problems of objectivity and grounding are demonstrably of concern to Gadamer, his emphasis on the historicality of understanding and on the constitutive role of prejudices clearly calls for a new approach to the way these problems are posed in a hermeneutic context. Moreover, any viable response must cope with the fact that Gadamer’s ‘perspectivalism’, as it might be termed, ensures that the spectre of relativism never recedes very far into the background. In addition, it is clear that Gadamer does not always provide fully worked out answers in *Truth and Method* or elsewhere. Yet, as I seek to establish, approached from a dialogical perspective, philosophical hermeneutics embodies a far greater repertoire of resources for responding to epistemological problems of this sort than it is typically credited with. Moreover, on a dialogical reading, Gadamer’s epistemological response goes far beyond the straightforward coherence approach typically attributed to him by those seeking to vindicate his epistemological credentials.

With regard to Gadamer’s refashioning of epistemological concerns, of special relevance in the present context is the way in which, following Heidegger, he directs attention away from the narrower, more purely cognitive relation to the world of our experience characteristic of traditional epistemology to the activity of
understanding, construed more holistically as the basis of our relatedness to the world. Even more important perhaps is the way in which Gadamer also takes a lead from Heidegger in bringing to the fore the intrinsically historical and situated character of hermeneutic understanding. Especially noteworthy in this connection is Gadamer’s emphasis on the thoroughgoing influence of ‘effective historical consciousness’ (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein), and the constitutive role of prejudices or prejudgments (Vorurteile) in the attainment of understanding. Taken together, the effect of these principles is to highlight the intrinsic historicality and contextuality of human understanding and, in the context of philosophical hermeneutics, they highlight the way in which the activity of understanding is conditioned by the possibilities of making sense of our world that have been given to us by the tradition of which we are a part and to which we, in turn, contribute. In this connection, Gadamer’s provocative contention regarding the indispensability of prejudices, or prejudgments, as a condition of the possibility of understanding warrants further comment for, as soon becomes apparent, this tenet has a crucial role to play in his distinctive hermeneutic formulation of the problem of grounding.

Drawing on Heidegger’s reappropriation of the ‘hermeneutic circle’, Gadamer famously contends that we advance in understanding not, per impossible, through the elimination of our prejudgments but through actively bringing them into play in grappling with a given subject matter (Sache). The significance of his thinking about prejudgments in terms of setting the problem of grounding on a new footing comes decisively to the fore in the second part of the second part of *Truth and Method* when, having established the indispensability of prejudices as prerequisites for understanding, he goes on to specify what he terms ‘the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics’. In Gadamer’s own terms, the decisive question is: ‘What is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?’ And notwithstanding critics who see it as something of a ‘category mistake’ to so much as raise this sort of question in the hermeneutic context, Gadamer goes on to give a clear indication as to how we might set about responding to it in appropriately hermeneutic terms. *Pace* Heidegger, he reminds us that ‘the constant task of understanding’ pivots on ‘working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed “by the things” themselves’. Moreover, as we will consider at some length in the sections that follow, Gadamer goes on to affirm that a dialogical process of inquiry is central to the validation of prejudgments thus construed. Even so, an element of ‘destructive retrieve’ is needed to bring to the fore the core dialogical processes at issue since Gadamer himself does not provide a systematically worked out account of the procedures involved. But before directly assuming this task, it will be helpful to enumerate some of the ways in which Gadamer’s emphasis on the historicality of understanding and on the centrality of prejudgments in the activity of understanding directly challenge entrenched Enlightenment presuppositions about epistemology, while generating concerns about the ability of philosophical hermeneutics to overcome the spectre of relativism.
Above all, it is clear that Gadamer rejects the assumptions both of neutrality and of presuppositionless understanding that pervade traditional conceptions of knowledge from Descartes to Husserl. Instead, Gadamer valorizes a situated conception of understanding, whereby the prejudgments constitutive of our hermeneutic situation play an influential role in determining what, and how, we understand. A significant implication of this core hermeneutic tenet is that understanding is always perspectival, such that while we are indeed capable of attaining knowledge and truth, we always inevitably come to understand the subject matter from some particular perspective or other, never in a complete or aperspectival way. A further implication is that differently situated inquirers (and indeed a given inquirer when she revisits the subject matter on different occasions) will be struck by different facets of the subject matter and so led to appraise it in a different light. In addition, as is well known, Gadamer rejects the idea that these relativistic threats can be overcome and knowledge claims validated in a traditional objectivist sense through the application of a univocal method. Given these departures from traditional epistemology, there might seem to be little prospect of ensuring that our interpretations of a given subject matter are in some significant sense ‘objective’ rather than simply a reflection of our own culturally ingrained prejudices, if not subjective preferences. Indeed, philosophical hermeneutics might even seem to present us with the very epitome of the contextualist threat highlighted by Habermas, against which his ‘strong idealizations’ were invoked as a bulwark. Not surprisingly then, critics remain pessimistic in their assessment of the ability of this approach to support a viable conception of justification, contending instead that philosophical hermeneutics not only raises the ‘spectre of relativism but ‘even sounds the death-knell of the traditional conception of objectivity’.

However, as indicated, my aim in this chapter is to establish that such criticisms ultimately miss their mark since, when its dialogical underpinnings are given their due, it can be seen that philosophical hermeneutics embodies a far greater repertoire of resources for addressing this problem than it is typically credited with. On this basis, we will come to recognize the extent of the contribution that Gadamer can make to the development of a viable dialogical response to the contemporary rationality problem.

Hermeneutic Inquiry, Nondefeatism and the Transformative Advancement of Understanding

To appropriately focus our exploration of the problem of grounding in a hermeneutic context, let us recall that while eschewing method as the route to knowledge or truth, in concluding *Truth and Method*, Gadamer opens up another possibility as the template for hermeneutic inquiry, namely, the idea of a ‘discipline of questioning and inquiring’, a discipline that, as he has it, ‘guarantees (verburgt) truth’. Moreover, as elaborated below, he gives clear indications that the envisaged disciplined mode of inquiry is to be conceived of in intrinsically dialogical terms. Viewed thus, as crystallized by Lawrence Schmidt, the crucial
question is: ‘How does one come to be able to authenticate, attest to, vouch for, guarantee, stand behind or warrant—all possible translations of verburgen—a truth by means of a disciplined conversation?’ In response, the challenge is to make progress in rendering explicit the conditions under which such a situated mode of dialogical inquiry can succeed in securing the advancement of understanding by principled means. In what follows, I will contend that a thoroughgoing dialogical reading of Gadamer’s stance holds the key to developing a viable response to this question. But to vindicate this assessment, we will need to take stock of, and respond to, a series of objections which if sustainable would significantly impair the ability of Gadamerian hermeneutics to ground truth or knowledge claims by principled means. Proceeding thus, we will at the same time gain insight into the dynamics and logic of a situated dialogical process of inquiry which can teach us much about redefining what it means to be rational for our times. As a first step in this direction, let us now take stock of some striking differences between the intrinsically situated mode of inquiry envisaged by Gadamer and the kind of idealized process valorized by Habermas.

**Situated Dialogue, Not Ideal Speech**

Noteworthy in the first instance is a striking contrast in the guiding orientations that animate these two approaches. In particular, while Habermas vigorously defends a conception of rational inquiry centred on the validation of truth claims which, in Peircean vein, are anticipated to win the assent of all rational participants as inquiry progresses, Gadamer valorizes a thoroughly interrogative conception of inquiry whereby, ‘as against the fixity of opinion, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid’. What especially distinguishes the hermeneutic approach in this regard is the fact that a proffered claim is no more than provisionally asserted, in hypothetical fashion, as a basis for further inquiry, rather than as an assertion of the settled truth of the matter. Moreover, in thus affirming the logical priority of the question, Gadamer makes it clear that the advancement of understanding is conditional upon our willingness to admit that we are not already in possession of the truth about the matter under investigation, but are instead seeking to uncover it by interrogating the subject matter in an appropriately directed way. For Gadamer, then, the guiding question remains the true focus of inquiry, so that instead of clinging tenaciously to preformed views, we take on the challenge of progressively opening up the topic for further investigation. Ultimately the contributions of the dialogue partners, as well as the outcomes of our dialogical exchanges, are simply means to this end. In short, while both theorists are committed to an inherently fallibilistic conception of inquiry, the Gadamerian model is altogether more open-ended. Thus in sharp contrast to an approach preoccupied with the validation of validity claims, Gadamer is committed ab initio to the injunction that we hold all of our prejudgments open to revision, subject to the test of ongoing experience of the thing itself and the potentially conflicting views of others who occupy different hermeneutic standpoints.

Above all, given Gadamer’s emphasis on our situatedness and finitude, it is clear that philosophical hermeneutics could have little truck with the postulation of
a trenchant critic of such a notion, repudiating it on the grounds both that a 'standpoint that is beyond any standpoint ... is a pure illusion',¹⁹ and that it represents ‘an impossible ideal, similar to the “divine perspective” of a metaphysical theology’.²⁰ As will be apparent at this point, the core hermeneutic objection is that even allowing for its counterfactual status, the postulation of an ideal speech situation cannot fail to connote the possibility of an atemporal, presuppositionless, aperspectival kind of knowing, which, given our status as finite, situated inquirers, is simply not tenable on hermeneutic principles even as an ideal. Equally importantly, however, the postulation of an ideal speech situation is severely flawed because in failing to do justice to the inherent historicality of human understanding, it distorts our appreciation of the temporalized learning process whereby the situated advancement of understanding actually takes place. Thus in hermeneutic terms, the postulation of an ideal speech situation is ‘an impossible ideal’ not just because it overlooks our historically conditioned status but also in virtue of its neglect of the temporalized, processual character of human understanding. In particular, such an idealization fails to do justice to the fact that, as Wachterhauser puts it, ‘every subject matter we can understand exists in a Wirkungsgeschichte or “history of effects” which makes our grasp of it part of an on-going process of “interpretation” and “dialogue” between our past and present’.²¹ Since, even ideally, ‘we can never grasp the subject matter as such or all at once’,²² it is a contradiction in terms to postulate as an ideal the concept of a knowledge situation where in we could come to complete reflective awareness of the subject matter under investigation or acquire fully transparent or unconditioned knowledge of it.

In addition, the postulation of an ideal speech situation also goes astray in overlooking the fact that a fundamental contradiction is involved in positing as an ideal for inquiry a contextless knowledge situation which cannot avoid presupposing the equivalence and interchangeability of all contributors and contributions, without regard for differences in their hermeneutic situations or the traditions of inquiry to which they belong. Further, since such an approach neglects the ongoing need to take account of new insights and perspectives as these emerge with the advancement of inquiry, on hermeneutic principles it does not make sense to posit, even ideally, a vantage point, or speech situation, from which the merits of all contributions taken together could be comprehensively and transparently assessed.²³ At the same time, of course, it needs to be borne firmly in mind that in thus eschewing the possibility of an ideal speech situation, Gadamer by no means envisages a pessimistic delimitation of the possibilities for knowledge and understanding that are open to us as finite, situated inquirers. On the contrary, as Bubner reminds us,²⁴ on hermeneutic premises, ‘[b]eing involved in tradition does not mean just being bound to the particular determination of a situation’, ‘it also means being confronted with an inexhaustible richness of possibilities’. Importantly however, the ‘hermeneutic activity of expanding horizons and stepping beyond limits, which makes up our true existence, unfolds itself by proceeding from a particular point of concrete involvement in tradition’, not from an unattainable idealized vantage point. Consequently, while hermeneutic thinking
fully endorses the view that ‘[w]e are ourselves when we find ourselves at work trying to determine our reality in argument with the cosmos of hermeneutical understanding’, it is axiomatic that this does not presuppose the availability of a counterfactual ideal speech situation, since this possibility is already ‘given through the tradition that engages us’. 25

But if philosophical hermeneutics thus could have no truck with Habermas’s idealizing presuppositions as a means of securing its grounding, just what alternatives does it have at its disposal? As noted, the aim here is to vindicate the merits of an intrinsically dialogical response to this question. To pave the way for this development, however, we must now take stock of an objection which, if sustainable, would threaten the cogency of the proposed line of response.

**Hermeneutic Truth: Between Logos and Nous**

Specifically, what of the contention proffered by Lawrence Schmidt that, in keeping with Gadamer’s valorization of the ‘event-like’ character of understanding, hermeneutic inquiry embodies its own criterion of self-evident correctness which renders otiose the need for delineating a process for systematically testing the cogency of our prejudgments? In particular, on Schmidt’s analysis, the criterion in question is ‘the enlightening’. In this connection, Schmidt explicitly contends that: ‘The experience of the enlightening perspective requires no further justification; it is enlightening. To ask what one should believe is to presume that what was experienced was not enlightening.’ 26 In short, on this view the ‘event-like’ character of understanding embodies a certain self-evident validity that does not stand in need of further justification by dialogical means or otherwise; the enlightening is simply self-validating.

In response, however, what needs to be affirmed is that recourse to the ‘event-like’ character of understanding and the alleged self-evident correctness of ‘the enlightening’ by no means relieves us of the responsibility, indeed necessity, of embracing, what Tugendhat insightfully terms a ‘constitutive moment of reflection’ and thus of assuming ‘the Socratic challenge of a critical justification’. 27 This is all the more the case since, given variations in our hermeneutic situations, too heavy a reliance on an appeal to the alleged self-evident validity of hermeneutic understanding only reinforces the threat of relativism instead of helping to ameliorate or resolve it. Moreover, the evidence is that Gadamer himself does not fall prey to the error of neglecting the need for assuming this Socratic challenge, as called for by Tugendhat amongst others. Instead, in explicitly valorizing a disciplined process of dialogical inquiry as integral to the pursuit of objectivity and truth, he actively embraces this challenge. Accordingly, as Robert Dostal perceptively observes, notwithstanding the emphasis he sometimes places on their ‘event-like’ character, for Gadamer, understanding and truth come about ‘when we take the time to dwell on the matter at hand in conversation with another’. 28 Indeed, as Dostal and Bubner both confirm, 29 far from one-sidedly embracing a concept of truth as enlightening, the ‘model of conversation is the primary model throughout Gadamer’s work on the experience of truth’. What needs to be acknowledged, then, is that Gadamer refuses to choose ‘between logos
and nous’; instead, he ‘affirms the possibility of “both”’. Thus, as Dostal concludes, ‘The circle for Gadamer is going back and forth between intuition and dialectic. The tension between these poles is precisely the engaging power of thought which characterizes his “between”’.\(^30\) In short, what needs to be affirmed is that while the event-like character of understanding is indeed a notable feature of Gadamer’s thinking, it is ultimately no more than a ‘moment’ in an ongoing dialogical process, oriented toward testing and refining prejudgments in respect of their attunement to the things themselves.\(^31\) This assessment will be further borne out in the course of what follows.

Having thus made the point that far from eschewing such concerns, philosophical hermeneutics readily assumes ‘the Socratic challenge of a critical justification’, let us now take a closer look at how Gadamer goes about discharging this challenge via his embrace of the Platonic template and the dialectic of question and answer on which it centres. In so doing, we will begin to gain clear insight into the conditions that must be fulfilled if hermeneutic inquiry is to succeed in responding effectively to the problem of grounding and thereby securing its critical efficacy.

The Interrogative, Dialogical Structure of Hermeneutic Inquiry and the Presupposition of Openness

Although on first encounter there is a somewhat enigmatic ring to Gadamer’s concluding endorsement of a ‘discipline of questioning and inquiring’ as the route to truth via the advancement of hermeneutic understanding, on reflection it soon becomes clear from the progression of Gadamer’s argument in the second part of *Truth and Method* that the template for this disciplined mode of questioning and inquiring is that of Platonic dialectic.\(^32\) By highlighting this aspect of Gadamer’s thinking, the aim in what follows is to elucidate the conditions of the possibility of a situated dialogical mode of inquiry with the capacity to promote the potentially transformative advancement of understanding, as envisaged by Gadamer himself.

In the first instance, Gadamer’s hermeneutic conception of inquiry is distinguished by its inherently interrogative character, as epitomized by his emphasis on the priority of the question,\(^33\) especially when contrasted with Habermas’s preoccupation with validation. Thus instead of beginning with the assertion of a claim, as Habermas proposes, Gadamer is emphatic that hermeneutic inquiry always begins with a question—along the lines of ‘how do matters stand with the subject matter?’—requiring that we then look to the ‘thing itself’ to ascertain how it ‘answers’. Moreover, since to proffer a prefabricated answer would be to foreclose inquiry, it is crucial that this guiding question remains open and continues to inform the advancement of inquiry for its duration. Claims are of course made as inquiry progresses but, importantly, their status is simply that of temporary answers, provisionally affirmed on the way to an enhanced, even transformed, understanding of the subject matter, something that will emerge only through sustained engagement with the guiding question. This opening up of a question is, for Gadamer, the decisive event for initiating inquiry on the hermeneutic model—just as the holding open of the question is the decisive
prerequisite for its continuance—essentially because in this way we acknowledge that we do not already know how matters stand with respect to the subject matter, but are investigating with a view to finding out.\textsuperscript{34} In this connection Gadamer invokes the Socratic \textit{docta ignorantia} to underscore the need for embarking on inquiry with an open-minded attitude \textit{vis-à-vis} the subject matter, allowing that our inquiries could take us either in this direction or that.\textsuperscript{35} In short, on the hermeneutic account in beginning with a question in counter-distinction to a validity claim, we acknowledge that the matter is not yet decided, that the matter is still open to reappraisal pending the further progress of inquiry. Thus in awareness that our understanding of the subject matter is inevitably conditioned by (inherited) presuppositions and projections of which we may not even be aware, we reserve judgment about the subject matter, pending the surfacing and testing of the relevant presuppositions. Likewise, in awareness of the partial and perspectival character of hermeneutic understanding, we recognize that we are inevitably viewing the matter under investigation from a particular standpoint, simultaneously acknowledging that others who occupy different hermeneutic situations will have different viewpoints and perspectives to bring to bear, and that we must remain open to these if we truly aspire to attain an adequate understanding of the subject matter commensurate with the possibilities afforded by our historico-cultural situation.

As noted, Gadamer emphatically valorizes Platonic dialectic as the template for this situated, interrogative mode of inquiry. What this model exemplifies in particular is the indispensability of structured conversation, or dialogue, in advancing our understanding of the subject matter under investigation. Given its centrality to our core concerns, we will return to the consideration of different aspects of Gadamer’s treatment of this theme at various stages throughout the present chapter. As a connecting thread, however, it will be helpful at this point to invoke Rudiger Bubner’s insightful characterization of the core dialogical process as Gadamer conceives it:

Here, partners, with their different points of view, come together in a conversation governed by a subject matter of common interest. It is this orientation to a subject matter that leads both sides into a dialogical context and binds them for the course of the dialogue. The process is not motivated by the chance of success of a single, one-sided viewpoint, for its limits are already set by the resistance of the partner. What is much more definitive is that both sides are bound by the task of the actual elucidation of the subject matter. The process of dialogue, however provisional its outcome may be, consists in … coming-to-an-agreement-with-another, [a process that] always occurs in reference to a subject matter in terms of which we produce unity through dialogue.\textsuperscript{36}

What this succinct statement of the dialogical underpinnings of the hermeneutic process of inquiry serves to establish in the first instance is that while it may seem natural to construe the problem of grounding primarily in subjectivist terms as centring on the legitimation of subjectively held prejudgments, this is not in fact what is at issue. Rather, on Gadamer’s account, while grounded in the ongoing surfacing and testing of prejudgments, hermeneutic inquiry is a conjoint, interactive—in a word, dialogical—process through and through.\textsuperscript{37} Hence, as will become increasingly apparent as we proceed, it cannot easily be charged, as some
critics have alleged, that Gadamer’s approach fails in respect of grounding because it ignores the intersubjective dimension of inquiry. It is noteworthy too that Gadamer’s commitment to a dialogical conception of inquiry is no mere adjunct to his thinking, but has its origins in the prior conviction that hermeneutic experience itself has ‘the structure of dialogical interplay with an other within a world’. Thus, as Gadamer emphasizes, in contrast to Erlebnis with its subjectivist connotations, hermeneutic experience (Erfahrung) is never monological or purely self-referencing (still less self-justifying), but instead embodies a fundamental relatedness, and openness, to what is other. A similar point could be made regarding Gadamer’s well-known treatment of the motif of a game or play (Spiel) as the paradigm for hermeneutic experience in the first Part of Truth and Method. But while Gadamer is emphatic that the need to keep open the guiding question is a sine qua non for meaningful inquiry, he is equally emphatic that it is possible to advance in understanding regarding the subject matter through making progress in resolving the guiding question, affirming that ‘deciding the question is the path to knowledge’. As the next step in advancing our investigations, it will be productive to take a closer look at the structure, dynamics and logic of the dialectical processes here at issue.

Deciding Questions through Dialectical Argumentation

In commenting on Gadamer’s approach to problems of grounding and truth, Richard Bernstein reinforces the cogency of our earlier discussion and crystallizes what is at issue when he makes the point that an ‘appeal to the Sache is not sufficient to clarify the concept of truth. For the question can always be asked, When do we have a true understanding of the thing itself?’ Moreover, in going on to make the point that a true understanding must be ‘warranted by the appropriate forms of argumentation’, Bernstein reinforces the conclusion we arrived at in the previous chapter about how grounding is to be secured in a postfoundationalist context. For in critiquing the limitations of Habermas’s appeal to a set of idealizing presuppositions as a means of securing the nondefeatism of critical inquiry, we saw that Habermas himself provides us with important guiding clues as to the possibility of an appropriately situated, detranscendentalized alternative. Thus in particular, although he continues to embrace the problematic idealizations, Habermas highlights the importance of intersubjective argumentation as a crucial resource for securing the grounding of our knowledge claims in the absence of the possibility of an appeal to incontrovertible foundations. What needs to be established here is that this insight is not unique to Habermas’s way of thinking. Rather, on closer analysis, it can be seen to have a direct correlate in Gadamer’s embrace of the Platonic template, although, as we shall soon see, the Gadamerian model incorporates a number of notable features which serve as correctives for the limitations of the Habermasian stance and thereby render it more adequate to postfoundationalist needs. In the present section, then, the guiding aim is to establish that, while eschewing appeal to Habermasian idealizations, hermeneutic inquiry nonetheless has at its disposal the dialectical resources needed to fuel a situated learning process compatible with its situated, interrogative
underpinnings.\textsuperscript{42} Yet, it remains the case that Gadamer’s specification of the dynamics of this mode of argumentation remains for the most part implicit in his treatment of the Platonic template, so that an element of ‘destructive retrieve’ is again needed to bring its distinctive features into clear relief. Hence in a recent essay Christopher Smith performs an important service in elucidating precisely this aspect of Gadamer’s thinking. We can productively draw on this source to gain direct insight into the workings of the inherently dynamic and dialogical conception of argumentation envisaged by Gadamer commensurate with the Platonic template.\textsuperscript{43}

Especially noteworthy in the first instance is the hermeneutic emphasis on mutuality; that is on the conjoint, interrogative, exploration of a subject matter of common interest. Thus in contrast to the standard model of argumentation ‘in terms of claim and counterclaim each advocated by the individual party as the commitment-less adversary of the other’, on the Gadamerian account what is emphasized from the outset is the importance of engaging with another in a conjoint inquiry into a given topic and doing so in such a way that we follow it together ‘where it would lead us’.\textsuperscript{44} That is to say, the aim is that of engaging in ‘conjont dialogical inquiry’ oriented toward ‘coming to an understanding of something in a verbal exchange’, as envisaged on the Platonic model.\textsuperscript{45} In contrast to the standard conception, the aim of hermeneutic inquiry thus construed is ‘“Sich-Verstandigen in einer Sache”, reaching understanding in a matter’,\textsuperscript{46} not that of defeating one’s opponent. Further, reinforcing our earlier analysis, Smith is emphatic that in the case of this ‘interrogative dialogical logic as opposed to the monological logic of demonstration’, the decisive factor is that at the outset, a question is opened up and is ‘properly delimited’.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, ‘far from being stated as a “claim” at the beginning, the answer is always still to be arrived at’ in awareness that, pending the further progress of inquiry, things ‘could either be this way or that’.\textsuperscript{48} But then how specifically does this interrogative, dialogical process of inquiry facilitate the advancement of understanding by principled means? In this connection Smith makes the important point that in keeping with its classical underpinnings, the hermeneutic conception of argumentation is essentially jurisprudential, and, as such, involves weighing the grounds that are forthcoming on one side of the issue against those forthcoming on the other.\textsuperscript{49} On this model, a critical intersubjective process of evidence assessment naturally eventuates since, as Smith puts it, once a claim is raised in interrogative mode, it inevitably provokes the response: ‘What do you have to go on? or ‘What reasons do you have for saying that?’\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, given the intrinsically interrogative character of this mode of argumentative inquiry, ‘not only the claim, but each of the links in the chain of argument supporting it are, with the exception of whatever happens to be the last, still in question, and even the last could always be called into question if the parties did not tacitly agree to let it stand’.\textsuperscript{51}

Overall, then, what becomes apparent is that, in contrast to the standard monological and adversarial model of argumentation, the hermeneutic conception of inquiry is characterized by the interrogative, dialogical structure of ‘talking something through’,\textsuperscript{52} with a view to progressively working out a (provisional) resolution to an open question, the answer to which was not known at the outset.
Thus on the hermeneutic account, ‘the essence of argument lies, not in our making it as individual agents in competition with each other, but in our following it together where it would lead us’. In other words, on the hermeneutic account, the anticipated outcome is not that of one side winning out over the other in terms of the vindication of initial claims, but rather the emergence of a potentially transformative understanding of the previously inadequately understood subject matter. Accordingly, the guiding insight here is that participants who engage in situated dialogical inquiry have limited horizons beyond which they cannot see at first. Hence an advance in understanding presupposes that something is heard and learned from another who sees things from a different angle, and that two or more perceptions come to augment each other in what Gadamer calls a fusion of their horizons. Put another way, originally in any reasoning about something none of us yet has present in mind the answer to the open question, rather it is always absent and still to be reached in conjoint inquiry.

Importantly, then, as Smith aptly puts it, in embracing ‘Plato’s characterization of the dialogical experience as to pathos ton logon, the happening of arguments to us, our undergoing them’, Gadamer brings it to our awareness that ‘a good argument is never won. Rather it ends in the “Oh, now I understand!” said by both of the participants at the provisional close’ of the conjoint dialogical process of inquiry ‘that was shared between them’.

Given its significance for present concerns, several features of Smith’s analysis of Gadamer’s dialogical logic of argumentation warrant brief additional comment, with a view to bringing to the fore some important respects in which the Gadamerian conception of argumentatively-grounded inquiry goes beyond the more restrictive Habermasian model. Firstly, in addition to underscoring the conjoint nature of this mode of inquiry, there is a strong emphasis here on the centrality of the subject matter. As Gadamer himself perceptively puts it, ‘Something is placed at the centre … which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another’. Moreover, there is a real sense in which, as dialogue partners, we must allow ourselves to be led forward in understanding by the subject matter itself, and hence refrain from attempting to impose our preconceived ideas upon it. Importantly too, if we are prepared to submit to this discipline, then at the (provisional) conclusion of the dialectical process, we stand to achieve a potentially transformative insight into the subject matter, as a result of a fusion of our horizons of understanding. Thus, as Gadamer evocatively puts it, at the conclusion of ‘a successful conversation both [partners] come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community’. For on the hermeneutic conception, reaching understanding in dialogue ultimately presupposes ‘being transformed into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were’. Importantly then, as I contend in the next section, notwithstanding Gadamer’s frequent references to ‘consensus’, ‘agreement’ and the like, there are good grounds for maintaining that his primary concern is with the potentially transformative advancement of understanding rather than with the attainment of (substantive) agreement as such.
In addition, the foregoing analysis reinforces the tenability of our earlier finding that while the event-like happening of understanding (as epitomized by the ‘enlightening’) is indeed a prominent feature of hermeneutic inquiry, it is not intended that we simply assume its self-evident correctness; instead, we must hold our flashes of insight open to the test of ongoing intersubjective appraisal. Only in this way, as Gadamer is aware, can we protect against the seeming self-evident validity that all too often accrues to what are in fact nothing other than ‘arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought’. Above all, however, on the basis of the foregoing, it may be concluded that, in its embrace of an intrinsically interrogative and open-ended conception of conjoint inquiry, philosophical hermeneutics embodies a model of argumentation that can serve as a corrective for the deficiencies of the relatively static and monological conception endorsed by Habermas. In particular, as both dynamic and dialogical, it has the advantage of incorporating a process of ongoing position modification as inquiry progresses and as new insight dawns, thereby demonstrating its ability to underwrite the kind of situated learning process envisaged by Habermas, but masked by his unduly idealized conception of inquiry.

To further vindicate the credentials of hermeneutic inquiry in this regard, we next need to consider how it is that, notwithstanding the heavily consensual orientation usually attributed to him, Gadamer’s emphases on the priority of the question directly supports an open-ended conception of inquiry oriented primarily toward the potentially transformative advancement of understanding rather than toward the enforcement of agreement about a preformed point of view. In so doing, it will become clear why it is that, as Gadamer himself puts it, ‘To understand each other means much more than to agree about something’, and that, although he himself does not always clearly distinguish between the two senses, his primary concern is not with consensus as such, but with the advancement of hermeneutic understanding in a sense that connotes the attainment of an enriched, even transformed, understanding of the subject matter under investigation. To this end, we can productively take our bearings from Bubner’s insightful characterization of the telos of hermeneutic inquiry as envisaged by Gadamer.

In particular, what Bubner brings to the fore is that once the interrogative, dialogical and opened-ended character of hermeneutic inquiry is given its due
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along the lines already delineated above, we can begin to see that while
hermeneutic inquiry does indeed aim to ‘produce unity through dialogue’, this
outcome ‘is not motivated by the chance of success of a single, one-sided
viewpoint, for its limits are already set by the resistance of the partner’.
Consequently, while it is true that understanding, for Gadamer, entails ‘coming-to-an-agreement-with-another’, this must not be construed as presupposing that all
parties agree to endorse the merits of one position at the expense of another.
Rather, as Bubner aptly puts it, ‘In Gadamer’s telling interpretation’ dialectical
inquiry is to be construed as ‘the overcoming of the given points of departure,
thanks to the dominance of the subject matter that sustained the dialogue’.
Ultimately, then, what is ‘definitive’ is that ‘both sides are bound by the task of the
actual elucidation of the subject matter’, and this in a sense that presupposes not
only the transcendence of initial viewpoints but also, as we shall consider further
down below, a willingness to learn from the encounter with otherness and difference. The
cogency of this assessment is reinforced by Christopher Smith who, in the course
of elucidating the dynamics and logic of dialectical inquiry on the hermeneutic
model, emphatically makes the point that what the key concept of Sich-
Verstandigen connotes for Gadamer is not consensus as such, but rather a process
of ‘reaching an understanding through discussion’, of ‘coming to an understanding
of something in a verbal exchange’. As Smith brings to the fore, the core
consideration here is that as the telos of hermeneutic inquiry what Sich-
Verstandigen presupposes is ‘an advance in understanding’ as a result of the fact
that ‘something is heard and learned from another who sees things from a different
angle, and that two or more perceptions come to augment each other in what
Gadamer calls a fusion of their horizons’. Or as Gadamer himself puts it, under
these conditions, ‘what emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor
yours’. In other words, as epitomized by the dicta about the forging of a ‘new
community’ and the achievement of a ‘higher universality’, what hermeneutic
inquiry presupposes is, not consensus as such, but a discernible forward movement
with the anticipated telos of coming to understand something better than before as
a result of having one’s (initial) presuppositions challenged through dialogical
engagement with the views of others who occupy different hermeneutic
standpoints. Clearly, then, what the telos of ‘coming-to-an-agreement-with-
another’ primarily presupposes is not consensus as such, but the emergence of a
conjoint appreciation of the subject matter under investigation, one that represents
a more adequate and textured understanding than that previously at the disposal of
any of the dialogue partners, a co-understanding which, while forged out of the
interplay of their views, goes beyond that initially available to the individual
participants. Importantly too, as the foregoing analysis serves to confirm, there is
nothing arbitrary about this emergence, or ‘happening’, of transformative insight.
Rather, as epitomized by Georgia Warnke, it eventuates through a principled
process of ‘integration and appropriation’, whereby the participants neither seek to
defeat their interlocutors nor to bolster their own positions. Instead, what the
dialogical logic of hermeneutic inquiry presupposes is that ‘each participant takes
account of the other opinions, attempts to show what is wrong and right with them
as well as with her own position and thereby formulates, in concert with the others,
a view that each recognizes to be closer to the truth than any of the original positions.\textsuperscript{66} In short, while it clearly would not do to interpret \textit{Sich-Verstandigen} in a sense that is at odds with the attainment of agreement,\textsuperscript{67} what is of primary importance is that, as hermeneutic inquirers, we remain committed to the advancement of understanding about the subject matter under investigation through a situated process of conjoint inquiry which, while it presupposes a certain ‘at oneness’ with our interlocutors also requires that we respect the differences in perspective that they inevitably bring to bear.

In this connection, it is important to respond to the objection that given Gadamer’s alleged ‘conservatism’, hermeneutic inquiry cannot really accommodate the encounter with otherness and difference. If sustainable, this criticism would clearly have damaging implications for the ability of philosophical hermeneutics to contribute significantly to the formulation of an account of rationality adequate to contemporary needs, especially in view of the proliferation of a ‘diversity of voices’ that Habermas rightly identifies as a defining characteristic of our postfoundationalist situation.

\textit{Hermeneutic Inquiry and the Encounter with Otherness}

In response to criticisms deriving from Gadamer’s alleged ‘conservatism’, from the perspective of present concerns the core point needing to be established is that, although by postmodern standards Gadamer may be hampered by a relatively univocal conception of tradition, he is by no means as unmindful of difference or otherness as critics typically contend.

Thus in the first instance, it should be noted that although he is generally ranked with Habermas as an irrevocable defender of consensus, from early on, Gadamer has expressed a clear appreciation not only of the reality of disagreement and difference, but also of its potentially productive character in stimulating the advancement of understanding. Indeed, although intersubjective agreement remains an ideal for Gadamer, as Gail Soffer notes, in response to Habermas, ‘he denies that such consensus is always possible, even in principle. In many cases, he argues, disagreements remain unresolved and unresolvable [in virtue simply of] an insurmountable difference of opinion due to historically-induced differences in interests and experiences’.\textsuperscript{68} Equally noteworthy is the fact that, as prefigured above, in the sections of \textit{Truth and Method} that deal explicitly with the dynamics and logic of hermeneutic inquiry on the model of Platonic dialectic, Gadamer repeatedly affirms the need for openness to what is other as a fundamental condition for the conduct of genuine dialogue and hence for the advancement of understanding. Moreover, as was also concluded above, on a dialogical reading, Gadamer’s treatment of hermeneutic inquiry reveals itself to be an intrinsically open-ended and expansive process which embraces the encounter with otherness as a crucial stimulus to the potentially transformative advancement of understanding. In particular, Gadamer is insistent that it is an indispensable precondition for the legitimization of prejudgments that what is being inquired into ‘can present itself in all its otherness, and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings’.\textsuperscript{69} Recall too that, as noted earlier, the hermeneutic concept of ‘experience’, central to
the integrity of Gadamer’s position, presupposes a direct commitment to remaining open to what is different, unanticipated or other, to the point of allowing oneself to being pulled up short by it, with a view to learning from it. Indeed, famously on Gadamer’s account, the ‘experienced person’, proffered as the ideal hermeneutic inquirer, is precisely the person with the capacity to remain open to learning from the experience of being pulled up short by that which runs counter to their expectations. Moreover, as we shall consider further below, in his treatment of I-Thou relations and of the ‘anticipation of completeness’, Gadamer drives home a similar point in respect of the need for remaining open to the truth embodied in the claims of the other. Further, while Gadamer does indeed intimate that in a ‘true’ conversation, we remain oriented toward reaching agreement with the other, he is equally emphatic that this does not involve suppressing otherness but presupposes rather remaining open to it so as to learn from it. Indeed, on the hermeneutic account, in aspiring to rise to ‘a higher universality’ in our investigation of the subject matter, it is crucial that we do not subordinate the other person to our own preformed views, but rather that we come to see the subject matter ‘within a larger whole and in truer proportion’, as a result of having learnt from this encounter with otherness. When these factors are given their due, it becomes clear then that, far from seeking to insulate us from the encounter with what is unfamiliar or different, as a condition for genuine understanding Gadamer enjoins us to place ourselves ‘in the other situation’, so that we can attain a more appropriate horizon of understanding whereby ‘what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions’. In sum, then, notwithstanding Gadamer’s consensual proclivities, it cannot cogently be maintained that hermeneutic inquiry is impervious to otherness; indeed, the evidence suggests that Gadamer recognizes the encounter with otherness as an indispensable stimulus to the situated advancement of understanding.

At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that it is not clear that Gadamer’s relatively univocal conception of tradition can adequately accommodate the levels of pluralism and difference that characterize our postfoundational situation. As crystallized by Robert Bernasconi, the core problem is that there is a danger that in Gadamer’s work, ‘[t]he notion of tradition functions monolithically in such a way as to diminish alterity’. Consequently, ‘it is far from clear whether Gadamer succeeds in freeing himself from the prejudice of representing difference or otherness as a problem to be resolved’. All told, then, although Gadamer seeks to forestall this outcome, the danger is that the conservative strains in his theory work ‘to deprive alterity of its otherness prior to its appearance’: ‘the other is always my other, my Thou; the text always belongs to the tradition to which I too belong; if it speaks to me at all it is in a language which has been established in advance in a common accord which unites us from the outset’. Accordingly, we will need to revisit the problem of otherness and difference in the chapters that follow in the interests of ensuring that our emergent conception of rational inquiry is fully adequate to responding to the challenges posed by our contemporary situation, especially those of thinking differently and of engaging productively with others who occupy altogether different hermeneutic standpoints.
But first, by way of advancing our core project, we need to take stock of two further criticisms which, if sustainable, would greatly detract from the ability of philosophical hermeneutics to make a decisive contribution, namely, its alleged failure to meet the ‘requirement of intersubjectivity’ and to incorporate ‘immanent idealizations’ as needed. The challenge of responding to these objections will enable us to round our account of how philosophical hermeneutics can contribute to the development of a viable postfoundationalist account of rationality.

Hermeneutic Inquiry and the ‘Requirement of Intersubjectivity’

In critiquing the ability of philosophical hermeneutics to secure the objectivity of its findings, Gail Soffer absolves Gadamer from the charge of radical subjectivism in virtue of his phenomenological adherence to ‘the constraining action of the phenomena’. Immediately thereafter, however, she goes on to press the potentially damaging criticism that this mode of inquiry nonetheless falls significantly short of what is required to secure objectivity because it cannot meet what she appropriately terms the ‘requirement of intersubjectivity’, whereby truth claims remain open to confirmation or challenge by differently-situated inquirers. In light of the foregoing analysis, however, what needs to be affirmed in response is that, perhaps as a consequence of being unduly preoccupied with Gadamer’s phenomenological roots, this criticism altogether misses the mark in that it neglects the intrinsically dialogical commitments that we have seen to characterize the hermeneutic stance ab initio. As we have repeatedly seen, far from being subjectivist or monological in orientation, philosophical hermeneutics supports a conception of inquiry that is dialogical—and hence, intersubjective—through and through. Furthermore, as we shall now consider, this criticism also fails to take due account of the procedural considerations which Gadamer brings to the fore in his treatment of I-Thou relations, and thereby overlooks a significant additional contribution on Gadamer’s part to our understanding of how the requirement of intersubjectivity might be met in appropriately hermeneutic terms.

Thus in the first instance, in distinguishing between authentic and deficient modes of the I-Thou relation, Gadamer reinforces the inherently dialogical character of the process whereby understanding develops, underscoring the fact that the progress of inquiry requires the stimulus and challenge posed by the presence and contribution of another. Equally importantly, he makes it evident that certain conditions must be fulfilled if we can be said to be genuinely open to being influenced by the views of others and thus ready to engage in a productive learning process. In particular, we must be prepared ‘to experience the “Thou” truly as a “Thou”, i.e. not to overlook his claim but to really let him say something to us’. Likewise, Gadamer affirms that:

it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject matter.
In other words, as a condition for engaging in hermeneutic inquiry properly so called, Gadamer stipulates as a core requirement that we must overcome our natural tendency to protect our own position at all costs, and instead genuinely attend to the claims that the views of the other make on us, to the extent that we allow our pre-existing views about the subject matter to be called into question and modified if the views of the other are seen to embody a greater claim to truth than our own. Indeed, Gadamer emphasizes that it is on this basis alone that we can anticipate the emergence of a ‘new community’, a ‘higher universality’, ‘in which we do not remain what we were’. But to reiterate, in this event it seems clear that far from eschewing the requirement of intersubjectivity, Gadamer actively valorizes it a prerequisite for the principled advancement of understanding by dialogical means.

A related lacuna in Soffer’s critique also warrants mention, namely that, while she is prepared to acknowledge the importance of fallibilism as a non-negotiable facet of situated inquiry, she misses the significance of the hermeneutic embrace of perspectivalism. Consequently, pace Habermas, she is led to contend that objectivity cannot be secured unless we assume that a proffered claim necessarily has as its ‘intentional horizon’ the implication that ‘this assertion is objectively true for everyone, independent of Fragestellung, but the evidence for this is fallible’.

In thus framing the issue Soffer overlooks the fact that, Habermas’s idealizing presuppositions notwithstanding, objectivity and avoidance of relativism could not depend on the assumption that claims have validity independently of the hermeneutic vantage point from which they are posed or appropriated. Instead, on hermeneutic premises, perspectivalism is just as integral to the process of inquiry as is fallibilism. Moreover, as was noted earlier in relation to the hermeneutic critique of the postulation of an ideal speech situation, since every subject matter exists in a Wirkungsgeschichte, on hermeneutic premises there is a fundamental contradiction involved in positing as an ideal a contextless forum of inquiry which presupposes the equivalence and interchangeability of all contributors and contributions, without regard for differences in their hermeneutic situations or the traditions of inquiry to which they belong. Further, as we saw above, far from representing a barrier to its attainment, the preservation of objectivity in an appropriately hermeneutic sense depends precisely on the interplay of views held by differently situated inquirers. Indeed, as we have also seen, on the hermeneutic account, the interplay between different interpretations and perspectives provides an indispensable stimulus for the potentially transformative advancement of understanding by principled means.

**Hermeneutic Inquiry and the Need for ‘Immanent Idealizations’**

But if hermeneutic inquiry does not succumb to the foregoing criticism, what of the further criticism, also vigorously pressed by Soffer, that in his eschewal of the Habermasian idealizations, Gadamer effectively collapses ‘the ideal to the real’ in such a way as to threaten not just ‘the very ideal of objectivity’, but also that of truth? Elaborating, Soffer contends that the ‘crucial weakness’ of Gadamerian
hermeneutics in respect of objectivity is its failure ‘to distinguish among different
types of idealizations’.\textsuperscript{52} In particular, Gadamer allegedly fails to distinguish
between ‘transcendent’ idealizations, which make reference to a point of view
neither intelligible nor imaginable to us’ and ‘immanent’ idealizations ‘which, far
from being incompatible with our situatedness, are needed to secure objectivity. In
rejecting the latter as well as the former, he inevitably falls prey to a debilitating
relativism. On a dialogical reading, however, this line of criticism also goes astray
because it neglects important features of Gadamer’s position.

In particular, it misses the mark because it fails to take due account of
Gadamer’s treatment of ‘the anticipation of completeness’, and thereby neglects an
indispensable hermeneutic resource for securing objectivity. For in his short, but
illuminating, treatment of this topic,\textsuperscript{83} Gadamer makes it clear both that this
regulative ideal does count as an ‘immanent idealization’ in the requisite sense, and
that such idealizations do indeed have a central role to play in securing the
principled advancement of hermeneutic inquiry. As outlined by Gadamer, this
regulative ideal has two dimensions, the anticipation of unity (the ‘formal’
dimension) and the anticipation of truth (the ‘substantive’ dimension), and while
both could legitimately count as ‘immanent idealizations’,\textsuperscript{84} the latter warrants
special mention in the present context. Thus in particular, in a brief elaboration
Gadamer goes on to defend the concept of ‘the complete truth’ as an important
regulative ideal, contending that the hermeneutic inquirer must be ‘guided by the
constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the
truth of what is being said’.\textsuperscript{85} Accordingly, although he rejects the idealizations
associated with an ideal speech situat

Indeed, on this reading the whole, or complete, truth functions as an ‘immanent
idealization’ in several senses. First, in reminding us that any given interpretation is
simply one perspective on the subject matter, it serves the critical function,
prefigured in our discussion of Habermas, of impelling us beyond resting content
with any given interpretation, to consider other perspectives from which the subject
matter could legitimately be appropriated. At the same time, in thus anticipating the whole, awareness of our situatedness reminds us that there can be no question of appropriating the whole in a comprehensive, or aperspectival, fashion from some neutral, atemporal God’s-eye vantage point. Instead, all we can ever have at our disposal is a range of situated perspectives on the subject matter, through which diverse aspects of it come into view. Thirdly, while the anticipation of completeness thus construed cannot deliver the whole up to us for surveying at a single glance, as it were, it can serve the important function of establishing an internal link between the range of (valid) interpretations which the subject matter supports. Hence, while we must allow for the diversity of possible viewpoints on the subject matter, we can simultaneously affirm that these diverse interpretations are internally related to one another in virtue of the relationship that each bears to the whole. But to reiterate, from the perspective of present concerns, the main point is that there are good grounds for maintaining that the anticipation of completeness, and hence the ideal of truth, does indeed function as an important ‘immanent idealization’ in the hermeneutic context, and such plays an important regulative role in providing a bulwark against relativism and contextualism. Hence, the allegation that Gadamer neglects immanent idealizations is not a valid criticism of his position.

With these objections disposed of, in concluding the present chapter it remains only to consolidate our findings by briefly reviewing how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can contribute to the development of a viable dialogical account of rationality commensurate with postfoundationalist needs.

**Toward a Hermeneutic Conception of Principled Transformative Inquiry**

In the present chapter I have sought to establish that notwithstanding his seeming antipathy to epistemological concerns, Gadamer’s hermeneutics does indeed have a decisive contribution to make to elucidating the structure, dynamics and logic of a situated, dialogical mode of inquiry capable of advancing our core project. In particular, as we have seen, hermeneutic thinking can serve as a corrective for the shortcomings generated by the embrace of a set of untenable idealizations, thereby enabling us to refine and expand the conclusions arrived at in the previous chapter. At the same time however, challenging the established proclivity to read these theorists as oppositional—as proponents, respectively, of an idealized and altogether situated conception of inquiry—the present analysis reinforces the case for reading them as complementary. This is so essentially because we need to build on the insights generated by both theorists to make progress in formulating the envisaged dialogical conception of rationality. For as will become apparent in the course of the following review, indispensable as is Gadamer’s contribution in this connection, to make progress in the envisaged direction we need to take our bearings from the ground plan already established in the course of our engagement with Habermas. With these qualifications in mind, let us proceed to take stock of
what has been established with regard to our core topic in the course of the present chapter.

Firstly, in contrast to the separation which the Habermasian idealizations instantiate between the domains of communicative interaction and (theoretical) discourse, a notable strength of the hermeneutic approach is the way in which, on the template of Platonic dialectic, it valorizes a conception of inquiry which is continuous with our everyday concerns and lifeworld involvements. Applied to the rationality problem, the direct implication is that critical reason cannot secure its efficacy at the expense of neutralizing, still less eliminating, our prejudgments, but depends, rather, on our becoming more reflectively aware of them and bringing them actively into play—with a view to putting them to the test. Correlatively, the hermeneutic approach reinforces our awareness that, given our situatedness, the testing and legitimation of prejudgments require a process that, far from being absolute, presuppositionless or ideal is not only finite, fallible and corrigible, but also situated and perspectival. In so doing, it helps validate the tenability of a situated learning process that can underwrite the legitimacy of its outcomes by non-idealizing means. As to the conditions under which critical inquiry on the hermeneutic model can underwrite this situated learning process without recourse to Habermasian-style idealizations, we have seen that several factors are decisive. In the first instance, the hermeneutic approach alerts us to the merits of an inherently interrogative conception of inquiry. Here the crucial consideration is that inquiry begins, not with the assertion of a claim construed as representing the truth of the matter on which all reasonable inquirers will, over time, come to agree, but with a question, a question that remains open and that guides the inquiry for its duration and that, indeed, is no more than provisionally answered at the end. In this context, in place of recourse to untenable idealizations, the requirement of openness enjoins us, actively and vigorously, to test the cogency of our prejudgments in as many varied forums as possible. What is required in particular is openness to the views of others with whom we engage in dialogue and a willingness to modify our initial positions if our prejudgments are shown to be wanting on the basis of such a situated engagement with others who occupy different hermeneutic standpoints. Importantly too, in response to those who contend that in his emphasis on the event-like character of understanding, Gadamer eschews concern with procedures of critical justification, I have sought to establish that in his embrace of the Platonic template, grounded in the logic of question and answer, he directly affirms his commitment to deciding questions on the basis of ‘the preponderance of reasons for the one and against the other possibility’. Developing this theme, on further investigation we saw that Gadamer provides us with clear insight into the structure and logic of a mode of critical inquiry grounded in an inherently dynamic and dialogical conception of argumentation, which can serve as a corrective for the limitations of the unduly static and monological Habermas/Toulmin model. Moreover, so construed, the hermeneutic approach valorizes a developmental conception of inquiry whereby the attainment of each new level of understanding opens up new horizons inviting further investigation, as does each shift in historico-cultural perspective. Proceeding thus, I have sought to reinforce the contention, already mooted in the preceding chapter, that
notwithstanding the prominence accorded consensus in the contemporary literature, the telos of rational inquiry is more appropriately construed in terms of the potentially transformative advancement of understanding.

At the same time, however, the hermeneutic conception of inquiry can function as a viable alternative to the Habermasian model with the ability to meet postfoundationalist needs only if it can be established that it does not fall prey to criticisms which would undermine its ability to secure its critical efficacy and hence the objectivity of its outcomes. Accordingly, in response to critics who contend either that it is a category mistake to even raise this issue in a Gadamerian context or that, when raised, the hermeneutic approach is seen to lack the ability to respond effectively to the problem of grounding, I have argued that once the dialogical underpinnings of Gadamer’s thought are given their due, it becomes clear that this approach does indeed embody a range of well-defined principles and procedures with the capacity to secure the potentially transformative advancement of understanding by principled means. In particular, critics notwithstanding, on a dialogical reading, there are good grounds for maintaining that the hermeneutic approach has the ability to meet the ‘requirement of intersubjectivity’. For in addition to the fact that from the outset his approach is demonstrably intersubjective in its orientation, in his treatment of I-Thou relations, Gadamer reinforces the need for the endorsement of a set of procedural conditions similar to those prefigured by Habermas, when shorn of the problematic idealizations. Furthermore, although there is room for a more developed specification of the constitutive/regulative ground rules here at issue, Gadamer demonstrably makes a significant contribution in shedding additional light on the structure, dynamics and logic of a dialogical mode of argumentation, oriented toward facilitating the potentially transformative advancement of understanding on a principled basis. Furthermore, in response to criticisms that Gadamer threatens the cogency of his conception of critical inquiry by failing to embrace the requisite context-transcendent standards, I have sought to vindicate his endorsement of a robust regulative conception of truth in a sense commensurate with our status as situated, finite inquirers. Thus on Gadamer’s account, while the pursuit of truth must not be conceived in terms which anticipate its unconditioned realization, taken in an immanent, regulative sense, it has an indispensable role to play in the advancement of situated dialogical inquiry, in terms both of securing the context-transcendence of truth claims and of establishing an internal link between the range of legitimate interpretations of the subject matter. In addition, Gadamer performs an important service in bringing to the fore the transformative dimension of situated inquiry, a dimension often ignored on conceptions of rationality which remain preoccupied with questions of validation. Indeed, on this reading it becomes clear that although Gadamer himself places considerable emphasis on the legitimization of prejudices, ultimately it is their potential transformation that is the driving force of situated dialogical inquiry on the hermeneutic account.

But while Gadamer’s hermeneutics thus has an indispensable contribution to make both toward vindicating the viability and elucidating the logic and dynamics of a situated learning process capable of underwriting the potentially transformative advancement of understanding by principled means, it remains the
case that our postfoundationalist situation poses still other challenges, most notably those of thinking differently and responding to the radically pluralistic and decentred character of contemporary forums of inquiry, challenges which, notwithstanding its distinctive merits, Gadamer’s relatively conservative stance is not especially well equipped to handle. Hence, it is to these features in particular that we must direct our attention in the next chapter and beyond with a view to ensuring that the emergent dialogical conception of rationality is indeed commensurate with the needs of our contemporary postfoundationalist situation. With this end in view, we turn next to the consideration of Michel Foucault’s contribution to this debate.

Notes


2 Misgivings in some quarters about attributing direct epistemological import to Gadamer’s thought continue to be reiterated in recent publications. Thus, for example, in an otherwise excellent essay, Francis Ambrosio contends that (‘The Figure of Socrates in Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics’, in The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, p. 261):

Critics from Betti and Hirsch through, more recently, Habermas, Warnke, and Bernstein have allowed their focus on Gadamer’s approach to the question of truth to be distorted by viewing it through the lens of the problem of relativism … Whether the charge be that Gadamer’s hermeneutics cannot arbitrate rival claims of validity, cannot adequately critique practices, or cannot articulate normative claims, the root of the misunderstanding in all cases is the same: they do not recognize the consequences that result from Gadamer’s transposition of the question of the nature of understanding and truth into an ontological context, centred in die Mitte der Sprache.


3 For a sustained defence of the contention that ‘despite the anti-Enlightenment rhetoric in which it is formulated’ and notwithstanding its primarily ontological orientation, Gadamer’s hermeneutical project ‘is in many respects sympathetic to Enlightenment concerns’ and in particular to its critical spirit, see David Detmer, ‘Gadamer’s Critique of the Enlightenment’ (in The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, pp. 275-86). For an insightful overview of Gadamer’s positioning within the phenomenalogico-hermeneutical tradition and a clarification and defence of his significance for contemporary epistemology, see too Tom Rockmore, ‘Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Overcoming of Epistemology’, in The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. 56-71. As a starting point for his analysis, Rockmore points out that: ‘[a]lthough Gadamer is certainly not an epistemologist in a Cartesian or even the Kantian mould, he does not flee the question of knowledge’; instead, ‘Gadamer signals his desire to come to grips with … the epistemological problem’ (p. 59). The cogency of this assessment is reaffirmed and the epistemological implications of Gadamer’s philosophy are further elaborated in several of the other contributions to this anthology. This theme is also to the fore in Hermeneutics and Truth, ed. B. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), as well as being central in several of the contributions to The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer.
5 In so doing, I forego any attempt at a comprehensive introduction to Gadamer’s thought in favour of a relatively sharp focus on those aspects of his position which bear directly on problems of rationality, objectivity and grounding. For a more comprehensive introduction to all aspects of Gadamer’s position, the reader is referred in particular to the following works, each of which has exerted a significant influence on the overall development of my own thinking about the issues dealt with in this chapter: Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); and P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991). In this regard, it could be said that Warnke’s study is the most focally concerned with the problem of grounding, and that Smith’s study provides the most incisive insight into the dialogical dimension of Gadamer’s work, while Grondin’s brings to the fore its ontological orientation.
6 Thus as Rockmore aptly puts it, what Gadamer gives us is a proposal ‘for a different kind of knowledge, which takes into account the finite, historical character of human experience as its basis’ (‘Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Overcoming of Epistemology’, p. 66).
7 For an insightful recent elucidation of the role of coherence as a constitutive feature in Gadamer’s account of the operation of understanding, see Linda Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), chs 1 and 2. As we shall see, however, on a dialogical reading, the emphasis is primarily on the structure, dynamics and logic of the exchanges that take place between participants in a situated process of intersubjective inquiry, factors not typically brought to the fore on a coherentist reading.
   Heidegger’s temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense that the term ‘hermeneutics’ has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world.
9 For Gadamer’s treatment of this theme, see in particular the section entitled ‘Prejudices as Conditions of Understanding’, *Truth and Method*, pp. 277-307. Here, Gadamer undertakes to vindicate the contention that: ‘The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust’ (*Truth and Method*, p. 270).
10 See especially *Truth and Method*, pp. 265-71.
11 *Truth and Method*, p. 277.
12 Here Gadamer echoes Heidegger’s conviction that ‘the first, last, and constant task’ is for the interpreter ‘to let himself be guided by the things themselves’, as a safeguard against ‘arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought’ (*Truth and Method*, pp. 266-7).
13 See further Gail Soffer, ‘Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Objectivity in Interpretation’, *Praxis International*, 12 (1992), p. 231. It should be noted, however, that while Soffer charges Gadamer with relativism, she does not deny his concern with the problem of objectivity. We will consider, and seek to respond to, some of Soffer’s main criticisms later in the chapter.
14 *Truth and Method*, p. 491.
Although Gadamer’s dialogical commitments are widely recognized, existing studies tend to emphasize the phenomenological origins of his position rather than focusing on the specifically dialogical features. Indeed, while the concept of hermeneutic conversation is a prominent theme in Georgia Warnke’s ground-breaking study, the intrinsically dialogical character of Gadamer’s project remains for the most part implicit, ultimately emerging into clear relief only in chapter 3 in the context of a discussion of ‘hermeneutics and the problem of subjectivism’ (see further Gadamer, especially pp. 100-106). As noted, the present chapter aims to go some ways toward redressing this imbalance.

Truth and Method, p. 367.

Truth and Method, p. 367: ‘To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented’. Cf. Truth and Method, p. 341: ‘Something is placed at the centre … which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another’.

Truth and Method, p. 376.

Cited in Soffer, ‘Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Objectivity in Interpretation’, p. 243; cf. Warnke, Gadamer, p. 66: ‘[F]or Gadamer the point of hermeneutics is precisely to destroy “the phantom of a truth severed from the standpoint of the knower”’.


Thus Gadamer eschews the Hegelian concept of absolute understanding in favour of that of a ‘bad infinite’ which is always open to new experience and further insight (see further Robert Dostal, ‘The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger’, in Hermeneutics and Truth, especially p. 58; also Rudiger Bubner, ‘On the Ground of Understanding’, ibid., p. 75).

Hermeneutics and Truth, p. 78.

Compare James Bohman who also apprises us that, in its emphasis on situatedness and finitude, the hermeneutic approach is not seeking to impose limits on what we can know but rather to gain insight into the conditions under which we can achieve understanding as intrinsically situated inquirers. In this regard, Bohman draws an insightful distinction between ‘enabling’ and ‘limiting’ conditions for understanding and knowledge (corresponding to a distinction between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ holism), with a view to establishing that ‘as opposed to limiting conditions, enabling conditions are open-ended and permit different degrees of knowledge’ (‘Holism without Scepticism’, p. 141). As will be apparent, we are focally concerned here with the identification of the enabling conditions for hermeneutic inquiry.

‘Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth’, p. 79.


The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger’, p. 49.


Moreover, in a more recent essay, Schmidt effectively seems to concede this point, when on revisiting the issue, he acknowledges that ‘[t]he enlightening permits the probable and reasonable justification of a prejudice’; indeed, in the interests of avoiding both subjectivism and relativism, it must be able ‘to stand up to testing’; ‘Das Einleuchtende: The Enlightening Aspect of the Subject Matter’, in Phenomenology, Interpretation, and Community, eds Lenore Langsdorf and Stephen Watson (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), see especially pp. 180-87.
See in particular Gadamer’s treatment of ‘the hermeneutic priority of the question’, comprising two interrelated subsections: ‘The model of Platonic dialectic’ (pp. 362-369), and ‘The logic of question and answer’ (pp. 369-379). Gadamer’s treatment of this important theme also carries over into the opening section of Part III, and thus forms a connecting link between the second and third parts of his major work. For an insightful analysis of the centrality of Platonic dialectic in the development of Gadamer’s thought, see further Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude*, especially ch. 2.

Thus, as Gadamer repeatedly affirms, there is an inherent interrelation between the ‘logical structure of openness’ and ‘the structure of the question’, implicit in all experience. For on hermeneutic premises, ‘We cannot have experiences without asking questions … From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question’ (*Truth and Method*, p. 362).

In my ‘Situated Rationality and Hermeneutic Understanding’ (*International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXVI (1996), pp. 155-171), I draw some parallels with the growth of hermeneutic understanding thus construed and the process of systematic hypothesis testing, while at the same time noting the ultimate inadequacy of this analogy as a means of explicating Gadamer’s stance (see especially pp. 163-4).


Cf. Christopher Smith who persuasively contends that Gadamer’s insistence, in the Third Part of *Truth and Method*, on ‘the dialogical process of our reaching an understanding about something in speech and language makes unequivocally clear that for Gadamer understanding was never monological’. Instead, it becomes apparent that ‘Gadamer always intended that understanding be construed dialogically and triadically, that is, as a discursive occurrence between two or more who together with each other are in the process of reaching an understanding about some thing and subject matter they share between them’ (see ‘The I-Thou Encounter in Gadamer’s Reception of Heidegger’, in Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 518).

See Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude*, especially pp. 190-91. In particular, Smith is concerned to establish that, as *Erfahrung*, the hermeneutic conception of experience simultaneously connotes ‘an experience of my own limits’ and ‘openness to the other’. Moreover, it should be noted that in contrast to the traditional empiricist conception of experience as static and discontinuous, *Erfahrung* ‘is ongoing and continuous with past and future experience’ (ibid., p. 192). Hence, in addition to being dialogical it is also intrinsically historical and processual.


In response to the potential criticism that to approach Gadamer from this perspective is to impose on a philosopher who has rejected method as the route to truth an alien requirement derived from another philosophical framework, such as that of Habermas or Dilthey, it may be affirmed that to deny to Gadamer a concern with, and respect for, the significance of argumentation in the advancement of situated inquiry is to neglect not just his explicit embrace of ‘the logic of question and answer’, but also those passages in which he makes direct reference to the importance of the availability of a dialectical procedure for testing the
cogency of our prejudgments, and doing so, moreover, through assessing the balance of good reasons. (See, e.g. *Truth and Method*, p. 364, where Gadamer observes that: ‘Deciding the question is the path to knowledge. What decides a question is the preponderance of reasons for one and against the other possibility’. Cf. also *Truth and Method*, pp. 367-8, 387.)

43 See P. Christopher Smith, ‘Toward a Discursive Logic: Gadamer and Toulmin on Inquiry and Argument’, in *The Specter of Relativism*, pp. 159-77. On the need for just such a conception of argumentation as a corrective for the limitations of the Habermas/Toulmin model, see my ‘Critical Reasoning and Dialectical Argument’, pp. 1-12.

44 Cf. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 176.


46 ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 175.


48 Cf. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 167.

49 Cf. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 166.

50 Cf. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 168.


52 ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 170.

53 ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 176.

54 ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, pp. 163-4; italics in original.

55 Cf. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, pp. 175, 176-7.

56 *Truth and Method*, p. 378.

57 *Truth and Method*, p. 379.

58 ‘What is Truth?’, in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, p. 45.


60 ‘On the Ground of Understanding’, p. 73.


62 Ibid., pp. 163-4.

63 *Truth and Method*, p. 368. Cf. Warnke who observes that:

the conclusion of a genuine conversation is not the sole property of either one of the dialogue-partners … [Instead, just as in conversation, the result is a unity or agreement that goes beyond the original positions of the various participants; indeed, the consensus that emerges in understanding represents a new view … (*Gadamer*, p. 104). 

64 See, e.g. *Truth and Method*, p. 379, where Gadamer points to the experience of dialogue partners, engaged ‘in a successful conversation’, wherein ‘they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community’; in the process, we are told, as interlocutors, we are ‘transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were’.


Transposing ourselves … always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. [O]ne learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion … In this process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs.


67 Indeed, in this regard it is noteworthy that Gadamer is emphatic that merely understanding another person’s viewpoint does not count as ‘a true conversation’ unless there is also some attempt to reach agreement with that person (*Truth and Method*, p. 303). It should also be
noted, however, that Gadamer’s primary concern in making this point is to establish the need on our part to seriously entertain the truth claims of our interlocutor and allow ourselves to be actively challenged by them (as in the case of a genuine I-Thou encounter, as elaborated below).


69 Truth and Method, p. 269.


71 Cf. Truth and Method, pp. 303-305.

72 Truth and Method, pp. 305, 388.


74 Cf. ‘Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Objectivity in Interpretation’, p. 245.

75 In going on to criticize aspects of Soffer’s critique deriving largely from her neglect of the dialogical dimension of Gadamer’s thought, I do not mean to deny the strengths of this serious and focused attempt to come to terms with the intricacies of Gadamer’s position. Indeed, in the present context it is noteworthy that, in contrast to those commentators who eschew Gadamer’s concern with problems of objectivity and grounding, Soffer clearly recognizes his involvement with these issues, faulting him only for his perceived failure to respond adequately to them.

76 In this connection, it is worth repeating Smith’s considered appraisal that: ‘Gadamer always intended that understanding be construed dialogically and triadically, that is, as a discursive occurrence between two or more who together with each other are in the process of reaching an understanding about some thing and subject matter they share between them’ (‘The I-Thou Encounter’, p. 518).

77 Truth and Method, p. 361.

78 Truth and Method, p. 385.

79 Cf. Kathleen Wright, ‘Gadamer: The Speculative Structure of Language’, in Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, ed. B. Wachterhauser (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 201: In a genuine I-Thou relationship, the I not only recognizes the Thou to be a person but also listens to what the Thou has to say. The I is open to the Thou and to the truth of what the Thou claims. Ready to experience the limitations of its own original understanding of that which is called into question by the Thou, the I is a questioner open to questions; it is open-minded and prepared to change its mind. The truth is that which emerges in the course of this conversation. It is no longer that originally claimed by the I or that originally claimed by the Thou, but rather that which emerges out of the give-and-take of conversation.


81 While Gadamer endorses an intrinsically realist conception of knowledge and inquiry, as Wachterhauser points out (‘Gadamer’s Realism’, in Hermeneutics and Truth, pp. 154-5), he nevertheless insists that ‘the thing itself is always grasped from a historically contingent, linguistically mediated perspective’. Thus, ‘[t]his linguistic/historical perspective functions as both a condition and limit on our understanding. It conditions our understanding in that we never grasp the thing in itself in its supposed “pure presence”’. Accordingly, [i]t is only as we are historically shaped and linguistically mediated that reality becomes knowable for us … Yet, for Gadamer, the reality we can know is rich enough that we can never exhaust our understanding of it; it is multifaceted enough that there is always more to say; and it is involved enough in time and language that we can know it in and through history and human speech rather than dreaming of a place beyond history and
language where we can escape our finitude and know reality like a god sub specie aeternitatis.

84 In the case of ‘the anticipation of unity’, as Warnke puts it, the presumption is that ‘the text forms a unity, an internally consistent whole’. In postulating this idealization Gadamer is at a minimum affirming that, in all attempts at interpretation, the text (or viewpoint expressed by the other person, etc.) must be conceived as a coherent and intelligible whole, as a unity of sense. And in this minimalist sense, as Gadamer clearly recognizes, the anticipation of unity is indeed a necessary presupposition guiding interpretation, for without it, the text (or person, etc.) could not be assumed to be the bearer of a coherent and intelligible message, to be a ‘unity of sense’.
85 Truth and Method, p. 294.
86 Thus as Dicenso aptly puts it: ‘The image of the whole functions heuristically to impel an ongoing supersession of specific finite perspectives’ (Hermeneutics and the Disclosure of Truth (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p. 83).
88 Thus to reiterate, as Gadamer puts it in one place, ‘to reach an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were’ (Truth and Method, p. 379).
Chapter 3

Foucault:
Problematisation, Critique and Dialogue

In turning to the work of Michel Foucault, the aim in the present chapter is to focus on aspects of our contemporary situation, overlooked or downplayed by the theorists considered in the previous chapters, with a view to further delineating the constitutive features of a viable postfoundationalist account of rationality. Accordingly it is not Foucault’s treatment of power relations, predominant in much existing commentary, which achieves prominence here, but rather his problematizing, transgressive conception of critical inquiry. Approached from this perspective, I seek to show that, critics notwithstanding, Foucault truly does have an important contribution to make to the debate about contemporary rationality. In particular I contend that in championing a conception of inquiry dedicated to ‘testing limits’ and hence to pressing the boundaries of what is currently accepted without question, Foucault performs the important service of radicalizing a trend implicit in Gadamer’s embrace of an intrinsically interrogative conception of inquiry, further challenging Habermas’s one-sided preoccupation with the validation of proffered knowledge claims.

More specifically, in his embrace of a thoroughgoing problematizing approach, Foucault significantly advances the case for a conception of rational critique conducive to facilitating the transformative advancement of understanding. Moreover, in so doing he highlights the crucial role that the encounter with difference has to play in promoting the transformative activity of thought by serving as a ‘contrastive foil’, with the potential to alert us to beliefs and presuppositions we may not even have been aware of holding. Nonetheless even on a sympathetic reading, the doubts about the normative, or critical, efficacy of Foucault’s project that dog his treatment of power relations resurface and threaten to undermine the cogency of his distinctive conception of critique unless we can succeed in allaying them. To this end, I draw on a recent strand in Foucauldian scholarship to motivate the case that, without incurring the charge of ‘enlightenment blackmail’, the core problem can be appropriately recast in terms of Foucault’s ability to meet a requirement of intersubjective accountability. Reassessing his contribution from this perspective, I contend that the resources at his disposal to meet this requirement are considerably more robust than would at first sight appear to be the case. Developing this theme, I go on to show that, when due account is taken of the dialogical strands in Foucault’s thinking, he has a decisive contribution to make in shedding new light on the constitutive features of the forums of intersubjectivity in which knowledge claims must be critically
appraised in a postfoundationalist context if they are to count as rational. Proceeding thus, I seek to reinforce the tenability of Alcoff’s assessment that, far from being inherently anti-epistemological, Foucault’s project ‘might be used to refashion rather than undermine epistemology and to move it onto more productive terrain’. At the same time, however, given some significant lacunae in Foucault’s articulation of his position it becomes equally clear that to realize its potential in this regard, we need to incorporate some important lessons from the other theorists we have already considered. Hence, it again becomes clear that we need to read these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional as has typically been the case.

In the first instance, however, let us take stock of some of the more distinctive features of Foucault’s contribution, beginning with his radically problematizing conception of inquiry, with particular reference to its explicitly stated aim of testing limits and thinking differently.

**Problematization, Critique and Limit Testing**

In reviewing the trajectory of his life’s work, Foucault affirms that his critical studies have been defined by a commitment to ‘the endeavour to know to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known’. Elaborating, he terms this project ‘the living substance of philosophy’, whose aim is ‘to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently’. Construed as a ‘philosophical exercise’ in this distinctive sense, Foucault brings to the fore a dimension of critical inquiry no more than implicit in the thought of Habermas and Gadamer, even allowing for Gadamer’s valorization of an interrogative conception of inquiry. As dedicated to resisting the hegemony of entrenched ways of thinking, the defining characteristic of Foucault’s problematizing approach is its transgressive, transformative orientation, aimed at liberating new possibilities for thinking, doing and being. As to the means of pursuing this goal, it is axiomatic for Foucault that ‘the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is free and always agitated by permanent criticism’. Moreover, as detailed below, as a condition for engaging in this style of critique, Foucault emphasizes the need to adopt a ‘limit attitude’, highlighting its potential to put ‘within the range of the work we can do to and for ourselves the greatest possible part of what is presented to us as inaccessible’. To further elucidate the parameters of this problematizing mode of critical inquiry, we need to have recourse to a cluster of interrelated, mostly late, essays in which Foucault takes stock of the overall trajectory of his life’s work. But since Foucault’s development of core themes remains implicit and impressionist, a significant task of reconstruction is needed to yield an integrated understanding of his critical intent. Here, the aim is to contribute in some measure to this undertaking by elucidating how he advances his transformative aims by valorizing the activities of limit testing and of thinking differently. Thereafter, we will be well positioned to revisit the problem of critical efficacy that has so troubled his critics.
In valorizing his distinctively problematizing mode of critique, Foucault explicitly defines it as dedicated to the challenge of thinking differently, to the ‘work of altering one’s own thought and that of others’. As to how this transformative aim is to be advanced, Foucault emphasizes a commitment to the ‘development of a given into a question’; as he puts it, this ‘is what constitutes the point of problematization, and the specific work of thought’. Correlatively, problematizing inquiry, we are told, presupposes the ability ‘to step back from [a] way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals’. Ultimately, then, this distinctive mode of inquiry presupposes a conception of ‘thought’ as ‘freedom in relation to what one does … by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem’. Thus construed, problematizing critique hinges on a ‘critical interrogation on the present and on ourselves’. More specifically still, on Foucault’s own telling, this mode of ‘critical interrogation’ necessitates a ‘limit attitude’, that is, a style of thinking committed to identifying, testing, and experimentally transgressing what has come to be regarded as ‘the contemporary limits of the necessary’. Hence, problematizing critique, we are told, ‘consists in seeing what kinds of self-evidences, liberties, acquired and non-reflective modes of thought, the practises we accept rest on’. Moreover, in counter-distinction to a Kantian-style concern with limits, the challenge for problematizing inquiry as limit attitude is, Foucault adds, that of separating out, ‘from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think’. And confounding critics who query its transformative potential, Foucault resolutely affirms his ‘optimism’ in this regard. Specifically, Foucault’s ‘optimism’ consists in recognizing that ‘so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than [of] inevitable anthropological constants’. In this way, then, Foucault seeks to forge a specific link between his problematizing mode of critique and the task of ‘seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom’.

In short, as ‘limit attitude’, Foucault’s distinctive problematizing mode of inquiry is conceived as dedicated to the task of opening up, and holding open, a transformative space of freedom. Furthermore it is ‘by following lines of fragility in the present’, Foucault apprises us, that problematization advances its transformative aims of elucidating ‘why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is’. Overall, then, what is especially distinctive about this problematizing mode of critique is its radical commitment to ‘a liberation of the act of questioning’. As such, it presupposes the cultivation of ‘an attitude’, an ethos, ‘a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task’. Moreover, Foucault is emphatic that far from being a once-off undertaking, this is an ongoing task to be engaged in ever anew, and, hence, in respect of which we are always in the position of beginning again. But then what of Foucault’s ability to
secure the critical efficacy of his problematizing stance, and thereby advance his transformative aims by principled means?

**Limit Testing and the Problem of Critical Efficacy**

Notwithstanding its undeniable merits in terms of provoking us to think differently, Foucault’s work has been dogged from early on by recurring criticisms of its critical resources and corresponding doubts about his ability to carry through on its envisaged aims. While subject to a number of diverse formulations, Richard Bernstein’s way of articulating the problem is especially apt in light of present concerns. Thus in the course of a relatively sympathetic appraisal of Foucault’s project, Bernstein contends that:

> He is constantly tempting us with his references to new possibilities of thinking and acting, of giving new impetus to the undefined work of freedom, of the need to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and of determining the precise form this change should take. But the problem is that these references to new possibilities and changes that are desirable are in danger of becoming empty and vacuous unless we have some sense of which possibilities and changes are desirable—and why.17

As is well known, the core problem has also been aptly characterized by Habermas as centring on Foucault’s alleged ‘arbitrary partisanship’ of one evaluative standpoint over another. In epistemic terms, Alcoff has perceptively formulated the issue as involving a distinction between an appraisal of Foucault’s project as ‘an exercise in the sociology of knowledge, which seeks mere description’ and one whereby Foucault’s aim is ‘the improved epistemic status of thought itself’.18 As Alcoff contends, to qualify as the latter as distinct from the former, Foucault would need to provide us with some reliable basis for making a principled evaluation of the proposals that emerge in the course of our problematizing inquiries. Again, however, the problem is that in the perception of most commentators Foucault has simply failed to deliver what is required in this regard. Here, the aim is to outline a fresh approach to this problem, an approach which in the first instance centres on the connection between autonomy and intersubjectivity as a basis for making the requisite evaluations, thereby forging a direct link with the dialogical concerns at the centre of the present project. As we shall see, in addition to shedding new light on the problem of critical efficacy, this approach enables us to gain fresh insight into how the discursive forums in which putative knowledge claims must have their credentials tested in a postfoundationalist context need to be constituted.

With these ends in view, let us turn to the consideration of Schmidt and Wartenberg’s insightful proposal as to how this seemingly intransigent problem can be productively recast while remaining true to Foucault’s stated aims.
Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue

Foucault, Dialogue and the Need for Intersubjective Accountability

In contrast to the usual preoccupation with Foucault’s alleged refusal to specify normative directives, by focusing on the tensions between the Nietzschean and Kantian strains in his thinking, Schmidt and Wartenberg redefine the problem in a way that can avoid the charge of what Foucault himself terms ‘the “blackmail” of the Enlightenment’. Thus recast, the tenability of Foucault’s problematising approach centres on the question of its ability to strike an appropriate balance between the demands of autonomy and those of intersubjectivity. From this perspective, as we shall see, Foucault’s difficulties are seen to derive from his relative neglect of the domain of intersubjectivity given his undue preoccupation, under Nietzsche’s influence, with an unbridled conception of autonomy. Let us briefly review the main features of this proposal centring on the interplay between the Nietzschean and Kantian dimensions of Foucault’s thought before proceeding to evaluate it.

What Schmidt and Wartenberg bring to the fore in the first instance is that in common with both Nietzsche and Kant, Foucault’s refusal to specify normative directives is motivated by his awareness of the need to safeguard our freedom and autonomy. Hence in his refusal to specify normative directives, Foucault is no more ‘culpable’ than these theorists. Rather, the problem derives from the relative strength of Nietzsche’s influence on Foucault’s thinking over that of Kant. Here the comparison with Kant is pivotal because it serves to highlight what is lacking in Foucault’s stance due to the predominance of Nietzsche’s influence. While, as noted, Foucault shares with Kant a passionate commitment to safeguarding our freedom and autonomy, this is where the similarities end and Foucault’s problems begin. For alongside his commitment to preserving our freedom and autonomy, Kant was also acutely aware of the need to establish a procedure or principle by reference to which we could ‘test those maxims of action which flow from our unexplainable but undeniable freedom’. Thus while desisting from issuing specific normative directives, Kant nonetheless clearly recognized the need to protect against the arbitrary or subjective exercise of individual judgment by other means. In particular, he sought to achieve this outcome by defending the need for a strong interconnection between the domains of autonomy and intersubjectivity. In contrast, swayed by Nietzsche, as Schmidt and Wartenberg diagnose, Foucault fails to follow Kant’s lead in this crucial respect, with damaging consequences for the critical efficacy of his distinctive mode of critique. In short, in embracing an unduly Nietzschean conception of ascetic self-creation, Foucault’s fatal error is that he fails to appreciate the necessary connection with intersubjectivity without which critique cannot ensure its critical efficacy. Hence on the matter of Foucault’s normative efficacy Schmidt and Wartenberg return the following verdict:

In Kant, the ‘maxim of unprejudiced thinking’ (‘think for yourself’) is joined to the ‘maxim of broadened thinking’ (‘think from the standpoint of everyone else’). To ‘think
for oneself” ultimately involves freeing oneself from contingent, heteronomous interests and attempting to construct a tribunal acceptable to all free, reasoning beings. This is a step which Foucault, good Nietzschean that he was, was unwilling to take.25

On this analysis, then, in contrast to the assessment proffered by some of Foucault’s best-known critics, the problem of normative efficacy derives, not primarily from a failure to specify normative directives, but rather, pace Kant, from a failure to ensure the accountability of autonomous judgment in an appropriately constituted intersubjective forum as a necessary check on its arbitrary or subjective exercise.

But perceptive as is Schmidt and Wartenberg’s analysis in recasting the core problem, it also embodies some telling shortcomings of its own. In particular in what follows I will seek to establish that notwithstanding the distinctive strengths of their analysis, Schmidt and Wartenberg are overly hasty in concluding that Foucault unthinkingly embraces a one-sided Nietzschean conception of autonomy to the complete neglect of a concern with intersubjectivity. Where this assessment goes astray is that it fails to take due account of another pervasive, if for the most part implicit, strand in Foucault’s thinking, specifically, its dialogical dimension. And importantly, once we allow that a concern with intersubjective accountability is not altogether alien to Foucault’s thinking, it likewise becomes clear that he could not have envisaged its satisfaction in the idealized, homogenized Kantian terms prescribed by Schmidt and Wartenberg. Hence, notwithstanding its strengths in recasting the problem of critical efficacy, this proposal itself ultimately stands in need of significant modification and refinement along the lines defended below.

Problematization, Critique and Intersubjectivity

Importantly for present purposes, the Schmidt and Wartenberg proposal for recasting the problem of critical efficacy embodies two untenable assumptions, namely, that the requirement of intersubjective accountability must be formulated in idealized Kantian terms as presupposing an appeal to ‘a tribunal acceptable to all free, reasoning beings’, and that Foucault altogether lacks the resources needed to meet this requirement. In what follows I will challenge both assumptions, contending instead that, as a dialogical reading enables us to appreciate, Foucault is considerably more sensitive to the requirement of intersubjectivity than these commentators allow, and further, that to do justice to the distinctive features of his thought the forums of intersubjectivity at issue must be characterized in pluralistic, decentred and contested terms. As we shall see, construed dialogically, the Foucauldian corpus embodies considerably more resources for meeting this requirement than the Schmidt and Wartenberg assessment allows for, even if these resources are ultimately less than adequate to secure the critical efficacy of his problematizing mode of critique. With these points established, we will be well positioned to reassess the extent of Foucault’s contribution to the formulation of a viable dialogical conception of rationality commensurate with postfoundationalist needs.
Before proceeding further, however, it is worth noting that Schmidt and Wartenberg are by no means alone in their assessment that Foucault’s Nietzschean preoccupation with autonomy and ‘care for the self’ preclude due acknowledgement of the extent and significance of our relatedness to others, to the detriment of his ability to meet the requirement of intersubjectivity accountability. Thus for example, following an incisive exploration of this topic, Michael Gardiner contends that ‘[t]here is little scope for a Foucauldian subject to engage in a dialogical relationship with the other’ and that, furthermore, ‘[t]his impasse occurs because Foucault relies on an ethical aestheticism that denies that intersubjective relations are ontologically primary’. Accordingly, like Schmidt and Wartenberg, Gardiner concludes that, under Nietzsche’s influence, Foucault’s stance ‘does privilege the achievement of unrestricted self-constitution’ to the neglect of ‘an appreciation of the centrality of intersubjective dialogue’. At the same time, however, this commentator is considerably more sensitive than are Schmidt and Wartenberg to the fact that a Foucauldian forum of intersubjectivity cannot simply mimic an idealized Kantian template, but must rather do justice to the defining characteristics of Foucault’s distinctive approach to inquiry. Moreover, he is also aware that ‘alongside Foucault’s overt preoccupation with a highly individualistic “stylistics of existence”, there exist traces of another viewpoint that affirms, however obliquely, the inescapably dialogical character of human life and selfhood’. Overall, however, Gardiner concurs that ‘in adhering to a Nietzschean ideal of perpetual transgression and self-stylization, Foucault is effectively blind to the possibility of a reciprocal, manifold and mutually enriching relation between human beings as they interact within the concrete lifeworld, as conceptualized by the dialogical model’. Accordingly, he concludes that ‘a Foucauldian approach would benefit greatly by an infusion of ideas from the dialogical tradition’. But notwithstanding this convergence of informed opinion, as we shall now consider, an alternative reading is possible whereby Foucault is seen to be considerably more attuned to the intersubjective and, indeed, dialogical dimension of human relations that these commentators allow.

In going on now to explore the possibilities opened up by such a reading, my primary aim is to establish the need to rethink the terms in which Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity are characterized so as to ensure their compatibility with Foucault’s problematizing concerns. Thereafter, as noted, we will be well positioned to reassess the extent to which Foucault can respond to criticisms regarding the critical efficacy of his problematizing project, and hence to reassess the extent of his contribution to the formulation of a viable conception of critical inquiry adequate to postfoundationalist needs. As the next step in this direction, let us now go on to consider why it is that in counter-distinction to the idealized Kantian tribunal valorized by Schmidt and Wartenberg, Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity need to be construed as dynamic, dialogical and reciprocal.

**Foucauldian Forums of Intersubjectivity as Dynamic, Dialogical and Reciprocal**

In contrast to the strongly subjectivist reading given by most commentators, in a recent work Christopher Falzon has gone a long way toward demonstrating just
how pervasive are the dialogical strains in Foucault’s thinking. As elaborated by Falzon, a dialogical reading of Foucault is grounded in the understanding that we are ‘from the start involved in a social dialogue of corporeal forces, the interplay of forces affecting and transforming one another’. As Falzon points out, such an interpretation ultimately derives its inspiration from ‘the Deleuzean interpretation of Nietzsche’s power as a relation of forces’. On this view, primarily ‘inspired, not by Nietzsche as the herald of the Overman, but rather by what he calls Nietzsche of the “geneses”’, Foucault ‘conceptualizes the social field in terms of a multiplicity of “force-relations”, of shifting, mobile, open-ended interplays of forces’. Thus even though themes of agonism, contestation, and war undeniably achieve prominence in Foucault’s presentation of his position, what is ultimately primary is a mobile and fluid interplay of forces. Hence in engaging with Foucault we are ‘from the start involved in a social dialogue of corporeal forces, the interplay of forces affecting and transforming one another’. In short, thus construed, ‘Foucault provides us with an account in which dialogue, animated by freedom—by revolt and the creative transgression of limits—is fundamental’. Clearly, for present purposes the significance of Falzon’s analysis is that, by bringing to the fore the pervasive, if implicit, dialogical strand in Foucault’s thinking, it legitimates the possibility of a dialogical reading, a prospect typically overlooked on standard accounts. Accordingly, my aim here is to further probe the dialogical strains in Foucault’s work so as to ascertain how the requirement of intersubjectivity might be formulated in terms more compatible with the distinguishing features of his problematizing approach to critique. To this end, let us next consider aspects of his treatment of the motif of ‘games’, which achieves prominence primarily in his later work.

Especially noteworthy for present purposes is the fact that since Foucault typically characterizes these games as ‘strategic’, and qualifies them using metaphors of agonism, contestation, war and the like, the reciprocal and cooperative dimensions of his thinking tend to go unnoticed. Instead, given the usual connotations of these terms, it is typically presupposed that in so far as the theme of intersubjectivity does make an appearance in Foucault’s work, it is, as one recent commentator has put it, ‘only as a vehicle for the realization of the subject’s purposes’. Thus on a standard reading, Foucault’s employment of the games motif simply reinforces the presumed correctness of a Nietzschean subjectivist reading of the sort earlier alluded to. But in a recent work, David Ingram vindicates the tenability of an alternative reading which challenges this commonplace, in the process reinforcing the dialogical dimension of Foucault’s thought. In particular, as Ingram contends, the usual connotations of this term notwithstanding, once we become attuned to the dialogical strains in Foucault’s thinking, we can begin to see that since ‘strategic relations’ comprise ‘games in which players use influence to elicit free responses’, they presuppose an inherent reciprocity in intersubjective relations, especially when contrasted with relations of dominance. Developing this theme, Ingram further points out that, once we recognize Foucault’s commitment to an ideal of reciprocity, we can see that his concept of strategic interaction actually has a great deal in common with the dialogical ideals embraced by Habermas, notwithstanding the fact that at first sight
his emphasis on the ‘strategic’ character of these games seems to mark him as an opponent of Habermasian discourse with its inherently communicative intent. Further, from this perspective, it can be seen that there are striking affinities between Foucault’s appropriation of the games motif and ‘Gadamer’s account of the play structure underlying all forms of mutual understanding, in which the action itself conducts the responses of the actors’. In short, Ingram’s analysis poses a strong challenge to Foucault’s presumed radical subjectivism, making the case instead that ‘if it can be said that Foucault interprets communicative action strategically, as a game of power, it can also be argued that he interprets strategic action communicatively, as a game of dialogue’. On independent grounds, Simon Thompson reinforces the cogency of such a reading, contending that his critics notwithstanding, Foucault was by no means unmindful of the domain of intersubjective relations, or of the elements of mutuality and reciprocity entailed therein. Thus Thompson too directly challenges the standard interpretation whereby it is presupposed that ‘since Foucault focuses exclusively on the relation of the subject to itself, he omits any account of intersubjectivity’. As a corrective, this commentator draws on the range of Foucault’s writings to argue that, far from endorsing a subjectivist Nietzschean interpretation, not only is Foucault ‘concerned with relations between subjects’, he also ‘uses ‘value-terms like symmetry and reciprocity to judge the quality of such relations’. Moreover, paralleling Ingram’s analysis, Thompson reinforces the point that on a dialogical reading, it can be seen that Foucault’s intent is not that of advocating manipulative or coercive relations between interacting subjects, as is often supposed. Instead, Foucault has as his target ‘“states of domination” in which “power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow an extremely limited margin of freedom”’. Developing this theme, Thompson further reinforces the contention that when the dialogical dimensions of Foucault’s thought are given their due, it emerges that far from ignoring intersubjectivity, Foucault is focally concerned with ‘the specification of the conditions of the possibility of reciprocal relations between subjects’. Indeed, it could be said that his primary end-view is ‘the achievement of mobile power relations in which one subject’s superiority over the other can never be guaranteed’.

In its application to the epistemic domain, this reading clearly has important ramifications for how we conceptualize forums of intersubjectivity as sites for the critical intersubjective appraisal of proffered knowledge claims. Thus while a standard reading would highlight the centrality of an adversarial contest having the ‘strategic’ aim of reinforcing entrenched interests and viewpoints, a dialogical reading brings to the fore the extent of Foucault’s commitment to creating, and holding open, a space for the free and unimpeded interaction of competing positions, so constituted as to resist the domination of any one viewpoint. From this perspective, we can begin to see that, construed epistemically, his aim is to challenge the hegemony of any discourse that tries to suppress questioning or the articulation of alternative viewpoints by insisting that it represents the only valid way of construing a given problem domain. As a corrective, as Ingram reminds us, in his embrace of the games motif, Foucault’s overarching intent is to ensure the opening up for active consideration of ‘a field of possible responses on the part of
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the addressee'. Hence, Schmidt and Wartenberg notwithstanding, we can begin to see why it will not do to construe Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity along orthodox Kantian lines in terms of a preconstituted, homogenized tribunal committed to ensuring uniformity in conformity with the assumed dictates of reason. Instead, as conducive to opening up for active consideration a field of possible responses to a problem domain, these forums need to be construed in inherently dynamic, dialogical and reciprocal terms, and hence as contributing to effecting a transformation in established ways of thinking through liberating counterclaims with the ability to challenge an existing hegemony.

Furthermore, as we shall now consider, if we are to do justice to Foucault’s problematizing endeavours, we likewise need to take due account of the pluralistic, decentred and contested character of these forums of intersubjectivity. Thereafter, we will be better positioned to reassess the extent of Foucault’s ability to respond to recurring criticisms regarding the critical efficacy of his problematizing project, and hence the extent of his contribution to forging a viable dialogical conception of critical inquiry adequate to postfoundationalist needs.

Foucauldian Forums of Intersubjectivity as Pluralistic, Decentred and Contested

A further clear indication of the incongruity involved in conceiving the requirement of intersubjectivity in a way that calls for accountability to a homogenized Kantian tribunal derives from Foucault’s explicit valorization of ‘local’ and ‘subjugated’ ‘knowledges’ and of the correlative need to do justice to the diversity of claims emanating from these localized and heterogeneous sites. For as Foucault makes clear, in valorizing subjugated knowledges his primary aim is to contest what he terms ‘the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse’, his explicit intent being ‘to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle’ against precisely that kind of ‘coercion’. To do justice to this professed aim, it seems clear that we need to break with an idealized and homogenized Kantian conception so as to take greater account of the pluralistic and decentred character of forums of intersubjectivity as envisaged by Foucault. To clarify what is at issue in this regard, we can productively draw on a related strand in the McCarthy/Hoy exchange about the conditions of the possibility for effective critique. Especially relevant for present purposes is Hoy’s Foucauldian response to McCarthy’s Habermasian defence of the need for an idealized ‘universal audience’ as a prerequisite for the critical efficacy of rational critique, paralleling Schmidt and Wartenberg’s Kantian defence of the need for a tribunal comprising ‘all free, reasoning beings’. As considered below, in responding to McCarthy in effect Hoy establishes that since the encounter with others who occupy different discursive standpoints in itself provides a potent dialogical resource for testing the cogency of our beliefs and assumptions, the efficacy of Foucauldian critique does not depend on an idealized Kantian tribunal or even on its Habermasian correlate, the presupposition of a ‘universal audience’.

To set this debate in context, recall that given his clear appreciation of our status as inherently situated inquirers, although highly sympathetic to his project,
McCarthy vigorously defends the need for a detranscendentalized reading of Habermas’s idealizing presuppositions, contending that communicative rationality needs to be understood ‘temporally (it is an ongoing accomplishment), pragmatically (which is never absolute but always only for all practical purposes), and contextually (in ever changing circumstances)’. But as noted, despite his clear recognition of our situated and contextualized status as rational inquirers, McCarthy goes on to defend the need for an appeal to a ‘universal audience’, if not an ideal one, contending that it is only in this way that the context-transcendence and hence the critical import of validity claims can be preserved—even if it is the case that, on his own admission, ‘convincing a universal audience can never be anything more than an orientation to essentially open-ended discursive processes’.

Challenging this residual idealization, Hoy argues in response that, since it has no real counterpart in practice and since it conflicts with the reality of our situatedness, the presupposition of a universal audience is an untenable idealization. In particular, Hoy presses the point that McCarthy’s admission that ‘warrants which suffice to convince one audience in one set of circumstances will not suffice to convince all other audiences in all other circumstances’ serves ‘as a good reason for thinking that we do not presuppose the possibility of an ideal universal audience when we engage in dialogue’.

Moreover, this assumption is rendered otiose when we consider that the intended aim can be achieved within the parameters of our socio-historical situatedness by appeal to the critical potential implicit in the possibility of diverse, situated position taking.

Elaborating, Hoy defends this eventuality based on our ability to engage in interaction with members of other discursive communities whose views we know to differ from our own. Thus, he points out that in place of the ‘contextless’ abstraction of an idealization like a universal audience, ‘what opens assertions to critical evaluation are more empirical events, such as finding some conflicting evidence, encountering someone who disagrees’. On a Foucauldian analysis, then, we come to recognize that ‘beliefs are checked only against other actual beliefs, not against some ideal panel of judges’. That is, we come to see that ‘we ourselves are the judges, and what we do is continually to reexamine the assumptions and methods of our interpretations against other evidence and other interpretations’; ‘in real time’ this serves as ‘the best corrective to actually accepted validity claims’. In short, since direct engagement with others who hold different views can provide all the critical potential we need, we lose nothing by replacing the presupposition of a universal audience with the injunction to hold our knowledge claims open to critical appraisal in a series of pluralistic, decentred and situated forums of intersubjectivity. Indeed, Hoy urges, the efficacy of critical inquiry is not only preserved but enhanced when we reject the homogenizing presupposition of a ‘universal audience’ in favour of a commitment to remaining open to learning from the encounter with otherness and difference. As we shall now consider, this assessment derives further support when due account is also taken of the inherently conflictual and contested character of Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity.

Notwithstanding the emphasis in the foregoing on the dialogical and reciprocal character of Foucault’s conception of intersubjective relations to counteract their
neglect on more standard accounts, there can be no doubt that the themes of contestation, disagreement, and difference, prominent on standard readings, do have a central role to play in the constitution of Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity. In the present context, this aspect of Foucault’s thought remains important because it can provide a potent counterbalance to the predilection toward agreement and consensus evident in the case of the theorists we have considered in the earlier chapters. In this connection, Rouse epitomizes the primary implication for the constitution of Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity when he makes the point that, for Foucault, knowledge is ultimately ‘developed in an agonistic field’, an ever-situated field traversed by conflictual relations. Hence, as Rouse points out, for Foucault, knowledge claims ‘could only be vindicated within the contested strategic field in which [such] claims are transformed, reproduced, or left behind’. Equally importantly, as reflected in Foucault’s emphasis both on the reversibility of intersubjective relations and the inherent contestability of knowledge claims, the outcomes thus achieved always remain provisional, corrigible, and subject to ongoing contestation. Moreover, these forums need to be conceptualized in such a way that all aspects of the process of knowledge production—including standards, values, and ideals—remain permanently open to contestation, and so are ever in process of transformation under the impetus of this ongoing contestation.

Similarly, we need to bear in mind that if ‘truth’ for Foucault is, famously, ‘a thing of this world’, then so too is the process of critical intersubjective interaction whereby putative knowledge claims have their evidential credentials assessed. Hence on a Foucauldian analysis, there could be no recourse to some ‘sovereign’ standpoint above the fray from which the resolution of contested knowledge claims might be incontrovertibly legislated. And in place of an ideal or ‘pure’ forum of intersubjectivity, purged of the influences of power and prejudice, what the Foucauldian stance calls for is a fluid, conflictual interplay of situated viewpoints such that whatever provisional resolution of contested issues is achieved must be worked out in situ, without the possibility of recourse to some superordinate, still less legislative, standpoint. Accordingly, it is clear that while famously not eschewing consensuality, Foucault accords priority to the availability of pluralistic and contested forums of intersubjectivity wherein proffered claims are subjected to rigorous critical scrutiny from multiple viewpoints in such a way as to facilitate the possibility of bringing about a transformation in what was previously considered to be beyond question. Equally clearly, this orientation fits well with the understanding that we have achieved that, in keeping with his problematizing commitments, Foucault’s primary concern is to facilitate the opening up for active consideration of a diversity of possible responses with a view to dislocating ways of thinking that have come to seem beyond question.

With these points established, we are now appropriately positioned to reassess Foucault’s ability to underwrite the critical efficacy of his distinctive problematizing mode of critique and hence the extent of his ability to contribute to the formulation of a viable dialogical account of critical inquiry adequate to contemporary postfoundationalist needs.
**Problematization, Critique and Transformation**

In the preceding sections, I have sought to establish that, when due account is taken of the dialogical undercurrents of Foucault’s thought and of the significance of the ‘games’ motif in particular, it becomes clear that, initial impressions notwithstanding, Foucault was not so preoccupied with a Nietzschean valorization of sovereign subjectivity as to neglect completely the domain of intersubjective relations or of intersubjective accountability. Rather, when the dialogical undercurrents of his thought are given their due, we can begin to see that when the later Foucault explicitly valorizes ‘the serious play of questions and answers’ and ‘the work of reciprocal elucidation’ as integral to ‘the search for truth’, this is not evidence of an anomalous shift in his thinking, still less of a ‘death-bed conversion’. Rather, it is the explicit articulation of a long-standing concern on his part with exploring ‘the conditions of the possibility of reciprocal relations between subjects’ in the epistemic domain as well as in the domain of power relations as such. Equally importantly, as we have seen, the foregoing line of analysis has significant implications for how we conceptualize the forums of intersubjectivity in which the accountability requirement is to be satisfied. With these points established, it is now time to revisit the question of whether Foucault’s problematizing mode of inquiry can be effective in deflecting the recurring criticisms of its critical potential and in particular the charge of ‘arbitrary partisanship’ repeatedly levelled by Habermas and others, when every attempt has been made to accommodate its distinctive characteristics. To this end, let us review the core criteria that have come to the fore in the preceding chapters as appropriate for deciding this issue from a dialogical perspective, namely, a commitment to the transformative advancement of understanding; an interrogative conception of inquiry oriented toward keeping open the guiding question; openness to otherness in reciprocal and inclusive forums of intersubjectivity; a context-transcendent, regulative conception of truth; and a well-regulated process of argument appraisal, allowing for reflective position modification in light of sustainable objections. In the course of assessing Foucault’s ability to meet these criteria, I will also endeavour to reinforce their appropriateness for evaluating the cogency of his problematizing mode of critique, notwithstanding its distinctive attributes.

In the first instance, in light of the arguments of the foregoing sections there can be little doubt about the extent of Foucault’s commitment to a transformative conception of inquiry. Thus as demonstrated at the outset, Foucault’s critical project is dedicated to the task of ‘thinking differently’ and as such is explicitly committed to the ‘development of a given into a question’. Moreover, as Foucault notes, there is a direct link between this problematizing orientation and the envisaged transformative outcome. Indeed, as he apprises us: ‘criticism is absolutely indispensable for all transformation. Because a transformation which would remain within the same mode of thought … would only be a superficial transformation’. ‘On the other hand’, Foucault continues, ‘from the moment one begins to be unable, any longer, to think things as one usually thinks them,
transformation becomes simultaneously very urgent, very difficult, and altogether possible’. Accordingly, he is insistent that ‘the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is free and always agitated by permanent criticism’. And if there can thus be little doubt about Foucault’s transformative intent, as the foregoing analysis testifies there can be even less doubt about his commitment to an inherently interrogative mode of inquiry oriented toward keeping open the guiding question, nor about his commitment to openness to otherness in reciprocal and inclusive forums of intersubjectivity. Indeed as we have seen, Foucauldian forums of intersubjectivity are specifically constituted so as to hold open the possibility of ongoing contestation in face of the ever-present threat of closure and domination through the hegemony of a unitary discourse claiming sole authoritative status in respect of knowledge claims. Furthermore, as we have also seen, in contrast to the Habermasian/Kantian preoccupation with a ‘universal audience’ adhering to homogeneous presuppositions, Foucauldian forums are to be construed as constituted by diversely situated voices defending a diversity of viewpoints such that each voice has the potential to challenge any other, while itself remaining open to being challenged by others.

In addition, as Foucault clearly recognizes, instead of being something to be overcome or negated in a push toward consensus, the encounter with difference can provide a potent stimulus for the transformative advancement of understanding. In particular, as Foucault apprises us, the encounter with difference can act as a ‘contrastive foil’ with the capacity to promote the advancement of understanding and learning both by making us aware of the concealed presuppositions that condition and restrict our thinking but of which we were not previously aware and by apprising us of new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being, which have heretofore escaped our attention but which may have informed and enriched the thinking of others. And provided we are truly sincere in our commitment to investigating the problem issues in an open-minded way, recognition of these previously unrecognized possibilities have the ability to fuel a situated learning process which can transform our whole way of thinking about the problem domain. However, if there can be little doubt that Foucault can meet the foregoing criteria to an even greater extent than the theorists considered in the earlier chapters, it is less clear that Foucault can meet the remaining two criteria to a satisfactory degree and thereby confirm his ability to incorporate the critical resources needed to fuel the transformative advancement of understanding by principled means. Accordingly, we need to take a closer look at how matters stand in this regard, beginning with the question of Foucault’s commitment to defending a context-transcendent, regulative conception of truth. In this connection, it is important to establish both that it is not an instance of ‘enlightenment blackmail’ to require that Foucault meet this criterion and that, whatever its other merits, Foucault’s valorization of plural truths cannot serve as an effective substitute for a context-transcendent conception of truth. To this end, we can productively take our bearing from Linda Alcoff’s analysis of Foucault’s treatment of the truth theme.

Challenging Taylor and Habermas’s dismissive assessment that Foucault ‘refuses’ or rejects truth, Alcoff draws on his commitment to the liberation of ‘subjugated knowledges’ to defend the contention that while he does not have an
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‘ontologically transcendent’ conception of truth, Foucault does endorse a concept of truth as ‘immanent’ to specific discursive formations. Being purely immanent, truth is also ‘irreducibly plural’, and on Alcoff’s account, this is as it should be, given Foucault’s explicit valorization of subjugated knowledges. Indeed, instead of finding the absence of a context-transcendent conception of truth problematic, like Foucault’s Nietzschean commentators, Alcoff celebrates the resulting pluralism of truths. By way of justification, she maintains that this endorsement of plural truths fits well with Foucault’s resistance to hegemony in that it challenges the traditionalist presupposition that there must be some ‘overarching schema or framework to which all the multiple discursively constituted truths might be reduced’. But in so doing, Alcoff fails to note that the availability of a context-transcendent conception of truth does not in fact require the presupposition of a universal framework of commensuration. Rather, as contended in earlier chapters, its primary function is to ensure that knowledge claims are held open to critical appraisal in a wide variety of discursive forums. Importantly, then, there is no real conflict between the endorsement of a regulative conception of truth and the valorization of pluralism and difference, which Alcoff rightly emphasizes as a significant strength of Foucault’s stance. Instead, as Alcoff elsewhere notes, what is really at stake in this debate is the availability of an evaluative standard whereby the relative merits of contending positions can be rigorously assessed, and in the absence of which the valorization of subjugated knowledges threatens to lead to ‘simple reversals of knowledges in the dominant position rather than to transformations’. Accordingly, the problem with simply resting content with a multiplicity of plural truths is that, in the absence of a context-transcendent, regulative conception of truth, we lack a key resource needed to determine which of the multiple knowledge claims emanating from diverse sites are worth endorsing and which are not. By the same token, while Alcoff vigorously defends the view that Foucault’s stance embodies ‘a project whose aim is the improved epistemic status of thought itself’, without a context-transcendent concept of truth we lack a key resource needed to ‘evaluate the production of knowledges in their historical specificity’, and hence to fuel his transformative endeavours. In this connection too, it is important to note that we should not regard the valorization of an immanent and a context-transcendent conception of truth as dichotomous alternatives, whereby the endorsement of one would necessitate the exclusion of the other. Indeed, as the arguments of the earlier chapters serve to confirm, to underwrite a mode of critical inquiry adequate to postfoundationalist needs we need to draw on both. Furthermore, notwithstanding the significance of the requirement of openness in its own right, in itself it cannot serve as an effective substitute for a context-transcendent conception of truth. Thus while, as was contended above, adherence to this postulate does enable us to dispense with the presupposition of a (homogenized) ‘universal audience’, it does not eliminate the need for a regulative conception of truth as an evaluative standard with reference to which we can judge the claims emanating from different discursive standpoints. This is all the more the case since, as argued in the previous chapter, in providing a needed common reference point, a regulative concept of truth serves the important integrating function of establishing an internal link between the range of valid
viewpoints on a given subject matter. As discussed further in the next section, in Foucault’s case such an integrating reference point is even more necessary so as to minimize the threat of fragmentation that inevitably accompanies the unqualified celebration of an irreducible pluralism of truths.

A similar assessment applies with regard to Foucault’s ability to satisfy the last of the specified dialogical criteria, namely the availability of a well-regulated process of argument appraisal, leading to reflective position modification in light of sustainable objections. For as we have repeatedly found in the earlier chapters, if intersubjective inquiry is to yield genuine transformative advances in understanding as distinct from ‘simple reversals of knowledges in the dominant position’, it needs to be regulated by a set of ground rules capable of ensuring the principled comparative evaluation of claims emanating from diverse standpoints and hence of underwriting a related process of reflective position modification. Moreover, the call for satisfaction of this requirement cannot easily be dismissed as an instance of ‘enlightenment blackmail’ since, in his late work at least, Foucault explicitly acknowledges the need for a set of ground rules very similar to those defended in the earlier chapters, in the process underscoring their importance for advancing the search for truth by principled means.68 But while Foucault is thus considerably more cognizant than his critics typically allow of the need for a rule-governed procedure to regulate our problematising inquiries, the problem nonetheless remains that he fails to integrate a developed account of its operation into the theoretical underpinnings of his position, with the result that his late endorsement of the need for such ground rules seems purely anomalous.69

In sum, then, since Foucault thus cannot meet the last two criteria to a satisfactory degree, it must be concluded that, although he makes a decisive contribution to redefining what it means to be rational for our times, his work ultimately lacks the full panoply of resources needed to repudiate the recurring charge of an ‘arbitrary partisanship’ of one evaluative standpoint over another. Even on a highly sympathetic reading, we can further conclude that, while Foucault makes a significant contribution to advancing our understanding of the conditions necessary for a viable dialogical account of rationality adequate to postfoundationalist needs, he nonetheless has some important lessons to learn from those representatives of the dialogical tradition with whom we engaged in the earlier chapters if he is to succeed in securing the critical efficacy of his distinctive problematizing mode of critique and hence advancing its transformative aims by principled means. In the next, concluding section, in reviewing where our engagement with Foucault leaves us with regard to our core concerns, we will take stock the main lessons that Foucault needs to learn from Habermas and Gadamer if his distinctive problematizing mode of inquiry is to be effective in advancing its transformative aims.

**Foucault, Transformation and Dialogue**

In the present chapter, I have argued that, notwithstanding his established reputation in some quarters as a radical relativist or anarchist, Foucault has a
significant contribution to make in developing our understanding of the conditions necessary for a viable dialogical mode of critique commensurate with postfoundationalist needs. Nonetheless, it has also become clear that, given significant lacunae in his statement of his position, he has important lessons to learn from the theorists with whom we have heretofore engaged if his critical project is to succeed in advancing its transformative aims by principled means. In reviewing what has been learned in the course of the present chapter, it will become clear why it is important to read these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional as has typically been the case. This review of the conditions necessary for well-grounded dialogical inquiry will also pave the way for testing the credentials of the dialogical approach in the chapters that follow in its application to the problems of paradigm disputes and cross-cultural communication. What, then, is especially distinctive about Foucault’s contribution to our core project?

Most notably perhaps, Foucault makes a decisive contribution by championing an inherently problematizing conception of critical inquiry which can provide a needed corrective for the limitations of the more conservative approaches of the theorists already considered. Thus Foucault apprises us that, to be effective in achieving its transformative aims, critical reason must go beyond a preoccupation with validating what is already known to embrace the challenge of thinking differently, thereby liberating new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. To this end, as we have seen, Foucault advocates ‘limit testing’ with a view to ‘deconstructing necessity’. In so doing, he goes beyond Gadamer as well as Habermas in alerting us to the constricting effects that unreflective adherence to what is considered to be beyond question can have on our thinking, and hence to the need for a commitment to calling radically into question what are generally considered to be the ‘contemporary limits of the necessary’. In thus making us aware of the pervasive influence exerted by entrenched ways of thinking in delimiting what we take to be real as well as necessary, Foucault goes further than either of the other theorists in advocating an inherently transformative conception of inquiry explicitly dedicated to liberating new possibilities for thinking. Foucault also goes significantly beyond the relatively conservative orientation of these theorists in highlighting the importance of the encounter with difference for promoting the transformative advancement of understanding. Above all, as we have seen, he underscores its potential to serve as a ‘contrastive foil’ with the ability to alert us to beliefs and presuppositions we may not even have been aware of holding and in apprising us of other possibilities for thinking, doing, and being which had heretofore escaped our attention. In the process he alerts us to the importance of preserving and respecting difference at the end of our problematizing inquiries as well as at the beginning instead of ignoring or suppressing it in the push toward consensus, as advocated by more traditionalist thinkers. Equally importantly, in contrast to the relatively conservative and homogenizing presuppositions of the other theorists, Foucault makes a significant contribution in alerting us to the need for construing postfoundationalist forums of intersubjectivity in pluralistic, decentered, and contested terms and in informing us about the processes whereby our knowledge claims must be tested in these
circumstances. In these and related ways, Foucault makes a real contribution to enhancing our appreciation of the conditions under which critical inquiry needs to be conducted in a postfoundationalist context so as to be capable of underwriting the transformative advancement of understanding by principled means.

On the debit side, however, given significant lacunae in his statement of his position, even on a dialogical reading doubts inevitably arise about Foucault’s ability to secure the critical efficacy of his problematising conception of critique, and hence about his ability to ensure that the transformative advances in understanding thereby achieved can qualify as rationally motivated rather than as arbitrary shifts lacking rational justification. Accordingly, as we have seen, to realize its own transformative aims and contribute effectively to underwriting a viable postfoundationalist conception of rationality, there is a pressing need for the incorporation of a number of conditions that emerged as constitutive for rational inquiry in the course of our engagement with Habermas and Gadamer. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the fact that, Foucault’s Nietzschean commentators notwithstanding, neither the activity of problematization nor its potentially transformative outcomes can qualify as self-validating. Nor is openness to otherness in itself sufficient to ensure the critical efficacy of problematising inquiry, even when full account is taken of the pluralistic and decentred character of postfoundationalist forums as delineated by Foucault. Instead, if the outcomes of our problematizing endeavours are to count as rationally motivated, we must ensure that they can meet a rigorous accountability requirement in appropriately constituted forums of intersubjectivity. At the nub of this requirement is the understanding that the proposals we put forward embody criticisable epistemic and moral claims for which we remain answerable to others. What is needed for this purpose (but lacking in Foucault) is the specification of an integrated rule-governed procedure for the principled comparative evaluation of inputs from diverse standpoints allowing for reflective position modification in light of sustainable objections from other points of view. And given a concern with rationality, the satisfaction of this condition is non-negotiable because it is only on this basis that we have good reason to believe that any advancement in understanding is the result of a principled process of ‘integration and appropriation’, and not merely arbitrary. Importantly too, it cannot easily be maintained that this requirement represents an instance of ‘enlightenment blackmail’ which Foucault should be absolved from meeting since, as well as being significantly more sensitive to the intersubjective dimension of inquiry than his commentators typically allow, as we have seen, in his late work Foucault himself explicitly acknowledges the significance of a principled procedure of this sort, noting its centrality in advancing the search for truth. This lacuna is further compounded by Foucault’s failure to incorporate a robust context-transcendent conception of truth which, as we have seen, is needed to secure the critical efficacy of his problematising endeavours. For without such a context-transcendent standard, the valorization of an irreducible plurality of truths is untenable because it lacks an indispensable resource for making principled comparative evaluations between claims emanating from diverse standpoints and for integrating the results of our problematizing endeavours. In this connection, the problem is not, as is
frequently maintained, that Foucault altogether neglects truth, but rather that he seems to render truth purely *immanent* to specific discursive formations or standpoints. As contended above, an appeal to purely immanent standards will not suffice to underwrite the rationally motivated advancement of understanding, still less a full-fledged process of transformative learning. And again, this requirement cannot be dismissed as an instance of ‘enlightenment blackmail’, incompatible with Foucault’s thinking, for not only does Foucault not actively deny the possibility of construing universals like truth in context-transcendent terms, in his late work, he explicitly seems to valorize the search for truth as a regulative orientation for a rule-governed process of dialogical inquiry worthy of our epistemic allegiance, while failing to incorporate this insight into the systematic articulation of his position. Consequently, far from absolving him from meeting this requirement, the advancement of Foucault’s own transformative aims would seem to necessitate its satisfaction.

In addition, as a corrective for Foucault’s undue emphasis on pluralism, difference and purely immanent standards, we must have recourse to some core hermeneutic tenets if we are to ensure that his distinctive problematising mode of critique does not serve to reinforce fragmentation instead of promoting transformative learning. Thus in particular, we need to invoke the Gadamerian tenet that our differences are never so great nor our horizons of understanding so self-sealing as to preclude the possibility of establishing points of communication and contact with differently situated others and hence of finding and building on common ground. Thus we need to bear in mind that, notwithstanding the extent of our differences on a more immediate level, as co-participants in a process of inquiry into a common lifeworld, we inevitably share many basic presuppositions with those who occupy different discursive, or hermeneutic, standpoints. Indeed, on hermeneutic premises, our differences really only come into sharp relief against the background of our prior interconnectedness. But, while prejudgments, or prejudices, deriving from our hermeneutic situation need not constitute a barrier to engaging with, or indeed learning from, others who occupy different hermeneutic standpoints, as we have seen, to realize this possibility, these prejudgments must be held open to ongoing critical appraisal in intersubjective forums so constituted as to support a principled process of ‘integration and appropriation’. Without the incorporation of such features, the emphasis on difference prominent in Foucault’s thought will fail to function as the envisaged stimulus to transformative learning.

Since the critical efficacy of Foucault’s problematising mode of critique thus depends on its capacity to incorporate features that emerged as decisive in the work of both Gadamer and Habermas, the present study reinforces the importance of reading these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional as has typically been the case in the interests of delineating a viable postfoundationalist conception of rationality. With these points established, let us now proceed to test, refine and extend the core insights generated in part I by applying them to the resolution of two troublesome contemporary problems for rationality, beginning with the rationality of paradigm disputes.
Notes

1 See further Linda Alcoff, Real Knowing, especially pp. 115-16. While the present chapter reinforces this assessment, it aspires to go beyond Alcoff’s coherentist interpretation with a view to highlighting the merits of a dialogical reading of Foucault.

2 This, first, part of the present chapter is a condensed and extensively reworked version of themes dealt with in my paper, ‘A “Limit Attitude”: Foucault, Autonomy, Critique’, History of the Human Sciences, 14 (2001), pp. 49-68. The second part, ‘Problematization, Critique and Intersubjectivity’ is a developed articulation of the implications of Foucault’s stance, which were no more than hinted at toward the conclusion of the earlier paper.


4 ‘Is it Really Important to Think?’, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 9 (1982), p. 34.

5 ‘Is it Really Important to Think?’, p. 35.


8 ‘Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations’, p. 388.


10 ‘Is It Really Important to Think?’, p. 33.

11 ‘Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations’, p. 156.

12 ‘What is Enlightenment?’ p. 46.


14 ‘Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations’, p. 386.

15 ‘What is Enlightenment?’ p. 38.

16 ‘What is Enlightenment?’ p. 47.


18 Real Knowing, p. 148.


20 For a more detailed development of this theme, see my ‘A “Limit Attitude”’, especially pp. 53-8.


23 For Kant, the appropriate exercise of reason presupposes its ‘free and public’ use such that we are willing to compare our judgments with those of others, ‘in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones’ (cited in Lewis Hinchman, ‘Autonomy, Individuality, and Self-Determination’, in What is Enlightenment?, ed. J. Schmidt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 496). Accordingly, as Hinchman puts it (ibid.), for Kant, the achievement of autonomy, properly understood, specifically presupposes engagement in an intersubjective forum ‘in which intellectually emancipated individuals participate in a continuous public, critical discussion’.
Epitomizing the subjectivist strain in Foucault’s thinking here at issue, Leslie Thiele makes the point in *Timely Meditations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 67 that:

Foucault adopts the Nietzschean premise that the self … must be of one’s own making. With the self no longer given (as the gift of God, nature, or history), freedom is manifest only through the ‘invention’ of the self. Invoking Nietzsche as his mentor, Foucault thus admonishes us ‘to create ourselves as a work of art’.


Foucault, my aim is to make explicit possibilities inherent in Foucault’s thinking that remain masked on a more standard reading. In particular, my intent here is to establish how the requirement of intersubjectivity might be construed in terms more compatible with Foucault’s situated, problematizing endeavours rather than in the idealized, homogenized Kantian terms proposed by Schmidt and Wartenberg. With this end in view, as we shall shortly see, the Foucauldian motif of ‘games’ represents an especially productive way of advancing our investigations.

While there is inevitably an element of ‘destructive retrieve’ involved in this undertaking, it is unlikely that Foucault would disapprove given his own explicitly articulated stance regarding the interpretation of other great philosophers in the tradition, and of Nietzsche in particular: ‘The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest’ (cited in Leslie Thiele, ‘The Agony of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault’s Thought’, *American Political Science Review*, 84 (1990), p. 916).

For on a standard reading, ‘Foucault’s aestheticism praises actions which are “manipulatory—predatory vis-à-vis other persons.” That is, the subject regards all others merely as objects, to be used in whatever way is necessary to achieve its own ends.’ (Simon Thompson, ‘The Agony and the Ecstasy: Foucault, Habermas and the Problem of Recognition’, in *Foucault contra Habermas*, p. 198.) As discussed below, Thompson also goes on to challenge the tenability of the standard reading in favour of a more dialogical interpretation.

We are always in the midst of dialogue, whether we like it or not. And this means that we continually encounter the other, influence it, exert power over it, and at the same time are influenced by it in turn. Even states of domination, where the other is temporarily silenced and overcome, remain ultimately subject to dialogue, to the resurgence of buried voices, to ongoing dialogue and transformation.

38 ‘Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason’, p. 242.
39 ‘Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason’, p. 244.
40 ‘Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason’, pp. 242, 243.
45 Joseph Rouse in particular has performed an important service in extrapolating the implications of Foucault’s analysis of power relations to the epistemic domain as such, with a view to elucidating ‘how we might understand knowledge as likewise dynamic, disseminated, strategically linked, contested, analytical, and productive’. See ‘Foucault and the Natural Sciences’, in Foucault and the Critique of Institutions, eds J. Caputo and M. Yount (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1993), p. 151; see too his ‘Power/Knowledge’, in The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, especially pp. 110-13).
49 Hoy and McCarthy, Critical Theory, p. 72.
50 Critical Theory, p. 77.
51 Critical Theory, p. 255.
52 Critical Theory, p. 268.
53 Critical Theory, p. 269.
54 Notably, too, this assessment has been reinforced by Calvin Schrag who observes, in Foucauldian vein, that, criticism is a situated practice ‘through which the linkages and disjunctions among the various configurations of thought and action that define our historical situatedness are recognized and evaluated in an ongoing process of comparison, contrast, discernment of similarities and differences, and tracing of practical consequences’: The Resources of Rationality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 257. Moreover (ibid.), to achieve this one need not step outside of one’s local context, intent upon attaining a transcendent, universal, [or] unconditioned standpoint. The resources for criticism reside in our ability to shuttle back and forth between received beliefs, points of view, theories, and institutional practices–testing each against the putative merits of the other–without settling on any particular one of them as the untarnished truth of the matter.
56 ‘Foucault and the Natural Sciences’, p. 154.
57 See further ‘Foucault and the Natural Sciences’, especially pp. 158, 161.
58 As Rouse aptly puts it, ‘[a] postsovereign epistemology would presumably offer no standpoint, outside the contested domain in which conflicting and heterogeneous knowledge
claims circulate, from which to assess what one ought to believe’ (‘Foucault and the Natural Sciences’, p. 157; italics in original).

59 The Foucault Reader, p. 379.
61 ‘Is it Really Important to Think?’, p. 34.
62 The extent of Foucault’s commitment to openness to otherness is reinforced by Falzon who emphasizes that ‘in the face of forms of domination, of closed forms of life’, Foucault’s primary concern is ‘to open up a space for that which is other, in order that the other might be heard and have transformative effects. He aims to foster the emergence of new forms of thought and action’ (Foucault and Social Dialogue, p. 63).
63 Thus as Falzon has it, Foucauldian critique is characterized by ‘the adoption of a different attitude toward the other’, an attitude which centres on ‘openness to the other, the refusal to reduce the other to a mere function of prevailing categories, to bend it to our purposes, and the willingness to respect the other, to listen to it, to take its claims seriously’ (Foucault and Social Dialogue, p. 59).
64 Real Knowing, pp. 159-60; cf. p. 154.
65 Real Knowing, p. 160.
66 Real Knowing, p. 152. Alcoff attributes this objection to Peter Dews, while seeming to assume that her vindication of a purely immanent conception of truth somehow circumvents it.
67 As epitomized by Thomas McCarthy (Critical Theory, p. 39), the point is that:
While we have no ideas of standards of truth wholly independent of particular languages and practices, it remains the case that ‘truth’ serves as an idea of reason with respect to which we can criticise the standards we inherit and learn to see things in a different way. Neither the particularity and context-immanence nor the universality and context-transcendence of truth claims can be ignored without doing violence to our actual practices of truth.
68 To this end, Foucault draws explicit attention to each partner’s right: ‘to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, etc’. Moreover, Foucault is emphatic that each party to this ‘shared investigation’ is ‘by the logic of his own discourse’ ‘tied to what he said earlier’, ‘and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other’ (‘Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations’, pp. 381-2). A similar appreciation of the rule-governed, and indeed truth oriented, character of critical inquiry is also evident in ‘The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’, in The Final Foucault, eds James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), see especially pp. 15-17.
71 As noted earlier, what this process calls for in particular is that ‘each participant takes account of the other opinions, attempts to show what is wrong and right with them as well as with her own position and thereby formulates, in concert with the others, a view that each
recognizes to be closer to the truth than any of the original positions’ (Warnke, Gadamer, p. 101).

72 See further Michael Kelly, “Foucault, Habermas, and the Self-Referentiality of Critique” (in Critique and Power, especially pp. 382-89), where Kelly contends that Foucault does not deny the validity of universals like truth, his aim is rather to historicize them and deconstruct their presumed unconditionality.

73 This way of crystallizing what is at issue here has been prompted by my reading of both Yanchar and Slife’s insightful discussion of how hermeneutic thinking can help overcome the ‘problem of fragmentation’ in psychology (see further, ‘Putting It All Together: Toward a Hermeneutic Unity of Psychology’, The Journal of Mind and Behaviour, 21 (2000), pp. 315-36), and John Forester’s valorization of ‘transformative learning’ as a key concept in policy debate. See further ‘Beyond Dialogue and Transformative Learning’, in Political Dialogue: Theories and Practices, ed. Stephen Esquith (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 295-333.

PART II
Chapter 4

Beyond Incommensurability: Rationality, Dialogue and Paradigm Disputes

In this chapter I want to demonstrate the merits of a hermeneutico-dialogical approach to rationality in terms of its ability to underwrite a productive new approach to the rationality of paradigm disputes having the potential to resolve significant problems inherent in Kuhn’s original statement of his position. In particular, I will endeavour to show that the dialogical approach can dissolve the circularity problem identified by Kuhn by demonstrating how, far from being vicious under appropriate discursive conditions the circularity of paradigm debate can serve as a productive stimulus to the potentially transformative advancement of scientific understanding. Correlatively, I will seek to vindicate the merits of the new approach as having the capacity to transcend the limitations of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy proffered as an appropriate basis for elucidating the logic and dynamics of transformative shifts in scientific understanding. What hermeneutico-dialogical thinking enables us to see in particular is that far from being instantaneous, totalizing or irrational, these shifts are to be explained in terms of complex and multi-layered dialectical processes regulating the principled exchange of good reasons between parties to the debate. In this connection, I contend that the strength of the dialogical approach derives from its ability to build on and extend Kuhn’s endorsement of a logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’ as holding the key to underwriting the rationality of paradigm debate, albeit in a way that foregrounds the hermeneutico-dialogical dimensions mostly overlooked by Kuhn himself.1 To this end, I will show how hermeneutico-dialogical thinking can provide an integrating framework for a number of important recent contributions to the analytic literature on this topic, contributions which in turn serve to provide independent confirmation for the tenability of hermeneutico-dialogical insights in this domain. In short, my aim here is to vindicate the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to the domain of post-Kuhnian science by demonstrating how it can provide us with the resources necessary to preserve what is most provocative and challenging in Kuhn’s stance—and in particular his valorization of an inherently transformative conception of scientific inquiry—while overcoming its more telling limitations in respect of rationality.2

As a first step in this direction, following a suggestion made by the later Kuhn himself, I engage critically with core facets of the Doppelt/Siegel debate with a view to gaining an appreciation of the strengths and limitations of an appeal to
criteria as a basis for underwriting the rationality of paradigm disputes. Although the limitations of a specifically criterial approach soon start to become apparent, critical engagement with this approach nonetheless enables us to gain valuable insight into the parameters within which paradigm debate must be conducted. Awareness of these parameters will set the scene for a more focused consideration of specifically dialogical themes in the remainder of the chapter.

Criterial Rationality and its Limitations: The Doppelt/Siegel Debate

Building on a suggestion by Kuhn himself, the Doppelt/Siegel debate centres on the viability of an appeal to criteria as a basis for underwriting the rationality of paradigm disputes.\(^3\) As noted, in engaging with aspects of this debate, while becoming apprised of the merits and limitations of a specifically criterial response, we stand to gain valuable insight into the conditions under which paradigm disputes need to be conducted. In particular, engagement with this debate enables us to gain insight into the inherently situated character of paradigm disputes and, by vindicating the legitimacy of the persistence of disagreement and difference, defuses the positivistic insistence on consensus as a prerequisite for rationality. At the same time, it soon becomes apparent that, whatever its other merits, an appeal to criteria is not in itself sufficient to secure the rationality of paradigm disputes. Instead, we need to have recourse to ‘a shared context of rational debate’ satisfying dialogical conditions of the sort defended in the earlier chapters. Importantly too, from a dialogical perspective it likewise becomes clear that both parties to this debate inadvertently polarize the issues in a way that detracts from the possibility of a meaningful resolution of their differences, even as each in his own way contributes significantly to elucidating the structural features involved. As a corrective, we must seek to develop a more viable ‘middle way’ capable of incorporating the strengths of both positions while overcoming their limitations.

In his major work Kuhn famously makes the provocative claim that: ‘When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm’s defence’.\(^4\) Elaborating, Kuhn further contends that: ‘To the extent … that two scientific schools disagree about what is a problem and what a solution, they will inevitably talk through each other when debating the relative merits of their respective paradigms’.\(^5\) Moreover, Kuhn specifically attributes this inevitable circularity to the allegedly paradigm-relative character of the criteria at issue.\(^6\) The Doppelt/Siegel debate addresses the implications of this controversial thesis. In particular, the debate centres on the extent of the circularity at issue and its effects on the rationality of paradigm debate. Especially contentious is Doppelt’s defence of a strong version of the circularity thesis. On this view, while the existence of shared criteria is not altogether precluded, the extent of paradigm differences is sufficient to ensure that the criteria are applied by each side in a purely paradigm-internal fashion, with the result that little or no progress can be made toward a consensual resolution of differences. As crystallized by Siegel, on such a strong interpretation, the incommensurability thesis gives rise to a vicious circularity of
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the following sort (which, on Siegel’s analysis, severely challenges the cogency of both Kuhn and Doppelt’s positions).

[A] paradigm’s evaluation is relative to the standards of adequacy of the paradigm from which one is evaluating. A paradigm will be assessed variously according to how well it meets the standards of adequacy of various paradigms—thus P1 will be (typically) superior to P2, relative to the standards of adequacy of P1, while P2 will be superior to P1, relative to standards of adequacy of P2. Since P1 and P2 are incommensurable, they do not share common criteria of adequacy (though they may well share certain items of observational data, problems, and concepts); and since their criteria of adequacy are incompatible (if not, P1 and P2 would not be incommensurable), their assessment is relative to the paradigm-bound criteria of adequacy appealed to in making such an assessment.7

But for Siegel this relativistic outcome is altogether indefensible. As an antidote, he goes on to insist on the existence of neutral, external vantage points and standards, defending this ‘absolutist’ stance as a necessary prerequisite for rationality.8 In what follows, however, I want to defend the viability of a ‘middle way’ between the polarized alternatives thus staked out by these protagonists. In so doing I will draw on suggestions made by the later Kuhn himself which serve to ameliorate his earlier, more extreme views about circularity. I thus lay the groundwork for contending that once the possibility of communication and contact between proponents of rival positions is allowed for, the resultant circularity is potentially productive, not vicious. To this end, I endorse Siegel’s vindication of the availability of standards shared by proponents of rival paradigms,9 while defending the need for significant revisions in how these standards are characterized. With these ends in view, let us consider Siegel’s response to what he perceives as the unacceptably relativistic implications of Doppelt’s stance.

In essence, Siegel persuasively contends that once we allow that communication and debate is possible between proponents of rival paradigms, it is not tenable to deny the existence of shared evaluative standards with the potential to override paradigm-specific differences, including differences in paradigm-internal standards. Thus as he puts it, once the possibility of meaningful debate is accepted, ‘standards of science can themselves be meaningfully compared and coherently debated. Therefore, reasons can be brought to bear on the decision whether or not to adhere to a given paradigm’s standards of science. There is no “reason-proof” shield which protects one’s adherence to a paradigm’s standards of science’.10 More controversially, however, Siegel goes on to contend that to be effective in overcoming paradigm differences (an outcome that, as noted, he deems necessary for rationality), the shared standards in question must have the status of being ‘paradigm-neutral’ and ‘external’. Furthermore, ‘there must be paradigm-neutral vantage points from which rival paradigms may be meaningfully compared’. In short, for Siegel, the very rationality of paradigm debate ‘depends on the existence of paradigm-neutral meta-standards by which paradigm-bound standards can be paradigm-neutrally evaluated’.11 Failing this, we are left with the persistence of ‘fundamental disagreements, irresolvable by scientific argument’. On Siegel’s analysis, this outcome is not compatible with rationality for, as he puts
it, if ‘there are no paradigm-neutral criteria of evaluation, paradigm debate can rely on no objective criteria of evaluation of paradigms; hence paradigm debate is irrational’. But while Siegel is correct thus to defend the possibility of shared evaluative standards under what might be termed conditions of ‘weak incommensurability’ (viz. conditions which allow for the possibility of communication and debate between proponents of rival positions), the way in which he characterizes these ‘meta-standards’ is ultimately untenable in the context of a Kuhnian conception of scientific inquiry.

In particular, given the intrinsically paradigm-based character of Kuhnian science, it is highly problematic, indeed ultimately untenable, to postulate the existence of ‘neutral’ vantage points, that is, vantage points that are ‘beyond’ or ‘outside of’ any paradigmatic standpoint and from which the merits of rival positions could be ‘neutrally’ assessed. For, on a Kuhnian analysis, it is axiomatic that we are always inevitably participants in one paradigm or another and so cannot be said altogether to step outside paradigmatic standpoints to occupy some mythical, ‘neutral’ space beyond. If such a neutral standpoint were available, as constituting the only truly objective stance, it would represent the only acceptable vantage point from which all scientific theorizing should be carried out. But, as will already be evident, it is precisely this positivistic conception of neutral theorizing with which Kuhnian science endeavours to break (a move with which of course hermeneutico-dialogical thinking concurs, as elaborated below). A similar objection accrues to Siegel’s insistence on characterizing these standards as paradigm-neutral and external, and in insisting on the need for the availability of standards of this sort as a prerequisite for rationality. What this analysis overlooks in particular is the inevitable influence of paradigm-internal factors on how any available standards will be appropriated and applied by proponents of rival paradigms. Consequently, in addition to not taking sufficient account of the inherent situatedness of paradigm debate, it overestimates the extent to which such standards can be effective in overriding paradigm-specific differences (something that, as already noted, Siegel mistakenly assumes to be necessary for rationality). To avoid these misleading implications, it would be altogether more defensible to conceptualize these ‘meta-standards’ simply as ‘paradigm-transcendent’. Equally importantly, contra Doppelt, it needs to be established that it is not necessary to postulate two sets of standards—internal as well as external—to justify the persistence of paradigm-specific differences, since this can be adequately explained simply by appeal to the effects of paradigm-internal presuppositions and values. Thus, to better conceptualize the dynamics and logic of paradigm debate, along with deflecting Siegel’s positivistic preoccupation with neutrality, we need to deconstruct Doppelt’s postulated paradigm-internal/external dichotomy of standards. To this end, it will be productive to elaborate on the later Kuhn’s own treatment of this topic, with a view to establishing that the persistence of rational disagreement can be explained (and legitimized) purely by reference to the availability of a shared set of paradigm-transcendent standards of the sort just valorized.

Although a modification of his initial seeming endorsement of a strong (and correspondingly problematic) incommensurability thesis, as is well known, the
later Kuhn valorized not only the possibility of meaningful communication and debate between proponents of rival positions, but also the availability of paradigm-transcendent standards as constitutive features of paradigm debate. In particular, Kuhn famously contends that the characteristics of accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, fruitfulness, “together with others of much the same sort” “provide the shared basis for theory choice.” Indeed, he suggests that these standards represent the accepted, trans-historical, criteria “for evaluating the adequacy of a theory”. Notably for present purposes, however, contra Siegel, he does not contend that these standards can be ‘neutral’ applied, still less that there is some ‘neutral vantage point’ from which this could happen. Equally importantly, contra Doppelt, he does not contend that these standards are purely paradigm-internal. Rather, while the operative standards are neither neutral nor external, they are nonetheless paradigm-transcendent with application between as well as within paradigms, although this will involve their paradigm-relative inflection. The further implication is that, Siegel notwithstanding, the application of these standards will not inevitably yield a consensual outcome, nor of course can this be stipulated as a condition for rationality on a paradigm-based conception of scientific inquiry. In this way, Kuhn vindicates the legitimacy of a pluralistic outcome to paradigm debate along the lines defended by Doppelt, while demonstrating that the tenability of such an outcome does not necessitate the postulation of a tenuous internal/external dichotomy of standards. Rather, the legitimate persistence of paradigm-specific differences is directly attributable to other factors. In particular, as Kuhn has it, the decisive considerations are that: ‘Individually the criteria are imprecise: individuals may legitimately differ about their application to concrete cases. In addition, when deployed together, they repeatedly prove to conflict with one another; accuracy may, for example, dictate the choice of one theory, scope the choice of its competitor’. Since the implications are significant, it will be productive to reflect further on the rationale for this assessment.

Specifically, Kuhn’s argument here is twofold bearing, on the one hand, on the ‘imprecise’ nature of the postulated criteria and, on the other, on the way in which they can conflict in the process of their application. Let us briefly consider each point in turn. Firstly, in emphasizing that, individually, the criteria are imprecise, Kuhn highlights the fact that each of the several criteria is amenable to diverse interpretations, leading to potentially divergent evaluations when it is appropriated and applied from different paradigmatic perspectives. For example, ‘simplicity’ may be understood in both a quantitative and a qualitative sense and depending on which sense is given priority, different evaluations follow. Thus in the case of the heliocentric/geo-centric debate, although there is little to choose between the paradigms in quantitative terms, a qualitative interpretation favours the Copernican thesis. Similarly, as Kuhn points out, the ‘accuracy’ criterion can be seen to favour either the oxygen or phlogiston theory depending on which interpretation of this criterion is invoked. In short, paradigm-relative differences in interpretation about what a standard means and how it is to be applied can explain, and justify, legitimate diversity in evaluation without the need to invoke an internal/external dichotomy of standards. This is all the more the case since, as Kuhn recognizes, different
evaluations may result depending on how the several standards are applied and weighted in particular cases. Thus, as Kuhn puts it:

When scientists must choose between competing theories, two men fully committed to the same list of criteria for choice may nevertheless reach different conclusions. Perhaps they interpret simplicity differently or have different convictions about the range of fields within which the consistency criterion must be met. Or perhaps they agree about these matters but differ about the relative weights to be accorded to these or to other criteria when several are deployed together.¹⁶

Thus the other, related reason for the legitimate persistence of disagreement and difference is that since multiple criteria are necessarily involved in assessing the merits of any paradigm, proponents of rival paradigms will inevitably give different weightings to some criteria over others. And clearly, these differences in weighting will legitimize different evaluations, although the same standards have been appealed to in making the evaluations. To illustrate, Kuhn notes that while consistency favours choice of the Ptolemaic theory, simplicity favours the Copernican, and there is no good reason why an informed participant would be compelled to give priority to one over the other. Similarly, in another context accuracy may favour the choice of one theory, while scope favours the choice of its rival.¹⁷ Importantly, then, there is no intrinsic incompatibility between the availability of paradigm-transcendent standards and the persistence of legitimate inter-paradigmatic differences in evaluation. And since the legitimacy of diverse interpretations of the available criteria, coupled with differences in relative weighting, can account for the fact that an appeal to a shared set of standards will lead to a pluralistic rather than a consensual outcome, it is clear that we do not need to postulate an internal/external dichotomy of standards to account for this possibility.¹⁸ Importantly too, it is equally clear that on a paradigm-based conception of scientific inquiry, the persistence of difference is by no means incompatible with rationality. Indeed, as we shall see (in line with the arguments of the earlier chapters), under appropriate dialogical conditions, far from representing a barrier to rationality, pluralism and the persistence of difference have an indispensable role to play in promoting the principled advancement of scientific understanding. With these points established, the point that now warrants our attention is that although an appeal to standards thus clearly has an important role to play in underwriting the rationality of paradigm disputes, by itself a criterial approach is not adequate to the challenge of explaining the rationality of Kuhnian science. Rather, to better comprehend the rationality of paradigm debate we need to break with a one-sided emphasis on standards to focus instead on the full range of factors that affect its conduct.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that throughout the Doppelt/Siegel exchange there are recurring references to a ‘shared context of rational debate’,¹⁹ centred on an exchange of ‘good reasons’, as the forum wherein the viability of claims and counterclaims need to be tested in light of the relevant standards. In this way, notwithstanding its explicit focus on criterial factors, its protagonists give clear, if largely implicit, indications that an appeal to evaluative standards
(however construed) is not of itself sufficient to secure rationality; rather, this presupposes that we take account of the broader context of dialectical argumentation in which the relative merits of contending positions may be assessed in light of the relevant standards. This is all the more the case since, on reflection, it becomes clear that an appeal to criteria cannot by itself be efficacious in accounting for the rationality of paradigm debate because, when invoked to underwrite the logic of criteria selection and application, such an appeal will inevitably result in an infinite regress, unless other relevant factors are also given their due. So to really come to terms with the rationality of paradigm debate, at this point we need to redirect our attention to focus firmly on the structure, dynamics and logic of the forums of dialectical argumentation wherein an appeal to criteria achieves its significance (alongside a range of other ‘substantive’ and ‘procedural’ factors as considered further below). The cogency of this assessment is further reinforced by the other commentators considered below, each of whom in their own way highlights the productive possibilities inherent in Kuhn’s own suggestive, if radically underdeveloped, endorsement of the logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’ as the fitting basis for securing the rationality of paradigm debate. It is in this context, as we shall now see, that the merits of a dialogical approach to rationality come decisively to the fore.

**Beyond Criterial Rationality**

As intimated at the outset, the strength of the dialogical approach in its application to this domain is that it can provide productive new insight into the rationality of paradigm debate, and do so in a manner which builds on the strengths of Kuhn’s own stance while overcoming its more telling limitations. In particular, the dialogical approach enables us to realize the potential implicit in Kuhn’s insight that the logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’ holds the key to elucidating the rationality of paradigm debate, while overcoming the limitations of his strong circularity thesis and the related gestalt switch analogy. But since very little literature exists which deals directly with the application of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking to the domain of postKuhnian science, to vindicate this contention we will need to draw on the contributions of several diverse theorists who, while not operating more within the analytic than the hermeneutic tradition, nonetheless provide clear, if partial, evidence of the operation of hermeneutico-dialogical principles in this domain. In this connection, the strategy followed here is to show that hermeneutico-dialogical thinking has the ability to function as an integrating framework for these otherwise dispersed and seemingly unrelated contributions, while the latter in turn serve to provide independent confirmation of the applicability of dialogical principles in this domain. To this end, it will be helpful first to focus on aspects of Helen Longino’s contribution to this debate. Of particular interest for present purposes is Longino’s vindication of the productive role of ‘background assumptions’ (akin to hermeneutic prejudgments) in advancing scientific understanding, and her valorization of a process of ‘transformative criticism’ as the appropriate basis for scientific objectivity in a
postKuhnian context. In these respects in particular, she highlights the limitations of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy as a means of characterizing the transformative advancement of scientific understanding, while reinforcing the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to this domain.

Like the other theorists considered below, Longino severely challenges the cogency of the positivistic emphasis on a methodologically driven approach to scientific rationality. In particular, she presses the point that the positivistic commitment to ‘an ideally rational procedure to which science, for better or for worse, fails to measure up’ must be rejected, even as an ideal. Paralleling the hermeneutic critique of idealizing presuppositions, Longino challenges the cogency of this ideal not primarily because ‘the vagaries of human psychology prevent us from realizing it but because it involves a radical misconception’. In particular, Longino undertakes to demonstrate that the way in which we assess a theory is not simply a matter of atemporal logical relations between data and claim. Rather a great deal depends on the interpretive framework with which we approach the subject matter—and this in turn is constituted by our (typically concealed) background assumptions which function similarly to hermeneutic prejudgments. Thus she takes issue especially with the positivistic conception of ‘the way in which hypotheses and evidence are related to one another’, pointing out that ‘states of affairs do not carry labels indicating that for which they are evidence or for which they can be taken as evidence’. Instead, ‘it is we who, in our search for support of beliefs, hypotheses, theories, assign the status of evidence to objects and states of affairs’. In this way Longino intends to bring to the fore the intrinsically temporalized and contextualized dimension of evidential assessment, neglected or denied on the positivistic model.

More specifically, Longino’s core contention is that:

how one determines evidential relevance, why one takes some state of affairs as evidence for one hypothesis rather than for another, depends on one’s other beliefs, which we can call background beliefs or assumptions. Thus, a given state of affairs can be taken as evidence for the same hypothesis in light of differing background beliefs, and it can be taken as evidence for quite different and even conflicting hypotheses given appropriately conflicting background beliefs. Similarly, different aspects of one state of affairs can be taken as evidence for the same hypothesis in light of differing background beliefs, and they can serve as evidence for different and even conflicting hypotheses given appropriately conflicting background beliefs.

Elaborating, Longino forcefully argues that it was neglect of this very point that caused Kuhn, still prisoner to a residual positivism, to embrace a deficient conception of evidential relations and hence of paradigm change, as epitomized by his use of the gestalt switch analogy and his inability to provide a satisfactory solution to the circularity problem. By thus highlighting the centrality of background assumptions in the constitution of evidential relations, Longino aims to challenge the ‘holism’ inherent in Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy. In particular, Longino shows that what is problematic about such inveterate holism is that it presupposes that theory, standards and evidence are so inextricably intertwined that
there is no possibility of invoking one of these factors as a critical check on the others. More specifically, while Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy has the merit of underscoring the extent of the transformative shifts in scientific understanding that periodically occur, it is demonstrably inadequate in so far as it presupposes that evidential relations are constituted by a process of direct seeing, without regard for the crucial influence of background assumptions, or paradigm-specific prejudgments, in determining what proponents of a given paradigm will make of the perceptual evidence. Thus, the core problem with Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy (and the related ‘conversion experience’ analogy) is that it reinforces the impression, already pinpointed by Kuhn’s early critics, that, for Kuhn, the paradigm ‘so determines the context of assessment that one’s perception of the world changes with the theories one adopts in such a way that one sees it as confirming the theory. This creates a bond between evidence and hypothesis impossible to break and even destroys, ultimately, the concept of evidence as something to which one can appeal in defending a hypothesis’.  

But once due account is taken of the role of background assumptions (or hermeneutic prejudgments) in the constitution of evidential relations, we can begin to see that while the assessment of evidential relevance is indeed a contextually conditioned process such that, pace Kuhn, there is a sense in which it could be said that proponents of different paradigms live in ‘different worlds’, this does not legitimate the further conclusion that they are so imprisoned in their respective worlds that they cannot understand one another, share any observational data in common, nor assess the relative merits of their respective positions on a principled basis. Instead, by elucidating the centrality of hermeneutic prejudgments in the process of theory choice, her analysis vindicates the conclusion that although observational data are necessarily interpreted in the light of the operative background assumptions (that is, those constitutive of one’s paradigmatic standpoint), this does not preclude access by proponents of rival positions to a shared body of observational data. Thus in the case of Kuhn’s familiar example, it will not do simply to insist, as Kuhn initially seemed to do, that in interpreting their perceptual experience as a swinging stone or pendulum respectively, the Aristotelian and Galilean physicist actually sees different things, the former a case of constrained fall, the latter an oscillating pendulum. Rather, when due account is taken of the centrality of background assumptions in the constitution of evidential relations, it becomes clear that, in virtue of their diverging theories of motion—natural motion to a predetermined resting place versus a version of impetus theory that supports oscillatory motion—the Aristotelian and Galilean ‘are seeing the same thing but attending to different aspects of it’. Proceeding thus, Longino persuasively argues that once due account is taken of the role of prejudgments in the constitution of evidential relations, contra Kuhn, we can see that a shift in one aspect of one’s paradigmatic worldview does not necessitate a corresponding shift in all other aspects. In short, once the effect of background assumptions, or prejudgments, is factored in, we can see that the proponents of rival paradigms are not prisoners of their worldview in a sense that would preclude the possibility of their appealing to a shared body of observational data. Hence, contrary to what the strong circularity thesis would suggest, it becomes clear that the proponents of
rival positions do have the ability to communicate in a way that would enable them to participate in a dialectical process of inquiry oriented towards assessing the relative merits of their respective positions on a principled basis, as the hermeneutico-dialogical model proposes. In particular, Longino reinforces the core hermeneutic insight that far from acting as a barrier to the advancement of understanding, in the scientific domain as elsewhere, the influence of prejudgments actively serves to facilitate it.

As Longino is aware, however, insightful as is her analysis of the role of background assumptions in the constitution of evidential relations, of itself it does not provide a comprehensive response to the rationality problem. To achieve this, more needs to be said about the structure, dynamics and logic of the process whereby proffered scientific hypotheses are critically appraised in light of the supporting evidence. In developing this theme, Longino vigorously defends the contention that it is through a situated process of rigorous intersubjective criticism rather than at the behest of an atemporal method that the objectivity of scientific inquiry is to be secured. In so doing, she implicitly reinforces the tenability of a number of core hermeneutico-dialogical tenets in their application to this domain. Thus, by way of vindicating the contention that ‘it is the possibility of intersubjective criticism that permits objectivity in spite of the context dependence of evidential reasoning’, Longino goes on to outline a process of ‘transformative criticism’, whereby ‘[w]hat is called scientific knowledge is produced by a community (ultimately the community of all scientific practitioners) and transcends the contributions of any individual or even any subcommunity within the larger community’. Elaborating, she goes on to defend the dynamic, interactive and indeed transformative dimensions of this conception of scientific inquiry, emphasizing in particular that the rationality and objectivity of the process depend on ‘the extent to which a scientific community maintains critical dialogue’ and, specifically, ‘upon the depth and scope of the transformative interrogation that occurs in any given scientific community’.

The affinities with hermeneutico-dialogical thinking become all the more evident when Longino goes on to reinforce the need for an inclusive mode of debate centring on ‘the clashing and meshing of a variety of points of view’. In this connection, she perceptively notes that it is precisely the potential for challenge from alternate points of view that provides the needed check on arbitrariness or subjectivism and, further, that in the interests of objectivity it is necessary to expose all aspects of evidential relations, including certainly background assumptions, to this kind of rigorous critical scrutiny. In addition, Longino explicitly notes the importance of the encounter with difference in surfacing and testing background assumptions that would otherwise go unnoticed because of their familiarity, which typically renders them invisible and hence unavailable for critical scrutiny by members of the community of inquiry (or paradigm) that embraces them. Consequently, as a precondition for objectivity, Longino goes on to reinforce the need for a forum of transformative criticism that is as inclusive of as many different points of view as possible, along the lines prefigured in earlier chapters. Likewise, she emphasizes the need for an open and responsive intersubjective process such that the critical interactions that take place
will have ‘have an impact on what is ultimately thought to be the case’. In so doing, Longino defuses any utopian undertones, noting that the validity of this conception of scientific inquiry does not depend on its perfect realization in practice; instead, its significance derives from the fact that it provides ‘the basis of an ideal by reference to which particular scientific communities can be evaluated’. In all of these respects, Longino’s analysis serves not only to confirm the tenability of core hermeneutico-dialogical premises in their application to the scientific domain but also to open up a conception of scientific inquiry which, while drawing on Kuhnian tenets, has the potential to overcome some telling limitations in Kuhn’s own stance especially regarding the strong circularity thesis and his use of a gestalt switch analogy. On the debit side, however, by hermeneutico-dialogical standards her model falls short when it comes to detailing the dynamics and logic of the dialectical procedures and ground rules needed to underwrite the critical intersubjective appraisal of the knowledge claims proffered by proponents of contending positions. For, to carry through on this project, it would be necessary to provide a developed account of the intersubjective procedures whereby the relative merits of rival paradigmatic positions may be assessed on a principled basis, in a manner compatible with her defence of transformative criticism as the ground of both rationality and objectivity. Unfortunately, however, this more specific account of the core processes at issue is ultimately lacking. Consequently, we must look elsewhere if we are to gain greater insight into the dialectical procedures and principles regulating the exchange of ‘good reasons’ in such forums. In this connection, it will be productive next to draw on Marcello Pera’s contribution to this debate. As soon becomes apparent, a particular strength of Pera’s analysis is the insight it provides into how dialectical, argumentatively grounded, procedures akin to those discussed in earlier chapters have direct application in this domain, even if some notable features of his analysis ultimately stand in need of modification and refinement in light of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking as heretofore elaborated.

By way of setting his contribution in context, it is noteworthy first that Pera too is emphatic in calling attention to the limitations of defining rationality in atemporal, methodological terms as prescribed by positivistic orthodoxy, observing that in recent decades its fundamental presuppositions have ‘one by one fallen by the wayside’. Accordingly, he concurs with hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in endorsing the merits of adopting a dialectical orientation as a corrective for what he aptly terms the outmoded ‘Cartesian syndrome’. In this connection, he draws inspiration from Kuhn’s provocative, but underdeveloped, remarks about the indispensable role of ‘persuasive argumentation’ as the appropriate basis for underwriting the rationality of scientific inquiry in a postfoundationalist context. Indeed, paralleling hermeneutico-dialogical thinking, Pera contends that the need to break resolutely with the positivistic emphasis on ‘universal methodological rules’ is truly pressing if we are to do justice to the significance of the ‘historical dialectical factors on which concrete interlocutors in concrete discussions rely’. Thereafter, Pera goes on to develop a specific account of the ground rules of dialectical argumentation and to vindicate the merits of a dialectical approach to the rationality of science by demonstrating its applicability to a number of the great
debates in the history of science, and in particular to the debate between Galileo and the Aristotelians. In so doing, he devotes specific attention to detailing the ‘substantive’ and ‘procedural’ ground rules that need to be in place to regulate the conduct of debate between proponents of rival positions, if these debates are to qualify as rational. Briefly stated, the ‘substantive factors’ are those that, taken together, ‘define scientific tradition, that is, a tight web of practices, norms, ways of thought, forms of argumentation, systems of beliefs, and so on, all historically established over a long period of time’. In particular, under this rubric Pera discusses facts, theories, assumptions, values, commonplaces, and presumptions, in a manner which serves to reinforce the situated, community-based character of scientific inquiry as valorized by Longino as well as by hermeneutico-dialogical theory. Complementing this analysis of substantive factors, Pera’s analysis of the ‘procedural factors’ focuses on elucidating the ground rules regulating the exchange of claims and counterclaims by proponents of rival positions in a manner that has direct affinities with the factors highlighted in earlier chapters. In developing these themes, Pera continually reinforces our awareness of the inadequacies of an atemporal, methodologically driven model of scientific rationality and the comparative advantages of a dialectical approach. Importantly too, Pera is at pains to establish that the dialectical debate between proponents of contending positions is a multi-layered process in which no one feature—neither presuppositions, standards, nor observational data—is of itself ultimately decisive. Instead numerous, multi-layered factors come into play simultaneously, and complex, dialectically grounded decision procedures are needed to adjudicate both the trade-offs between them and the moves between the various levels in the decision-making process.

In these respects Pera’s analysis provides a worthwhile complement to that of Longino. Indeed, going beyond Longino, he makes an important contribution in detailing the dialectical procedures at issue in a manner that has direct affinities with the procedures and ground rules discussed in earlier chapters. In addition, Pera makes evident the inherently multi-dimensional and open-textured nature of the dialectical processes at issue, while reinforcing the need to hold all the factors amenable to dispute between proponents of contending positions—Longino’s background assumptions as much the criteria and standards at issue in the Doppelt/Siegel debate—open to critical intersubjective scrutiny via a rigorous argumentative process regulated by postulated the ground rules. In the process, he adds weight to the contention that, although significant, the differences between proponents of rival positions are never so great as to preclude one side from engaging in meaningful communication and debate with a rival and on this basis working toward achieving a reasoned appraisal of the merits and limitations of the opposing position. Importantly too, in shedding direct light on the complex multi-dimensional processes at issue he provides further grounds for seriously challenging the adequacy of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy, with its implicit but untenable presupposition that paradigms constitute monolithic wholes, which must be accepted or rejected in toto. In all these respects, Pera’s analysis fills a significant lacuna in Longino’s analysis and thereby serves not only to reinforce the cogency of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to this domain,
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but also to advance significantly our understanding of the specific dialectical procedures needed to underwrite the advancement of scientific understanding by principled means. But perceptive as is Pera’s analysis, comparison with the hermeneutico-dialogical model as developed in the earlier chapters brings to the fore a number of respects in which it is less than fully adequate to elucidating the rationality of scientific inquiry post Kuhn.

Overall, the most telling shortcoming is that while Pera specifically acknowledges the contextuality of scientific inquiry in a manner that resonates directly with Kuhn’s understanding, his analysis does not ultimately do justice to the true extent of paradigm differences as elaborated by Kuhn or to the extent of their impact on the further course of paradigm-based scientific inquiry. An especially notable way in which this deficiency manifests itself is in his unremitting emphasis on consensus as the anticipated telos of the debate between proponents of rival positions. Lacking here is an awareness, along the lines that we have seen exhibited by Kuhn himself, of the extent to which differences in paradigmatic outlook will inevitably be reflected in the differential weighting accorded the various ‘substantive’ factors that become the focus of debate. As Kuhn’s own arguments serve to establish, when this factor is given its due it becomes clear that while consensus on some issues is altogether possible, even to be expected, significant differences will inevitably continue to persist in other areas. While Pera certainly does not exclude the possibility of disagreement, the point at issue here is that the tenor of his analysis clearly indicates that he continues to share the positivistic prejudice that failure to reach consensus is indicative of a failure of rationality, notwithstanding his incisive critique of related positivistic tenets. The persistence of this way of thinking is further confirmed by his emphasis on ‘winning moves’ that allow one side to claim ‘victory’ over the other, as representing the crucial desideratum in resolving scientific disputes by rational means. As emphasized in earlier chapters, where such an approach falls short is in failing to recognize that, far from constituting a barrier to rationality, the persistence of difference has a crucial role to play in providing a potent stimulus to the potentially transformative advancement of scientific understanding. This lacuna is the more telling, given that while Pera explicitly endorses the inherently transformative character of scientific inquiry, his analysis falls short of explaining how rational debate between proponents of rival positions furthers this transformative process as distinct from simply enforcing consensus. Ironically too, this problem is compounded by the fact that although he allows for this possibility, in valorizing an adversarial conception of argumentation, Pera understimates the extent to which a process of finding and building on common ground is also integral to the advancement of scientific understanding on a thoroughgoing dialectical approach. Ultimately then, although Pera intends his analysis to do justice to core Kuhnian insights, its other merits notwithstanding, it falls short of what is required to elucidate the rationality of paradigm debate. Accordingly, we now need to draw on the work of other contributors to this debate having the potential to shed light on aspects of the dialectical process that remain underdeveloped on Pera’s account. In particular, at this juncture we will benefit by taking stock of some pertinent features of Harold Brown’s contribution, which
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again draws on the debate between Galileo and the Aristotelians as an illustrative case study. For present purposes, we will focus sharply of aspects of Brown’s analysis that help elucidate the hermeneutico-dialogical dimensions of paradigm debate overlooked, or underdeveloped, on the other approaches we have thus far considered. Of particular interest is the way in which Brown’s analysis opens up—at least implicitly—the possibility of construing paradigm debate as a potentially transformative learning experience fuelled by rational disagreement rather than an enterprise aimed at achieving consensus through the making of ‘winning moves’.

In the first instance, Brown’s case study serves to reinforce the hermeneutico-dialogical contention that paradigm differences are not so extensive or insuperable as either to preclude the possibility of meaningful communication and debate between proponents of rival positions or to rule out the possibility of securing a rationally motivated outcome to such disputes. As Brown perceptively contends, the key factor is that whatever their differences, as co-participants in the process of scientific inquiry at a particular point in time, proponents of diverse paradigms will inevitably share many presuppositions in common about its constitutive features including the procedures required to test proffered knowledge claims. Thus for example, as Brown points out, notwithstanding significant differences in other respects, among protagonists in the debate between Galileo and the Aristotelians there was ‘a great deal of agreement on relatively simple observations’ (e.g. that ‘a stone dropped from a tower falls at the base of the tower’). Likewise, there was agreement that ‘a theory which leads to conclusions that are inconsistent with observations is in trouble’. There was also ‘substantial agreement on matters of logic’, and even about what concepts could be appealed to and presuppositions reasonably made when it came to explaining the observed phenomena. In this way Brown effectively reinforces the tenability of contending that while both sides in this debate could legitimately be said to live in ‘different worlds’, they were by no means so completely imprisoned in their respective ‘worlds’ as to preclude the possibility of meaningful communication or indeed rational debate. By the same token, Brown also reinforces our awareness that the rational appraisal of scientific theories depends not on any one factor, but rather on a multi-faceted dialectical process, involving theories, standards, data, and so on.

From the perspective of present concerns, however, Brown makes an especially worthwhile contribution in breaking with an undue emphasis on consensual outcomes and ‘winning moves’ in favour of vindicating the legitimacy of the persistence of ‘rational disagreement’ as integral to the conduct of paradigm debates. An important, if largely implicit, implication is that he thereby opens up the possibility of construing the telos of paradigm debate primarily in terms of growth of understanding, fuelled by a process of conjoint learning, rather than in consensual terms as such. Thus, as Brown clearly recognizes, it is important that any available points of commonality not be perceived primarily as a basis for effecting ‘winning moves’ against one’s opponent. Instead, commensurate with dialogical tenets, we need to recognize their ability to serve as ‘a bridgehead’ from one conceptual system to the other, in a manner conducive to facilitating the possibility of mutual learning despite the persistence of difference. For example, although Galileo’s worldview is seemingly completely at odds with that of the
Aristotelians, the former’s claim that ‘all natural motion is circular’ is nonetheless ‘understandable’ to the latter. Likewise, significant differences in denotation notwithstanding, Galileo’s retention of the notion of a ‘natural place’ ensured a point of commonality, and hence a bridgehead, between the two belief systems, as did his retention of three of the traditional Aristotelian elements (earth, air, and water) to explain ‘fundamental features of the physical world’, notwithstanding ‘significant changes in the relevant dynamical properties’. Thus, as Brown has it, while the ‘frameworks’ endorsed by the protagonists ‘were sufficiently different that failures of complete communication undoubtedly occurred … there were also enough points of commonality to allow substantial discussion, and to permit the individuals involved to work toward further common understanding, even if this did not bring total agreement’. Overall, then, although Brown is not as specific as is Pera about the dialectical procedures involved, he perceives much more clearly than does Pera that, notwithstanding the persistence of significant differences in worldview, as co-participants in a situated process of scientific inquiry, proponents of rival paradigms have the ability to contribute to the advancement of scientific understanding through a process of conjoint learning rather than through an adversarial contest. But while Brown’s analysis thus effectively reinforces the tenability of key hermeneutico-dialogical tenets in their application to this domain, from a dialogical perspective it nonetheless suffers from the limitation that he does not go far enough in rendering explicit the indispensable role that the encounter with difference has to play in promoting the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. Consequently, to round out our treatment of this theme, we need to take stock of other relevant contributions to this literature. In particular, it will next be productive to consider what we might learn from Mary Hesse’s specifically transformative approach to scientific development in which the encounter with difference has to play in promoting the progression of scientific inquiry. Hesse’s analysis is all the more relevant to present concerns, given her explicit endorsement of the importance of dialectical argumentation in the advancement of scientific understanding. Thereafter, to complete the our analysis, we will have recourse to some noteworthy features of Paul Feyerabend’s conception of scientific inquiry.

Like the other theorists we have been considering, Hesse reinforces the importance of argumentation in underwriting the advancement of scientific inquiry in a postfoundationalist context, observing that ‘[a]fter Kuhn and Feyerabend, natural science is no longer an unproblematic arena of neutral evidence and continuous approximation to ideal language and ideal truth’. Importantly too, she positively appraises Habermas’s contribution in highlighting the centrality of argumentation in grounding rationality in a postfoundationalist context, while nonetheless going on to criticize him for embracing an unduly monological conception of argumentation inadequate for its intended purpose. As a corrective, parallelising our earlier critique of Habermas, Hesse defends the need for a ‘dialogical and dialectical’ conception of argumentation, in virtue of its ability to do greater justice both to the logic of scientific discourse and the reality of its historical development. In this connection, an important facet of her defence of the need for a dialectical conception of argument is that it better reflects the way in
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which the encounter with difference has a crucial role to play in stimulating the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. To this end, Hesse contends that, far from being a linear—or indeed consensual—process as is often presumed to be the case, scientific inquiry develops through a ‘number of distinct stages’ in which the clashing of opinions has an indispensable role to play. Thus, as Hesse has it,49 ‘An initial thesis is put forward, for example, the explanation of light phenomena in terms of particle motion’. Thereafter, ‘[t]he thesis is opposed by an antithesis, the wave theory of light, which highlights different analogical aspects of the phenomena, and provides a new paradigm through which to view and describe the world’. In the next stage, as Hesse has it, ‘A period of controversy between thesis and antithesis ensues, during which the moves are not typically logical confirmations and falsifications, but much more obviously negotiations about theoretical meanings, auxiliary and ad hoc hypotheses, and the theoretical interpretations of observed phenomena’. ‘In the course of this debate’, Hesse contends, ‘both thesis and antithesis become modified’, leading ultimately, to ‘a new thesis about physical reality at a deeper level, and the deadlock between the first two models is resolved by setting a new antithesis against the new thesis’.

From the perspective of present concerns, the major merit of Hesse’s analysis is that it serves not only to reinforce the tenability of an inherently transformative conception of scientific inquiry as envisaged by hermeneutico-dialogical thinking, but also to highlight the importance of the persistence of difference in stimulating the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. In this, Hesse clearly goes beyond the other theorists considered above. Importantly, she goes beyond Pera in reinforcing the contention that scientific argumentation is not just an adversarial contest dedicated to ‘winning moves’, but instead a genuinely dialectical process concerned equally with finding and building on common ground and with learning from difference. As reflected in the passage cited, in this connection Hesse makes it clear that such transformative advances presuppose ‘negotiations about theoretical meanings, auxiliary and ad hoc hypotheses, and the theoretical interpretations of observed phenomena’. By the same token, Hesse goes beyond Brown in making it apparent that as well as being epistemologically permissible, the persistence of difference also has a potent role to play in facilitating the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. On the debit side, however, as again epitomized in the passage cited, her account of transformative change has a decidedly Hegelian ring, no doubt in virtue of her embrace of a quasi-structural account of the dialectical process involved as centred on the emergence of a synthesis through the interplay of thesis and antithesis. Given that Hesse explicitly links her advocacy of dialectical argumentation, not to Hegel, but to ‘dialectics in the medieval sense of argument from theses to antitheses’,50 it would seem that these Hegelian overtones are unintentional. Nonetheless, they are problematic not only because they are not sufficiently in accord with her avowedly jurisprudential intent, but also because they give too structured and aprioristic an impression of the stages through which scientific inquiry develops under the impetus of dialectical argumentation. As a corrective, to do justice to the open-textured, contingent and fallible developments centrally at issue,51 we need to envisage scientific inquiry as advancing through a process more
akin to a Gadamerian fusion of horizons than through a series of Hegelian
syntheses. To this end, Hesse’s quasi-structural overview must give way to a more
situated account of the argumentative processes involved, centring on what Pera
terms the ‘historical dialectical factors on which concrete interlocutors in concrete
discussions rely’. In addition, as prefigured in the arguments of the earlier chapters,
to do justice to the transformative aims which Hesse explicitly emphasizes as
integral to the dialectical model, we need to take due account of the interrogative,
indeed problematizing, character of scientific inquiry to a greater extent than either
Hesse or any of the theorists so far considered seem to appreciate. To sharpen our
appreciation of the dynamics of the dialectical processes at issue in this regard, we
need to have recourse finally to aspects of the work of Paul Feyerabend,
notwithstanding his established reputation in some quarters as an irrationalist.52

Of particular significance in the present context is Feyerabend’s insightful
treatment of the role of ‘natural interpretations’, or entrenched background
assumptions, in the constitution of a given scientific worldview, and hence, in
advancing—or blocking—the progression of scientific understanding, depending
on the ability of participants to detect the influence of such assumptions and
subject them to critical scrutiny. In the present context, Feyerabend’s treatment of
this theme is especially noteworthy because it effectively reinforces Longino’s
analysis of the role of background assumptions in the constitution of evidential
relations, while going beyond all other theorists considered here in highlighting the
need for endorsing an inherently problematising conception of scientific inquiry
with a view to stimulating the potentially transformative advancement of scientific
understanding. Moreover, Feyerabend also clearly emerges as a strong advocate of
a situated, historico-culturally conditioned, and inherently contingent conception of
scientific inquiry which can explain the transformative advancement of scientific
understanding without recourse to heavily idealized or schematized conceptions of
scientific development. Indeed, what is generally taken to be his patent disregard
for methodological constraints can productively be read as advocacy of a
problematising conception of scientific inquiry grounded in a kind of ‘limit testing’
akin to that valorized by Foucault. To help vindicate this assessment, let us reflect
briefly on how Feyerabend’s insightful treatment of the role of ‘natural
interpretations’, or entrenched background assumptions, in the constitution of a
scientific worldview serves to reinforce the tenability of hermeneutico-dialogical
tenets in their application to the scientific domain, while bringing to light
additional features of their functioning.

Firstly, Feyerabend reinforces the key hermeneutic insight that, far from being
optional extras ‘added to a previously existing field of sensations’, like
prejudgments, natural interpretations ‘are instrumental in constituting the field’.
This is so to the extent that if we eliminate all natural interpretations, we ‘also
eliminate the ability to think and perceive’.53 In thus directly challenging the
positivistic insistence on neutrality as a precondition for rationality and objectivity,
Foucault effectively reinforces the hermeneutic contention that, far from
constituting barriers to the advancement of understanding, ‘natural interpretations’,
or prejudices, are indispensable in rendering possible the very activity of
understanding. Equally importantly, however, Feyerabend is aware that certain
conditions must be fulfilled if these productive possibilities are to be realized in practice. In particular, he clearly recognizes that what is especially crucial is our ability to detect, and subject to critical appraisal, the influence of these concealed presuppositions which would otherwise simply ‘enter the debate in the guise of observational terms’. Indeed, reinforcing a core tenet of both Longino’s analysis and of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking, Feyerabend makes the point that if our natural interpretations are to further the advancement of scientific understanding rather than act as barriers to it, we must have the ability to ‘surface’ these typically concealed presuppositions and subject them to rigorous critical scrutiny. In this connection, he likewise goes on to reinforce the importance of embarking on ‘a critical discussion to decide which natural interpretations can be kept and which must be replaced’. Moreover, in so doing he helps vindicate the contention that, although typically viewed as an aberration to be overcome, the encounter with difference has a potent role to play in stimulating a process of transformative learning. Here, the key consideration is that, since they are, by definition, so deeply ingrained in our usual way of experiencing the world, we need to encounter ‘an impression of strangeness’, as he aptly puts it, to alert us to the fact that ‘natural interpretations are at work’. In other words, to invoke a Foucauldian idiom, since natural interpretations are by definition so deeply ingrained in our familiar ways of experiencing the world, we need the challenge of the encounter with a different framework of understanding which can function as a ‘contrastive foil’ with the ability both to make us aware of the potent influence of existing presuppositions on our thinking and to alert us to the productive possibilities inherent in alternative ways of construing the problem domain. In this way, Feyerabend again implicitly concurs with hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in reinforcing the importance of uncovering and testing these erstwhile-concealed presuppositions if we are to prevent them from exerting an inhibiting, or even distorting, influence on the progress of inquiry. He likewise reinforces the need for maintaining an attitude of openness in the face of the experience of ‘strangeness’ (or in hermeneutic terms, ‘negativity’) that results from the encounter with difference, so as to facilitate the ‘surfacing’ of entrenched natural interpretations with a view to rendering them available for ‘critical discussion’. Thus, in a manner that directly parallels hermeneutic thinking, he specifically contends that the only way to ‘get out of this circle … consists in using an external measure of comparison, including new ways of relating concepts and percepts’. By way of illustration, Feyerabend goes on to observe that in the debate between Galileo and the Aristotelians, although strongly resisted initially, the availability of the Copernican worldview fulfilled the important function of serving as just such ‘an external measuring rod’, with the ability to make participants aware of the extent of the influence of Aristotelian presuppositions on their thinking. In this way, Feyerabend effectively reinforces the Foucauldian tenet that, in liberating an alternative way of seeing and thinking, the availability of a new framework of understanding contributes significantly to
deconstructing the air of necessity, not to say inevitability, accruing to entrenched ways of thinking.

In several respects, then, his anarchistic reputation notwithstanding, Feyerabend not only reinforces the cogency of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to the scientific domain, but also enables us to gain additional insight into the structure, dynamics and logic of the core processes at issue. In particular, he highlights the need for an inherently problematizing conception of scientific inquiry and for the preservation of difference as potent stimuli to the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. In so doing, he reinforces the rationale for preferring an inherently situated, fallible and historically contingent account of the advancement of scientific understanding to an aprioristic Hegelian style analysis. Even so, it must be concluded that by hermeneutico-dialogical standards, in itself Feyerabend’s stance remains inadequate as a basis for elucidating the rationality of paradigm debate—and hence that Feyerabend’s anarchistic reputation is not entirely unjustified, even if he is less of an irrationalist than is usually thought to be the case. Essentially, this is because, even when full allowances are made for his valorization of a problematizing approach to scientific inquiry, as in the case of Foucault, his stance still emerges as deficient for want of an explicit endorsement on his part of the need for a set of dialectical ground rules and related intersubjective procedures capable of ensuring that our problematizing endeavours will yield rationally-motivated advances as their outcome rather than arbitrary, if transformative, shifts in scientific understanding.

In concluding, it is now time to take stock of what has been established in the course of the present chapter about the merits of a hermeneutico-dialogical approach in terms of its ability to underwrite the rationality of paradigm debate, with a view to confirming its ability to provide us with the resources necessary to preserve what is most provocative and challenging in Kuhn’s approach—and in particular his valorization of an inherently transformative conception of scientific inquiry—while overcoming its more telling limitations in respect of rationality.

Beyond Incommensurability: Rationality, Dialogue and the Transformative Advancement of Scientific Understanding

As noted early on, the aim of the present chapter has been to vindicate the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to the domain of postKuhnian science. In particular, I have sought to demonstrate the merits of this approach in terms of its ability to dissolve the circularity problem as initially posed by Kuhn himself by showing how, far from being vicious as Kuhn feared, provided the appropriate conditions for the constitution of a forum of transformative criticism are satisfied, the in-built circularity of paradigm debate can actively contribute to stimulating the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. Equally importantly, I have sought to vindicate the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in terms of its ability to overcome the limitations of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy as a means of explicating the occurrence of transformative shifts in scientific understanding and elucidating their rationality. In this connection, I have
argued that if they are to be effective in contributing to the realization of his transformative aims, these shifts should not be construed as instantaneous, totalizing or irrational. Instead, as the foregoing analysis serves to establish, their rationality can (and should) be secured through complex and multi-layered dialectical processes capable of regulating the principled exchange of good reasons between the parties to the debate. Let us now briefly review our main findings in this regard.

Through engaging first with core issues in the Doppelt/Siegel interaction, it was argued that while an appeal to criteria does have an important role to play in securing the rationality of paradigm debate, it must ultimately be regarded as just one facet of a multi-dimensional process of transformative criticism, grounded in an argumentative exchange of good reasons. In this connection, we saw that in a post-Kuhnian context the possibility of ascending to a neutral vantage point above the fray from which the available standards could be appropriated and applied cannot be regarded as a defensible requirement for rationality. Likewise, it was contended that an internal/external bifurcation of standards is not necessary to secure rationality; and that, positivistic orthodoxy notwithstanding, the attainment of consensus could not be defended as a *sine qua non* for rationality. Thereafter, the focus shifted to elucidating the conditions needed to constitute an effective forum of transformative criticism and hence to realize the possibilities implicit in Kuhn’s valorization of a logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’, albeit in a manner more sensitive to the hermeneutico-dialogical dimensions of paradigm debates than was Kuhn himself. To this end, I drew successively on a number of significant contributions to the analytic literature to vindicate the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in terms of its ability to provide the resources necessary to preserve what is most provocative and challenging in Kuhn’s stance, while overcoming its more telling limitations in respect of rationality.

Thus engagement with Longino’s analysis of the way in which background assumptions have a pivotal role to play in the constitution of evidential relations did much to confirm the inevitable influence and potentially productive role of hermeneutic prejudgments in the conduct of scientific inquiry, notwithstanding the fact that on the received view they have typically been castiguated as barriers to rationality. In so doing, this analysis contributed significantly to our ability to identify and transcend the limitations of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy as a means of elucidating the logic and dynamics of transformative shifts in scientific understanding. In particular, as we saw, Longino challenges the holism characteristic of Kuhn’s original statement of his position in favour of defending a more differentiated, and multi-faceted, process of evidential assessment having strong affinities with the dialogical procedures outlined in the earlier chapters—a process which she aptly characterizes as one of ‘transformative criticism’. This line of analysis thus reinforced the tenability of construing scientific rationality and objectivity along hermeneutico-dialogical lines in terms of a process of mutual learning whereby all aspects of one’s (paradigmatic) belief system—including certainly background assumptions—are held open to critical scrutiny in rigorous forums of intersubjective criticism. But while Longino’s analysis thus serves to confirm the overall tenability of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application
to the scientific domain, it falls short of what is required for want of detailing the specific argumentative processes at issue. Accordingly, to gain a more textured appreciation of what is involved in the situated exchange of good reasons between proponents of rival positions, we next drew on Pera’s work on the dynamics and logic of scientific dialectics. In detailing the dialectical processes involved, Pera’s analysis further reinforced the tenability of a hermeneutico-dialogical approach to the rationality of post-Kuhnian science. But as important as is Pera’s contribution in this regard, his work could only take us so far in the requisite direction because, as a hermeneutico-dialogical analysis enables us to see, it ultimately fails to take sufficient account of the influence of paradigm-specific differences in affecting how proponents of rival paradigms will weigh the evidence at their disposal, even when we allow for the fact that they adhere to similar procedural ground rules. Moreover, Pera’s analysis suffers from the further limitation that he places undue emphasis on the importance of ‘winning moves’ in what he construes as an adversarial contest intended to result in a consensual outcome when one party achieves victory over the other. Thus notwithstanding his enthusiastic embrace of Kuhn’s valorization of a logic of ‘persuasive argumentation’, it became clear that Pera remains prisoner to a positivistic prejudice which, instead of acknowledging the persistence of difference as a potent stimulus to the advancement of scientific understanding, tends to deny it legitimacy. Hence, although he contributes greatly to enhancing our understanding of the argumentative procedures alluded to by Kuhn, Pera’s contribution ultimately lacks an important ingredient needed to do justice to the logic of paradigm debate and, in particular, to elucidate the dynamics underpinning the transformative advancement of scientific understanding. As a corrective, to deepen our appreciation of the core dialectical processes at issue and to further test the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in its application to this domain, we drew on aspects of the work of Brown, Hesse and Feyerabend. The subsequent analysis reinforced the merits of conceptualizing paradigm debate as a situated, fallibilistic process of inquiry grounded in a principled exchange of good reasons, and reinforced the capacity of this approach to underwrite the transformative advancement of scientific understanding in a manner that can transcend the limitations of both the strong circularity thesis and of Kuhn’s gestalt switch analogy. Central to the logic of this account, as we have seen, is the concept of an interactive process of transformative criticism whereby participants are enabled to find and build on common ground, while learning from difference.

In thus vindicating the merits of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in terms of its ability to elucidate the rationality of paradigm disputes, I have contended that, provided the appropriate discursive conditions are in place, even deep-seated differences in paradigmatic outlook can have an indispensable role to play in promoting a dialectically grounded process of mutual learning capable of underwriting rationally motivated transformations in scientific understanding.\textsuperscript{59} In the next chapter, we will see that hermeneutico-dialogical thinking holds open a similar possibility in respect of our efforts to communicate and forge meaningful relations across seemingly incommensurable cultural divides.
Notes

1 In going on to discuss the application of the emergent dialogical approach to the problems of paradigm disputes and of cross-cultural communication, I appropriate and adapt the term “hermeneutico-dialogical”, introduced by Dimitri Ginev in his paper “On the Hermeneutic Fore-Structure of Scientific Research” (Continental Philosophy Review 32 (1999), pp. 143-68). This designation has the advantage of highlighting the inter-linkage of the dialogical and hermeneutic dimensions in the conception of rational inquiry here under consideration. It should be noted, however, that while both approaches bear clear marks of Gadamer’s influence on their development, the approach developed here is distinctive in incorporating in equal measure core insights gleaned from engagement with Habermas and Foucault, thereby rendering it better adapted to postfoundationalist needs.

For details of Ginev’s stance and its development, the interested reader is referred to his A Passage to the Hermeneutic Philosophy of Science (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997). For a more broad-based sampling of recent trends in the hermeneutic philosophy of science, the reader should consult the special issue of Man and World devoted to this topic (vol. 30 (3), 1997), while bearing in mind that to date dialogical thinking has not been prominently represented in this literature. But as Robert Crease makes clear in his Introduction to this special issue (pp. 261-62), hermeneutic philosophy of science consciously sees itself as embracing an open-textured ‘constellation of orienting ideas’ and remains open to exploring new perspectives on the implications of hermeneutics for the sciences. Consequently, it is to be hoped that dialogical thinking will play a more prominent role in the future development of hermeneutic philosophy of science.

2 While the valorization of an inherently transformative conception of scientific inquiry directly challenges traditional thinking in this area, it needs to be borne in mind that this orientation is by no means an idiosyncratic by-product either of Kuhn’s analysis or of hermeneutico-dialogical thinking. Instead, it represents a recurrent, if often neglected, strand in the literature on the history and philosophy of science, a stance endorsed by a number of other influential theorists writing both before and after the publication of Kuhn’s major work.

For example, in relatively recent times the defense of an intrinsically transformation orientation is characteristic of the work of David Bohm, who emphasizes its significance in promoting scientific creativity; see further David Bohm and F. David Peat, Science, Order, and Creativity (London: Routledge, 1987). At an earlier stage, the value of a transformative orientation in scientific inquiry was likewise strongly defended by Herbert Butterfield, who emphasizes the need to ‘escape from the tyranny of a preconception’ and to take a fresh look at ‘the confused pieces of the jig-saw puzzle and see a way of turning them into a pattern’; see further Butterfield on ‘Chemistry Transformed’ in Galileo’s Commandment, ed. Edmund B. Bolles (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 53-62. And as is well known, in the Preface to his major work Kuhn himself draws our attention to the influence of theorists like Alexandre Koyre and James Conant on the development of his paradigm-based conception of revolutionary scientific change.


The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, p. 109.
8 On Siegel’s ‘absolutism’, see further Relativism Refuted, ch. 8.
9 As we shall see, the possibility of points of communication and contact between proponents of rival positions is defended by all of the commentators considered below, as indeed by the later Kuhn himself. Interestingly, this possibility was originally defended by Kuhn’s early positivistic critics, who perceptively contended that in its absence, it would not even make sense to regard these paradigms as rivals or as in competition with one another.
10 ‘Epistemological Relativism’, p. 112.
11 ‘Epistemological Relativism’, p. 113.
12 Relativism Refuted, p. 54.
14 As such, Kuhn intimates, they are ‘permanent attributes of science’. Indeed, they are ‘the canons that make science scientific’ (‘Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice’, pp. 335, 324). While other influential Kuhnian commentators also reinforce the availability of paradigm-transcendent standards, they rightly express reservations about their precise identity, number and enduring trans-historical status. See for example, Ernan McMullin, ‘Rationality and Paradigm Change in Science’, in World Changes: Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science, ed. Paul Horwich (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), especially pp. 63-70. Fortunately, however, in the present context the resolution of this particular controversy need not detain us since it is the availability of paradigm-transcendent standards, not their specific status, that is focally at issue here.
18 Accordingly, Kuhn famously emphasizes that the criteria he identifies function as ‘values’ that influence choice, not as rules which compel it (see ‘Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice’, especially pp. 331-2).
19 See, e.g. ‘Epistemological Relativism’, p. 113.
22 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 58.
23 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 40.
24 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 43.
25 See Science as Social Knowledge, especially pp. 53-60. It is noteworthy that this problem derives in part from the fact that Kuhn himself does not clearly indicate that his emphatic references to a ‘gestalt switch’ are intended as an analogy. For an illuminating discussion of the significance of this point, see Harold Brown, ‘Incommensurability’, Inquiry, 26 (1983), especially pp. 19-20.
26 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 57.
27 Having made this point, Longino goes on to note that (Science as Social Knowledge, p. 54):

there is no need to suppose that the Galilean or the Aristotelian must fail to see aspects that interest the other, nor to suppose that there is no description of the situation that both could accept and that would then form the basis for discussion of differences. To use the notion of background beliefs … for analysis of this example and similar ones
shows also that it is not always the case, in theory change, that exactly the same body of evidence supports conflicting theories. In the pendulum case different features constitute evidence for different hypotheses, so they are not strictly speaking supported by the same evidence, even though the different features are features of what is identifiable as the same state of affairs.

28 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 71.
29 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 69.
30 Science as Social Knowledge, pp. 76, 79.
31 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 69.
32 See, e.g., Science as Social Knowledge, p. 76:
[C]riticism from alternative points of view is required for objectivity … A method of inquiry is objective to the degree that it permits transformative criticism. Its objectivity consists not just in the inclusion of intersubjective criticism but in the degree to which both its procedures and its results are responsive to [this].

33 Science as Social Knowledge, p. 80.
34 See Marcello Pera, The Discourses of Science, trans. Clarissa Botsford (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Discourses, p. 132. Thus, as Pera goes on to observe (ibid.), it is now routinely acknowledged:
that data are theory-laden, that there is no logic of discovery leading from data to cognitive claims, that there is no clear distinction between observational and theoretical concepts, that theories cannot be reduced to their empirical basis, that they are underdetermined by it, and finally that there is no universal method.

36 See Discourses, especially pp. 1-12.
37 Thus in Discourses, p. 47, Pera cites with approval Kuhn’s observation that: ‘To discover how scientific revolutions are effected, we shall therefore have to examine not only the impact of nature and logic, but also the techniques of persuasive argumentation effective within the quite special groups that constitute the community of scientists’ (originally The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, p. 94).
38 The Discourses of Science, p. 47.
39 The Discourses of Science, pp. 112-17.
40 Clearly, the intent here is not to deny that such ‘winning moves’ may be of significance in advancing paradigm debate or that they may be powerful motivators for some participants. Rather the point at issue is that they are more appropriately construed as ‘moments’ within a more primary, and more comprehensive, process of inquiry whose overall orientation is toward the advancement of scientific understanding.
41 Thus for example, on the dialectical model, as Pera has it, ‘science is always transformation of previous knowledge, and the philosophy of science has the task of analysing the transformation’s dynamics’ (The Discourses of Science, p. 135).
42 See further Brown’s paper on ‘Incommensurability’ and his book on Rationality, especially chs 3.3, 3.4, and 5.5. As noted above, the availability of points of communication and contact between proponents of rival paradigms has been defended by many of Kuhn’s major commentators as well, indeed, as by the later Kuhn himself. It is noteworthy that, on hermeneutico-dialogical premises, this possibility is readily explicable on the basis of the inevitable continuities recognized to exist between traditions of inquiry. In phenomenological terms, it can be explained by the fact that scientific inquiry is characterized by a specific ‘fore-conception’, ‘fore-sight’ and ‘fore-having’, features which also help explain its inherently situated, temporalized and perspectival character. See, for example, Joseph J. Kockelmans, Ideas for a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of the Natural Sciences (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), especially ch. 3, sec. 1.1. The implications are further
explored with reference to notable historical examples in Kockelmans, ‘On the Hermeneutical Nature of Modern Natural Science’, Man and World, 30 (1997), pp. 299-313. Moreover, in phenomenological terms scientific inquiry is characterized by a distinctive mode of ‘thematization’, which, as shared in common by all scientific investigators, effectively reinforces the in-principle possibility of points of contact and communication between scientists, regardless of their particular paradigmatic commitments or historical vantage point. For a more textured analysis of what ‘thematization’ presupposes, see Kockelmans, Ideas for a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of the Natural Sciences, especially ch. 3, sec. 1.3. See too Kockelmans, Heidegger and Science (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1985), especially ch. 4, sec. 16. Especially noteworthy for present purposes, is the fact that, as prefigured in the earlier chapter, in Gadamerian terms the paradigm-based character of scientific inquiry is readily explicable in terms of the constitutive influence of the ‘effective history’ of scientific research traditions (see further Ginev, A Passage, especially p. 62).

43 Rationality, p. 217
44 Rationality, especially ch. 5.5.
46 Rationality, p. 219.

49 See ‘Habermas and the Force of Dialectical Argument’, p. 375.
50 ‘Habermas and the Force of Dialectical Argument’, p. 375.
53 Against Method, p. 76; italics in original.
54 Against Method, p. 75.
55 Against Method, p. 73; emphasis in the original.
56 Against Method, p. 77; cf. Longino, Science as Social Knowledge, p. 80:

[When] background assumptions are shared by all members of a community, they acquire an invisibility that renders them unavailable for criticism. They do not become visible until individuals who do not share the community’s assumptions can provide alternative explanations of the phenomena without those assumptions … Until such alternatives are available, community assumptions are transparent to their adherents.

57 Against Method, p. 76; italics in original.
58 Against Method, p. 77. If one were to quibble with the terms of Feyerabend’s analysis, then, since on hermeneutico-dialogical grounds it is not possible ‘to get out of’ the circle of understanding, it would be preferable to speak of re-entering ‘the circle’ (or ‘spiral’, as it is sometimes referred to, to convey just this sense of acquiring ever-deepening insight) in a new and more informed way. Similarly, for reasons akin to those raised in the context of the Doppelt/Siegel debate, given the potentially misleading connotations of this phrase it would be preferable not to insist on the need for ‘external measures of comparison’.

59 In light of the foregoing analysis, it will be clear that in valorizing the importance of transformative learning as a guiding orientation for paradigm-based scientific inquiry, the hermeneutico-dialogical approach calls for a deconstruction of the postulated Kuhnian dichotomy between ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science. In this, it joins with other commentators in contending that while the history of science does indeed exhibit certain phases appropriately regarded as ‘revolutionary’, these phases are clearly not altogether discontinuous with the (no doubt more laborious and less obviously inventive) phases that precede them. From a hermeneutico-dialogical perspective, it is very clear that, informed by
a transformative orientation rather than a concern with mere ‘puzzle solving’, the research engaged in during so-called periods of ‘normal science’ lays the groundwork without which the more accelerated periods of advancement would not be possible. For the articulation of a more sustained challenge to the tenability of the normal/revolutionary distinction, see Bohm and Peat, *Science, Order and Creativity*, ch. 1. See too McMullin, ‘Rationality and Paradigm Change in Science’, especially pp. 62-63.

Thus in common with Kuhn’s early Popperian critics, the hermeneutico-dialogical approach calls for the conceptualization of scientific inquiry as involving ‘revolution in permanence’. Along with these critics, the hermeneutico-dialogical approach calls for the deconstruction of Kuhn’s postulated normal/revolutionary divide in favour of according priority to a commitment to continually testing the boundaries of existing knowledge as a fundamental aim of scientific inquiry in all its phases, and not just at extraordinary moments. (See especially the essays by John Watkins, Stephen Toulmin, and Karl Popper in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, eds Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).) At the same time, however, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking does not follow Kuhn’s Popperian critics in endorsing a (purely) falsificationist account of scientific rationality. For in comparison to the situated, temporalized, multi-dimensional and dialectically grounded character of scientific inquiry valorized on the dialogical model, such an approach represents a somewhat ‘thin’, and correspondingly limited, conception of what scientific rationality presupposes.
Chapter 5

Beyond Ethnocentrism and Relativism: 
Rationality, Dialogue and Culture

In this concluding chapter I aim to show that hermeneutico-dialogical thinking can provide a productive new response to the problems arising from the post-Winchian debate about cultural rationality, and thereby enhance the prospects for mutually enriching interaction across cultures. In particular, I seek to vindicate the potential of the dialogical approach to overcome the problem of ‘invidious comparison’, which has beset the debate about cultural rationality since its inception. To this end, I set out to clarify the conditions needed to facilitate the advancement of cross-cultural understanding and learning, notwithstanding the barriers posed by the real differences in beliefs, values and practices that exist between members of diverse cultures and traditions. I thus seek to establish that the dialogical approach constitutes a productive basis for moving beyond the polarized alternatives of an ethnocentric universalism and a radical cultural relativism, which, post-Winch, have posed well-nigh insuperable barriers for standard attempts to grapple with this problem. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the need to overcome possible barriers to implementation given the challenges posed by the pressures of contemporary coexistence.

To begin with, however, let us briefly revisit the original debate to gain a sense of how its embrace of ethnocentric universalism and radical cultural relativism as polarized alternatives set seemingly insurmountable barriers to the potential for cross-cultural understanding and learning.¹

The Original Debate and its Limitations

As is well known, at the heart of the debate initiated by Winch were questions of the putative rationality of other cultures and the availability of standards with reference to which this issue could be adjudicated.² Notwithstanding the subtlety and originality of the early contributions, the debate soon came to centre on the polarized alternatives of universalism and relativism.³ While relativists sought to defend the uniqueness and integrity of other cultures by precluding the possibility of meaningful comparisons in respect of rationality and truth, universalists mounted a sustained challenge to the relativist contention that no common standards could be identified that could serve as measures of their comparative rationality. In what immediately follows I want to highlight the limitations of
characterizing the options in such polarized terms with a view to laying the basis for developing a more productive alternative.

In response to Winch’s perceived relativism, universalists defended the existence of a set of non-negotiable standards held to apply, universally, across cultures as the definitive measure of cultural rationality. Typically, the principles of logic (non-contradiction, identity, and the like) and of scientific reasoning (induction, deduction, falsifiability, etc.) were identified as the operative universal standards. Prominent universalists who contributed to the original debate included Jarvie, Lukes, Horton, and MacIntyre, each defending a variation on the standard universalist theme. As these commentators sought to establish, the decisive strength of the universalist stance is its defence of the existence of a common measure with reference to which comparative evaluations can be made across cultures about the rationality of beliefs, practices, and even whole ‘forms of life’. Some contributors also endeavoured to allow for local variations in cultural beliefs and practices, while continuing to defend the primacy of standards of rationality derived from logic and scientific practice. But despite such concessions at the margins, the strong universalist stance was beset by the problem of ‘invidious comparison’. More specifically, the problem is that in designating logico-scientific reasoning as the definitive measure of cultural rationality, other cultures—and especially the so-called ‘primitive cultures’ at the centre of this debate—could not fail to emerge as deficient in point of rationality since, by definition, these cultures do not define their rationality in these terms. As Winch aptly put it, in judging an atheoretical culture by the standards of a theoretical one, universalism falls prey to a ‘category mistake’—with damaging consequences for the perceived rationality of non-Western cultures.

At first sight, relativism has the strength of serving as a potential corrective for the ethnocentrism implicit in the universalist stance. As defined by Jarvie, relativism stipulates that: ‘what is true, what is rational, even what is logical vary from culture to culture and no extra-cultural court of appeal exists to adjudicate differences’. Thus relativism attempts to solve the problem of invidious comparison by rejecting the possibility of any principled basis on which such comparisons could be made. A potential strength is that, by rejecting any appeal to common standards, it precludes the possibility that another culture could be characterized as inferior to our own, as happens when other cultures are assessed using our standards. Clearly, however, this putative strength is bought at a considerable cost. In particular, in characterizing cultures as self-sealing monads with no context-transcendent standards that could serve as common measures between them, it completely rules out the possibility of principled comparative evaluation; and without this, there is no reliable basis for coming to appreciate the distinctive strengths of these cultures in all their difference from our own. In short, the significant limitation of the relativist stance is that it ‘solves’ (or rather dissolves) the problem of invidious comparison only by precluding the possibility of making any comparisons at all. And in thus blocking the possibility of comparative evaluation it also precludes the possibility of mutual recognition and respect arrived at through a developed awareness that other cultures have merits from which we could profitably learn. Ironically, then, in endeavouring to promote
appreciation and respect for other cultures by emphasizing their radical difference from our own, relativists ultimately undermine the very basis on which we might arrive at this appraisal in a reasoned way.

Given the impasse thus generated, the dialogical approach again seeks to forge a viable ‘middle way’ that could transcend the limitations of the original debate, while building on its strengths. To this end, in what follows I draw on core hermeneutico-dialogical tenets with a view to delineating the conditions needed to underwrite non-invidious intercultural comparisons on a principled and judicious basis. As we shall soon see, in contrast to the preoccupation with judgments of relative superiority that permeated the original debate, central to the dialogical model is a commitment to rehabilitating Winch’s valorization of mutual understanding and learning as the true focus of intercultural communication and inquiry. In this way, the dialogical approach seeks to promote mutual recognition and respect as the basis for interaction between members of diverse cultures and traditions.

**Beyond Universalism and Relativism: On the Conditions Necessary for Non-Invidious Intercultural Communication and Inquiry**

In short, the challenge to which I endeavour to respond in the present chapter is the identification, and vindication, of the presuppositions on which intercultural communication and inquiry must proceed if we are to avoid the problem of invidious comparison, and so contribute to promoting more productive modes of intercultural relations. More specifically, the aim is to vindicate the merits of a dialogical conception of intercultural inquiry as an interactive process oriented toward growth of understanding, whereby each culture has the ability to call into question the established modes of self-understanding of the other and thereby fuel reflection on the tenability of taken-for-granted presuppositions, standards and values, with a view to liberating new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. Integral to this proposal is the availability of a process of judicious comparative evaluation which can do justice to the real strengths of each culture without neglecting its limitations. But as I will contend, if this process is to fulfil its intended aims it must satisfy certain core conditions paralleling those identified in the earlier chapters. Chief among these are the presuppositions of ‘comparable validity’ and ‘dialogical equality’, along with recognition of the need for a multi-dimensional conception of cultural rationality. To this end, let us first consider the arguments in favour of the presupposition of comparable validity as a prerequisite for overcoming the problem of invidious comparison, and hence as a basis for facilitating mutual recognition and respect between members of diverse cultures and traditions.

**Presupposition of Comparable Validity**

As reflected in the standard literature, two related principles have, to date, dominated the mainstream paradigm in cross-cultural research, to wit, the
principles of ‘charity’ and ‘humanity’.

Especially noteworthy for present purposes is the consideration that, on these principles, understanding another culture essentially requires only that we acknowledge its intelligibility and that we proceed on the assumption of its similarity to our own. But in emphasizing mere intelligibility and in postulating likeness as conditions of understanding, these principles are less than adequate. Accordingly, they need to be replaced with others more conducive to enabling us to experience the richness and diversity of other cultures in their full integrity and complexity, such that they can be seen to pose a challenge to our own entrenched cultural ways of thinking.

Firstly, the principle of intelligibility is a less-than-adequate basis on which to undertake cross-cultural inquiry since, on this minimalist principle, little account is taken of the potential richness of the other culture such that it could represent an integrated conceptual framework with the ability to inform and confer significance on the whole way of life of a people over an extended period of time and which, as such, has the potential to challenge our own entrenched values, standards, and presuppositions. In thus failing to take due account of the richness and integrity of the other culture as a complex repository of meaning, potentially comparable in significance to our own, the presupposition of intelligibility does little to alleviate the problem of invidious comparison. Instead, in settling for intelligibility it seems rather to reinforce the existing ethnocentrism. Moreover, the injunction to ‘count them like us’ simply exacerbates the problem. This is because in legislating similarity as a condition for understanding, this principle enjoins us to minimize, if not negate, difference in our efforts to come to terms with the way of life of another culture. Thus it fails to take adequate account of the possibility that other cultures could legitimately ground their way of life in standards, values, and even styles of reasoning very different from our own. In addition to perpetrating ethnocentrism, these principles effectively preclude the possibility of learning from other cultures as advocated by Winch, in that, if due account is not taken of the ways in which another culture differs from our own and of the possibility that it could pose a real challenge to our familiar ways of thinking and doing, there is little prospect that we could believe that there is anything worthwhile that we stand to learn from that culture. Hence if we are to transcend the limitations of the original debate, the existing heuristic principles need to be replaced by others that can better respect difference. In this regard, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking offers a promising alternative.

In particular, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking enjoins us to bear in mind that understanding is possible only on condition that we begin by acknowledging the holistic integrity of the thing to be understood, be it a text, a person, or a culture. Thus on hermeneutic principles what is primarily at issue is the holistic integrity of the other way of life as grounded in a distinctive ‘symbolic order’, such that it can function as a rich repository of meaning which informs, and confers significance on, the whole way of life of a people. Moreover, recourse to the key Foucauldian concept of an episteme provides us with additional grounds for appreciating other cultures as constituting distinctive symbolic frameworks of meaning with their own ‘regional rationalities’, each embodying its own rules of formation, principles of inference, and standards of evidence, etc. On hermeneutico-dialogical premises,
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then, it becomes clear that there is little basis for taking our own culture and its constitutive presuppositions as the definitive standard of cultural rationality; still less for assuming its a priori superiority over other cultures. Correlatively, we become aware that if we really want to understand another culture we need to appreciate that that culture’s differences from our own are at least as significant as its similarities. In other words, the core implication is that, unless we come to terms with that culture in all its difference from own, we can make little progress in truly understanding it, still less in learning from it. Moreover, we need to bear in mind that, as grounded in a distinctive symbolic order, the differences in question can be far-reaching and fundamental. So instead of being preoccupied with similarities, the challenge is to approach the other culture in such a way that we can gain an appreciation of what is most distinctive about it in its own terms. Furthermore, on hermeneutico-dialogical premises, we need to embrace the challenge of preserving this sensitivity to difference without assuming that the differences will be eliminated as we move from a preliminary engagement with the belief system of the other culture to a progressively richer understanding of it. At the same time, however, it is important to be clear that the hermeneutic respect for difference is of an altogether different order from the sort of self-sealing relativism characteristic of the original debate. For as discussed further below, like Kuhnian paradigms, far from being ‘windowless monads that share nothing in common’, on hermeneutic premises diverse cultures are seen as holistic frameworks of significance which are mutually permeable and inherently open to one another. Accordingly, rather than accentuating either pole at the expense of the other, the advancement of intercultural understanding presupposes our ability to tack between an appreciation of sameness and that of difference.

Thus in the interests of overcoming the polarities which characterized the original debate, embrace of the postulate of comparable validity enjoins that we go beyond presuppositions of mere intelligibility and sameness in the direction of endorsing another set of presuppositions grounded in a genuine respect for difference and hence more conducive to advancing intercultural understanding and learning. In particular, we need to be prepared to grant that on investigation the other culture could turn out to rival our own in terms of its integrity, richness, and complexity; and consequently, we must attend to the standards, values, and presuppositions implicit in its beliefs and practices to the extent that we allow them to challenge our own existing ways of thinking, doing, and being. Hence, instead of assuming the a priori validity of our own belief system as the measure of cultural rationality, we must endeavour to suspend our own prejudices about this at least for long enough to enable us to gain an appreciation of the significance of the other belief system as a holistic repository of meaning, such that it could pose a challenge to our own entrenched preconceptions. As discussed further below, in so doing we neither accord the other culture the right to define rationality or truth solely in its own terms nor do we a priori assume the superior correctness and rationality of our own belief system.14 Rather we begin by allowing the other culture to make a claim on our attention, recognizing that it is likely to embody ways of viewing the world and of thinking and reasoning about it previously unfamiliar to us but from which we could profitably stand to learn. Importantly
however, while the postulate of comparable validity thus goes significantly beyond the principles of charity and humanity in committing us to respecting the integrity, cohesiveness, and richness of another culture in its own terms, it does not support the relativistic contention that there is no basis for principled comparative evaluation between cultures, nor does it assume that the beliefs and practices of the other culture are in fact on a par with our own in terms of their actual significance for living. Instead, as elaborated below, it requires of us only that we respect the integrity of the other culture as a rich, holistic repository of meaning and significance to the extent that we allow it to pose a challenge to our own entrenched ways of thinking, doing, and being. Under these conditions, as we shall see, far from acting as a barrier to the advancement of understanding as the standard view tends to assume, the encounter with difference can provide a potent stimulus for genuine intercultural learning.

In light of the analysis of the earlier chapters it should be clear that the possibility of growth of understanding through intercultural learning is open to us only on condition that differences between cultures are not so great as to preclude the possibility of identifying meaningful points of communication and contact between them. Accordingly, in the next section, drawing parallels with our discussion of a closely related theme in the last chapter, I indicate why a strong incommensurability thesis such as would preclude the possibility of points of contact, communication and comparison between cultures should not be seen as posing a significant barrier to intercultural exchanges oriented toward growth of understanding and learning.

Case against the alleged incommensurability of cultures Given that as repositories of meaning and significance cultures share many attributes in common with scientific paradigms, the arguments against the radical incommensurability of scientific paradigms also count significantly against the incommensurability of cultures and, correspondingly, in favour of the availability of points of communication and contact. Indeed, as noted in the previous chapter, the very idea that paradigms (or cultures) could be seen as rivals and in competition with one another already presupposes that these paradigms share a good deal in common at a fundamental level; for without some commonalities and points of contact between them, this way of characterizing them would not make sense. In the case of cultures, this assessment receives further support from Davidson’s contention that unless other cultures share certain core attributes and capacities in common with us, there could be few grounds for regarding these cultures as representing intelligible conceptual schemes. The case against the presupposition of incommensurability is further reinforced by hermeneutico-dialogical thinking in virtue of its appreciation of the mutual permeability of linguistico-cultural frameworks. The hermeneutic perspective is aptly epitomized by Richard Bernstein, when on the basis of a review of several major contributions to this debate, he concludes that: ‘Incommensurable languages and traditions are not to be thought of as self-contained windowless monads that share nothing in common … There are always points of overlap and crisscrossing … Our linguistic horizons are always open. This is what enables comparison, and even sometimes a “fusion of
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In proffering this assessment, Bernstein effectively endorses Gadamer’s conviction that notwithstanding their inviolable holistic integrity, distinctive origins and defining characteristics as linguistic systems cultures remain inherently open to one another.

But if it is thus reasonable to assume that differences between cultural ‘forms of life’ are not so great as to preclude the existence of meaningful points of communication and contact between them, we must next direct our attention to the consideration of the standards, values, and presuppositions that need to be invoked if we are to be able to engage in a judicious process of principled comparative evaluation across cultures, and hence advance the prospects for growth of understanding through intercultural learning. In this connection, it is important to appreciate the advantages of a multi-dimensional conception of cultural rationality as an indispensable factor in enabling us to overcome the threat of invidious comparison.

Toward a multi-dimensional conception of cultural rationality As we saw early on, the problem of invidious comparison arises not in virtue of the activity of comparison itself but rather because appeal is made to a standard, notably that of logico-scientific reasoning, which when used as a yardstick for cross-cultural assessments cannot but fail to show the other culture in an inferior light in point of rationality. As a corrective, we need to embrace a conception of cultural rationality incorporating multiple standards, not all of which a priori favour the superior rationality of our own culture. To motivate the case for such a conception, we can productively draw on contributions to this debate by Charles Taylor and David Wong, respectively.

Although at first sight Taylor could be read as endorsing a strong universalist thesis, his contribution embodies features which distinguish it from the ethnocentric variety and on which we can draw in defence of a multi-dimensional conception of cultural rationality. For while Taylor is intent on defending the legitimacy of ‘transcultural judgments of rationality’, he sets about doing so in a manner that goes some way toward accommodating the integrity and cohesiveness of the belief systems of different cultures. In particular, Taylor opens up the possibility that in making transcultural judgments of rationality we may need to include diverse measures of rationality—‘attunement’ alongside logico-scientific reasoning, for example—if we are to do justice to the way of life of other cultures. Accordingly, while Taylor continues to defend logico-scientific reasoning as an important measure of cultural rationality, he nonetheless recognizes that ‘there is no such thing as a single argument proving global superiority’. Correlatively, he alerts us to the fact that the standards relevant for the assessment of cultural rationality are closely related to possible ways of living a worthwhile human life. Further, once a multiplicity of standards are allowed, Taylor recognizes that it is well-nigh inevitable that different cultures will receive different ratings on the several measures employed, with the consequence that there could be no ready means of assessing which way of life represents ‘the proper form of human life’ overall, and hence no basis for a univocal judgment of superior rationality. Even more emphatically than Taylor, Wong defends the view that while transcultural horizons...
judgments of rationality are indeed possible, far from being univocal, cultural rationality is a multi-faceted phenomenon whose specification depends on the values most highly prized in a given culture. Thus he contends that if our comparisons are to be judicious, we must make appeal, not to a unitary standard like logico-scientific reasoning, but to a plurality of standards which have a close relation to the values most highly prized in the culture in question. By way of illustration, Wong documents the significance of ‘attunement’ as a key organizing principle in traditional Chinese culture, and demonstrates its significance for how that culture conceives of rationality. Wong is correspondingly emphatic in his defence of the contention that while transcultural judgments of rationality are indeed possible, it does not make sense to insist on a single measure of global superiority (as did traditional universalists). Moreover, while Taylor expresses concern about the possibility of dichotomous judgments when multiple standards are allowed, Wong appeals instead to the ideal of a balanced way of life in which, as he puts it, values like ‘attunement and greater control over nature are combined and reconciled’. Further support for the legitimacy and value of a multi-dimensional approach to cultural rationality derives from Dascal who persuasively argues that, as an antidote to the problem of invidious comparison, we need to adopt a holistic measure of cultural rationality, such as ‘quality of life’, as ‘a necessary ingredient of unprejudiced cultural comparison’. Commensurate with the thrust of the foregoing discussion, Dascal is emphatic that such a holistic measure would ‘have to be defined over a set of transcultural parameters along with their respective weights’.

Overall, then, the advantage of a multi-dimensional approach to cultural rationality is that it allows for the possibility of ‘transcultural judgments of rationality’ along universalist lines, while serving to ensure that we do not devalue other cultures by imposing our standards on them. As an antidote to the problem of invidious comparison, it valorizes the need for invoking multiple measures, grounded in the constitutive values of the forms of life in question, in the expectation that different cultures will achieve different weightings on different measures in a manner that precludes the tenability of holistic judgments of relative superiority. Indeed, as noted, endorsement of a multi-dimensional approach is specifically intended to motivate a break with a fixation on judgments of relative superiority, and to regain instead the original Winchian concern with learning from other cultures about how we might live a worthwhile human life. In short, as Wong observes, the advantage of a multi-dimensional approach to cultural rationality is that it facilitates the possibility of intercultural learning by instilling in us ‘a solid sense of what is satisfying in alternative forms of life’.

Presupposition of Dialogical Equality

As a basis for challenging the ethnocentric presuppositions characteristic of strong universalism, in vindicating comparable validity I have drawn on hermeneutico-dialogical tenets to support the contention that other cultures constitute rich and integrated frameworks of significance comparable in validity to our own. At the same time, challenging radical relativism I have defended the possibility of
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Transcultural comparative evaluations provided only that multiple measures, capable of doing justice to the strengths of the cultures in question, are invoked as an antidote for the problem of invidious comparison. But if intercultural communication and inquiry are to proceed on a non-prejudicial basis, we also need to endorse a commitment to a postulate of ‘dialogical equality’ as a basis for regulating our interaction with other cultures. As elaborated below, a core implication is that we must stop presupposing that we can stand in for other cultures by representing their views better than they can themselves, and instead accept members of these cultures as co-subjects from whom we might have some important lessons to learn.

The case for dialogical equality is effectively motivated by Thomas McCarthy, who proffers an interlocking epistemic and ethical justification. The epistemic justification hinges on the contention that since members of other cultures are necessarily participants in the construction of the accounts we give of them, to be confident of the adequacy of our representations, we must relate to them in a way that acknowledges the legitimacy of their right to represent their position in their own terms and to contest our representations when they have grounds for dissatisfaction. Thus the presupposition of dialogical equality is needed to enable us to transcend the limitations of what McCarthy terms ‘the one-way descriptions of realist anthropology’. The limitations of the latter approach are exemplified in the fact that it ‘objectified others by desubjectifying them in certain ways, that is, by representing them not as competent partners in dialogue—particularly dialogue about ethnographic accounts of their way of life—but as objects of a monologue that disqualified them in certain key respects’. Correlatively, the ethical justification for this postulate derives from the Kantian imperative: ‘Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only’. For if we fail to include members of other cultures as equal dialogue partners, we treat them ‘as less than responsible subjects’, thereby ‘failing to respect them as mature human beings capable of defending their own views and challenging ours’. Furthermore, in specifically hermeneutic-dialogical terms this postulate derives additional support from Gadamer’s treatment of the I-Thou relationship, as discussed in chapter 3 above. As prefigured earlier, Gadamer enjoins that in interacting with others we should never presuppose that we already understand them better than they understand themselves. Nor should we presuppose that we are already well positioned to stand in for the other by representing their views more capably than they can themselves. Instead, we need to begin by acknowledging our own lack of understanding and so be willing to allow the other to represent their views in their own terms, attending carefully to what they have to say to the extent of being prepared to modify our preconceptions in the light of what we come to learn from them.

In short, adoption of the postulate of dialogical equality enjoins that members of other cultures be included not just as participant informants in cross-cultural inquiry, but also as members of a broad-based intercultural forum in which the tenability and accuracy of our interpretations of them are tested and potentially called into question. Beyond that, however, it signals the need to include other cultures as dialogue partners in a well-grounded process of intercultural learning.
along the lines elaborated below. Clearly, to facilitate this outcome we need to accord significance to the beliefs and practices of the other to the extent that we can come to see how they could pose a challenge to our own culturally familiar ways of thinking and acting, thereby opening up new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. Accordingly, we must now go on to consider this possibility in further detail, with a view to vindicating its merits as a regulative ideal over the preoccupation with judgments of relative superiority that characterized the original debate.

Commitment to Advancement of Understanding through Intercultural Learning

A striking, if regrettable, feature of the original debate is that, commensurate with its predilection toward polarized alternatives, it invited readers to side with one position in the debate to the exclusion of the other, to make a unequivocal judgment of relative superiority in favour either of Western logic or Zande magic. In this context, the ideal, proffered by Winch, of learning from the other position did not get a widespread hearing. As a corrective, in keeping with the arguments of the earlier chapters, as telos of intercultural inquiry the hermeneutico-dialogical approach valorizes growth of understanding in a sense that presupposes that we are willing not just to respect, but also to learn from difference. As discussed further below, the primary advantage of endorsing this regulative orientation is that it enables both sides to participate in a potentially transformative learning process. Noteworthy in the first instance, however, is the fact that the injunction to endorse this guiding orientation flows directly from our embrace of the postulates of comparable validity and dialogical equality.

Thus, as prefigured in the previous section, the postulate of dialogical equality enjoins that we approach the other culture with an open-minded, questioning attitude. This postulate makes it clear that instead of assuming the a priori superiority of our own cultural self-understanding and way of life, we need to acknowledge that there is a great deal we do not know and that we stand to learn by engaging with members of other cultures on a basis of equality. Likewise, as we have seen, embrace of the postulate of comparable validity enjoins that we approach the other culture as an integrated and significant framework of meaning, comparable in validity to our own, such that it could pose a challenge to our established ways of thinking. Clearly, then, on dialogical principles, the aim of intercultural inquiry is not to underwrite a univocal judgment about the relative superiority of the rationality of one cultural form of life over another. Instead, as considered further below, the aim is to promote an interactive learning process which can enable us to develop an enriched understanding about the possible ways of living a worthwhile human life through acquiring a well-grounded appreciation of the best features of both (or of several) cultural ways of life. But if we take this commitment to mutual understanding and intercultural learning seriously, it presupposes a profound shift in attitude, which, as we shall now consider, has a number of important, interrelated consequences for how we conceptualize the dynamics and logic of intercultural communication and inquiry. Here again, the
contrasts with both strong universalism and radical relativism, as manifested in the original debate, are striking.

In particular, the dialogical model calls for an altogether different attitude to intercultural inquiry from that which animated the original debate. Thus while strong universalists were from the outset convinced of the self-evident superiority of the Western way of life (and of the Western conception of rationality in particular) to the extent that they assumed that we had little or nothing to learn from other cultures (especially from so-called ‘primitive’ cultures), the dialogical approach calls for the adoption of an open-minded, questioning attitude in our interaction with other cultures. Moreover, in keeping with the postulate of dialogical equality, it enjoins that, instead of rejecting difference on the assumption of the relative superiority of Western culture, we undertake to identify the strengths of the other culture’s way of life with a view to actively learning from it. Importantly too, as discussed at length in the earlier chapters, the dialogical approach eschews the semblance of aperspectivalism or disinterestedness in favour of a frank acknowledgement of the inevitable influence of our prejudgments and preconceptions on how we construe what is going on in the other culture and what we take its significance to be. Thus in contrast to traditional universalism, it clearly recognizes that objectivity cannot presuppose the elimination of our prejudgments. For, as Fay puts it, ‘far from opening the eyes’ of those engaged in cross-cultural inquiry, ‘such an elimination would in fact render them blind, unable to see anything at all’. Instead, as detailed in earlier chapters, the advancement of understanding through intercultural inquiry presupposes that we actively bring our prejudgments into play, seek to render them conscious and explicit, and hold them open to critical appraisal in the course of ongoing interaction with others who occupy different discursive standpoints. In this connection, it is important to reaffirm that on the dialogical model members of other cultures are not to be construed as objects of inquiry about whom we are expected to arrive at (allegedly disinterested) evaluations in our own terms, but rather as co-subjects in a process of conjoint inquiry, oriented toward mutual learning. Hence, in keeping with the postulate of dialogical equality, we need to relate to members of other cultures in a way that acknowledges the legitimacy of their right to represent their views in their own terms and to contest our representations of them. But how, then, is intercultural learning to proceed given far-reaching cultural differences?

In this connection, recall that, as was established in the previous chapter in relation to debates between proponents of rival paradigms, far from being at odds with a search for commonalities, the process of learning from difference actually presupposes the ability to find and build on common ground. Indeed, as we saw earlier, instead of giving priority to one at the expense of the other a commitment to learning from others differently positioned than ourselves presupposes a process of ‘tacking’ between perceptions of sameness and of difference. But in reflecting on what is at issue here, it is important to bear in mind that, while we remain committed to coming to appreciate how things appear from the perspective of the other culture, it is nonetheless the case that we are inevitably embroiled in what Simpson aptly terms, a “transcendingly” necessary ethnocentrism, recognizing that it is neither possible nor desirable that we ‘go native’ as was traditionally held
to be the case. But while it recognizes the impossibility of experiencing things just as they are experienced by native members of another culture, this stance clearly needs to be distinguished from an ‘invidious ethnocentrism’, the crucial distinction being that while the latter supports only judgments of relative superiority, the former facilitates the mutual enrichment of understanding assuming our willingness to remain open to learning from difference. But how, then, are we to gain access to the belief system of another culture in such a way as to transcend invidious comparison in the direction of mutual learning?

As already intimated, our ability to understand, let alone learn from another culture presupposes the identification of common reference points—or ‘bridgeheads’, as they are sometimes termed—which would enable us to gain a conceptual foothold in the belief system of another culture. While this can be a challenging undertaking especially in the case of cultures that are very different from our own, the protests of radical relativists notwithstanding there are good grounds for maintaining that pertinent commonalities can always be found. Indeed, as Winch famously pointed out, the ‘limiting concepts’ of birth, death, and sexual relations enter into the life of every society, and ‘give shape’ to what we understand by ‘human life’ and ‘morality’. More problematic is the process of appropriating and building on the available common reference points in a way that can facilitate the advancement of understanding and intercultural learning. As Bernstein observes in a related context, since there is no algorithm that can determine how we should proceed, this process is ‘always precarious and fragile’ and depends on ‘the cultivation of hermeneutical sensitivity and imagination’.

This is all the more the case in virtue of the fact that while a similar-sounding concept may be employed in both cultures, ‘the corresponding assumptions and “epistemic orientations” may be completely different’. Hence instead of being beguiled by the impression of sameness, the challenge is to use these ‘bridgeheads’ to achieve a progressive awareness of their different connotations in the new context and thereby gain an appreciation of what is distinctive about the other culture in all its differences from our own. For example, Kögler notes that while the concept of ‘self’ is likely to afford a productive bridgehead in our endeavours to come to better understand the other culture, we must remain continually alert to the differences that surface as we gain a sense of how this concept is used in the other cultural context. For example, we can expect to find that while in the Western world realization of selfhood tends to presuppose a process of self-actualization requiring a break with conformity to established cultural conventions, in non-Western cultures it is ‘conformity to preexisting rules’ that is often conceived ‘as the expression of a successful way of living’. Overall, however, the point to be reinforced here is that, far from constituting a barrier to mutual understanding and learning, approached in an appropriately open-minded way the experience of difference can provide a potent stimulus to its advancement. Given the significance of this point, it is worth elaborating briefly.

Firstly, respect for difference enables us to gain an appreciation of why, in the context of its constitutive symbolic order and concomitant ‘regional rationality’, it makes sense, from the standpoint of that culture, to endorse the specific beliefs and practices that it does. In other words, it enables us to discern why, given the
presuppositions prevalent in that culture, certain beliefs and practices are considered ‘thoroughly meaningful and “convincing’”, even though they may not ‘ring true for us’. Accordingly, we can see why these beliefs and practices ought to be respected as ‘truth candidates’ which merit our attention regardless of whether we are ultimately convinced of their actual veracity. Secondly, as discussed in earlier chapters, the experience of difference can serve as a potent stimulus to learning—in this case, cross-cultural learning—by functioning as a ‘contrastive foil’, with the ability both to make us aware of heretofore unrecognized limitations in our own position and to alert us to new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. It does so by enabling us both to see why, given its constitutive symbolic order and concomitant ‘regional rationality’, it makes sense, from the standpoint of that culture, to endorse the specific beliefs and practices that it does and to recognize these beliefs and practices as potentially valid responses to the problems of living to the extent that they can pose a challenge to our own preconceived ways of thinking and doing, thereby causing us to re-evaluate what we ourselves take to be worthwhile and important. Thus, as Lorenzo Simpson puts it, a genuine process of intercultural learning presupposes a moment both of ‘familiarization’ and ‘defamiliarization’, whereby ‘not only might “they” become more familiar to “us”, but we may well become more “strange” to ourselves’. Moreover, as Simpson further contends, provided we are genuinely open to learning from otherness, ‘[s]uch an encounter may well provide answers to our questions that are different from those with which we have become comfortable’, and ‘lying behind those different answers may be different presuppositions … than those we have taken for granted’. The literature on human rights provides one fertile source of examples of how exposure to cultural difference can promote productive cross-cultural learning through serving as a ‘contrastive foil’ in the manner just outlined. In particular, this literature insightfully illustrates how, assuming genuine openness on our part, engagement with difference can promote learning on two distinct, albeit interrelated, levels. Consider, for example, the way in which the encounter with other cultures that have long exhibited a more deep-seated commitment to communal values and social responsibilities can serve to remind us in the West of the extent of our prejudices in favour of individualism and personal self-advancement and of our consequent valorization of rights as individual ‘possessions’, often without sufficient thought for the correlative social responsibilities. One level of response to this learning experience provoked by our encounter with difference would simply be to expand the currently recognized list of human rights (but without altering what many regard as its Western liberal underpinnings) to include additional ‘rights’, like ‘filial piety’, highly valued in other cultures but relatively neglected in the West. But in this situation a deeper type of learning experience is also possible whereby, through motivating a ‘fusion of horizons’ along the lines discussed in earlier chapters, the encounter with difference can lead to a more thoroughgoing transformative outcome. In this event, as Taylor puts it, we learn ‘to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar
Thus in the case of the foregoing example, intercultural learning at this deeper level might cause us to reassess completely the basis on which we construe human rights, perhaps to the extent of reassessing our Western predilection for emphasizing their individualistic character and instead coming to see them primarily as a means of acknowledging and underscoring our recognition of our ultimate responsibility for the well-being of all human beings.

But if embrace of the postulates of comparable validity and dialogical equality thus commits us to remaining genuinely open to learning from difference, it is equally important to note that it does not commit us to adjudging that the beliefs, values, practices, and presuppositions entertained by diverse cultures are all of equal worth. Instead, we are committed only to engaging with other cultures in a process of open-minded dialogical inquiry, in the expectation that once we have come fully to appreciate the significance of their beliefs and practices in the context of their home culture and its constitutive ‘regional rationality’, we will come to see that they have their own validity and integrity as answers to the problems of living, to the extent that they can come to pose a real challenge to our own preconceptions. Nonetheless, the dialogical approach severely challenges the relativistic assumption that the beliefs, norms and values of any culture (including certainly our own) have a self-evident validity which renders them immune from critical appraisal, and hence from the need for modification or revision in the light of criticism from other standpoints. Instead, as a corrective for radical relativism hermeneutico-dialogical thinking actively defends the merits of engaging in a process of principled comparative evaluation, provided of course that this is undertaken in a manner commensurate with the postulates of comparable validity and dialogical equality. In this connection recall that hermeneutico-dialogical thinking breaks with traditional universalism in eschewing logico-scientific reasoning as the measure of cultural rationality in favour of multi-dimensional measures. While, as contended earlier, this precludes totalizing judgments about the overall relative superiority of one culture over another, it nonetheless allows for comparative judgments about specific areas in which, on balance, one culture seems to have merits over another, and hence about specific areas in which one culture might productively learn from another—while recognizing that the judgment might well go in the opposite direction if a different standard is used as yardstick. Thus for example, while it may be the case that some non-Western cultures fare less well than us when, as Simpson puts it, it comes to ‘rendering a reliable, technologically pregnant account of natural processes’, they may fare considerably better when it is a question of their overall ‘attunement’ to their world or of their ability to live in a sustainable long-term relationship with the natural environment. While intercultural learning thus does not presuppose assessments of equal worth, it clearly does presuppose that we don’t just tolerate other cultures in their difference from our own, but that we see them as actively making a claim on us and as embodying strengths from which we could productively learn. In this connection, I have noted the importance of a willingness on the part of each culture to adopt a ‘problematising’ approach to its own cultural heritage. This in turn presupposes a willingness to engage in a selective process of ‘unlearning’, and indeed relearning, when certain of its taken-for-granted norms, beliefs and
practices are found wanting. In concluding, to complete the picture and prevent misunderstanding, a couple of other qualifications are in order.

First, it is important to bear in mind that the challenge of understanding another culture is not a once-off endeavour or an easily realizable goal. Instead, as Simpson in particular has been at pains to establish, it is an always-unfinished project and a potentially infinite task. Hence, pace Foucault, it is a project in respect of which we are always in the position of ‘beginning again’. Secondly, while I have sought to highlight the potentially transformative shifts in intercultural understanding that can result if we interact with other cultures in a spirit of genuine openness, the dialogical approach does not anticipate that pervasive shifts in understanding will come about either frequently or all at once. Rather, to reiterate a point made in an earlier chapter, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking recognizes clearly that as well as being gradual, the negotiations leading to the advancement of intercultural understanding and learning are likely to be ‘informal and partial’, and characterized by a ‘diffuse, fragile, continuously revised and only momentarily successful communication in which participants rely on problematic and unclarified presuppositions and feel their way from one occasional commonality to the next’.

Thirdly, as will be apparent at this point, the dialogical model does not presuppose a pre-established framework of commensuration wherein all divergences in perspective will be reconciled; nor does it presuppose that all will come to agree on a specific set of claims as promulgated within a given discursive framework. Instead, as Simpson has it, what is at issue is ‘a negotiated mutual understanding’, whereby as a result of engaging in a learning process of the sort envisaged on the dialogical model, our experiential horizon, composed of background assumptions and values that shape our interpretations of the world, [is] broadened in such a way that those assumptions and values can be situated as just one possibility alongside the different assumptions and values of a formerly unfamiliar culture … they can be situated as shaping just one way to be human.

Even then, as indicated earlier, the anticipated outcome is not complete mutual understanding but rather, as one commentator has aptly put it in relation to the cross-cultural debate about human rights, ‘the maximum possible degree’ of each ‘at whatever level it can be achieved’ in the circumstances obtaining. Of course, there is no getting around the fact that little of value is likely to be achieved through intercultural dialogue unless all parties to the debate are willing to keep an open mind, and to reassess their own presuppositions in the light of the challenges posed by the encounter with difference with a view to learning from it.

Finally, a comment is in order about the extent of the mutuality involved in this process of intercultural learning. As will by now be abundantly clear, on hermeneutico-dialogical principles intercultural learning is conceived of as an interactive process grounded in mutual recognition and respect. Equally, it is envisaged that the learning that takes place should be two-way, and beneficial to both. But while mutuality is thus highly valorized as integral to the envisaged learning process, respect for the integrity and equality of the other nonetheless
enjoins that this mutuality not be insisted upon to the detriment of their (or our) autonomy. Accordingly, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking enjoins that, starting with our own, each culture takes responsibility primarily for its own learning, leaving it largely in the hands of the other cultures themselves to determine what it is that they may profitably learn from the encounter. At the same time, this autonomy is not total, nor does it negate a culture’s accountability for its beliefs and practices. Instead, as prefigured earlier, hermeneutico-dialogical thinking endorses the view that in our interaction with other cultures we inevitably issue criticizable moral as well as epistemic claims, for which we remain accountable to others. On dialogical premises, then, each culture ultimately remains answerable in principle to the network of other cultures with whom it is unavoidably interlinked in an increasingly globalized world for the particular beliefs and practices that, on reflection, it sees fit to endorse as acceptable responses to the problems of living with which it is confronted. Hence, on dialogical principles, each culture ultimately remains accountable to other cultures in the larger forum of intercultural dialogue in which all cultures, in principle, participate for the beliefs, values and practices it chooses to endorse and live by. In this way, in our relations with other cultures the dialogical approach endeavours to forge a viable middle ground between the demands of mutuality and those of autonomy.

On the Need to Transcend Possible Barriers to Implementation

While hermeneutico-dialogical thinking thus opens up productive new vistas in the domain of intercultural relations, as a moment’s reflection makes apparent, in practice there exist numerous barriers to fostering intercultural relations on a basis of equality and of free and open dialogue oriented toward growth of understanding and learning along the lines argued for above. On the side of the dominant culture, these barriers include: prejudice, lack of comprehension in the face of difference, fear, determination to hold onto existing powers and privileges, as well as a generalized lack of motivation to make the effort needed to engage with other cultures on a basis of comparable validity and dialogical equality. On the side of the less dominant culture, the barriers can include: lack of status, influence, and power, coupled with the lack of a developed ability to represent its position adequately in a way that could ensure that it would get a hearing in its dialogue with more dominant cultures. Since these problems are very real and need to be addressed, it would not do to play down their significance. However, it is equally important to affirm that the existence of these barriers does not impugn the validity, nor indeed the practical significance, of an inquiry like the present oriented toward clarifying the conditions necessary to promote intercultural relations on a non-invidious basis. Moreover, it should be noted too that the proffered dialogical model harbours no utopian pretensions. In particular, its significance is not predicated on the anticipation of a future state of society in which no inequalities obtain, desirable as this might be. Nor does it envisage implementation in all-or-nothing terms. What is at issue rather is that having made some progress in identifying the requisite conditions, we undertake to try to implement them to the extent possible in any given set of circumstances. By way
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of reinforcing the need on our part to rise to this challenge, it is appropriate to conclude by noting some potent (and clearly interrelated) pragmatic and ethical considerations that should motivate us to promote change in the envisaged direction, notwithstanding the acknowledged obstacles that exist to so doing. Chief among these are the following:

We have to get along with others in a globalized, multicultural world As is well known, the original debate achieved prominence in the context of a concern with making sense of remote, ‘primitive’—and seemingly ‘exotic’—cultures, like those of the Azande, Nuer, or Hopi peoples. But in just a few decades, the conditions of cultural integration and interaction have changed dramatically. As is now widely acknowledged, the contemporary world is a tightly interconnected global nexus, in which there exist few, if any, completely isolated cultures. Instead, as a result of the globalization of culture, as McCarthy has it, ‘radical cultural relativism is now factually as well as conceptually a red herring’. Accordingly, we have to get along with others in an interconnected, multicultural world, in which, as we are all too well aware, the neglect or misunderstanding of other cultures can have truly damaging national and/or international consequences. In these circumstances, the fostering of a commitment to mutual understanding and learning in our dealings with other cultures, grounded in endorsement of the postulates of comparable validity and dialogical equality, may well be our most productive option, practically as well as theoretically.

Morality enjoins us to acknowledge the dialogical equality of other cultures, and hence the need to seek to understand and learn from them In recent decades, outside anthropological circles as well as within, people have come to recognize that we stand to perpetrate a significant injustice on other cultures if we respond to them on anything other than on a presupposition of equality. In particular, as McCarthy notes, we stand to perpetrate a significant injustice by failing to respond to the ethical imperative which, along Kantian lines, enjoins us to respect members of other cultures as ‘mature human beings capable of defending their own views and challenging ours’. Hence, the very dictates of morality motivate us to embrace the regulative commitments that have been argued for above and to seek actively to implement them in our dealings with other cultures.

We can actually benefit ourselves Although this possibility tended to be lost sight of in the original debate, over and above the acknowledged need to get along with others on an equitable basis, it should be firmly borne in mind that, if we are receptive to so doing, we stand to undergo a productive learning experience through engaging in dialogue across cultural boundaries. To some, this prospect might seem remote given a widespread presumption about the self-evident superiority of Western rationality and culture. But since not much reflection is needed to establish that not all is right in our own culture, it seems clear that there are lessons of genuine value to ourselves that we stand to learn from dialogical engagement with (members of) other cultures who have developed different responses to the challenges of living. Thus the very real potential for learning about
new and productive possibilities for living a worthwhile human life provides us with another potent motive for seeking to overcome barriers to intercultural dialogue.

In sum, then, while significant barriers do indeed exist to the implementation of the dialogical relations, there are potent moral, epistemic and, indeed, pragmatic reasons why we should actively strive to overcome these barriers in our dealings with other cultures. And lest it be objected that the dialogical approach is unduly idealistic, in concluding it should be reiterated that, in its application to the domain of intercultural relations as elsewhere, this approach is not proffered as a blueprint for a utopian world order, but a defensible and worthwhile counterfactual ideal. As the whole thrust of the present study reminds us, when such counterfactual ideals are at issue, the challenge is not to reject the ideal in virtue of its perceived conflict with current ‘reality’, but rather to strive to implement it to the fullest extent possible in any given set of circumstances so as to contribute to reconfiguring the boundaries of what are assumed to be ‘the contemporary limits of the necessary’. And in a tightly interconnected global world, the dialogical ideal is not one whose implementation we can really afford to postpone.

Notes

1 This chapter is a much reworked version of the ideas developed in my ‘Self-Other Relations and the Rationality of Cultures’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 26 (2000), pp. 79-101. While the views I defend here are substantially the same as in the article, I have significantly revised the way in which I present them especially in the second half of the chapter. In part these revisions were undertaken to reinforce connections with themes developed in earlier chapters.


3 As is also well known, the original debate focused on the rationality of so-called ‘primitive’ cultures, and in particular on the rationality of the beliefs and practices of the Azande people. The major contributions to this debate are collected in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), and in *Rationality and Relativism*, eds Martin Hollis and Stephen Lukes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

4 For these contributions, see in particular Wilson, ed., *Rationality*.

5 A notable example is Stephen Lukes, who, while he allows for ‘context-dependent’ criteria of rationality, continues to emphasize the importance of evaluating the beliefs and practices of other, native cultures by universal criteria of rationality which, he insists, ‘simply are criteria of rationality, as opposed to criteria of rationality in context’ (see ‘Some Problems about Rationality’, in Wilson, ed., *Rationality*, especially pp. 208-13).

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7 ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 93.
9 Interestingly, most commentators, Jarvie included, have dubbed Winch a relativist in this strong sense, although this assessment would seem to be at odds with Winch’s own commitment to the ideal of growth of understanding through intercultural learning, as discussed further below.
10 For an insightful recent review of this terrain, see further Brian Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), especially pp. 105-10.
11 As Dascal notes, recent ethnography attests that so-called ‘primitive’ cultures are far richer than what is assumed on a mere presupposition of intelligibility, in that they have ‘a language which is no less complex and rich than [ours]’, ‘elaborate kinship systems’, ‘a systematic way of categorising their environment’; they also have ‘a religion, a morality, a literature, a collective memory, art, rules of etiquette, rules of communication and argumentation—in short, a complete set of interlocked socially shared systems comparable in scope to ours’ (‘The Ecology of Cultural Space’, p. 284).
12 For an extended elucidation, and vindication, of this theme in its application to the domain of cross-cultural communication and inquiry, see Hans Herbert Kögl, The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), especially ch. 3.
13 See further The Power of Dialogue, especially pp. 95-7. As explicated by Kögl (p.178), ‘regional rationalities’ pertain to ‘the internal logic of symbolic systems, according to which specific statements are rational and relevant to truth, relative to specific basic assumptions, whereas other statements are from the outset excluded from the realm of what is true or real.’ See too Bohman and Kelly, ‘Intelligibility, Rationality, and Comparison’, especially pp. 91-7.
14 Hence, as argued by Bohman and Kelly as well as by Kögl, in our engagement with other cultures, we should suspend a priori imputations of truth in favour of a concern with coming to understand the basis of the truth candidacy of the other belief system vis-à-vis our own.
15 For a concise outline of the supporting arguments, see Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science, ch. 4, especially pp. 80-88.
16 Cf. Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science, pp. 80-84.
17 Cf. Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science, pp. 84-8.
19 See Truth and Method, especially p. 447.
25 ‘Three Kinds of Incommensurability’, p. 156. Clearly, much works remains to be done in pinning down the specific standards that need to be included in such a multi-dimensional conception so as to facilitate non-prejudicial comparative evaluation and hence productive intercultural learning (as discussed further below). For some promising leads, the interested reader is referred to Deutsch’s Culture and Modernity, and especially to the contributions to this volume by Cua and Kupperman, respectively.
See ‘Doing the Right Thing in Cross-Cultural Representation’, *Ethics*, 102 (1992), 635-49. While I thus draw on McCarthy’s analysis in support of the postulate of dialogical equality, it should be noted that this way of crystallizing the issue is my own.


Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science, p. 216.


*The Unfinished Project*, p. 89.

*The Unfinished Project*, p. 92.


Thus for example, as Taylor elsewhere points out, if we were prepared to accept Buddhist culture as an equal dialogue partner having a claim to our attention, and hence to learn from it rather than dismissing it as incompatible with human rights thinking deriving from Western liberalism, its core principles of non-violence and compassion could have a far-reaching transformative influence on our whole Western way of understanding human rights. See Charles Taylor, ‘Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights’, in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, eds Joanne Bauer and Daniel Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially pp. 133-7.

*The Unfinished Project*, p. 88.


*The Unfinished Project*, p. 89.

*The Unfinished Project*, p. 79.


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