THE AMBIGUITY OF 'RATIONALITY'

Richard Rorty

It is tempting to describe *Critical Theory* as an American version of the Habermas-vs.-Foucault debate, a debate which has agitated Europe in the ten years since the publication of Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. It is also tempting to read it as a contribution to the debate over postmodernism which is presently agitating the American academy. But neither description is quite right.

Although McCarthy is a reasonably orthodox Habermasian, Hoy's allegiance is more to Gadamer than to Foucault. Nobody has, as far as I know, described Gadamer as a post-modern. Further, Hoy has no wish to defend Foucault against the most important criticism which Habermas made of him: namely that nobody would guess from Foucault's books that human freedom, and the chances of human happiness, increased considerably as a result of the Enlightenment. Hoy's defense of Foucault against Habermas is largely a defense of Foucault's refusal to offer a general theory of rationality, something Gadamer too refuses to do. As Hoy says, "The question . . . is whether his [Foucault's] substantive genealogical histories need to be supplemented by an abstract, universal and procedural conception of reason that is validated solely by philosophical arguments (for instance, transcendental ones) instead of by historiographical and socio-logical data" (148).

In his rejoinder to Hoy, Thomas McCarthy agrees that we need Foucauldian "critical histories of contingent regimes of rationality." But he disagrees with Hoy on the question of "whether there is *anything universal at all* to say about reason, truth, objectivity, and the like, or rather anything that would not be too 'thin' to be of any use" (223). McCarthy thus lays out what I take to be the central issue of the book: namely, whether these traditional topics of philosophical debate are relevant to socio-political deliberation.

I doubt that they are. So I am on Hoy's side of the argument. I agree with him when he says that McCarthy's ideal of a "validity that could be rationally acknowledged by all competent judges under ideal epistemic conditions" (268) is too thin to help us change our minds about anything,

too thin to do anybody any good. Most of what I will be saying today will be devoted to pressing this charge of thinness against McCarthy. I agree with Foucault, Gadamer and Hoy that rationality is not as fruitful a topic as Habermas and McCarthy think it.

Habermas and McCarthy are not inclined to resurrect a correspondence theory of truth. But their ideal of universal validity is an awkward half-way house between the old idea that Truth is correspondence to the One Way the World Is and Hoy's fully pragmatic view. More generally, the Habermasian idea of "communicative reason" is an unsatisfactory compromise between what Habermas calls "subject-centered reason" and the pragmatists' suggestion that if we pursue freedom, tolerance and equality we need not worry about either rationality or universal validity. On the version of pragmatism which I favor, we should just let the notions of reason and rationality wither away. For we can use such concrete, explicitly political, notions as freedom of speech, democratic government, international law, and universal literacy to do the inspirational work which these notions have done in the past.

Getting rid of the notion of rationality would at least have the merit of eliminating an ambiguity. Rationality is the name of both a cognitive faculty and a moral virtue. The epistemological notion of rationality is that the human subject can surmount appearance and reach reality – a feat lesser animals cannot perform. The brutes, so this story goes, can only have useful habits, whereas we, thanks to rationality, can strive for universal validity. The moral notion of rationality is just a preference for persuasion over force: you are rational insofar as you would rather argue than fight, rather use words than blows. The epistemological notion of rationality concerns our relation to something non-human, whereas the moral notion is concerned entirely with our relations to our fellow human beings. I should like to drop the epistemological notion of rationality altogether by dropping the subject-object model of knowing. I should also like to use less ambiguous and more concrete terms when commending persuasion over force.

Habermas dislikes the subject-object model as much as pragmatists do. He describes the contrast between subject-centered reason and communicative reason by saying that "the paradigm of knowledge of objects has to be replaced by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects." This way of putting the contrast suggests that he might be willing to disengage the notion of rationality from that of truth-tracking. If he did so, he could say that we no longer need the word "Truth" as the name of the goal of inquiry, since we have another term to describe that goal – namely "increased mutual understanding – agreement about what to believe and do among ever larger and more various sorts of people." If he took this tack, Habermas could have said that although we can continue to use the word

'true' as an adjective, in all the familiar ways, getting rid of the useless notion of corresponding to the One Way the World Is also gets rid of the useless nominalization of an irreplaceable adjective. By taking this tack, Habermas could avoid one more temptation to do what he says he does not want to do, namely "resurrect the purism of pure reason" within communicative reason.[2]

But, of course, this is not the tack he takes. By insisting that communicative rationality incorporates the notion of universal validity Habermas accomplishes precisely the resurrection he hopes to avoid. For this insistence resurrects the idea of unconditionality. As Habermas says, "The validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, *'blots out' space and time.*"[3] Like Truth, and unlike "increased mutual understanding among ever more various persons and groups," the "agreement of all competent judges operating under ideal epistemic conditions" is something we can never know whether we have attained. Unknowability and unconditionality go hand in hand. Both expressions name a goal which we could never know ourselves to have reached, and which we can never know we are closing in on rather than veering off from.

The skeptic has always been there to remind us that the One Way the World Is might have nothing to do with any of the ways in which human beings find it useful to describe their environment. Analogously, these ideally competent judges might be people whose existence we have no reason to encourage. There will always be a Foucault or a Feyerabend around to suggest that the very procedures we think of as increasing communicative rationality are the ones which prevent the emergence of those competent judges and of those ideal epistemic conditions. You have to accept the bitters as well as the sweets of unconditionality. The more unconditional, the more unknowable. The more unknowable, the thinner.

McCarthy, however, thinks that reference to the unconditional "opens up assertions to one's discursive examination" (74). He says that

> While we have no standards of truth wholly independent of particular languages and practices, it remains that 'truth' serves as an idea of reason with respect to which we can criticize the standards we inherit and learn to see things in a different way. Neither the particularity of context-immanence nor the universality of context-transcendence of truth claims can be ignored without doing violence to our actual practices of truth. We can, and typically do, make contextually conditioned and fallible claims to objective truth. (39)

I think that Hoy is right in saying that the thought that there is context-independent validity to be had is "not pragmatically relevant enough to be the motivation of challenging our assertions" (268). I agree with him when he goes on to suggest that any work done by envisaging such validity can be done equally well by reminding ourselves that our present consensus about

what to believe and to do is a function of the needs of those who have reached agreement, and that other people may have different needs. Only concrete suggestions about what these other needs are or might be can do the job which McCarthy describes as "criticizing the standards we inherit and learning to see things in a different way."

On the other hand, I think that McCarthy has a point when he says, in the passage I just quoted, that we cannot give up unconditionality and universal validity "without doing violence to our actual practices of truth" – at least if "actual practices" means "the way we have been brought up to describe what we are doing." Our common sense does in fact encourage us to nominalize the adjective "true." It tells us that the love of Truth is a virtue, that the search for Truth takes precedence over the search for happiness, and so on. So pragmatists are being consciously counter-intuitive when they say that the true is simply what is good in the way of belief, and that the search for truth is merely one species of the generic search for happiness.

As McCarthy says earlier in *Critical Theory*, we are heirs to "centuries of distinguishing between appearance and reality, doxa and episteme, prejudice and reason, custom and morality, convention and justice, and so on" (32). So if we are to drop not only the idea that there is One Way the World Is and One Truth which corresponds to that Way, but the Habermasian idea of truth as something universal and context-transcendent, we shall have to change our ways of speaking considerably. We shall have to stop exalting the stable over the transitory. We shall have to stop thinking that it is a good idea to "blot out space and time."

McCarthy thinks that anybody who criticizes a theory of rationality must do so on the basis of an alternative theory of rationality. Similarly for theories of truth and objectivity. He thinks that these are inescapable topics, and that people like Hoy and myself who eschew theories about them are evading their intellectual responsibilities. Hoy, however, who uses "pluralism" as the antithesis of universalism, says that "pluralism is . . . a negative meta-position, and is not setting itself up as offering positive claims to replace the universalist's axioms" (201). Hoy thus hopes to escape McCarthy's charge that any radical historicism will entail "familiar self-referential contradictions" (32).

I think that Hoy adopts the right strategy here, but that his strategy can be reinforced by granting McCarthy's point that the universalistic ideas to which Habermas appeals are so "deeply embedded in our culture" that "dislodging them is less a matter of frank self-acceptance than of radical self-transformation" (33). People like Hoy and me should admit that the only way to escape the sort of charge of self-referential contradiction which McCarthy brings against us is to replace the vocabulary in which he brings it. We have to answer McCarthy's rhetorical question "How can one deconstruct all ideas of reason without at the same time relying on them, at

least tacitly?" (35) by saying "We aren't so much deconstructing ideas of reason as suggesting replacements for them – replacements that will do the inspirational job just as well, without some of the unfortunate side-effects of universalism." We are not saying that we have objective, universalizable, rationally defensible ideas about rationality and truth. We are saying instead that we think that human happiness might be better served by turning objectivity and truth over to philosophers of language like Brandom and Davidson and sociologists of science like Latour, and by turning rationality over to students of what McCarthy calls "contingent regimes of rationality" – historians of disciplines like Foucault and Hacking. This would amount to saying that our use of adjectives like "true" and "objective" can be semantically explicated without making either Truth or Objectivity a goal of inquiry. Again, our use of the adjective "rational" can be understood socio-historically without developing a theory about the nature of Rationality.

Charges of self-referential absurdity such as those McCarthy brings against Hoy assume an unchanging heuristic vocabulary – one that includes reference to Truth and Rationality as the names of universally agreed-upon goals. Such charges assume that we are all working within a single terminological horizon, and that we have agreed to use the terminology in question. But the Gadamerian line of thought which Hoy is developing suggests that our job is to keep the color of the sky changing by continually merging old horizons with new ones. As Gadamer has said, "Changing the established forms is no less a kind of connection with the tradition than defending the established forms" (quoted by Hoy at p. 127). Encouraging old topics to shuffle off stage is a traditional form of intellectual progress. Hoy's position should, I think, be that Truth, Objectivity and Rationality are topics which we can safely let go of once we let go of the philosophy of consciousness.

I agree with Habermas that the philosophy of consciousness produced a pendulum movement between scientism and romanticism. The pendulum has swung between insisting that the important thing is to get something out there right, thus glorifying the object, and insisting that the most important thing is to make something new, thus glorifying the subject. This "found or made?" "discovered or constructed?" question is the one currently being debated in American academic circles under the rubric "common sense vs. postmodernism." The triteness and sterilty of the latter debate is further evidence that Habermas is right in thinking that the philosophy of consciousness has outlived its usefulness. But Habermas is wrong in thinking that you can keep universalism without setting the same old pendulum swinging again. That pendulum will keep swinging as long as the search for truth is thought to be distinct from the search for happiness. That is the separation which pragmatism hopes to end.

Habermas and McCarthy think it enough to unite the search for truth with the search for consensus and freedom by making rationality communicative rather than subject-centered, thereby dropping correspondence to reality in favor of intersubjectivity. Taking that step does rule out what Putnam calls metaphysical realism: the suggestion that what everybody agrees to believe may have nothing to do with the Way the World Is. But it does not eliminate the contrast between what makes beliefs true and what makes them conducive to human happiness, the contrast which pragmatists hope to blur. As long as rational inquiry is thought to converge to a single point, and as long as we think that there are many different ways for human beings to be happy, pragmatism will seem counter-intuitive.

Hoy makes the repudiation of the notion of convergence central to his formulation of what he calls "Critical Theory as Geneaological Hermeneutics" (201ff). I think that this is just the right strategy for him to pursue. The idea of convergence to something context-independent should be sharply distinguished from the idea of ever-broader agreement. If one retains the idea of convergence one will see Truth as a goal of inquiry, and then look around for some definition of "Truth" which chimes with the idea that reason is essentially communicative. The agreement of competent judges in ideal epistemic conditions will fill the bill – empty, thin and uninstructive as such a definition is. But if one drops the idea of convergence, and of context-independence, one will see agreement between communities which have different needs and concerns not as a closer approach to a *focus imaginarius* but simply as a way of attaining more happiness by cooperation than either community could have attained on its own.

On the pragmatist view, there will always be new contexts, produced by the fusion of horizons which inevitably occurs when two rather different individuals or communities meet and create a new context by formulating a cooperative project. But none of these new contexts produces beliefs which are more context-independent than their predecessors. Just as no spatio-temporal position is closer than any other to a region in which space and time are blotted out, so no recontextualization of disputed issues gets you closer to context-independence and universal validity than any other recontextualization. If, with Bain, Peirce and James, you take beliefs to be habits of action, you will think of attaining agreement in belief as just a way of arranging for cooperative action. Then you will not see the point of asking whether the beliefs agreed upon have some further advantage, such as universal validity. You will be content to see them as tools for producing increased human happiness. Convergence will have dropped out of consideration.

To put this point another way, pragmatists do not assume that the same beliefs will form the right habits of action for everybody. So they find it

implausible that "all competent judges" will reach the same conclusion on all disputed matters. Nor can they make sense of the notion of these judges working in "ideal epistemic conditions," since they do not think of knowing as an activity for which there are ideal conditions – as there are, for example, for raising mushrooms. Unlike mushrooms, knowings – as Michael Williams' book *Unnatural Doubts* has recently argued – do not form a natural kind.

The pragmatists' principal reason for being suspicious of convergence and context-independence is that you cannot make much sense of the notion of convergence of descriptive or deliberative *vocabularies*, even though, once such a vocabulary is isolated, you can make sense of the notion of convergence on one or another of the statements which that vocabulary provides as options for belief. Once the usual Kuhnian and Gadamerian points about changes of such vocabularies in the course of history are granted, the only way to make sense of convergence is to suggest that vocabularies are adopted and discarded depending upon how well they are found to fit something that is not a vocabulary. This something is usually called "reality" or "the facts." But Habermasians have to give up this notion of "fit" once they admit that the correspondence theory of truth is a relic of subject-centered reason. Once we drop knowledge as a relation between subjects and objects and start thinking of it as a product of consensus, the notion of "fit" is no longer available.

McCarthy, in his rejoinder to Hoy towards the end of *Critical Theory*, suggests that we can use ideas of "completeness and unity or coherence" as ways of judging progress toward universal validity. These ideas, he says, "seem anything but empty." Without such ideas, McCarthy goes on, "we would likely drift into an uncritical pluralism of 'whatever serves your purposes, whatever they may be' " (233). "Can we write history – in contrast . . . to fiction, propaganda, or rationalization," McCarthy asks, "without being oriented to the idea of truth?" This, he continues, is "the sort of question for which Hoy will have to find convincing answers if he is to persuade us to de-emphasize the idea of truth in favor of that of usefulness, and the idea of unity in favor of that of proliferation" (234).

In this rejoinder, McCarthy is taking for granted that there are interest-free and context-free criteria of unity, coherence, and completeness. I do not think that there are. A complete, coherent, unified, non-fictionalized, and non-propagandist historical account is one which is able to answer all questions of the form "What about this document?" "How do you fit the following facts into your account?" to the satisfaction of competent judges. What these judges take to be a satisfying answer is a matter of the context in which they themselves are working. So are their ideas about what documents are relevant and which citations are to the point. All the usual Kuhnian and Gadamerian arguments can be marshalled here to show how

these contexts have changed in the course of history, and why they may be expected to keep right on changing.

The only way we could make the regulative ideals of truth, completeness and coherent unity relevant to the practice of historians would be to do what Kuhn and Gadamer tell us we cannot do: lay down context-free criteria of relevance that are thick and rigid enough to exert some pressure. Words like 'truth' and 'completeness' and 'coherence' seem to me no better able to provide such criteria than the word 'good.' Gadamer seems to me quite right in saying that one context's domination is another context's liberation, and that the ideas of complete freedom from domination and complete independence of context are empty. Foucault seems to me right in suggesting that history will always reveal domination hiding behind enlightenment, and wrong only in not mentioning that it will often reveal enlightenment riding in on the coattails of tyranny. Foucault's notion of resisting power and Habermas's notion of resisting domination seem to me fine as long as they are explained by reference to concrete instances: Nazis, Communists, or religious fundamentalists, for example. But I think that any attempt to give them context-free significance will drive us right back into the arms of the philosophy of consciousness, the problematic of subject and object, and the correspondence theory of truth.

Hoy, McCarthy, Gadamer and Habermas all agree that the more different sorts of people we talk to about what ought to be believed and done the better off we shall be. They are all good democrats, good listeners, good conversationalists. All are equally eager to tolerate and encourage difference, novelty, and freedom. The only thing that divides them is whether such tolerance and encouragement is all one can do for the human future, or whether there is more to do. Hoy and Gadamer think that there is nothing much more to do. In particular, they think that specifically philosophical reflection cannot do much to help realize, or even to clarify, our socio-political hopes. McCarthy and Habermas, however, are inclined to protest that there must be something more to political idealism than "our preferences." So we find Habermas blaming Castoriadis for being a mere romantic decisionist[4] and McCarthy telling Hoy that his liberal political outlook must be more than the expression of "an aesthetics of personal existence" (234). McCarthy won't let up on Hoy until Hoy gives him good, non-aesthetic, rationally defensible reasons for wanting social justice, and Habermas won't let up on Castoriadis until Castoriadis admits that the politics both men share is a result of rational reflection rather than mere decision.

Let me conclude by trying to say something general about the very idea of "critical theory." In the first chapter of *Critical Theory*, McCarthy approvingly quotes Marcuse as saying that "Reason is the fundamental category of philosophical thought" (22). He approvingly paraphrases

Horkheimer as saying that "the turn to the psychological, social and historical roots of thought did not herald the end of reason; it was the latest and most radical phase of its radical self-critique" (12). The biggest difference I have with McCarthy, perhaps, is that he thinks the word "reason" still useful in describing philosophy's nature and function. I do not find the word useful for either purpose. I have never seen any way to bring together what Kant was doing in the *Critique of Pure Reason* with what Marcuse and Horkheimer wanted to do. I am baffled by the Germans' ability to use the word *Kritik* to encompass both Kant's criticism of Wolff and Marx's criticism of capitalism.

If I had to define "critical theory" I should say that it is the attempt of philosophy professors to make the study of Kant, Hegel, and various other books intelligible only to philosophy professors, relevant to the struggle for social justice. I do not think that this attempt has been very successful. Although I agree with McCarthy that Horkheimer and Foucault both gave useful warnings against taking the social scientists as seriously as they often take themselves, I do not think that these warnings suffice to show the relevance of philosophy to (in McCarthy's words) "an investigation of the social, economic, political and cultural conditions that perpetuate misery and injustice" (234). These investigations are, I think, best carried out by journalists who can report their findings to the rest of us without using either the jargon of the social sciences or that of philosophy.

McCarthy says that in order to investigate the conditions that perpetuate misery and injustice we "need a critical theory of contemporary society at the level of Marx's *Capital* or Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*" (234). I think that what we need, in addition to the journalists and their academic allies, are imaginative and well-read trend-spotters. That is how I should describe Marx, Habermas and Foucault. Marx warned us against such trends as the tendency of the modern state to become the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, and the increasing ability of capitalists to immiserate the proletariat by maintaining a reserve army of the unemployed. When Habermas invented the term "colonization of the life-world" and Foucault the term "medicalization of sexual life," they too spotted dangerous trends. I do not see that any of these three men were much assisted in their trend-spotting work by having read the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Discussion in such areas as epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy in mind, and philosophy of science is not easily made relevant to spotting socio-political trends, nor to the construction of safeguards against the dangers these trends foretell. But we philosophy professors still like to think that the various things we learn in graduate school somehow make up a natural kind. One quick way to tie them all together is to say that, as philosophers, we are professionally concerned with rationality. But this

seems to me an empty verbal flourish. As I have already said, I think that this slogan conceals the fact that "rationality" can mean either a cognitive faculty or a political virtue. The popularity of the term "critical theory" seems to me a result of this ambiguity.

I agree with Hoy when he writes that "the wrestling over how best to 'inherit' the tradition of critical theory may be the most pressing controversy in the recent decade of European philosophy." But I regret this fact. Not all politically engaged art has been bad art, but a lot of it has. Not all politically engaged philosophy has been bad philosophy, but a lot of it has been boringly programmatic and tiresomely self-righteous. I think that we philosophy professors should think of our discipline as no more, and no less, involved with the struggle for human freedom than any other academic discipline. It is true that Kant was both the institutor of philosophy as an autonomous academic discipline and a hero of the Enlightenment. But as far as I can see, that was just a coincidence. We should not infer from this coincidence that our choice of discipline helps up play an important socio-political role.

NOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 295.
2. Ibid., 301.
3. Ibid., 323.
4. Ibid.