Introduction

Throughout a remarkable number of contemporary disciplines there is a vigorous interest in the questions of foundations, an interest that is by turns nervous, skeptical, and controversial. This interest is a product of numerous intellectual cycles of various wave-lengths, but certainly it represents the coincidence of both the post-structuralist skepticism of recent decades as well as a postmodern crescendo of skepticism that began with Nietzsche, if not with Romantic challenges to the Enlightenment. Thus we find today not only a postmodern culture, but also a postmodern philosophical skepticism, a hermeneutics of suspicion, which has challenged the Enlightenment legacy's progressivism, universalism, and rationalism.

Postmodern skepticism appears as a crisis, a break, and one whose reach lays claim not only to modernism, but to Western philosophy as a whole. It is a crisis, moreover, because while its roots are not new, serious challenges to the rationalist-scientific tradition of the West have remained, for much of this century, safely marginalized as the exorbitances of the poets, fideists, and nihilists. But that has changed: the anti-rationalist impetus no longer emerges solely from the academic and cultural margins, but through the very legacy of analytic philosophy itself.

The linguistic turn: philosophy discovers language

How is it that analytic philosophy came to put so much stock in the linguistic approach to philosophical problems? In philosophy's search for the foundations of knowledge, language has traditionally been thought an obstacle to something more reliable. As epistemology and science idealized the authority of logic and facts, they spurned the ambiguity and colloquialism of natural language. Just as Plato looked beyond the linguistic perplexities of his *Cratylus* toward certain intellectual grounds, Descartes and Bacon looked beyond the idols of

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language to the quantified verifications of science, while Kant simply ignored linguistic perplexities for the pure reason of concepts. What could have so altered this legacy of rigor? The roots of the linguistic turn lie in the history of modern foundationist thought.

After the breakup of scholasticism's Aristotelian synthesis of concepts and senses, modern epistemology dispersed its search for ultimate foundations between the mind (rationalism), the senses (empiricism), and the representations of thoughts (nominalism). Of these three, nominalism is inherently anti-foundationist insofar as it tends to collapse representational authority into the very process of representation, in which case transcendent foundations are suspected if not denied. Against this more skeptical line, modern strong foundationists turned to the subject and object for the most promising philosophical grounds. The rationalist line culminated in Kant's Transcendental Subject and Pure Reason, the universal categories by which the mind ordered the world, while empiricism placed its faith in the integrity of its verificationist methodology, culminating in the confidence of positivism. But finally, as Kant's categories began to appear less immediate and necessary under the scrutiny of his critics, and as science's pronouncements began to seem more theory-laden and discursive, language seemed less the dispensable and transparent medium of philosophy's insights than the very locus of philosophical perplexity.

Against the background of this foundationist legacy, the linguistic turn appeared to promise (to ideal language philosophers at least) an old style epistemology of privileged grounds, even as it circumvented or explained away metaphysics. Here lies the linguistic resurgence of strong foundationist theory. Just as modern philosophy was born in dissatisfaction with classical metaphysical approaches to philosophical foundations, so philosophy in the twentieth century came to believe that rationalist epistemologies were too abstract, and scientific practice too concrete to expose the roots of philosophical issues. According to Richard Rorty, the linguistic turn grew out of the belief "that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."[1] Language and linguistic analysis became of central philosophical importance. The linguistic

1. *The linguistic turn: recent essays in philosophical method*, University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 3.

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turn became, Rorty notes, the last major revolution in philosophical paradigms, the last hope for finding the proper philosophical grounds that would either answer or dissolve the big questions.

The revolution, however, did not go as planned. Despite its popularity, the linguistic turn failed to specify the larger significance of language for the question of philosophical foundations. Philosophical problems either did not reduce to linguistic solution, or reduced to a proliferation of linguistic explanations – from the formal to the ordinary – challenging the coherence of linguistic philosophy's methodological integrity. Linguistic theory and analysis not only did not solve most philosophical problems, but raised new questions no less fundamental, and therefore no less troubling for the question of foundations, such as "the more difficult topic of how changes in the vocabulary used in formulating substantive theses produce changes in the vocabulary of metaphilosophy."[2]

Yet, the origins and failure of the linguistic turn may signal something deeper, an insight into the question of foundationism itself. Indeed, the linguistic turn appears almost fated by a genetic logic. Modern epistemology began with a bifurcation into rationalist appeals to subjective certainty (Descartes to Kant) and objectivist appeals to objective givenness (Bacon to Popper). Given the failure to get formality out of objectivity or objectivity out of formality, the translation of Kant's conceptual determination of experience into a *linguistic mediation* of knowledge seems to follow naturally enough. As Rorty put it: "The point about the so-called 'linguistic turn' in recent philosophy is supposed to be that whereas once we thought, with Aristotle, that necessity came from things, and later thought with Kant that it came from the structure of our minds, we now know that it comes from language" (*CP*, 26). This origin of linguistic philosophy is significant both historically – in the genealogical struggle of ideas – and semiologically – in defining the formal conditions of philosophical authority and postmodern explanation.

In fact, as if to demonstrate the formal or semiotic conditions of thought, the dispersion of linguistic philosophy constitutes a microcosm of foundationism itself: rather than converging on a privileged ground or method, linguistic philosophy recapitulates the heterology of foundationist elements in a variety of linguistic guises. Between Russell's logical atomism and contemporary speech-act theory, for

2. *The linguistic turn*, 39.

instance, one finds grounds ranging from the phenomenal atoms given by experience, to formality of syntax, and the pragmatically and culturally relative practices of language games. Linguistic founda-tionism has generated its own heterology of objective, formal, *and* conventional constraints on knowledge. The diaspora of linguistic foundations into syntactic formulae, referential theories, pragmatic conditions, language games, speech acts, interpretive communities and such indicates the historical approximation of linguistic phil-osophy to the heterological conditions of thought, the semiotic elements of objectivity, formality, and historical contingency.

For many, the inconclusiveness of linguistic philosophy implies the truth of postmodern conventionism, of hermeneutic relativism, of the belief that language is an unreliable index of a deeper reality. For postmodernists, the linguistic turn has become the ubiquitous occasion for anti-foundationist deconstructions of meaning.

The hermeneutic turn: hermeneutics dis-covers philosophy

For traditional philosophy, the structure of epistemic authority descended from the privileged elements at the peak of the hierarchy of principles (e.g. in defending his logical atomism, Russell declares that "Descartes' method [of analyzing into privileged elements] is on the whole a sound one"[3]). To violate one's hierarchy of explanatory priorities threatens a viciously circular argument, the only solution to which is a final appeal to immediate foundations. In Rorty's view, the most persuasive analyses of the nature of philosophical authority suggest that this hierarchical view is fundamentally mistaken. In his influential *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, Rorty extends his view of linguistic philosophy (i.e. as the last strong foundationist revolution) into a sweeping repudiation of epistemology as foundationist theory, declaring the foundationist project defunct.

Contrary to tradition, the work of Quine, Sellars, and Kuhn shows that epistemic authority is holistically and historically dependent upon pragmatically and culturally relative contexts, in which case no privileged principle can account for what is taken as knowledge or

3. From the "Facts and propositions" section of "The philosophy of logical atomism." *The Monist*, 1918; reprinted in *Contemporary analytic and linguistic philosophies*, E. D. Klemke (ed.), Buffalo, New York: Prometheus, 1983; p. 208.

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meaning. Where traditional epistemology sought such privileged grounds, the holistic critique of strong foundationism suggests that

> we will not be able to isolate basic elements except on the basis of a prior knowledge of the whole fabric within which these elements occur ... Our choice of elements will be dictated by our understanding of the practice, rather than the practice's being "legitimated" by a "rational reconstruction" out of elements. This holistic line of argument says that we shall never be able to avoid the "hermeneutic circle." (*PM*, 319)

The hermeneutic circularity of epistemic holism negates the hierarchical model of privileged elements, and suggests instead an expanding horizon of mutually coherent and interdependent elements that can only be explored dialectically, never finally reducing to certain conditions or transcendental criteria. This is the hermeneutic turn from epistemology, the breach of modernist foundations with a postmodern *heterology* of elements.

Instead of trying to replace the failed epistemological theories of old, Rorty urges philosophy to do hermeneutics instead.

> In the interpretation I shall be offering, "hermeneutics" is not the name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled – that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt. (*PM*, 315)

Philosophically considered, postmodernism embodies the fall from absolute frameworks, after which language – as the medium of foundationist contingency – is taken to be a chronic opportunity for repeated lapses. In Derrida's words:

> However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded, *as such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology ... a historico-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. (*OG*, 6)

Postmodernism is the time for which language is the game. The heralds of the postmodern condition have turned the traditional vices of mediate truth and conflicting perspectives into the virtues of liberal understanding of significant flux, and of openness to the questionability of past knowledge and to the creativity of future truths. In its

Critical conditions

post-strong-foundationist spirit, contemporary hermeneutics em-
braces the instability of signs, the relativity of premises and contexts.
In response to this skeptical tendency, hermeneutics itself has shifted
its center of gravity from the positive to the negative, from confidence
to suspicion, from its original interest in correct interpretations to self-
reflection on its own contingencies, from the sure elimination of error
to the *questionability* of the grounds of understanding.

Nor is this skeptical and opening movement without force. There is,
to begin with, its effect upon strong foundationist thought. Targeting
the structures of philosophical order, Derrida remarks that "in a
classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful
coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy ... To
deconstruct the opposition ... is to overturn the hierarchy at a given
moment."[4] It is for this power of displacement that Rorty has cast
hermeneutics as the nemesis for strong foundationist philosophy, as
the subverter of epistemology rather than its fulfilment.

Yet as postmodern thought has emerged, it appears that her-
meneutics faces its own problems regarding the status of its global
claims. Saying how and why hermeneutics can confront traditional
foundationist theory without using the older terms is not as easy as
some would-be innovators have suggested.[5] Once one has character-
ized the philosophical canon as foundationist, one wonders what
could successfully deconstruct that tradition *in principle* (rather than
just in isolated cases) if not another foundationist theory of equivalent
universality. The standard explanation is to say that postmodernism
substitutes practice for theory (as do the literary anti-theorists,[6]) but
that suggestion faces the problem of either (a) being local and leaving
the *principle* of strong foundationism untouched by ad hoc textual
analyses, or (b) being universal and accounting for its own universal
implications while denying universalism. In this regard, the post-
modern condition is less the transcendence of universalisms than a

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4. *Positions*, University of Chicago, 1981, p. 41.
5. On this point, Derrida has been exceptionally acute in recognizing the continuity
between traditional foundationism and the postmodern discourse, especially:
"Structure, sign, and play" reprinted in *The structuralist controversy: the languages
of criticism and the sciences of man*, eds. Eugenio Donato and Richard Macksey,
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970; *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins Press, 1976; pp. 85–6.
6. "Against theory"; "A reply to our critics"; "Consequences"; all in W. J. T.
Mitchell's *Against theory: literary studies and the New Pragmatism*. Chicago, 1985.

contest of universalisms, a contest that reveals a profound crisis of foundationist theory, and the need to revise the notion of how philosophical foundations operate.

A contest of universalisms

On the one hand, science and epistemology have traditionally sought to transcend the relativity of context to achieve foundational universality. Thus Popper defends the privilege of an empirical foundationism by arguing that "the growth of scientific knowledge may be said to be the growth of ordinary knowledge *writ large* ... [for] science is one of the very few human activities – perhaps the only one – in which errors are systematically criticized and fairly often, in time, corrected ... in other fields there is change but rarely progress."[7] In the name of a linguistic formalism, Michael Dummett awards to Frege's innovations the canonical mantle of "first philosophy":

philosophy has only very recently struggled out of its early stage into maturity: the turning point was the work of Frege ... What has given philosophy its historical unity, what has characterized it over all the centuries as a single subject, is the range of questions which philosophers have attempted to answer ... Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established: namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of *thought*; secondly, that the study of *thought* is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of *thinking* and, finally, that the only proper method for analyzing thought consists in the analysis of *language*.[8]

Husserl, Lévi-Strauss and others could be cited in the same vein, i.e. as pretenders to the discovery of the ultimate grounds of knowledge-truth-meaning. It is the very foundationist ideal of closing off philosophical and hermeneutic questionability – either with some theoretical structure or some methodological security – that the hermeneutic revolution seeks to challenge.

On the other hand, hermeneutics has responded to traditional claims for transcendence – largely through the influence of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida – with a claim to its own universality: that of contextual and historical contingency, the universal questionability of philosophical grounds. For it is precisely at the foundational moment, the moment when empirical and formal theories lay claim to the heart

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7. *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 216.
8. *Truth and other enigmas*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1978, p. 457.

of truth, that hermeneutics steps in and discovers the questionability of *all* epistemic assumptions.

Against the ideals of scientific and epistemological closure Gadamer claims that "philosophical hermeneutics takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world and thus for all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself" (*PH*, 18). Hermeneutic universality does not appeal to privileged grounds, but to the instability of all grounds: "The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable" (*PH*, 13). This ability is no mere cleverness; its reality derives from the openness of human experience, for it "is clear that the structure of the question is implicit in all experience" (*TM*, 325). On the one hand, it appears that hermeneutics displaces the universalism of science and philosophy; on the other hand, hermeneutics claims a universalism for its own ontological originality. With a touch of foundationist ambiguity, Gadamer dubs his project "philosophical hermeneutics."

Thus postmodern skepticism walks through the door of linguistic philosophy armed with a negative, critical universalism. For hermeneutic questionability, ideas that are supposed to be "indubitable" for traditional epistemology or "objective" for science only appear so when their assumptions are not under scrutiny, either through forgetfulness, habit, or convenience. By showing that "the given" is contingent upon the particular historical question which it answers, philosophical hermeneutics posits an infinite regress of foundational questionability. Hermeneutic universality implies the *historicity* of all argument, i.e. philosophy's dependence upon a context of questions which – through the assumptions that underlie doubt and belief – structure the authority of the given with precritical prejudices.

Moreover, it is no small irony that the most significant site of hermeneutic questionability lies in the philosophical closure attributed to the *foundational moment itself*. For insofar as hermeneutics successfully questions the ultimate closure of philosophical authority, so the historical residues of language – the residues that bear the traces of the original questionability from which philosophy springs – will remain for hermeneutics an open book, i.e. open to debate in a somewhat untraditionally genealogical, contextual, and irreducible sense of openness.

Hermeneutics' challenge to traditional foundationist philosophy is disturbing, therefore, to the degree that philosophy must take the

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problem of language seriously, for it is language that is supposed by hermeneutics to keep the origins of philosophical authority open. And for Gadamer as for Derrida, that degree is total: "interpretive language and concepts are ... an inner structural element of under-standing. This moves the whole problem of language from its peripheral and incidental position into the center of philosophy" (*TM*, 274). Not surprisingly, then, the hermeneutic challenge has thrown the issue of critical conditions into notable disarray. If critical authority cannot turn to metaphysical permanence, transcendental subjectivity, scientific objectivity, formal systematicity, methodological closure, or any other transcending constraints for its authority, are we not left with nothing firmer than Nietzschean perspectivism and an anarchy of wills to power? Might not the respectable looking Trojan Horse of philosophical hermeneutics be filled with sophists, gamesters, and fascists?

These doubts cannot be dismissed lightly. As the career of post-structuralist theory shows in abundance, the hermeneutic turn brings with it a surfeit of troubling questions about hermeneutic question-ability and critical conditions, of which there may be some ir-responsible versions, but which include rigorous versions as well.[9] But if one takes hermeneutic questionability seriously, one question is of particular philosophical interest, the question implied by the contest of universalisms. When conceived philosophically, as Gadamer poses it, hermeneutics raises the problem of *its own* foundationist question-ability, an issue certain postmodern skeptics have overlooked: how is it that hermeneutics can warrant both its own universality (of questionability) and postmodern anti-universalism at the same time? Is not the historical-conventional subversion of foundationism, if it claims to be universal, itself a global theorization of the necessary nature of language, if not of reality? What, finally, is the authority and scope of the postmodern critique of philosophical foundations?

9. E.g. Is there really nothing outside language? Is *Hamlet* really Norman Holland's greatest creation as a reader-response? Does that mean that literary criticism is, as the rank and file version of hermeneutics, (a) the science of rules that has no rules as Hayden White suggests, and (b) incapable of extraprofessional critique as Fish suggests? Can the pragmatic conditions of communication yield tran-scendental moral constraints upon social-critical discourse as Apel and Habermas have argued? Does the universality of questionability only subvert all *other* universalities, such as the formal conditions of language and the objectivity of science, or does the universality of questionability imply that maybe *some* things may not actually be questionable, though we cannot know what they are?

The paradox of hermeneutic universalism

Gadamer's elevation of language to the center of philosophical authority constitutes the paradox of *centralizing the decentering of foundations*, a paradox which lies at the heart of the postmodern crisis of criticism. On the one hand, hermeneutic universality threatens the traditional notions of critical foundations with the universality of questionability; on the other, this universality of questionability (presupposed by postmodern anti-foundationism, localism, pragmatism, etc.) cannot be accounted for in anti-theoretical, local, and conventional terms. For if hermeneutic questionability is local, how could it be universal? If it is not theoretical, how could its necessity anticipate future practices? If it is merely conventional, why could it not simply be refused? Hermeneutics cannot escape its own foundational questionability.

This problem determines what conclusions we can draw from the critique of foundationism. Does the claim of hermeneutics to universality (a) *transcend* the errors of traditional foundationism, (b) *revise* the notion of foundations, or (c) merely *repress* its own totalization into a new and unaccountable form of theory? Can one have a universalism of openness without some sort of universalism of closure? These problems pervade Derrida's notion of the General System, Fish's "no consequences" thesis, Gadamer's notion of the perfect interiority of language, Habermas' notion of quasi-transcendental grounds for critique, Lyotard's goal of scientific dissent, and Foucault's anarchic injunctions to "substantial resistance." Indeed, the universality of hermeneutic questionability is the philosophical crux of postmodern critique.

In their satisfaction with deconstructive practices, postmodern innovators have not taken the issue of foundations seriously enough, but have too readily adopted an anti-foundationist stance. This precipitousness is twofold.

First, anti-foundationism too often suggests that strong foundationism achieved its hegemony over philosophy through some sleight of hand rather than through appeal to actual discoveries about the conditions of thought. Notwithstanding some more restrained moments, the willingness of postmodern skeptics to dismiss essentialism, foundations, theory, logical and necessary conditions, and objectivity at one blow indulges the fantasy that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon, Kant and Hegel defended the philosophical canon