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**That Philosophy as Epistemological-Based is Not Debased:  
A Critique of Post-Modernist/Hermeneutic Critique of  
Traditional Philosophy\***

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**Abstract**

*Over the centuries, beginning with the classic Greeks through the trends of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophical enterprise has been intricately and seemingly irretrievably rooted in the theory of the given—an edification of philosophy as that giant mirror and standard for measuring what counts as knowledge; but is it thus synonymous with or reducible to epistemology? How or why? There are two answers to both of these questions. The attempt in this work is to delineate those separate concerns, their areas of convergence and disparity, but also indicated the genesis of edifying philosophy rooted in epistemology but which has been discredited in the works of some post-modernist reformers—Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, Quine, and Rorty. Against theirs, this piece shows that historically, philosophizing has had a methodology and some perceptual axioms; that it is not easy to abdicate it from this mode, no matter the will and zeal—for success is not a matter of will alone; that the post-modernists revolution is nothing new with its swollen nerves and arteries (as others before it, it soon wanes). It concludes that the urge for philosophic understanding shows no sign of abating and so the philosophical journey will probably go on and on, each stage building on and rewriting its past and ruminating specific but perennial problematic; that while some of the issues seemingly do appear resolved, others may have endured and eloped any final solution; and finally that the philosophical method and basic assumptions have seriously remained firmly even beyond post-modernist restructurers.*

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## I. Introduction: Philosophy and epistemology—A Synopsis

Is our lofty philosophical enterprise synonymous with or reducible to epistemology? How or why? The concern ignites the need to examine the idea that philosophy has been an epistemologically based discourse (and which has given it a kind of purpose); yet the province of epistemology constitute a small portion of that of philosophy. The attempt here is not only to adumbrate or delineate those separate concerns, their areas of convergence and disparity, but also to indicate the genesis of edifying philosophy rooted in epistemology but which has been discredited some post-modernist reformers. In other words, our concern is to ex-ray the bases or the instances, in a historical trajectory, where philosophy can be inextricably linked with epistemology or epistemological problems, which have given a kind of purported fertile-ground for this attempt at what John Dewey calls “reconstructions of philosophy”, and which had been championed by especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, John Dewey, Quine, and recently more practically articulated by Richard Rorty (1979). Nevertheless, would these challenges mean the death of traditional philosophy or epistemology as (Papineau, 1981/82) asks in his seminar article “Is epistemology dead?”? A proper analysis of the intricate issues could be instructive.

For a comprehensive presentation and analyses of the materials, we shall proceed with a synoptically delineation of the meanings of philosophy (its nature, origin, branches, *et cetera.*) on the one hand, and epistemology (its nature and problems) on the other. Subsequently, there will be an attempt to situate or tersely historicize the epochal or perennial problematic of philosophy. The object of this is to enable a sifting of the possible linkage of philosophy with epistemology. Accordingly, there will be need and presentation/review of the arguments of some philosophers who reason that the only ‘*sumum bonum*’ of modern practice of philosophy as that in need of what “deconstruction” and “reconstruction”.

The quest for deconstruction and reconstruction finds vivid support in the works of not only post-modernists, post-structuralism, but also in the Hermeneutics; accordingly, there emerges a need to review the basic tenets, content and mission of both strands, study a select bibliography (relevant) and thereafter synthesis them in order to highlight their implication for future philosophical exercise.

Simply put, philosophy is a word derived from Greek words (*Philos* = love, and *Sophia* = wisdom) and which is a disciple that is in search of wisdom in all of reality—social, economic scientific, religious, political etc.; its major branches include metaphysics, aesthetics, logic, and epistemology (Stumpf, 1975: 11). Epistemology, itself refers to a branch of philosophy which inquires into the nature and content of knowledge. In this wise, we can extrapolate that philosophy and epistemology are inextricably linked but which Rorty and others however attempt to abdicate *ab initio*. Not surprising though, philosophy is not only an inquiry and a method, it is not dogmatic but critical, prescriptive and, therefore, normative. In this way, it helps to build critical minds, point the way to order, thereby propelling development and progress.

And this pattern is historical. It has been held that the main problem of philosophy is to discuss and historicize perennial problematic. In other words, philosophy at various epochs of history has concerned itself with discussions of problems ranging from 'being' to 'essence' or 'knowledge' or 'justification', 'justice', 'God', 'matter', etc. and that this mode or tradition has recycled itself through the ages, with little variance, using the 'language-game'. According to Popkin (1999: 56) "the history of philosophy is always being rewritten in terms of newer developments", seeking knowledge and wisdom. Its successes and ever widening complexity raise the question as to what knowledge can ever be achieved through it. It seems, therefore, that determining the province of epistemology is a sine qua non for the progress of philosophical enterprise. This link could be indicated in a historical matrix, since "the task of epistemology is to explain how it is possible to have knowledge in each of the various areas of knowledge" (Pollock, 1974: 21).

### **Epistemological bases of philosophical discourse: A Terse Historical approach**

The pre-Socratic philosophers concerned themselves mainly with attempt to place all things under one concept. At this first stage, people were confused and though all was an imprecise unity. What made-up the "stuff" of things? Thus, Zeno developed the dialectics and Thales natural philosophy (Popkin: 760). Whether the basic stuff is fire or water or otherwise, the pre-Socratic philosophers and even the Aristotelean successors concerned themselves with the task of conjecturing nature and existence, with reasonable appeals to reasons, cosmology, universals, etc.

From the time of St. Augustine, attention had shifted from the Platonic forms and knowledge to the questions of God and his manifest stations. The defense of the existence and all-knowing nature of a benevolent God dominated the next three-quarter of a millennium. Whether was know or knowable was linked with God; we could discover ourselves and the world by leaning on God. This period of philosophy is termed scholasticism. But of what source can we apprehend God? This question did not surface until the Cartesian time. However, the medieval and modern times were separated by the age of renaissance the dark ages, where there was an attempt to return to the Platonic era, but suppressed by the church. Consequently, Greek mythology and traditional Christianity extolled the relevance and frequent instances of intervention of the gods or of God in human affairs, and they heightened the quest for knowledge. At other level, they thought of a *necessary being* as the basic explanation for the existence of finite things.

Vivid skepticism and the question of scope of human knowledge reared its head in the late-modern time, especially beginning with the philosophical works and methods of Rene Descartes (1596-1650). His "cogito" had engendered spontaneous and critical thought about the process of knowledge, consciousness, objects of knowledge, certainty, truth, etc. and thereby originated a heated debate between rationalism and empiricism.

It brought or resurrected the problem about truth and justification. In his 'cogito', Descartes lunched the modern period with:

*Architectonic imagery by affirming the need for a deconstruction of epistemic superstructure until one gets to a solid base upon which he can erect other forms of epistemic beliefs? (Owolabi, 2000: 64).*

His method of discovering truth Descartes calls “methodic doubt” and its first discovery is the “1” which is a basic belief, and all others (body, matter and God) non-basic. This method and findings is to Descartes, infallible and do not need further justification for its formed on reason and intuition (methodic doubt). It must be stated however that the cartelism categorization altered the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition and prompted the absolute skeptic mind. So the mind-body epistemology emerged, first, in the attempt to answer to the skeptics; and second, in the attempt to try to define the mind—whether it is mirror in the ancient sense, or in a hylomorphic sense. According to Popkin,

*The movement of the ‘free-spirit of enquiry’ into ‘principle’ happened only when an interest in abstract reasoning’s was developed by Descartes (Popkin, 765).*

Appropriately, the theory of knowledge as it is known today is a post-Cartesian phenomenon; it also marks the origin of the mind- body as a problem of consciousness. It marks a difference between the ancient contemplation of knowledge as physical apprehension and the Cartesian rationalism. This tradition endured through the centuries with threats by analytic philosophy in the last century. Thus, most of the particular criticisms of modern theorists were hammered by empiricists, on the one hand, and analyticists on the other. But “this emphasis on language ... does not essentially change the Cartesian-Kantian problematic... for analytic philosophy is still committed to the construction of a permanent, neutral framework for enquiring, and thus, for all of culture” (Rorty, 1979: 8).

Importantly, we must recall that the objective of this section was / is historicize philosophic discourse and we have found out that through the pre-Socratic, the Socratic, the medieval, modern times, philosophy ruminated between recurring problems: of being- justice, knowledge, justification, reason, matter, mind and consciousness, using the language–game. Notably, these concepts are/is epistemological and as well as metaphysical, therefore, philosophical. So, it is true that philosophy has for more than two thousand years been epistemology based.

Today, many philosophical practitioners decry the teaching of a litany of dead or false themes. Instead, they ‘want’ a deal only with what they consider ‘true’ philosophies. For many, the history of philosophy is seen as ‘a brief introduction to the history of human stupidity”, which lasted until Wittgenstein, Quine, Dewey and Heidegger, came along. But what did these men say that warrants the “deconstruction” of philosophic tradition of two millennia?

### **The deconstruction of philosophy as rooted in epistemology**

It might seem that the whole business of ‘accounting for’ knowledge, of showing our beliefs about the external world can be justified, must presuppose that there are certain ‘privileged representations’—certain beliefs not themselves in need of justification, ‘the given’ in other words. If our aim is the philosophical validation of doubtful beliefs, then surely, we need some indubitable beliefs to serve as premises in the validations, to provide a foundation for the superstructure of those beliefs. For the post-modernist, such is what is inferable from the ancient and the Cartesian traditions of foundationalism (Papineau: 1981:83).

Truly, traditional philosophers, ever since Plato, tried to discover or establish the ultimate foundations of knowledge, to provide grounding for absolutely certain truth. Most classical responses were experience-base, and the medieval thinkers mystified and rooted it on God. Centuries later, analytic philosophers, by contrast, scaled down the enterprise of philosophy to the more modest objective of discovering the foundations of meaningful language, instituting objectivity and verifiability of claims as the yardstick; thus several traditional issues were simply eliminated from the agenda and province of philosophy. Although this was as revolutionary as was Socratic adulation of knowledge and moral justice, as was medieval presuppositions about God, as was the Cartesian requirement of the thinking being, “the I”, and as was Kant’s distinction of analytic/apriori truths, analytic philosophy (as was other strands before it) does not represent a departure from the traditional concerns of philosophy (provide a foundation for knowledge).

However, it had seemed to a number of modern philosophers—Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rorty and Quine, amongst others—that once the idea of ‘the given’ is indicated, discredited and rejected, then the search for ultimate philosophical justification of knowledge<sup>8</sup> should be abandoned altogether.

On his part, V.W.O. Quine (1953) had argued that many of the functions of traditional epistemology can still be served if we ‘naturalize’ the enterprise and conduct it from within accepted scientific theory, rather than as a propaedeutic to science. The aim then is not to stand outside science and show how we can manage, in our interaction with the world, to acquire reasonable beliefs. In this consideration, there is no room for unnatural philosophy—to try an epistemological foundation for non-philosophical knowledge (Popkin, 648-650). Yet, before Quine, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger had argued even more devastatingly.

John Dewey (1929), following his pragmatism, schism and a niche for philosophical praxis, had criticized the historical philosophical traditions as promoting or perpetrating deplorable misuse of intelligence. Dewey emphasized that there exist some biological and psychological aspects involved in thinking; as well, he also recognized the socio context in which intellectual problems arise and are resolved; unfortunately, for Dewey, over the centuries, philosophers have not been diligent or considerate enough to recognize these facts. Instead, philosophers since the medieval time have tried to produce rigid and abstruse theories which they have tried to impose on intellectual activity—without any reference to whether or not they apply. This

scheme and attitude has resulted in philosophy becoming almost entirely useless in terms of actual human needs; thus philosophers, especially since Descartes have often been carried away with the search for complete assurance not relevant to human situations. Consequently, for Dewey, however, what is presently needed is a “reconstruction of philosophy”, lending back to the role it had in the Greek times, directed towards solving human problems. Dewey believes with Marx that “the aim of philosophy should be not simply to understand the world but to change it” (Bunnin and Yu, 2004:179).

The II Wittgenstein (1958), and using an analogy of St. Augustine’s notion of time, noted that traditional philosophy is a conceptual activity that attempts in non-scientific, non-factual, or non empirical ways to understand the nature of the world, including its human inhabitants which “essence is hidden from us”. For him, philosophy is not a fact finding discipline but its function is to change one’s orientation to and understanding of reality, by calling one’s attention to facts one has known but seen as unimportant. Wittgenstein therefore, sees an alternative to “a picture held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it by our language, and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.” Further, Wittgenstein declares:

*Philosophy simple puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.... One might give the name ‘philosophy’ to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions. The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.... We must do away with all explanations, and description alone must take its place (Popkin, 633).*

Like Quine and Dewey, Wittgenstein believes the problem of search for explanation resulted from platonic ‘Forms’ and Cartesian ‘mind’, ‘I’ or ‘Cogito’, thereby instituting a bases for search for some foundation of knowledge, for certainty; the task now is then how to emerge from these ego-centric predicaments.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1962), argues that self-awareness is not a reflective self-representation of mental life at a moment along Cartesian lines but rather the temporary extended practical end emotional awareness of oneself in terms of one’s own possibilities, options, etc. Hence, to Heidegger, the concrete analysis of phenomena involves a “destruction” or “deconstruction” of the tradition that provides the background for the place where we find ourselves today. He argues that it is being, and therefore history context which shape one’s conception. Accordingly, technology, for example, is not a set of human practices or even a basic worldview; it is a form of being itself. Invariably, Heidegger had influenced a shift of philosophical emphasis, away from Cartesian subjectivity to some more dynamic models of human life; away

*from theoretical cognition of reality in favour of practical understanding of possibilities (from knowledge- that to knowing- how – to), from scientific knowledge to everyday familiarity... from truth as correspondence to truth as an event of things becoming manifest, and*

*from an emphasis upon unchanging universal structures to historical and contextual situatedness (Popkin, 645).*

In America and elsewhere, Heidegger's attempt to overcome the traditional methods and concepts of philosophy has inspired philosophers to seek of new (alternative) ways to philosophize. Of immense importance is the prolifically vehement Richard Rorty.

In his seminar work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty try to show the non-systematization of traditional philosophy, and the irrelevance of epistemology and metaphysics. Rorty traced the origins of modern usages of the terms (epistemology and metaphysics) to the Cartesian quest to answer the skeptics and thereby, the invention of the mind—for which, though, he criticizes as setting out on a mission or enquiry after setting out the/its goals (Popkin, 10-45). Rorty also traced how Cartesianism has resulted to destructive skepticism and philosophy as epistemologically based discourse just as medieval times was scholastically. He argued and indicated that the metaphysical “problem of consciousness” is no more and no less than the epistemological problem of “privilege access”. Rorty (Popkin, 10) does not only view knowledge as a social phenomenon, contextually justifiable, he meaningfully used the analytic tools of Ryle (and other analytic tools) to try to reconstruct philosophy by recourse to the past and castigating their “appeals to linguistic habits”. This could also be the reason in what many critics think is an attack on analytic philosophy, when Rorty (1982: 217) averred that “. . . analytic philosophy has become, whether it likes it or not, the same sort of discipline as we find in the other “humanities” departments—departments where pretensions to “rigor” and to “scientific” status are less evident”. Consequently, Rorty holds, all the philosophical aversions, debates, and disputations over the years, however, are not only irrelevant but also unnecessary. He posits that Wittgenstein's “theory of new representation”, Heidegger's “new set of philosophical categories”, and Dewey's vision of “naturalized history” respectively tried to reject the 17<sup>th</sup> century notions of knowledge and mind. To be clear, he says about those men:

*For all three, the notions of “foundations of knowledge “and of philosophy as revolving around the Cartesian attempt to answer the epistemological skeptic are set aside... this is not to say they have alternative “theories of knowledge” or “philosophies of mind”. They set aside epistemology and metaphysics as possible disciplines... their attitude towards the traditional problematic is like the attitude of seventeenth century philosophers toward the scholastic problematic (God) (Popkin, 10).*

Theirs, Rorty argues, is not skepticism, but is a “reconstruction” of philosophy to suit relevant issues in the world's social, economic, political, science- technological spheres. It is a kind of pragmatic view, away from pseudo-problems and dissipation of intellectual energies on them to confronting palpable social problems; that philosophy as a praxis be a second-order discipline (i.e. at the service of other areas of knowledge and human needs). While projecting such a philosophy, Rorty holds that its

epistemological strand whatsoever be discarded. Fortunately for Rorty and the philosophical post-modernist/deconstructionists, and towards the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their ideas became congenial to the neo-Marxians and the ideals of hermeneutics.

### **Evaluating post-Modernist/Hermeneutic challenge to modern philosophy**

The critique of modernity has been the chief commitment of critical theory, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and communitarianism. Each criticism is from a separate standpoint and from a different understanding of modernity since the whole project of modernity formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop a philosophy fashioned after objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their own logic.

On its surface value, the doctrines of hermeneutics—a preferred method of interpretation first of texts, and secondly of the whole social, historical, and psychological world—may seem congenial to the thoughts of Dewey and his co-critics. Moreover, as anticipated by Vico, early hermeneutical theory criticized Cartesianism of his time for refusing or ignoring to recognize that mathematics and physical science (which Descartes over emphasized) and its certainty are human construction, that it neglected the possibility of social and historical knowledge. Rather, Vico claims that understanding any past mode of thought must take as its data and into account all the languages, myths, and traditions that are handed down, interpreted not in terms of a fixed idea of a universal human nature, including an imaginative capacity for re-entering the modes of consciousness that they represent. For Vico, human history is coherent and patterned through connected stages of growth and decay (Blackburn, 1996: 393). Knowing this is the foundation for knowledge, a foundation that Dewey and others obsess. Yet, studying these requires some coherent methodology and some assumptions. There lies the Achilles hill for the reformers. As stressed by Gadamer, true knowledge emerges where there is a shared meaning/understanding between a historically situated author and equally historically situated reader, giving room for constant re-interpretation and reevaluation, thereby instituting a projection of different meanings upon the same piece concerned (Gadamer, 1975; 1976). To sum up: what Gadamer has called ‘tradition’ is nothing other than the way in which our own horizons are constantly shifting through ‘fusion’ with other horizons. ‘In a tradition,’ he says, ‘this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly distinguished from the other’ ([9.7], 273). The all-inclusive name for the phenomenon in question is the ‘understanding’. To highlight in this way the ‘horizontal’ nature of understanding is, once again, to underscore the essential finitude of all understanding. ‘Philosophical thinking’, Gadamer insists, ‘is not science at all. . . . There is no claim of definitive knowledge, with the exception of one: the acknowledgement of the finitude of human being in itself’ (33). The important thing to note in this regard, however, is that while an emphasis on finitude rules out the possibility of our ever attaining to



‘definitive knowledge’, it does not exclude the possibility of *truth*. It does not, that is, if and when truth is no longer conceived of in a metaphysical fashion, as a state of rest in which one has achieved a final coincidence with the object in question (e.g., the meaning of a text), but is reconceptualized to mean a mode of existence in which we keep ourselves open to new experiences, to further expansions in our horizons. Truth, for Gadamer, is not a static but a dynamic concept. It is not an epistemological but an existential concept, designating a *possible mode of being-in-the-world*. When, in the very last line of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer speaks of ‘a discipline of questioning and research, a discipline that guarantees truth’, what he means by ‘truth’ tends to coincide with the notion of *openness*. This is why he writes: ‘The truth of experience always contains an orientation towards new experience.... The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself’ ([9.7], 319).<sup>34</sup> Much of the ideals of hermeneutics are also stressed by Henri Ricoeur.

Hermeneutics and the philosophy of deconstruction converge at some point of post-modernism—reconstruction, with strong emphasis on relativism; but while the latter rejects, the former prefers a great consideration for foundations in form of historical ideals and methods. Possible deconstruction of historical philosophy, therefore, has first to contend with the hermeneutic principles.

Post-structuralism rejects a static notion of meaning and is hostile to any system or attempt at system construction. While structuralism sees truth as being ‘behind’ or ‘within’ a text, post-structuralism stresses the interaction of the reader and his text as productivity. Postmodernist criticism of modernist concerns with meaning, truth, objectivity, rationality, and universality has not led a constructive alternative, but not having a constructive alternative is perhaps part of the point of postmodernism.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously, postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs our attention to changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture. Hence Dewey and other critics of foundationalism may well be thought of as caught in the hermeneutic circle; this results, perhaps, from their rejection, *ab initio*, that historically, philosophy as an activity has a method and has some perceptual beliefs. However, it is not easy to abdicate it from this mode; the will and zeal may be clear; but the success of an attempt is not solely a matter of the will. Even examining the success of the philosophical method and its assumptions might have to trend the path being re-examined—thereby furthering the method—in the discussion of another emergent squabbles in the history and discourse of philosophy. This status might raise doubt about the final success of post-modern reformers; it however, does not diminish the impact of their resolve on contemporary society and philosophic activity. Hence David Papineau asks:

*Why should we not use existing perceptual beliefs to adjudicate scientific theory... and in turn to check the reasonableness of those perceptive beliefs (Papineau, 130).*

In the malleability and constraints in rejecting observation, Papineau defused the immediate arguments for “killing” of epistemology; that naturalized epistemology is both coherent and practical reasoning. While the anti-realist refuses to recognize a reality beyond all theoretical projections, one must still recognize a ‘reality’ i.e. the world as we find it. After all, Ron Amundson (1983) has averred that “recent history of science has shown that substantive scientific theories are typically associated with specific methodological, metaphysical, and epistemological views, and that when the theory changes, the epistemology shares its fate.” However, Amundson gives away that epistemology has been gradually adjusted as the empirical result demand, yet he admits of epistemological permanence.

By and large, traditional philosophy, rooted in normative critical evaluation of all ideas, does not exhaust its scope; as long as there is need for justification (off course which Rorty does for contextualism/relativism), there must be need for critical scrutiny of societal and developments in the sciences, politics, and culture; the wisdom established in these spheres represent what we know about them—and this at once represents philosophy in search for epistemological theory. Hence, just as was post-Aristotelianism, medieval thought, and modernism, the post-modernists revolution is nothing new with its swollen nerves and arteries; and as Wittgenstein asserted that light dawns gradually over the whole, it soon wanes. And “the urge for philosophic understanding shows no sign of abating and so the philosophical journey will probably go on and on, each stage building on and rewriting its past” (Popkin, 756). Apparently, philosophical activity ever has ruminated specific but perennial problematic, with some intermittent emergent issues along the way. While some of the issues seemingly did appear resolved, others may have endured and eloped any final solution; but the philosophical method and basic assumptions have seriously remained firmly even beyond post-modernist restructurers.

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