

## RATIONALITY, DIALOGUE, AND CRITICAL INQUIRY: TOWARD A VIABLE POSTFOUNDATIONALIST STANCE

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**ABSTRACT:** Given the long-standing and deeply rooted intertwinement between reason and philosophy, there is a pressing need to reappraise our operative conceptions of rationality and critical inquiry in the wake of the transition from foundationalism to postfoundationalism. For while opening up exciting new vistas, this transition poses perplexing problems regarding how we might go about justifying our knowledge claims without the possibility of recourse to incontrovertible foundations, indubitable starting points, or algorithmic procedures. The challenge is all the more acute given that the turn to language and intersubjectivity that characterises this transition has fostered the proliferation of a diversity of competing and allegedly self-validating worldviews, that render the encounter with difference an indispensable feature of the contemporary epistemological landscape while reinforcing the threat of relativism and groundlessness. Through engaging with the work of Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michel Foucault, three theorists widely recognized as major contributors to the contemporary debate, the present paper responds to these problems by seeking to delineate the constitutive features of a dialogically-oriented conception of rationality and critical inquiry capable of meeting postfoundationalist needs. In the process, it reinforces the advantages of the reading these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional, as has typically been the case.

**Keywords:** Rationality; Foundationalism; Postfoundationalism; Habermas; Gadamer; Foucault

Given the long-standing and deeply rooted intertwinement between reason and philosophy, in the wake of the far-reaching philosophical paradigm shift from foundationalism to postfoundationalism,<sup>1</sup> there is a pressing need to reappraise our operative

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1. For a succinct overview of the significance of this term as it is intended here, see G.B. Madison, 'Philosophy without Foundations', Reason Papers 16 (1991), especially pp. 15-29. As a designator for our contemporary philosophical situation, it seems preferable to the term 'postmetaphysical' used by Habermas and others. For while, 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), the present paper endorses the hermeneutic contention that, as Grondin again puts it, 'through hermeneutics, a differentiated, more subtle, and more

conceptions of rationality and critical inquiry. Through engaging with the work of Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michel Foucault, theorists widely recognised as major contributors to the contemporary debate, the present paper responds to this need by seeking to delineate the constitutive features of a dialogically-oriented conception of rationality and critical inquiry commensurate with the defining characteristics of our postfoundationalist situation. To set the scene, it will be helpful to begin by briefly reviewing some notable challenges posed by the transition from foundationalism to postfoundationalism.

Along with belief in indubitable foundations, a subject-object divide, a representational theory of knowledge, and adherence to ‘the ideal of a universal method’, the traditional foundationalist paradigm was characterized by the conviction that ‘human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice, and tradition’, and that ‘by the power of self-reflection we can transcend our historical context and horizon and know things as they really are in themselves.’<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the transition to postfoundationalism is marked by a loss of faith in these erstwhile certainties, with significant consequences for how we construe the epistemological project. Thus, sustained challenges to traditionalist foundationalist presuppositions have resulted in a loss of faith not only in indubitable foundations, but also in atemporal truths, superordinate legislative standpoints and infallible algorithmic procedures for adjudicating knowledge claims. Challenges to ‘the Cartesian paradigm of the solitary thinker’<sup>3</sup> have resulted in a corresponding loss of faith in the monological subject as the indisputable fulcrum in the quest for knowledge and understanding, and in the correlative recognition of language and intersubjectivity as the media wherein we must proffer and seek to justify our knowledge claims. Correlatively, the demise of traditional foundationalist certainties has been accompanied by a growing recognition of the historicity, finitude, and fallibility that characterise our inquiries, and of the correspondingly conditioned status of the epistemic resources at our disposal for the critical adjudication of proffered knowledge claims. Thus, while opening up exciting new vistas, the transition from foundationalism to postfoundationalism also poses perplexing questions regarding how we might go about justifying our knowledge claims without the possibility of recourse to incontrovertible foundations, indubitable starting points, or algorithmic procedures. The challenge is all the more acute given that the turn to language and intersubjectivity that marks this transition has promoted the proliferation of what Habermas terms a ‘diversity of voices’, effectively, a diversity of competing worldviews, or conceptual frameworks, each viewing itself as self-validating in its own right and correspondingly resistant to holding itself accountable to any forum beyond itself.

It is against this background that the passage from foundationalism to postfounda-

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dialogical understanding of metaphysics can be brought about’ (ibid., p. 17); and as delineated by Madison the term ‘postfoundationalist’ embodies this possibility.

2. Cf. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 36.

3. For this apt designation, see Thomas McCarthy, translator’s Introduction to Habermas’s *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. vii.

tionalism ‘imposes’ on us ‘the obligation’ of ‘redefining what it means to be ‘rational’”<sup>4</sup> To respond effectively, we need to make progress in formulating what Habermas aptly terms a ‘nondefeatist’ conception of rationality and critical inquiry, one that can accommodate the features that characterise our postfoundationalist situation while avoiding groundlessness and radical relativism. In this regard, we can derive some comfort from the fact that postfoundationalism is not yet tantamount to postmodernism, with its now familiar connotations of groundlessness, arbitrariness, and irrevocable relativism. Accordingly, the demise of foundationalism need not entail the negation of the possibility of rational grounding, nor that ‘anything goes’. But to vindicate this contention, we need to make progress in delineating a conception of rationality and critical inquiry that in addition to securing its critical efficacy in the absence of indubitable foundations, can harness not only the historicity and finitude but also the pluralism and difference that characterise our postfoundationalist situation as resources for, rather than as barriers to, the situated critical appraisal of knowledge claims.

To this end, in what follows I engage critically with the work of Jurgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Michael Foucault, three theorists widely regarded as major contributors to the ‘new conversation’ informing the contemporary debate about postfoundationalist philosophy and its implications. Notwithstanding significant differences in the texture and structure of their thought, there are numerous, though typically concealed, points of interrelation and overlap in their respective approaches. In particular, the present analysis serves to confirm Richard Bernstein’s assessment that when we think through what contemporary contributors to this debate are saying and try to discern a common thread running through this ‘new conversation’, ‘we are led back to the fragile, but persistent ‘ideal’ of dialogical communicative rationality’.<sup>5</sup> For, although not apparent at first sight, through engaging in an element of ‘destructive retrieve’,<sup>6</sup> we can come to discern a significant dialogical undercurrent in their thinking, and on this basis make progress in delineating the constitutive features of a dialogically oriented conception of rationality and critical inquiry well suited to postfoundationalist needs. In so doing, both the merits and legitimacy of reading these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional as has typically been the case, will also begin to come to the fore.<sup>7</sup>

4. ‘Philosophy without Foundations’, p. 27.

5. *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 52; see too pp. 48-50, 337; also *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp. 77-78, 172, 229-30.

6. As intended here, this term denotes a reappropriation of a thinker’s position in accordance with its constitutive features with a view to liberating possibilities inherent in that position not sufficiently developed nor perhaps explicitly highlighted by the theorist 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’, *Research in Phenomenology* 7 (1977), pp. 106-37; for a succinct summary, see Kockelmans’s *Heidegger and Science* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1985), especially pp. 59-62.

7. My treatment of these themes in the present paper is a condensed version of the more detailed analysis undertaken in part I of my recent monograph *Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue: Toward a Viable Postfoundationalist Account of Rationality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). In what follows, the reader is periodically referred to the longer work for a more extended analysis of specific issues.

With these ends in view, it is now time to take stock of how critical engagement with Habermas can help advance our core project.

## HABERMAS

Given his commitment to redefining for our times what it means to be rational, the work of Jurgen Habermas presents itself as a natural starting point. What distinguishes Habermas's contribution in particular is his acute awareness that the transition to post-foundationalism requires us to sever our ties to the monological subject as the indisputable fulcrum for reason and knowledge in favour of embracing the turn to language and intersubjectivity as the requisite starting point for underwriting a 'nondefeatist' conception of rationality. But while Habermas's core intuition in this regard is of decisive significance for the present project, his contribution to 'redefining what it means to be "rational"' for our times embodies some telling shortcomings.

Especially problematic from the perspective of present concerns is his embrace of a set of 'idealizing presuppositions', posited as necessary to secure nondefeatism. Although avowedly counterfactual, the problem is that their idealised connotations are profoundly at odds with our acknowledged status as situated inquirers, with the result that they generate untenable tensions in a postfoundationalist theory of knowledge. As a corrective, there is a pressing need to replace them with regulative orientations more commensurate with our postfoundationalist status. To this end, we need to undertake a focussed critique of these 'strong idealisations' with a view to working out a more defensible postfoundationalist alternative. Fortunately, as we shall see, in the course of modifying his position to better accommodate the situatedness, historicity, and fallibility that characterise our postfoundationalist situation, Habermas himself has provided us with some important guiding clues, without however going far enough in the requisite direction. In what follows, then, the aim will be to build on these guiding clues with a view to liberating possibilities inherent in his position but which remains masked by his idealising proclivities, thereby correcting for the weaknesses of his unduly idealised stance. In the process, it will become clear that to complete the break with the 'philosophy of the subject' which motivated his 'communicative turn' from the outset in a manner that can liberate liberating the potential for situated learning that lies at the heart of his communicative project, a dialogical reappropriation of Habermas's discursive stance is needed. On this basis, a critique of the Habermasian strong idealisations can provide us with a preliminary specification of the constitutive features of a more defensible postfoundationalist alternative, one that can be refined and extended in the sections that follow. As a step in this direction, it is now time to embark on a focussed critique of the postulated unconditionality of truth claims, the first of the problematic idealisations.

From early on, an emphasis on the unconditionality of validity claims, and of truth claims in particular, has figured prominently in Habermas's thinking, and with qualifications continues to do so in his more recent writings.<sup>8</sup> As in the case of his other

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8. See, e.g., *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 322-23; cf. *Justification and Application*, trans. Ciaran

idealizations, Habermas defends the postulation of unconditionality primarily on the grounds that it is necessary to secure nondefeatism under postfoundationalist conditions. Essentially, he maintains that without recourse to a truth standard that “blots out” space and time’ and ‘bursts every provinciality asunder’,<sup>9</sup> it would not be possible to secure the nondefeatism of critical reason in the face of the ‘contextualist threat’ deriving from the diversity of allegedly self-validating paradigms, linguistic formations, and worldviews that proliferate in the wake of the ‘linguistic turn’ which characterises the transition to postfoundationalism.<sup>10</sup> As considered further below, Habermas insists that the presupposition of unconditionality is needed to ensure that knowledge claims are held open to rigorous critical scrutiny in an indefinitely extended array of appropriately constituted forums of intersubjectivity, as he maintains is required to secure grounding under postfoundationalist conditions. On the debit side, however, this ‘strong idealisation’ conflicts sharply with our acknowledged postfoundationalist status as situated and fallible inquirers, to the extent that it engenders unsustainable tensions within an epistemological stance committed to meeting postfoundationalist needs. At a minimum, it constitutes what Thomas McCarthy terms ‘a potentially misleading hypostatization’,<sup>11</sup> effectively limiting the capacity of Habermas’s communicative stance to do justice to the parameters of our postfoundationalist situation. As a corrective, building on guiding clues provided by Habermas himself, the following short critique makes the case for an appropriately detranscendentalised alternative that can secure his nondefeatist aims by building on the strengths of his communicative stance while minimising its weaknesses.

From a postfoundationalist perspective, a first major problem with the postulation of unconditionality is that, although avowedly counterfactual, 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, a possibility that is simply not available to us as situated, finite inquirers. Correlatively, in masking the inherently conditioned status of the truth claims on which we must rely in practice, it deflects attention away from the resources that we, as situated inquirers, actually have at our disposal in a postfoundationalist context for the critical appraisal of truth and other validity claims. To his credit, Habermas has increasingly sought to distance himself from these idealised connotations, acknowledging that ‘the extramundane perspective of a God’s-eye view’ constitutes a perspective that ‘is radically different from the lines of sight belonging to innerworldly participants and observers.’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, he has gone so far as to explicitly acknowledge that our actual concern needs to be with claims that are ‘held to be true here and now’,<sup>13</sup> and hence with what has been termed ‘warranted

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Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 145-46; 164-65.

9. Cf. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 322-23.

10. For a developed treatment of this theme, see further *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William M. Hohengarten. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), especially ch. 6.

11. See David C. Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 76.

12. Cf. *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 145.

13. Cf. *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, pp. 137; ‘A Reply’, in *Communicative Action*, eds A. Honneth and H. Joas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 231-32.

assertability? But in themselves these concessions are not enough to dispel the tensions generated by his continued embrace of this idealisation while simultaneously emphasising our status as inherently situated inquirers.<sup>14</sup> By the same token, his erstwhile defence of unconditionality as integral to the very ‘grammar’ of the truth concept<sup>15</sup> sounds increasingly hollow and unconvincing in light of his increasingly explicit emphasis on the fallible and corrigible status of our truth claims. A similar assessment applies with regard to the connotations of immutability that inevitably also accrue to this idealisation. Given Habermas’s avowed fallibilism as well as the need to acknowledge the inherent mutability of our truth claims as they undergo sustained critical appraisal from diverse situated perspectives, the connotations of immutability generated by this idealisation are simply not defensible. Moreover, in masking the inherently conditioned and mutable status of the truth claims on which we must rely in practice, it threatens to undermine the fallibilistic learning process that the logic of Habermas’s position avowedly presupposes. Importantly too, it needs to be recognised that, since it retains unconditionality as one of its poles,<sup>16</sup> Habermas’s recourse to a ‘Janus-faced’ conception of truth cannot suffice to remedy this deficiency. Instead, what needs to be acknowledged is that while our knowledge claims reflect our best current estimation of the truth of the matter, they nonetheless represent no more than a partial and provisional understanding of the subject matter under investigation, an understanding that will need to be reconceptualized, if not transformed, as inquiry advances in response to critical input from a diversity of standpoints and with shifts in our historico-cultural vantage point. As a corrective, we need to eschew this idealisation in favour of a regulative orientation that can do justice to the inherently conditioned status of the truth claims with which we must deal in practice, and which can thereby enable us to make better use of the discursive resources actually available to us for their situated critical appraisal in a postfoundationalist context.

Fortunately, despite the problems spawned by his continued endorsement of this ‘strong idealisation’, in drawing attention to the ‘aporetic tension’ generated by ‘the possibility of distinguishing between what is true and what we hold to be true’,<sup>17</sup> Habermas has provided us with an important guiding clue as to how the nondefeatism of communicative reason might be effectively secured by appropriately detranscendentalised means. That is to say, what actually needs to be presupposed to underwrite the nondefeatism of our truth claims in a postfoundationalist context is their context-transcendence, not their presumed unconditionality. As elaborated below, this ‘weaker’ regulative orientation is sufficient to achieve the envisaged effect of ensuring that they are held open to critical scrutiny in an indefinitely extended array of appropriately constituted intersubjective forums, thereby fulfilling the primary requirement that Habermas specifies as the ra-

14. For Habermas’s acknowledgement of our situated status, see, e.g., *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 322. 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.

15. See ‘A Reply’, p. 232; cf. *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 138.

16. See, e.g., *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 322–23; *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 142.

17. See in particular *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, pp. 138–39.

tionale for defending unconditionality.<sup>18</sup> Importantly too, this detranscendentalized alternative has the merit of refocussing our attention on the dynamics and logic of the situated intersubjective processes whereby proffered truth claims must have their evidential credentials appraised in a postfoundationalist context,<sup>19</sup> thereby better positioning us to adequately conceptualise the situated learning processes that, as Habermas recognises, are integral to rationality on a postfoundationalist analysis. The following short critique of Habermas's long-standing valorisation of the concept of an 'ideal speech situation'<sup>20</sup> will serve to reinforce this assessment, as well as extending our understanding of the constitutive features of a more defensible postfoundationalist alternative.

As in the case of unconditionality, the postulation of an ideal speech situation is inherently problematic in a postfoundationalist context firstly because it conjures up the ideal of attaining an unconditioned, 'God's-eye' standpoint from whence the acceptability of truth claims could be conclusively established, unaffected by any of the situational constraints of the sort that, on a postfoundationalist analysis, are acknowledged to condition our situated inquiries. In addition, it conveys a misleading sense of homogeneity among participants that serves to mask, if not negate, the diversity of standpoints that we, as situated inquirers, actually occupy. Hence, as considered further below, it fails to take adequate account of the impetus provided by the encounter with otherness and difference in motivating a situated process of mutual learning. By the same token, this idealisation can all too easily conjure up the possibility of a ready-made framework of commensuration capable of obliterating fundamental differences in perspective. In addition, it can connote the possibility of engaging in a *single* meta-discourse with the capacity to resolve at once all differences that might arise in localized contexts of inquiry. In this case too, to his credit, Habermas has increasingly sought to distance himself from these idealised connotations, emphasising that he harbours no illusions about the possibility of our attaining an idealised meta-standpoint such as would enable us both to transcend our conditioned status and resolve all differences in perspective deriving therefrom. Instead, he acknowledges that whatever outcome is achieved will, as Simone Chambers perceptively puts it, inevitably be 'the cumulative product of many

18. See, e.g., *Justification and Application*, pp. 145-46, 164-65; *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 322-23, 408-409, n. 28.

19. Cf. Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, pp. 75-76.

20. In introducing his theory of communicative competence, a forerunner of the theory of communicative action, Habermas already asserts that 'the design of an ideal speech situation is necessarily implied with the structure of potential speech' ('Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', *Inquiry* 13 (1970), p. 372). But it is in '*Wahrheitstheorien*' (in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion*, ed. H. Fahrenbach (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), pp. 211-65—not available in English translation) that Habermas presents the most developed statement of his conception of the ideal speech situation. For the background to, and rationale for, this problematic idealization, see McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), ch. 4.2, especially pp. 306-10; also Rick Roderick (1986), *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), ch. 3, especially pp.73-79. For an incisive expose and early critique, see too John Thompson, 'Universal Pragmatics', in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, eds J. Thompson and D. Held (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 116-33. For a succinct overview of early criticisms, see Roderick, *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 85-86.

crisscrossing conversations over time.<sup>21</sup> But while stopping short of breaking completely with this problematic idealisation, Habermas has again provided us with an important guiding clue as to how the requirements embedded in the ideal speech situation might be appropriately specified in detranscendentalised terms. In particular, he has made it clear that the ideal speech situation is intended to function primarily as a shorthand summary of the conditions needing to be satisfied if the forums of intersubjectivity in which our knowledge claims are tested are appropriately structured so as to ensure the rationality and objectivity of this process and its outcomes. More specifically, as a precondition for underwriting the rationality and objectivity of proffered knowledge claims, he has highlighted the need for these forums to be so structured as to incorporate the argumentative ground rules needed to ensure the rigorous critical appraisal of claim and counterclaim.<sup>22</sup> In addition, in endorsing the Toulmin model of argumentation, he has gone some ways toward delineating the argumentative procedures that he believes are needed to regulate the situated exchange of claim and counterclaim in a manner conducive to underwriting the principled advancement of understanding about the subject matter under investigation. But to render this proposal fully compatible with the requirements of a postfoundationalist theory of knowledge he would need to complete the break with this problematic idealisation. In addition, he would need to rethink the adequacy of the Toulmin model as a template for the envisaged process of situated learning. For, notwithstanding its advantages over earlier, more decontextualised and homogenised models, being inherently monological in structure, the Toulmin model of argumentation remains severely limited in its ability to underwrite a truly dialectical exchange of views of the sort that the situated appraisal of validity claims actually calls for in a postfoundationalist context,<sup>23</sup> especially given the acknowledged diversity of viewpoints this encapsulates. Since the Habermas/Toulmin model is insufficiently dialectical to be capable of underwriting a process of ongoing position modification in light of sustainable objections and hence incapable of sustaining the type of situated learning process that postfoundationalist rationality ultimately calls for, we will need to look to our other theorists to see if they can provide a more fitting template. But, first, to complete our critique of the problematic idealisations, it is now time to consider the limitations inherent in Habermas's embrace of idealised consensus as the overarching *telos* for postfoundationalist inquiry, with a view to establishing the need for a more defensible alternative.

Committed to the idea that 'the condition of the truth of statements is the poten-

21. *Reasonable Democracy: Jurgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 169.

22. See, e.g., *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, p. 25; *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 87-92; *Justification and Application*, p. 163.

23. For Habermas's endorsement of the Toulmin model, see in particular *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, pp. 24-27. On the inherently monological status of this conception of argumentation and on the need to go beyond it in a dialectical, and indeed dialogical, direction, see further Mary Hesse, 'Habermas and the Force of Dialectical Argument', *History of European Ideas* 21 (1995), pp. 367-78; see too Paul Healy, 'Critical Reasoning and Dialectical Argument: An Extension of Toulmin's Approach', *Informal Logic*, IX (1987), pp. 1-12.

tial agreement of all others',<sup>24</sup> from early on Habermas has enshrined the concept of a rationally motivated consensus arrived at under ideal speech conditions as another cornerstone of his position, and with modifications it too continues to figure prominently in his more recent writing.<sup>25</sup> But as in the case of the other idealisations, given the tensions it engenders within a situated theory of knowledge, it too needs to be abandoned in favour of a guiding orientation more conducive to the requirements of our postfoundationalist situation. Since problems pertaining to its ideality and unconditionality have already been adequately canvassed in critiquing the other idealisations, this short critique focuses instead on problems specific to this idealisation. At bottom, the core problem is that in one-sidedly valorising consensuality Habermas radically underestimates the importance of disagreement and difference as indispensable stimuli for fuelling the rationally motivated advancement of understanding about a contested subject matter, notwithstanding his acknowledgment of their pervasiveness as defining characteristics of our postfoundationalist situation. More specifically, the problem is that although Habermas acknowledges the need to incorporate the possibility of disagreement as a condition for terming debate 'rationally motivated', he fails to accord it a positive or productive role in advancing the progress of inquiry. What is thereby overlooked is that the encounter with someone who disagrees, or who occupies a different discursive standpoint, constitutes our primary motivation to reassess, refine and, if need be, modify our initial claims about a contested subject matter. Since the very real differences in perspective that differently situated participants bring to bear have an indispensable role to play in generating a rich and textured understanding of the subject matter under investigation, an adequate postfoundationalist approach must do justice to the fact that, far from constituting an inconvenient obstacle to be peremptorily overcome in the push toward consensus, the very progress of inquiry beyond its starting point depends in large measure on the impetus provided by the persistence of disagreement and difference.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the validity and worth of the encounter with disagreement and difference must not be subordinated to the attainment of consensus, but must rather be acknowledged as integral to very structure, dynamics and logic of a mode of rational inquiry commensurate with postfoundationalist needs. Hence, a one-sided emphasis on consensus must give way to a regulative orientation more commensurate with the process of situated learning that Habermas rightly valorises as integral to postfoundationalist rationality. Given that it connotes the prospect of attaining a rich and textured understanding of the subject matter, whose validity and worth transcend that of mere agreement, the aim of 'reaching understanding' presents itself as a promising alternative.

24. 'Wahrheitstheorien', p. 219; cited in McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, p. 299. As McCarthy notes (ibid.), this contention is a 'much revised version' of the Peircean dictum that: 'The opinion which is fated to be agreed upon by all who investigate is what we mean by truth.'

25. See, e.g. *Justification and Application*, pp. 164-65.

26. See further Paul Healy, 'Argumentation, Rational Disagreement, and the Rhetorical Constitution of Objectivity', in *Proceedings of the Third ISSA Conference on Argumentation*, vol. I: *Perspectives and Approaches*, eds Frans van Eemeren et al, (Amsterdam: International Centre for the Study of Argumentation, 1995), pp. 62-71.

The tenability of this assessment is reinforced when we recall that, though eclipsed by his consensual proclivities, from early on Habermas has always valorised ‘reaching understanding’ as an ideal,<sup>27</sup> but without sufficiently registering important distinctions between these interrelated concepts.<sup>28</sup> Pending further elaboration in later sections, the main distinction at issue is that, unlike idealised consensus, a commitment to reaching understanding presupposes neither a univocal framework of commensuration nor the elimination of disagreement and difference as *sine qua non* for rationality. Instead, what the aim of reaching understanding presupposes is that, through a principled exchange of good reasons emanating from a diversity of perspectives, each side progressively comes to better understand the views proffered by the other and remains committed to learning from their strengths. Hence in contrast to a one-sided emphasis on consensus and in keeping with Habermas’s thoroughgoing fallibilism, reaching understanding calls for the modification of initial positions under the impetus of the encounter with difference and embraces this as a prerequisite for the forging of an enlarged and enriched framework of understanding. While a measure of consensus may well be implicated in this process of mutual learning, it is the latter rather than the former that has priority, such that there is no expectation that significant differences in perspective will give way to outright agreement even in the long run. The aim of reaching understanding is thus intended to correct for the limitations of a one-sided emphasis on agreement by fostering a genuine openness to learning from difference.

As noted, the aim of the foregoing short critique of key Habermasian ‘idealizing presuppositions’ has been to build on the strengths inherent in his communicative stance while correcting for its weaknesses, with a view to making progress in delineating the constitutive features of a conception of rationality better attuned to postfoundationalist needs. Proceeding thus, I have sought to establish that to secure nondefeatism in a manner commensurate with the parameters of our postfoundationalist situation, the postulation of unconditionality needs to give way to the embrace of a robust context-transcendent truth standard which, in virtue of preserving the ‘aporetic tension’ inherent in the distinction between what is true and what we hold to be true, suffices to ensure that proffered knowledge claims are held open to critical scrutiny in an indefinitely extended array of situated forums. Likewise, to meet the requirements for a situated theory of knowledge, the valorisation of an ideal speech situation needs to give way to the specification of an argumentatively grounded dialectical procedure for the rigorous critical appraisal of knowledge claims in appropriately constituted intersubjective forums. Correlatively, in a postfoundationalist context characterised by pluralism and difference, the postulation of idealised consensus as the anticipated outcome for situated rational inquiry needs to give way to the aim of ‘reaching understanding’ about a contested subject matter under the impetus provided by a principled exchange of good reasons by diversely situated participants. In its favour this move toward a detranscendentalised re-

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27. See, e.g., his ‘Universal Pragmatics’ in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1979), p. 1; *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, p. 288.

28. Cf. Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, pp. 180, 181.

appropriation of the Habermasian idealisations has the virtue of liberating the potential for situated, dialogical learning inherent in Habermas's position but typically masked by the problematic idealisations. Moreover, given that it is motivated by the need to overcome untenable tensions within his position, this dialogical reappropriation cannot easily be dismissed as an external imposition. Instead, it emerges as needed to fulfil the very aims that motivated Habermas's 'communicative turn' from the outset.

The critique of the Habermasian idealisations thus provides us with an invaluable starting point for our investigation into the constitutive features of an appropriately grounded postfoundationalist conception of rationally motivated critical inquiry, generating insights that can be tested, extended and refined through engagement with our other theorists. Given its sensitivity to the ways in which our historico-cultural situatedness inevitably conditions our ability to engage in a situated learning process of the sort prefigured in the foregoing, we next need to take stock of what we can learn from Hans-Georg Gadamer about the hermeneutic dimension of inquiry with a view to ascertaining how this might contribute to advancing our core project.

## GADAMER

More specifically, in this section the aim is to show that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can provide a needed corrective for Habermas's 'highly abstract concept of coercion-free discourse which totally loses sight of the real conditions of human praxis'.<sup>29</sup> In particular, it can do so in virtue of his vindication of the intrinsically situated and contextual character of human understanding and the inherently interrogative and developmental conception of inquiry to which it gives rise, whereby the attainment of each new level of understanding opens up new horizons for investigation, as does each shift in historical perspective. Given these and related characteristics, it has much to offer as a template for a dialogical mode of inquiry well attuned to postfoundationalist needs, even if to foreground the extent of Gadamer's contribution there is a need to engage in an element of 'destructive retrieve', informed by the debate with Habermas. To this end, it will be productive to begin by reprising Gadamer's critique of the Habermasian ideal speech situation, as a prelude to exploring the inherently situated and dialogical alternative it opens up. In the process, it will become clear that notwithstanding its avowed ontological orientation, fundamental epistemological questions lie at the heart of the hermeneutical project.

From early on, Gadamer has been a trenchant critic of the presupposition of an ideal speech situation, contending that a 'standpoint that is beyond any standpoint ... is a pure illusion',<sup>30</sup> and that it represents 'an impossible ideal, similar to the "divine perspective" of a metaphysical theology'.<sup>31</sup> Reinforcing the critique of the previous section, he

29. See Gadamer's 'Reflections on My Philosophical Journey', in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Hahn (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), p. 32.

30. *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 376.

31. Cited in Soffer, 'Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Objectivity in Interpretation', *Praxis International*, 12

severely challenges the tenability of this presupposition on the grounds that it conjures up the possibility of attaining an atemporal, presuppositionless and aperspectival kind of knowing, which is simply not commensurate with our situated status. On hermeneutic premises, what such an idealisation overlooks in particular is the fact that ‘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.’<sup>32</sup> Since, even ideally, ‘we can never grasp the subject matter as such or all at once,’<sup>33</sup> it does not make sense to postulate an idealised knowledge situation wherein we could come to complete reflective awareness of a given subject matter, and acquire wholly transparent and unconditioned knowledge of it. Nor is it tenable, even ideally, to posit a vantage point, or speech situation, from which the merits of all contributions taken together could be comprehensively and transparently assessed.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, on hermeneutic principles, a fundamental contradiction is involved in positing as an ideal for inquiry a contextless knowledge situation that effectively presupposes the equivalence and interchangeability of all contributors and contributions, without regard for fundamental differences in hermeneutic situation or standpoint. In effect, then, the postulation of an ideal speech situation is altogether untenable because it denies, or negates, the inherently temporalized, perspectival and processual character of human understanding and learning. Furthermore, in overlooking the need to factor in new insights and perspectives as these emerge with the progress of inquiry, it fails to do justice to the temporalized learning processes needed to underwrite the situated advancement of understanding. As a corrective, Gadamer valorises a situated dialectical conception of inquiry better suited to the characteristics that define our postfoundationalist situation. Thus, reflection on core features of the Gadamerian template will enable us to gain invaluable additional insight into the constitutive features of a dialectical process of situated learning that can secure the principled advancement of understanding by non-idealized means.

Noteworthy in the first instance is the inherently interrogative character of his situated, dialectical conception of inquiry.<sup>35</sup> Eschewing a preoccupation with the validation of validity claims, Gadamer is emphatic that genuine inquiry begins with a question—along the lines of ‘how do matters stand with the subject matter?’—requiring that we look to the ‘thing itself’ to ascertain how it ‘answers’. Since to settle for a prefabricated answer would be to foreclose inquiry, the guiding question must remain open and con-

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(1992), p. 243.

32. See Brice Wachterhauser, ‘Prejudice, Reason and Force,’ *Philosophy*, 63 (1988), p. 233.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

34. Gadamer’s rejection of the tenability of such a standpoint is evident from his vigorous opposition to 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*, ed. B. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), especially p. 58; also Rudiger Bubner, ‘On the Ground of Understanding,’ *ibid.*, p. 75).

35. See *Truth and Method*, pp. 362-79. See too p. 269, where Gadamer defines ‘the hermeneutical task’ as centered on ‘a questioning of things’. For a more extended defense of the ‘logical priority’ of the question, see Gadamer’s ‘What is Truth?’, in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Wachterhauser, pp. 33-46.

tinue to inform the progress of inquiry for its duration. Claims are of course made as inquiry advances but, importantly, their status is simply that of temporary answers, provisionally asserted on the way to an enhanced, even transformed, understanding of the subject matter, which will emerge only through sustained engagement with the guiding question. This opening up of a question is, for Gadamer, the decisive event initiating inquiry—just as the holding open of the question is an indispensable prerequisite for its continuance—essentially because in this way we acknowledge that we do not already know how matters stand regarding the subject matter, but are investigating with a view to finding out. Correlatively, given that our understanding of the subject matter is inevitably conditioned by inherited presuppositions of which we may not even be aware, we need to reserve judgment pending the surfacing and testing of the relevant presuppositions. In addition, acutely aware of the partial and perspectival character of human understanding, the hermeneutic stance reminds us that we are inevitably viewing the matter under investigation from a particular vantage point, and that others who occupy different hermeneutic standpoints will have different viewpoints and perspectives to bring to bear—to which we need to remain open, if we truly aspire to attain a well-textured understanding of the subject matter commensurate with the possibilities afforded by our historico-cultural situation. Thus invoking the Socratic *docta ignorantia*,<sup>36</sup> Gadamer reinforces the importance of ‘openness’ as a constitutive feature of an inherently situated mode of inquiry oriented toward promoting the principled advancement of understanding.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, however, recognising that ‘deciding the question is the path to knowledge’,<sup>38</sup> he embraces the model of Platonic dialectic, grounded in a logic of question and answer, as the appropriate template for the situated learning process needed to underwrite the advancement of understanding on a principled basis. Epitomising what is at issue here, Rudiger Bubner provides us with the following insightful characterization of the core dialectical model as valorised by Gadamer:

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.<sup>39</sup>

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36. *Truth and Method*, p. 362f.

37. Moreover, 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).

38. *Truth and Method*, p. 364.

39. ‘On the Ground of Understanding’, pp. 72-73.

What this passage brings to the fore in particular is the centrality of structured conversation, or dialogue, as the route to attaining a well-textured understanding of the subject matter. In this connection, it alerts us to the conjoint, interactive character of the dialectical learning process at issue, the priority accorded the subject matter in leading the conversation forward, and its guiding aim of producing ‘unity through dialogue’. Given their significance for our core project, these constitutive features warrant further elaboration, beginning with the hermeneutic centrality of dialogue. Here, the core contention is that, as a corrective for the excesses of idealised discourse, the hermeneutic approach valorises the interrogative, dialogical structure of ‘talking something through’, with a view to progressively working out a (provisional) resolution to an open question, the answer to which was not known at the outset. A first noteworthy implication is that, notwithstanding his emphasis on the ‘event-like’ character of understanding, contrary to what has sometimes been maintained,<sup>40</sup> it is not the ‘enlightening’ that is ultimately decisive when it comes to determining what to believe. Instead, as Dostal and Bubner attest,<sup>41</sup> the ‘model of conversation is the primary model throughout Gadamer’s work on the experience of truth’. Understanding and truth come about ‘when we take the time to dwell on the matter at hand in conversation with another’.<sup>42</sup> Far from being decisive, then, the enlightening is simply a ‘moment’ in an ongoing dialectical process, whose overall aim is that of enriching, and indeed transforming, our understanding of the subject matter under investigation.<sup>43</sup> Importantly too, although often overlooked when the phenomenological roots of his thought are stressed, a commitment to an inherently dialogical conception of inquiry is no mere adjunct to Gadamer’s 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’.<sup>44</sup> A further noteworthy implication is that, notwithstanding his avowedly ontological orientation, Gadamer by no means eschews the epistemological dimension of inquiry. Rather, in embracing the Platonic template, he affirms his commitment not only to holding proffered knowledge claims open to ongoing critical appraisal with a view to ensuring their attunement to the things themselves, but also to deciding questions on the basis of ‘the preponderance of reasons

40. Thus for example, Lawrence Schmidt contends that 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’ (‘Uncovering Hermeneutic Truth’, in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 79). On this assessment, the ‘event-like’ character of understanding embodies a self-evident validity that does not stand in need of further justification; the enlightening simply is self-validating.

41. See Dostal, ‘The Experience of Truth’, especially pp. 58-62, and Bubner, ‘The Ground of Understanding’, especially pp. 72-73.

42. ‘The Experience of Truth’, p. 49.

43. Thus, as Dostal perceptively puts it, ‘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”’ (‘The Experience of Truth’, pp. 66-67).

44. See further P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), p. 191.

for the one and against the other possibility'.<sup>45</sup> To advance our core project, we now need to take a closer look at how Gadamer goes about discharging this commitment. To this end, we can productively take our cue from Christopher Smith, who has performed an invaluable service in elucidating the 'interrogative dialogical logic' centrally at issue,<sup>46</sup> which for the most part remains implicit in Gadamer's own statement of his position. In so doing, we will also gain additional insight into the other constitutive features highlighted by Bubner, namely, the conjoint, interactive character of this dialectical learning process, the priority accorded the subject matter in leading the conversation forward, and its guiding aim of producing 'unity through dialogue'. Above all, however, it will become clear that, to be 'completely true' to its Platonic prototype, the appropriate model for the dialectical learning process whereby we make progress in 'deciding the open question' needs to be 'what Gadamer calls *Gesprach*', that is to say, a cooperative process of 'conversation and discussion', oriented toward reaching understanding.<sup>47</sup>

Echoing Bubner's emphasis on mutuality, Smith reinforces the hermeneutic commitment to the conjoint, interrogative, exploration of a subject matter of common interest whereby, as dialogue partners, we suspend a proclivity to assert the superiority of our preconceived views in favour of allowing ourselves to be led forward by the subject matter itself. Thus, in contrast to the standard adversarial model of argumentation 'in terms of claim and counterclaim each advocated by the individual party as the commitmentless adversary of the other', the hermeneutic approach is defined by its commitment to engaging with another in a conjoint inquiry into a topic of common interest and to following it together 'where *it* would lead us'.<sup>48</sup> On the hermeneutic template, then, in contrast to the standard adversarial model, the guiding orientation is that of "'*Sich-Verstandigen in einer Sache*", reaching understanding in a matter'.<sup>49</sup> Correlatively, in awareness that pending the further progress of inquiry, things 'could either be this way or that',<sup>50</sup> this 'interrogative dialogical logic' serves to remind us that that, 'far from being stated as a "claim" at the beginning, the answer is always still to be arrived at'. In contrast to 'the monological logic of demonstration', then, the decisive consideration is that a question is 'opened up and properly delimited'.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter, the progress of inquiry is characterised by the interrogative, dialogical structure of 'talking something through',<sup>52</sup> with a view to progressively working out a (provisional) resolution to an open question, the answer to which was not known at the outset. Moreover, this inherently interrogative orientation exerts its influence on the process of inquiry throughout all its phases, such that 'not

45. *Truth and Method*, p. 364

46. 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 Healy, 'Critical Reasoning and Dialectical Argument', pp. 1-12.

47. Cf. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', p. 173.

48. Cf. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', p. 176.

49. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', p. 175.

50. Cf. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', p. 167.

51. Cf. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', pp. 165-66.

52. 'Toward a Discursive Logic', p. 170.

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.<sup>53</sup>

Complementing this inherently interrogative orientation and emphasis on conjoint inquiry, the hermeneutic approach accords priority to the subject matter itself in leading the conversation forward. Thus as Gadamer 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’.<sup>54</sup> Commensurate with this guiding orientation and in contrast to the standard adversarial model, the hermeneutic template valorises ‘the very different goal of merging the horizons of only seemingly opposed viewpoints in a clarified consensus that neither party had wholly in view to begin with’.<sup>55</sup> This shift in guiding orientation is needed to do justice to the core hermeneutic insight 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’.<sup>56</sup> It thus reminds us that, as co-participants in this situated dialectical process, instead of seeking to secure agreement about the correctness of a proffered validity claim or trying to establish the superiority of our preconceived views, we should aspire to achieve a potentially transformative insight into the subject matter through a fusion of our horizons of understanding. As Gadamer himself evocatively puts it, what is envisaged is that 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’.<sup>57</sup> When properly engaged in, then, the process of situated dialogical inquiry culminates, not in the validation of validity claim, but in our ‘being transformed into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were’.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, however, this outcome will only eventuate provided we are prepared to forego a preoccupation with vindicating our own initial prejudgments in favour of remaining open to learning from the encounter with otherness to the extent that we are 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’.<sup>59</sup> To this end, we must seriously attend to the views of our dialogue partners, 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

53. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, p. 169.

54. *Truth and Method*, p. 378.

55. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, pp. 173-74.

56. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, pp. 163-64.

57. *Truth and Method*, p. 379.

58. *Truth and Method*, p. 379.

59. *Truth and Method*, p. 361. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 385, where 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.

truth than our own.<sup>60</sup> As Gadamer has it, 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 in this event it follows that, notwithstanding Gadamer’s many references to ‘agreement’, ‘consensus’ and the like, the hermeneutic approach ultimately valorises a considerably more open-ended, developmental conception of inquiry, oriented more toward the transformative advancement of understanding than toward agreement about a preformed viewpoint. Hence, while the advancement of understanding does indeed entail ‘coming-to-an-agreement-with-another’, this should not be construed as necessitating that all parties come to agree on any of the initially proffered positions. Instead, as Bubner aptly puts it, ‘in Gadamer’s telling interpretation’, dialectical inquiry needs to be understood as anticipating ‘the overcoming of the given points of departure, thanks to the dominance of the subject matter that sustained the dialogue’. What is ‘definitive’, rather, is that ‘both sides are bound by the task of the actual elucidation of the subject matter’,<sup>61</sup> and this in a sense that presupposes both the transcendence of initial viewpoints and a willingness to learn from those who occupy different hermeneutic standpoints. In short, as Smith aptly puts it, what *Sich-Verständigen* presupposes as *telos* of hermeneutic inquiry is, not consensus as such, but ‘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’.<sup>62</sup> Under these conditions, as Gadamer evocatively puts it, ‘what emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours.’<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, then, what the *telos* of ‘coming-to-an-agreement-with-another’ primarily presupposes is 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 considerably beyond that initially available to the individual participants. Hence, while it would not do to interpret *Sich-Verständigen* as at odds with consensus, on hermeneutic premises the goal of reaching understanding in a sense that connotes the attainment of an enriched, even transformed, understanding of the subject matter under investigation ultimately warrants priority. Accordingly, what is primarily called for is that we commit ourselves to a conjoint process of situated dia-

60. Cf. Kathleen Wright, ‘Gadamer: The Speculative Structure of Language’, in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. B. Wachterhauser (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 20: 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.

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

62. ‘Toward a Discursive Logic’, pp. 163-64.

63. *Truth and Method*, p. 368.

lectual inquiry, such that, while it presupposes a certain ‘at oneness’ with our interlocutors, necessitates that we forego easy agreement in the interests of attaining a rich and textured understanding of the previously inadequately understood subject matter. And importantly, being underwritten by a distinctive ‘interrogative dialogical logic’, there is nothing arbitrary about this emergence, or occurrence, of transformative insight. Rather, as epitomized by Georgia Warnke, it eventuates through a principled process of ‘integration and appropriation’, whereby participants neither seek to defeat their interlocutors nor to bolster their own positions. Instead, in keeping with the dialogical logic of dialectical inquiry, what is required 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.’<sup>64</sup>

Finally, by way of consolidating its merits as a viable postfoundationalist template, it should be noted that, contrary to what some have claimed, the hermeneutic approach does not succumb to the criticism that it collapses ‘the ideal to the real’ in the sense of eschewing the need for, or possibility of, a regulative truth concept capable of giving impetus and direction to our critical endeavours.<sup>65</sup> Where such a criticism goes astray is in overlooking Gadamer’s commitment to ‘the anticipation of completeness’, which functions as an indispensable hermeneutic resource for underwriting the quest for objectivity and truth. In the present context, suffice it to note that in embracing this concept Gadamer valorises ‘the complete truth’ as a core regulative ideal, enjoining that the hermeneutic inquirer be ‘guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said.’<sup>66</sup> Clearly, then, his eschewal of the problematic Habermasian idealisations does not cause him to neglect the need for a context-transcendent truth standard as a precondition for underwriting our situated inquiries. Equally importantly, however, given the hermeneutic emphasis on situatedness, historicity, and the inherently open-ended character of inquiry, it is clear that Gadamer’s references to the ‘complete truth’ must not be understood in a sense that connotes either his espousal of an unconditioned truth concept or of an idealized vantage point from whence the (complete) truth could be atemporally ascertained. Rather, in proffering a given interpretation what needs to be borne in mind is that that far from exhausting the significance of the subject matter under investigation, it simply affords us one situated perspective on the complex whole toward which we are oriented in the effort to understand. Nonetheless, in thus projecting an interpretation, we remain intrinsically related to the whole in the sense of the full range of (valid) interpretations that the subject matter can support.

As noted at the outset, the aim of our encounter with Gadamer has been to establish that the hermeneutic template has a decisive contribution to make in advancing our core project while correcting for the limitations of the unduly idealised Habermasian

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64. *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 101.

65. Cf. Soffer, ‘Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Objectivity in Interpretation’, especially pp. 253-54.

66. *Truth and Method*, p. 294.

prototype. As we have seen, a first notable feature is the way in which the hermeneutic approach valorises a conception of inquiry that is continuous with our everyday concerns and lifeworld involvements, thereby eschewing a separation between the domains of communicative interaction and (theoretical) discourse. In so doing, it alerts us to the fact that critical reason cannot secure its nondefeatism by negating its situatedness, but must rather secure its grounding by non-idealized means. More specifically, it apprises us that far from seeking to neutralise our prejudgments, we need to become more reflectively aware of them and bring them actively into play, with a view to putting them to the test. Moreover, given our situated status, the surfacing and testing of prejudgments presuppose a process that, far from being absolute, presuppositionless or ideal is situated and perspectival, yielding outcomes that are finite, fallible and open to reappraisal. Accordingly, hermeneutic thinking valorises an inherently interrogative approach, whereby inquiry begins, not with the assertion of a claim construed as representing the unequivocal truth of the matter about which all reasonable participants will, over time, come to agree, but with a question, a question that remains open and guides the inquiry for its duration and that always remains open to re-examination. In addition, the requirement of openness enjoins us, actively and vigorously, to test the cogency of our prejudgments in as many varied forums as possible, with a view to modifying our initial positions if our prejudgments are shown to be wanting. And notwithstanding its avowedly ontological orientation, philosophical hermeneutics does not eschew concern with procedures of critical appraisal. On the contrary, in embracing the model of Platonic dialectic Gadamer clearly signals his commitment to deciding questions on the basis of ‘the preponderance of reasons for the one and against the other possibility’, and provides us with a template for a situated learning process that can underwrite its development by non-idealized means. As we have seen, this template is characterised in particular by its commitment to the centrality of structured conversation, or dialogue, as the route to attaining a well-textured understanding of the subject matter. More specifically, it alerts us to the conjoint, interactive character of the dialectical learning process at issue, the priority accorded the subject matter in leading the conversation forward, and its guiding aim of producing ‘unity through dialogue’. In thus correcting for the limitations of the unduly idealised, static and monological Habermasian stance, the hermeneutic template has the capacity to underwrite a developmental conception of inquiry that liberates the potential for situated learning inherent in the Habermasian stance but inhibited by his idealising proclivities.

Notwithstanding these decisive merits, it remains the case that our postfoundationalist situation poses still other challenges, most notably those of transgressing entrenched presuppositions and of accommodating the encounter with radical diversity and difference which Gadamer’s relatively traditionalist approach is not especially well equipped to handle.<sup>67</sup> In the next section, then, we turn to the consideration of Michel Foucault’s

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67. While a careful reading of *Truth and Method* makes it clear that Gadamer does not neglect the themes of otherness and difference to the extent that is sometimes maintained, it is equally clear that the challenges posed by the encounter with radical diversity and difference do not figure prominently in his thinking.

contribution to this debate to ascertain how it might enable us to better respond to these and related facets of our postfoundationalist situation.

## FOUCAULT

Since the aim in the present section is to advance our core project by foregrounding facets of postfoundationalist critique overlooked or downplayed by our other theorists, it is not Foucault's treatment of power relations, predominant in much existing critical commentary, that achieves prominence here, but rather his problematising, transgressive conception of inquiry and the light he sheds on the pluralistic, decentered, and contested character of contemporary forums of intersubjectivity. In thus alerting us to the problematising dimension of inquiry and in foregrounding the indispensable role that the encounter with difference has to play in promoting the potentially transformative advancement of understanding, Foucault has a distinctive contribution to make toward advancing our core project, notwithstanding his reputation in some quarters as a radical relativist or irrationalist. Accordingly, although necessarily circumscribed, the present analysis serves to reinforce Alcoff's assessment that far from being inherently anti-epistemological, as has frequently been claimed, Foucault's project has the potential 'to refashion rather than undermine epistemology and to move it onto more productive terrain.'<sup>68</sup> To gain a sense of what is at issue in this regard in the present context, it will be productive to begin with a brief reflection on Foucault's distinctively problematising conception of critique and on the importance of the encounter with difference in stimulating the transformative advancement of understanding before going to take stock of what we can learn from him about the constitution of the forums of intersubjectivity in which we must hold our knowledge claims open to appraisal in a postfoundationalist situation.

Embracing the challenge of thinking differently, Foucault eschews a preoccupation with validating what is already known in favour of a commitment to liberating new possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. In thus celebrating the activity of 'limit testing' aimed at 'deconstructing necessity', he presses the boundaries of the more conservative approaches we have thus far considered. In so doing, he goes beyond Gadamer as well as Habermas in alerting us to the constricting effects that unreflective adherence to what is taken to be beyond question can have on our thinking, and hence to the need to be willing radically to call into question what are considered to be the 'contemporary limits of the necessary'. In thus apprising us 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 our other theorists in promoting an inherently transformative conception of inquiry, dedicated to liberating new possibilities for thinking, doing and

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68. See further Linda Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), especially pp. 115-16. But while the present analysis reinforces Alcoff's overall assessment of his contribution, it foregrounds aspects of Foucault's thinking that challenge the boundaries of a coherentist reading of his work.

being.<sup>69</sup> Correlatively, he contributes decisively to our core project by apprising us of the importance of the encounter with difference in motivating the transformative advancement of understanding. In particular, he highlights its potential to serve as a ‘contrastive foil’ with the capacity both to alert us to beliefs and presuppositions we were not aware of holding and to acquaint us with other hitherto unrecognized possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. He achieves this outcome by apprising us of the force of the concealed presuppositions that condition and restrict our thinking, and of the correlative need to remain open to new possibilities that inhere in other ways of thinking and doing that can challenge our presumed self-evident certainties. In this way he alerts us to the importance of the encounter with otherness and difference in fuelling a situated learning process that can transform our whole way of thinking, and hence to the importance of respecting and preserving difference at every stage of our critical endeavours, instead of ignoring or suppressing it in the push toward consensus as more traditionally minded theorists tend to advocate.

Especially noteworthy for present purposes, Foucault makes a decisive contribution to refining our appreciation of the conditions needed to underwrite the potentially transformative advancement of understanding by radicalizing our understanding of the constitution of the forums of intersubjectivity in which our knowledge claims must be critically appraised in a postfoundationalist context. To appreciate the nature and extent of Foucault’s contribution in this regard, it is necessary to recognise the challenge he poses to the presumed need to remain answerable to some superordinate legislative standpoint as a prerequisite for effective critique, in favour of vindicating the critical potential inherent in holding our knowledge claims open to ongoing critical appraisal in diverse localised forums of intersubjectivity.<sup>70</sup> In this connection, what warrants attention in particular is that although he has been criticised for not conforming to an idealised Kantian ‘tribunal acceptable to all free, reasoning beings’,<sup>71</sup> Foucault’s avowed aim is to challenge the idealised, homogenising presuppositions that underpin the notion of a Kantian tribunal or a Habermasian ‘universal audience’ in favour of valorising the need to defend our knowledge claims in diverse, situated and conflicted forums in interaction with others who occupy very different discursive standpoints.<sup>72</sup> In the present context suffice it to note that Foucault’s eschewal of the need to appeal to an idealised Kantian or Habermasian ‘tribunal’ is epitomised by his celebrated valorisation of ‘subjugated knowledges’, wherein he highlights the importance of contesting ‘the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse’ so as ‘to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of

69. See further Paul Healy, ‘A “Limit Attitude”’: Foucault, Autonomy, Critique’, *History of the Human Sciences* 14 (2001), especially pp. 51-53.

70. For a more extended analysis of this theme, see further my *Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue*, especially pp. 68-70.

71. See James Schmidt and Thomas Wartenberg, ‘Foucault’s Enlightenment’, in *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), especially pp. 306-307.

72. See further Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, especially pp. 268-69.

struggle' against precisely that kind of 'coercion'.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in place of an idealised, acontextual forum of intersubjectivity purged of the influences of situatedness and difference, what achieves prominence on a Foucauldian analysis is the inherently pluralistic, decentred and contested character of these forums.<sup>74</sup> Correlatively, the need for appeal to an idealised 'tribunal' is rendered altogether otiose when it becomes clear that the intended aim can be achieved in a manner commensurate with the parameters of our postfoundationalist situation by liberating the critical potential inherent in the encounter with difference in diverse localised forums of discourse.

Valorising the merits of this Foucauldian alternative, David Hoy points out that instead of a 'contextless' abstraction like that of an idealised universal audience, 'what opens assertions to critical evaluation are more empirical events, such as finding some conflicting evidence, encountering someone who disagrees'.<sup>75</sup> On a Foucauldian analysis, then, we come to recognise that since 'we ourselves are the judges', we can forego appeal to 'some ideal panel of judges' in favour of continually re-examining our prejudgments and interpretations 'against other evidence and other interpretations' in diverse, localised forums of intersubjectivity.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, since direct engagement with others who occupy different discursive standpoints can provide all the critical potential we need (or could have), we lose nothing by replacing the presupposition of a universal audience with the injunction to hold our knowledge claims open to critical scrutiny in an open-ended series of pluralistic and decentred forums of intersubjectivity.<sup>77</sup> On the contrary, since the encounter with otherness and difference can fuel a transformative learning process, eschewal of the homogenizing presupposition of a 'universal audience' or Kantian tribunal in favour of a commitment to remaining open to learning from the encounter with difference represents a gain rather than a loss in critical efficacy. Indeed, since the encounter with otherness has the ability to function as a 'contrastive foil' which can cause us to take note of, and reassess, entrenched presuppositions we may not even have been aware of holding, it has a greater potential to fuel a process of transformative learning than what could be achieved under the aegis of an idealized,

73. *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 85.

74. On this aspect of Foucault's stance, see further Joseph Rouse, '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), pp. 153-61; also his 'Power/Knowledge', in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially pp. 110-13.

75. Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, p. 268.

76. Cf. *Critical Theory*, p. 269.

77. 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 transcendental, 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.

homogenized Kantian tribunal or a Habermasian ‘universal audience’. Nor is anything lost by abandoning the presupposition of idealised consensus inherent in the Kantian/Habermasian ideal. On the contrary, once we forego the notion of accountability to an idealised and homogenised Kantian/Habermasian tribunal in favour of endorsing the critical potential inherent in the to-and-fro movement characteristic of the encounter with difference, we come to recognise that, as Georgia Warnke perceptively puts it,<sup>78</sup> ‘each interpretive stance may retain its distinctiveness; it can also help to develop and enrich the others and, in turn, be developed and transformed by them’, without anticipating an idealised resolution of differences. By thus apprising us of the gains in transformative learning that accrue in virtue of the stimulus this provides for ‘enlarging one’s interpretations, and enriching them by holding them open to other interpretations’,<sup>79</sup> a Foucauldian analysis alerts us to the potential for transformative learning that inheres in the encounter with difference without the need for recourse to an idealised tribunal. In provoking us to reconceptualise both the nature of critical inquiry and the conditions under which it must operate in a postfoundationalist context, engagement with Foucault has an invaluable contribution to make toward extending and refining our appreciation of its constitutive features. In particular, it alerts us to the merits of eschewing a preoccupation with the validation of proffered claims in favour of embracing an inherently problematising approach, oriented toward testing the boundaries of what is currently considered to be beyond question. Correlatively, it challenges a perceived need to hold our knowledge claims accountable to a superordinate legislative tribunal in favour of holding them open to ongoing critical appraisal in diverse, localised forums of intersubjectivity. Moreover, in alerting us to the inherently pluralistic, decentred, and contested character of these forums, it eschews a one-sided emphasis on consensus in favour of valorising the transformative advancement of understanding.

But notwithstanding the extent of Foucault’s contribution to our core project in these respects, on further reflection it becomes apparent that his problematising project lacks two features which emerged as important in the course of our engagement with Habermas and Gadamer, specifically, the need for a context-transcendent, regulative truth standard capable of giving impetus and direction to our situated inquiries and a well-regulated dialogical procedure for the argumentative appraisal of proffered claims with the capacity to underwrite potentially transformative shifts in understanding. In this connection, what is of primary importance in the present context is to conclude our brief analysis of Foucault’s contribution by indicating why it is that, far from absolving us from meeting these requirements as is sometimes maintained, the endorsement of an inherently problematising and transformative conception of inquiry on Foucault’s part actually serves to reinforce their indispensability.<sup>80</sup> Thus in the first instance, although it has not infrequently been contended that Foucault’s valorisation of a plural concep-

78. *Justice and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 132; cited in Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, pp. 260-61.

79. Cf. Hoy and McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, p. 264.

80. For a more extended analysis of this theme, see further my *Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue*, especially pp. 77-79.

tion of truth enables him to dispense with the need for a robust context-transcendent truth standard, on closer analysis, it becomes clear that this is not in fact the case. In essence, this is because in the absence of such a standard we lack a key resource needed to determine which of the multiple knowledge claims emanating from diverse sites are worth learning from and which are not, and hence an indispensable feature needed to underwrite a process of transformative learning of the sort valorised by Foucault himself. In addition, as noted in connection with Gadamer, a context-transcendent truth standard is needed to fulfil the important integrating function of establishing an internal link between the range of valid viewpoints on a given subject matter. And in Foucault's case such an integrating focus is all the more necessary to minimize the threat of fragmentation that inevitably accompanies the incautious celebration of an irreducible pluralism of truths. Moreover, because integral to the very logic of inquiry, it is difficult to maintain that Foucauldian critique could be absolved from meeting this requirement, or that it constitutes an instance of "enlightenment blackmail" to require that it does so. The cogency of this assessment is reinforced by the fact that, contrary to what is sometimes supposed, not only does Foucault not actively reject the legitimacy of context-transcendent universals like truth,<sup>81</sup> on occasion he goes so far as to directly valorise the search for truth as an integral feature of a situated process of principled inquiry worthy of warranting our epistemic allegiance.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, we may conclude that far from negating the need for a context-transcendent truth standard, engagement with Foucault effectively serves to reinforce its indispensability.

A similar verdict is apposite in respect of the need to incorporate an integrated rule-governed procedure for the principled comparative evaluation of inputs from diverse standpoints, with the capacity to fuel a principled process of situated transformative learning. Here again, contrary to what is sometimes contended, this requirement cannot readily be dispensed with on the basis of an appeal to some distinctive feature of post-foundationalist critique of the sort foregrounded by Foucault. In particular, Foucault's Nietzschean commentators notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that, neither the activity of problematization nor its potentially transformative outcomes can qualify as self-validating.<sup>83</sup> 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, decentered and contested character of postfoundationalist forums of intersubjectivity to which Foucault specifically alerts us. On the contrary, under these conditions and in the absence of a superordinate legislative tribunal, the need for the specification of such an integrated rule-governed procedure becomes all the more necessary. Here again, this is because without the requisite argumentative procedures for establishing which contributions are worth learning from and which are not, we would lack a key resource for underwriting

81. See further Michael Kelly, 'Foucault, Habermas, and the Self-Referentiality of Critique' (in *Critique and Power*, especially pp. 382-89), where Kelly points out that Foucault's aim is not to deny the validity of universals like truth, but rather to highlight their historicity and deconstruct their presumed unconditionality.

82. See especially 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin, 1984), pp. 381-82.

83. See further Healy, 'A "Limit Attitude"', pp. 59-60.

the transformative advancement of understanding, a regulative orientation prefigured by the whole thrust of Foucauldian critique itself. Indeed, given a concern with rationality, the satisfaction of this requirement too emerges as non-negotiable since it is only on this basis that we could have good reason to believe that any advance in understanding was the result of a principled process of 'integration and appropriation' rather than a merely arbitrary, and correspondingly groundless, shift in our way of thinking. Nor can the need to meet this requirement easily be dismissed as a mere external imposition or as an instance of 'enlightenment blackmail', given that again in a late work Foucault explicitly endorses the need for a principled procedure of just this sort as indispensable for underwriting the integrity of a well-structured, truth-conducive process of inquiry.<sup>84</sup> Hence, here again, it can legitimately be concluded that, far from negating the need for this requirement, engagement with Foucault serves to confirm its status as integral to the very logic of inquiry,<sup>85</sup> thereby effectively reinforcing its non-negotiable status in a postfoundationalist context.

In conclusion, then, it is noteworthy that while recasting the terms in which the problem is construed, the foregoing analysis serves to confirm the widespread perception that Foucauldian critique lacks the full panoply of resources needed to underwrite its transformative aims. Furthermore, since the contributions of all three are needed to correct for the limitations of each individually, the foregoing analysis reinforces the advantages of the reading these theorists as complementary rather than as oppositional in the interests of formulating a viable postfoundationalist stance. Specifically with regard to our core project, while much work clearly remains to be done in consolidating the constitutive features that have been identified into a cohesive ground plan, it is hoped that the present paper has gone some ways towards vindicating the legitimacy and merits of a dialogically-oriented conception of rationality and critical inquiry as a worthwhile postfoundationalist template, and hence as an appropriate focus for the renewed contemporary debate about these fundamental philosophical topics.

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84. See especially 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations', pp. 381-82.

85. Cf. Bernstein, 'Foucault: Critique as Philosophic *Ethos*', in *The New Constellation*, pp. 165-66; cf. also James Marsh, 'Truth and Power in Foucault', in *Reinterpreting the Political*, eds L. Langsdorf and S. Watson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 303-304.