The Humanities as Conversation and Edification: On Rorty’s Idea of a Gadamerian Culture

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1. Introduction

In his paper on the famous thesis of Gadamer saying that ‘being that can be understood is language’1 (‘Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache’), Richard Rorty heralds the advent of what he calls a ‘Gadamerian culture’, which means a culture based on the hermeneutical principle of conversation.2 Philosophy, the humanities and even the natural sciences should develop an understanding of their field of research as, first and foremost, a place for an endless conversation between the human beings. This is, to be sure, a great tribute to Gadamer and his hermeneutics. In a way, what Rorty is saying is that Gadamer’s hermeneutics will or should become the common ground (or the koinè) of tomorrow’s culture. I don’t want to make a prediction on whether or not such a thing will happen, since history reveals that philosophers are bad prophets. My intention is rather to examine, in the context of Rorty’s works, this idea of a ‘Gadamerian culture’ and ask if Gadamer himself would endorse it. More precisely, I want to show how Rorty’s view of a ‘Gadamerian culture’ doesn’t really do justice to the importance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics for the understanding of the humanities. My thesis is that to give a better account of Gadamer’s contribution to the humanities, we need to go beyond

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the structural oppositions of Rorty’s pragmatic philosophy and rediscover the full meaning of Gadamer’s return to the humanist tradition.

2. Rorty’s Idea of a Gadamerian Culture

To understand the idea of a ‘Gadamerian culture’ proposed by Rorty, we first need to go back to his major book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), where one can discover what lies exactly behind his ambitious claim. In the last part of this book, Rorty wants to describe the passage from a modern philosophical thinking centered on epistemology to a hermeneutical philosophy based on conversation. ‘Epistemology’ should be understood as the philosophical ambition to elaborate a theory of knowledge giving us the possibility to determine which scientific discourses are better descriptions of the reality, which mental representations adequately mirror the world in itself, and which do not. Rorty’s book is a strong attack – inspired by Dewey, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine and Davidson – against the possibility of achieving this philosophical search for absolute foundations of knowledge. But ‘hermeneutics’ is not for Rorty the name of a new philosophical project replacing epistemology. Rather, as he explains:

> In the interpretation I shall be offering, ‘hermeneutics’ is not the name of a new discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled – that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt.³

In this sense, Rorty refers to ‘hermeneutics’ as the attempt to go beyond the epistemological ambition of finding a ‘permanent neutral framework’, a definitive

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epistemological ground, where all discourses would be commensurable and where we could reach rational agreement. From a hermeneutical point of view, he argues, such a framework is just another metaphysical dream. In fact, Rorty’s antifoundationalist and pragmatic thesis is that there is simply no such thing. Hermeneutics doesn’t offer a new set of terms to reach agreement, it simply lets the conversation go on:

Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but simply hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement.\(^4\)

In other words, there’s no way to avoid the hermeneutical circle, to stand outside of the conversation and to look at it from the point of view from nowhere. When we realize this fact, culture is no longer seen as a search for a perfect mirroring of the world, but a space where endless conversations are taking place.

This is at least the portrait painted by Rorty to support his idea of a ‘Gadamerian culture’. In his view, the main contribution of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is precisely to leave the epistemological dream behind and to formulate a view of culture centered on conversation. Rorty maintains that Gadamer fulfils this important change through his reading of the humanist tradition, since the rediscovery of this tradition leads to a substitution of the notion of Bildung for that of knowledge as the main goal of thinking\(^5\).

In this sense, Gadamer’s hermeneutics would help us understand what philosophy and the humanities are all about, after the weakening of the epistemological ideal. The result of

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this rediscovery of the humanist tradition would be a different understanding of the
human being. Rorty sees in hermeneutics the polemical attempt to set aside the ‘classic
picture of human beings’ for which ‘man has an essence – namely, to discover essences’.6
This view was transmitted in the history of philosophy by major authors like Plato,
Descartes and Kant. Rorty maintains that one of the major contributions of Truth and
Method was to formulate a redescription of human being without any reference to a
metaphysical dualism or to a transcendental subject. The existentialist intuition puts
forward by Gadamer (with Heidegger and Sartre) is that ‘redescribing ourselves is the
most important thing we can do’.7 From this perspective, the conversation going on in
philosophy and in the human sciences would be guided by the attempt to find new and
interesting ways to redescribe and express ourselves, but without the hope or the pretense
to discover the true essence of man. This conversation is endless, because ‘there is no
limit to the human imagination – to our ability to redescribe an object, and thereby
recontextualise it’.8

What Rorty calls ‘edification’ illustrates exactly this endless process of
redescription. ‘Edification’ is the notion used by Rorty to translate the Gadamerian notion
of ‘Bildung’. This means that Rorty interprets Gadamer’s return to the humanist tradition
as the defense of the endless search to find interesting, creative or original ways of
speaking about ourselves. But, in this context, edification doesn’t characterize a work of
construction. Constructive research is limited to what Rorty calls ‘normal discourses’
which means discourses taking place in an epistemological framework where all the
contributions are ‘commensurable’. It’s only in such a limited context that we can speak

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about problem-solving and progress on the way through knowledge. By opposition, the activities of edification and conversation are taking place in the field of ‘abnormal discourses’ or ‘incommensurable discourses’.⁹ As Rorty puts it:

The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the ‘poetic’ activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions.¹⁰

When we consider the distinctions between normal and abnormal discourses or between constructive and edifying thinking, we can understand better what Rorty is claiming when he writes that Gadamer has substituted the notion of Bildung for that of knowledge as the main goal of thinking. This claim means that, in Rorty’s reading, Bildung has no other goal than to give rise to interesting and fruitful conversations. The aim of edification is to continue the conversation coming from the past, rather than discovering the true essence of something. Through the process of a humanist education, we acquire a sense of the incommensurability of discourses: ‘a sense of the relativity of descriptive vocabularies to periods, traditions, and historical accidents’.¹¹

To accept this picture of philosophy and of the human sciences as edification is to relinquish a theory of truth as correspondence and to adopt what Rorty calls a ‘reactive’ style of thinking. Here, his models are thinkers like Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, whose (later) works do not aim to give us more accurate representations of man or of the

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world, but simply tools to emancipate ourselves from different metaphysical problems. The goal of a conversational philosophy ‘is not to find out what anything is “really” like, but to help us grow up – to make us happier, freer, and more flexible’.\(^\text{12}\) Instead of grasping the true essence of something, the task is more to discover different ways of coping or dealing with the world. It is a fact that Rorty’s definition of philosophy and the human sciences as conversation and edification seems to lead to relativist consequences. Although Rorty refuses at times to acknowledge them, it is hard to see clearly how he can avoid such consequences. His views lead, to the very least, to an ‘aesthetization’ of research in the field of philosophy and the humanities. This appears to me to contradict directly Gadamer’s hermeneutics. My thesis is that the sharp oppositions put forward by Rorty – between epistemology and hermeneutics, knowledge and conversation, constructive thinking and edification – to support his idea of a ‘Gadamerian culture’ constitute obstacles to a good understanding of Gadamer’s contribution. I would like to show why and how Gadamer’s hermeneutics simply doesn’t imply or support such systematic oppositions.

3. Gadamer’s Contribution to the Humanities

In fact, the importance of *Truth and Method* for the human sciences lies in the fact that it does not want to oppose but to articulate in the proper way edification and dialogue with truth and knowledge. In this regard, it is symptomatic of Rorty’s reading that, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, truth characterizes almost exclusively objective truth. From this point of view, the contribution of Gadamer is to put in place an

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opposition between the desire for (objective) truth and the desire for edification. This opposition is grounded in a critique of the search for objective knowledge stemming from Heidegger. As Rorty puts it:

Gadamer rightly gives Heidegger the credit for working out a way of seeing the search for objective knowledge (first developed by the Greeks, using mathematics as a model) as one human project among others.

Given this critique, we should see philosophy and the humanities as a conversational activity with the aim of creating imaginative ways to redesign the human being and the world, but not as a search aimed at grasping their essence. In Rorty’s reading, the Gadamer’s thesis that ‘being that can be understood is language’ must be read in a nominalist way. The famous adage is interpreted by Rorty as the claim that there are no essences, that there is no metaphysical access to any being in itself and no privileged descriptions. In other words, being is reduced to language, for ‘only language can be understood’. In the ‘Gadamerian culture’ pictured by Rorty, the aim of the conversation is merely to create new discourses, new languages, able to ‘capture the imagination’ and ‘being picked up and used’. To ask for something more would be to fall back in metaphysical thinking.

However, this seems to me neither a sound reading of *Truth and Method* nor a necessary development if one wishes to avoid the bugbear of metaphysical thinking. Rorty rightly says that the search for objective knowledge is for Gadamer only one project among others. But we don’t need to accept the further step of opposing conversation and edification to truth and knowledge of essences. As a matter of fact, Gadamer doesn’t sweep aside truth and knowledge of essences; he tries rather to rethink the experiences of truth and knowledge from a hermeneutical point of view, which means with regard to our fundamental belonging to history and language. The transformation called for by Gadamer is that we need to think history and language less as obstacles and more like what enables us to understand and to search for accurate knowledge in the first place. Thus, history is not what we need to escape from to reach the understanding of something. On the contrary, it is in history that we make the full experience of understanding, it is in our belonging to history that we encounter the event of truth. In the same way, ‘being that can be understood is language’ means that language is the mode of our openness to the world, the horizon in which we can truly understand being.

The picture of the humanities drawn by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* must be understood as a rediscovery of the experience of art and of the humanist tradition. Gadamer undertakes to retrieve an experience of truth, distinct from the model of the methodical truth and the objective knowledge of the natural sciences, by a phenomenological description of the experience of art. This can however only be done, if

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we free the experience of art from the narrow confines of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer wants to offer a better understanding of what is characteristic of the humanities, by avoiding the Scylla of reducing the human sciences to the methodological model and the Charybdis of reducing them to the aesthetic dimension. The experience of art reveals that there is a form of truth that is more like an event than like a pure product of method; it is an ‘experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science’.

In the work of art, something is presented, revealed, and gives rise to thoughts. The subject who makes the experience is totally concerned and engaged in this experience. Like in a game, the subject is hooked by what is happening. This represents exactly the opposite of the model of the distant and disinterested observer favored in the natural sciences.

It is in this context that Gadamer goes back to the sources of the human sciences in the ‘humanoria’. His aim is less to oppose a conversational mode of thinking to a more constructive one than to defend the kind of knowledge and truth we deal with in the field of the human sciences. For this, Gadamer has to fight against the forgetfulness of the humanist tradition by rediscovering its guiding concepts: Bildung, sensus communis, judgment and taste. To guard against Rorty’s one-sided appropriation of these ideas, a closer look at these concepts is needed.

With Hegel, Gadamer understands the notion of Bildung primarily as the ability of the educated human being to rise to the universal in breaking with the immediacy and the particularism of his personal situation. This means, among other things, leaving the narrow circle of private life to enter in the social life and to participate in a shared culture.

This is what happens for example with every child who leaves the family’s house to go to

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school. To reach the universal also means being capable of rational thinking. Through education and conversation we develop the capacity to acquire different points of view and put them into perspective, instead of being blinded by our personal view or by a private interest or desire. In this way, we confront ourselves with the otherness or the strangeness that we need to take into account and to appropriate. This is what Gadamer sees in Hegel’s description of the dialectical movement of spirit:

To recognize one’s own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical Bildung, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of Bildung that begins much earlier. Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own. Thus every individual is always engaged in the process of Bildung and in getting beyond his naturalness, inasmuch as the world into which he is growing is one that is humanly constituted through language and custom.¹⁹

Actually, this movement characterizes not only Hegel’s dialectic, but also the hermeneutical experience as such. What Gadamer describes as the task of understanding is precisely to appropriate what is alien. Hermeneutical experience takes place in the tension between a fundamental belonging and openness to otherness. Through the learning of the language, the process of education and socializing, one is introduced in the culture of the community to which one belongs, understands one’s own tradition and also discovers other cultures or civilizations.

In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty rightly underlines that Bildung (or edification) has in a way ‘no goals outside itself’.²⁰ This means that Bildung is not only a mean to achieve something else, but a goal in itself. However, does it imply, as Rorty

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holds, that Gadamer is here substituting the notion of Bildung for that of knowledge? To be sure, as Rorty suggests, an educated person is not necessarily a ‘human encyclopedia’ knowing all the results of all the research going on in the field of science. But an educated person is clearly someone who knows how to think, how to ask good questions and to distinguish what is most relevant from what is not. He or she also knows how to move towards knowledge and this implies being open to new understandings and to the possibility of learning from the dialogue with others (the contemporaries and the tradition). This openness and receptivity also requires formation and preparation. An educated person has developed what Helmholtz calls ‘tact’, which has for Gadamer a distinct cognitive value. As he explains: ‘The tact which functions in the human sciences is not simply a feeling and unconscious, but is at the same time a mode of knowing and a mode of being’. It is a mode of knowing in a field where the results cannot be warranted by a strict methodical approach alone.

The same thing is true for the three other guiding concepts of humanism Gadamer signals out, sensus communis, judgment and taste, but which Rorty fails to take into account and even to mention (‘). Gadamer clearly wishes to underline their cognitive relevance, which was obvious for the humanist tradition, before being downplayed and even erased by Kant and the emergence of the aesthetic consciousness. What the humanists call the ‘sensus communis’ is less a sense or a faculty possessed by every

human being, than a result of the process of formation. As Gadamer puts it, education is a ‘training in the sensus communis’.

To be educated means to be introduced in the community, to develop a sense of the community or a sense of the principles on which a community is founded. The sensus communis is also what used to be called by Scottish philosophers such as Hutcheson the ‘common sense’, a sense of what is right and of what can be true. This sense is indeed, for Gadamer, a real source of knowledge, even if it does not correspond to the kind of scientific knowledge based on methodical research. It is more like a wisdom formed by tradition and shared by the community. Gadamer insists on the relevance of this knowledge for the human sciences:

There is something immediately evident about grounding philological and historical studies and the ways the human sciences work on this concept of the sensus communis. For their object, the moral and historical existence of the humanity, as it takes shape in our words and deeds, is itself decisively determined by the sensus communis.

Therefore, in the field of the humanities, the scholar and his object are determined by the sensus communis. In other words, it is by his belonging to history and to a community that the individual is formed and is then able to study and understand concretely the moral and historical existence of humanity.

The concepts of judgment and taste also help us understand the kind of knowledge and truth we can reach in the human sciences. Judgment, in humanist thinking, sums up the capacity to apply what we have learned to new particular cases, where there is no methodic rules to accomplish correctly the work of application. It doesn’t only characterize a work of subsumption of particular cases under a universal concept. It

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entails an appreciation of the particular cases for themselves, an awareness of their particularity and a search for sound judgment. In this sense, judgment is not something we can learn, like the results of objective knowledge. Rather, it is a type of ability or capacity related to a form of wisdom and not to logical proofs or to a methodical knowledge. Nevertheless, Gadamer maintains, judgment can be formed through education and it possesses a moral and a cognitive significance. As he explains:

Common sense is exhibited primarily in making judgments about right and wrong, proper and improper. Whoever has a sound judgment is not thereby enabled to judge particulars under universal viewpoints, but he knows what is really important – i.e., he sees things from right and sound point of view.26

This ability is manifest when we say of someone that she has a ‘good sense’ of things. This means to be able to make a wise decision in regard to a particular context and to know how to react in different situations. What Gadamer suggests is that, in a similar way, a good scholar in the field of the humanities is someone who knows how to make sound judgments, someone able to distinguish what is important from what is not.

The moral and cognitive significance of judgment is exhibited in particular in the judgment of taste. We are certainly accustomed to say that taste cannot be discussed. This is probably true of what we call ‘personal tastes’ (e.g. taste regarding flavors). But Gadamer reminds us that the notion of taste was understood differently by the humanist thinkers. At the time, the notion was more related to moral life than to aesthetic or personal preferences. It is only with Kant’s Critique of Judgment that this meaning started to change. Here again, taste is not simply something we can learn like an input of

information. Taste is a faculty that needs to be developed through a process of Bildung. This is what is meant when we talk about ‘good taste’ (and its opposites: having ‘bad taste’ or ‘no taste’ at all). In this context, taste is not only a private thing. In fact, taste implies that one is able to take a distance from one’s more private preferences to make a sound judgment. Taste is, for the humanist tradition, obviously linked to moral life and it possesses a claim to validity:

The concept of taste undoubtedly implies a mode of knowing. The mark of good taste is being able to stand back of ourselves and our private preferences. Thus taste, in its essential nature, is not private but a social phenomenon of the first order. […] One must have taste – one cannot learn through demonstration, nor can one replace it by mere imitation. Nevertheless, taste is not a mere private quality, for it always endeavors to be good taste. The decisiveness of the judgment of taste includes its claim to validity.27

Thus, taste is a mode of knowing and its judgments are accompanied by a type of certainty. It is a sense of what is convenient or suitable regarding different particular cases. This is the reason why Gadamer can claim that taste was the achievement of moral judgment for the Greeks as well as for the humanist tradition, since their ethics were an ethics of good taste.28

4. Conclusion

Rorty is certainly right to say that Gadamer’s hermeneutics understand philosophy and the human sciences as conversation and edification. However, Rorty’s picture of a ‘Gadamerian culture’ doesn’t do justice to the main orientation of Truth and Method. His reading of the chapter on the humanist tradition leaves behind what is most important for

Gadamer, the idea that a rediscovery of the guiding concepts of the humanist tradition helps us to describe the type of truth and knowledge adequate to the human sciences. This is what is set aside if one reads the first part of *Truth and Method* following the structural oppositions of Rorty’s pragmatic philosophy. A closer examination of the role of this chapter in the argument of *Truth and Method* and of the analysis of the four guiding concepts reveals that Gadamer tries to describe an experience of truth that cannot be reduced to a purely methodical truth. The guiding tenets of the humanist tradition refer to a mode a knowing that differs from the modern ideal of the objective knowledge in the natural sciences. It is, above all, a mode of knowing based on the ability to make sound judgments on what is accurate, relevant or suitable in regard to different particular cases. It is also a mode of knowing where the individual is totally engaged in the understanding or in the conversation with other scholars and with tradition. When we take all these things in consideration, we can say, against Rorty’s reading, that the contribution of Gadamer is indeed to think *the humanities as a conversational search for truth and knowledge*. 