The Greenhouse, the Oppressed and the Conversation of Humankind:
Fiduciary Hermeneutic Fallibilism and the Pragmatic Necessity of Realism¹

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The conversation of humankind and the future of the planet depend on an objective realist understanding of truth in science and morality. While Richard Rorty’s pragmatist break with post-Cartesian philosophy is sound in part, his utopian agenda for ‘the conversation of mankind’ is weakened by his ‘epistemological behaviorism’, which offers no purchase on extra-human reality for universal truth claims. This leaves Rorty committed to an ethnocentric, liberal view promoting ‘the best we can be’ through persuasion but without an appeal to truth. Michael Polanyi and Hans-Georg Gadamer also turn away from the quest for guaranteed knowledge, but offer a realist alternative.
INTRODUCTION

Human-induced climate change and universal human rights are two intimately connected issues that highlight cognitive dissonances in contemporary scientific and moral/theological discourses. How remarkable that in an age of science and technology in the post-Christian West, scientific consensus on climate change is called into question, while at the same time it is an almost unquestioned tenet of twenty-first century faith that all humans are morally equal. Political correctness, self-interest, as well as politics and a smattering of philosophy have turned post-Enlightenment rationality on its head to fuel a debate about whether to trust the judgement of science, while there is little dissent directed at those who proclaim the universal truth of inalienable human rights. In its reaction to the flaws and optimism of post-Enlightenment ultra-rationalism, Western thinking finds itself in a postmodern muddle.

This essay concerns the pragmatic necessity of a realist position in both science and morality. It then points to a way forward that is both sensitive to the patent philosophical problems of making universal knowledge claims, and grounded in the pragmatics of human existence at a crucial historical moment. The task is pressing and the conversation is necessarily a global one; as the calendar counts down the remaining decades of Western power, creation’s clock too is ticking. Climate change and human rights are paradigm cases and critical examples in the race to find common accord. In both cases a viable human future requires that we, as a species, come to agreement, but neither post-Cartesian rationalism nor postmodern sophistry offers a viable way forward: the first is bankrupt, the second loudly proclaims its lack of realist pretensions. Neither offers reasons for believing what Western common sense, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, holds to be true: that science is a trustworthy guide to the natural world, and that morally we stand under an obligation to feed the poor, to care for the planet and to respect the equal dignity of all human beings. The universal nature of these claims, held dear in the Western tradition and rooted in a trans-human reality, is in doubt, and with it the possibility of global conversation and action.

This essay draws on the work of three ‘big-picture’ philosophers, all concerned with what one of them (borrowing from Michael Oakeshott) calls ‘the conversation of mankind’.² I focus on the
‘epistemological behaviorism’ of North American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who encapsulates the postmodern in his nonchalant setting aside of philosophical discussion about ‘reality and the world and truth’, and who argues that philosophy, understood as the two-thousand-year history of trying to find grounds for truth and knowledge, has lost its way in fruitless debate that does little to promote the human conversation. After a critique of Rorty, I briefly suggest that a more nuanced alternative, which I call **fiduciary hermeneutic fallibilism**, might be drawn from an amalgam of the work of Hungarian scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi with that of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. They, like Rorty, recognise difficulties inherent in philosophy after Descartes. Nevertheless, they both argue for the possibility of robust truth, of credible but fallible claims to knowledge, and for the possibility of action—scientific and moral—despite debate about the ultimate justification of our beliefs.

In this essay I take **realism** (in science or morality) to be the view that at least some objects of human judgements are independent of human beliefs. And, unless otherwise qualified, I take **objectivism** to be the epistemological position that holds that those judgements are true or false in a universal, trans-historic sense, independent of beliefs or epistemic practices. But neither realism nor objectivism entails either that we are able to specify with certainty which of our judgements are true or what it is about the world that makes them so. At face value the claim that all human beings have inalienable rights appears to be reporting a universal (moral) fact in the same way that the claim that human-induced global warming is occurring appears to be reporting a universal scientific fact. While neither claim is indubitable, they are both stated in a way that does not admit of relativisation: in both cases the claims are apparently either universally true or they are false. Richard Rorty disagrees.

**RICHARD RORTY’S ‘EPISTEMOLOGICAL BEHAVIORISM’**

Richard Rorty (1931 – 2007) is perhaps the most respected proponent of pragmatist philosophy since John Dewey. He responds to the intractable and traditional philosophical problems associated with defining and grasping truth and reality by turning away from that project to adopt a ‘community-based understanding of truth’,
and by proposing a role for philosophy characterised by imaginative rhetoric rather than rigour. According to Rorty, for two millennia philosophy has lost its way in a fruitless discussion that does little to promote the 'conversation of mankind'. In his inimitable style, he challenges philosophy's quest for epistemic security, 'driven by the need to find something to be apodictic about'. In this outline I quote Rorty extensively in order to convey something of his ironic and insouciant style.

Rorty adopts and adapts the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey in his agenda for a 'liberal utopia' to reform both philosophy and society, and to protect the best of Western liberalism. For Rorty, traditional philosophy is unnecessary baggage on this journey, based as it is on confused notions about the nature of reality 'in itself' and the futile pursuit of apodictic truth based on a representationalist epistemology. Rorty's project is explicitly ethnocentric, as he recognises, but in the absence of universal adjudicating standards beyond human consensus, the choice for the philosopher and thinker is either to contribute constructively to the debate or to bunker down in fruitless philosophical disputes. So Rorty is a self-described liberal ironist: liberal because 'liberals are people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do'; and ironist because ironists know that their 'final vocabulary' is contingent and not dictated by the nature of the world or by a human essence. Ironists also recognise their precarious social position; 'The opposite of irony is common sense', he says.

According to Rorty, philosophy lost its way by accepting an incoherent model that postulates representations in the mind of a world external to the mind. On this view, truth lies in a correct 'correspondence' between the so-called 'real' world and the representation which is reflected in the mirror of the mind and which is immediately present to consciousness: 'the picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods'. Rorty's principal argument against traditional understandings of truth is found in his criticism of the 'appearance – reality distinction': if truth lies in the correspondence between how the world appears (expressed through human sentences or propositions) in contrast to reality or the world 'in itself', then, says Rorty, such a notion is meaningless, because
we have no idea what “in itself” is supposed to mean’. Despite our familiarity with such a way of speaking, we can make no sense of a ‘world in itself’ that is not always and already a product of our cultural and linguistic practices: ‘there are many ways to talk about what is going on, and ... none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other’. So, Rorty claims, highlighting his pragmatic position, ‘the notion of “accurate representation” is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do’. In fact, ‘we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation’.

According to Rorty, the view of knowledge as accurate representation is based on adopting the model of visual perception for our relation to objects, and this contingent choice of metaphor results in the ‘wish to substitute confrontation [with that which compels the mind to belief as soon as it is unveiled] for conversation as the determinant of our belief’. The implications of undoing this thinking are widespread: ‘if this way of thinking of knowledge is optional, then so is epistemology, and so is philosophy, as it has understood itself since the middle of the [nineteenth] century’.

Having turned away from a representationalist epistemology, Rorty holds that when we have justified our knowledge through consensus there is nothing more to be done. This he calls ‘epistemological behaviorism’, reflecting an attitude he finds in Dewey and Wittgenstein, which involves taking empirical human behaviour associated with knowledge claims as the basis for those claims:

If assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate privileged representations. Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call ‘epistemological behaviorism’.

On this view, if we understand the rules of the epistemic language game then we have understood all that there is to understand about why such moves in that language game are made.
Rorty recognises that such a move might be criticised for begging the question against ontological foundations that are rooted in an objectively real world. He asks: ‘Can we treat the study of “the nature of human knowledge” just as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact, or does it require an ontological foundation?’ Rorty’s answer is that ontological connections are not necessary because, understood from an epistemological behaviorist viewpoint, a claim to knowledge such as ‘David knows that p’ is simply a remark about the status of David’s reports among his peers and not about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror. This leads to a pragmatic view of truth and to what Rorty calls a therapeutic approach to ontology that leaves philosophy in the role of clarifying the conversation, but not of ‘contributing any arguments of its own for the existence or inexistence of something’. According to Rorty, the alternative to this pragmatic behavioural epistemology is some sort of indefensible ontological explanation that relates ‘minds and meanings, minds and immediate data of awareness, universals and particulars, thought and language, consciousness and brains, and so on’.

Rorty also responds to critics who hold that if the realism of common sense is to be preserved then there must be an explanation that will make truth more than ‘what our peers will ... let us get away with saying’. He claims that such explanations usually try in vain to bridge the gap between object and knowing subject. So, for Rorty, the choice is between the pragmatic view of truth as ‘what it is good for us to believe’ and an incoherent view of truth as ‘contact with reality’. To adopt a behaviorist view is to ‘refuse to attempt a certain sort of explanation’ which interposes an acquaintance with meanings or with sensory appearances between the impact of the environment on human beings and their reports about it and then uses these explanations ‘to explain the reliability of such reports’.

According to Rorty, the hope of a grounding in nature does not make sense; once we have understood from a historical point of view when and why certain beliefs have been adopted, there is nothing more concerning the so-called ‘relation of knowledge to reality’ to explicate. In explaining this incoherent expectation, Rorty introduces an analogy with morality: just as the pragmatist in morals cannot see what it would be like for moral customs to be grounded, for example in human nature, so the epistemological behaviorist
cannot make sense of the question of grounding epistemic claims in a correspondence with reality. So Rorty describes his attitude to correspondence as that of Martin Heidegger, and of Peter Strawson, who he quotes: ‘The correspondence theory requires, not purification, but elimination’, or, in his own words, ‘more mildly, it requires separation from epistemology and relegation to semantics’.

In his defence, Rorty recognises that for most people who think that ‘truth is correspondence to the way reality “really is” ... this will look like an argument that there is no truth’. But he denies doing away with truth altogether. ‘Nobody says there is no truth’, he says, rejecting charges of relativism and of denuding ‘true’ and ‘false’ of their substantive senses, and even arguing that he has an absolute conception of truth: ‘Truth is, to be sure, an absolute notion, in the following sense: “true for me but not for you” and “true in my culture but not in yours” are weird, pointless locutions’. On the other hand, he says, justification is relative to people and circumstances: ‘phrases like “the good in the way of belief” and “what it is better for us to believe” are interchangeable with “justified” rather than with “true”’. Nevertheless, despite this conceptual distinction between justification and truth, we have, says Rorty, ‘no criterion of truth other than justification’, and justification will always be relative to audiences and ranges of truth candidates, just as goodness is relative to purposes and rightness is relative to situations. So, he says, ‘granted that “true” is an absolute term, its conditions of application will always be relative’, and despite the fact that ‘there are many beliefs ... about which nobody with whom we bother to argue has any doubt’, no justification is ever sufficient to remove all possible doubt.

On one understanding, Rorty might sound like he is toeing a fallibilist line which accepts that while truth is an absolute notion consisting of correspondence to a ‘non-description-relative, intrinsic nature of reality’, nevertheless our knowledge of that reality is always fallible, justified as it is within the inevitable confines of human practices. Therefore, on this line of thinking, the criterion of truth (justification) is relative but the nature of truth would remain as correspondence to reality. But Rorty denies that he can be interpreted this way: ‘to get around this argument, we followers of James and Nietzsche deny one of its premises: namely, that truth is correspondence with reality’. Rorty insists that his
understanding of truth is not a representationalist one of truth as
‘a word—world relation such as “fitting” or “correspondence” or
“accurate representation”, but rather, is the semantic one elaborated
by Tarski of describing how ‘true’ is used in a given language.33 So
he is dismissive of the controversies concerning the correspondence
theory of truth or a possible successor theory, seeing such questions
as ‘leading nowhere’.34 And in the face of demands to produce an
alternative theory of truth, Rorty pays tribute to Donald Davidson,
who ‘helped us realize that the very absoluteness of truth is a good
reason for thinking “true” indefinable and for thinking that no theory of
the nature of truth is possible’.35

Rorty also argues that truth is unserviceable as a goal of enquiry,
because its absoluteness means we can never know if we are nearer
or further from the truth. With justification as the only criterion,
and justification being relative to the purposes and lights of an audi­
ence, the question of whether our justificatory practices lead to truth
is both unanswerable and unpragmatic: ‘It is unanswerable because
there is no way to privilege our current purposes and interests. It
is unpragmatic because the answer to it would make no difference
whatever to our practice’.36 Rorty responds to the challenge that,
‘surely ... we know that we are closer to the truth’, by acknowledging
a progress of sorts, but one which is relative to our cultural expecta­
tions: ‘we are much better able to serve the purposes we wish to
serve, and to cope with the situations we believe we face, than our
ancestors would have been’.37 But, he says, we can make no claims
about our relationship to ‘Truth’ any more than we can talk of get­
ing closer to Beauty or Goodness or Rightness. This nominalisation
of adjectives implies a Platonic realm that we approach with greater
or lesser success but which fails to answer the sceptical question of
whether we are making progress in approaching these absolutes.38
It seems that epistemic failure is for Rorty a reason for abandoning
realism in science and morality.

Giving up the appearance–reality distinction, says Rorty, means
offering separate accounts of progress in science and in morality
that do not describe progress as somehow related to the intrinsic
nature of reality. With respect to science, Rorty’s self-described ‘left­
wing Kuhnianism’ enlists Thomas Kuhn in arguing that progress
is not to be understood as approaching truth, but rather, that science
progresses when it makes predictions and thereby ‘enables us ... to
influence what will happen’. While critics might say that science is able to make accurate predictions because it gets reality right, Rorty calls this an incantation rather than an explanation for predictive success, ‘because we have no test for the explanans distinct from our test for the explanandum ... it seems enough simply to define scientific progress as an increased ability to make predictions’. So while Newton progressed over Aristotle, and Einstein over Newton, ‘neither came closer to the truth, or to the intrinsic character of reality, than any of the others’.40

With respect to moral progress, Rorty claims:

Once one gives up on the idea that we have become less cruel and treat each other better because we have more fully grasped the true nature of human beings or of human rights or of human obligations (more pseudo-explanations), it seems enough to define moral progress as becoming like ourselves at our best (people who are not racist, not aggressive, not intolerant, etc., etc.)41

The essence of morality, then, is to see differences of race or gender or religion as irrelevant to cooperation for mutual benefit and the need to alleviate suffering. So, characteristic of his unabashed ethnocentricity, Rorty promotes a ‘Western liberal picture of a global democratic utopia [which] is that of a planet on which all members of the species are concerned about the fates of all the other members’.42 And, although historically one society has progressed over another in achieving this goal, ‘none of these societies was closer to the Demand of Morality’.43 In fact the suggestion that progress can be defined as a recognition of the existence of human rights, for example, should be interpreted as: ‘they conformed more closely to the way we wealthy, secure, educated inhabitants of the First World think people should treat one another’.44 And, while such a view is quite justified, ‘we cannot check our view of the matter against the intrinsic nature of moral reality’.45 It is a pointless question to ask whether such rights exist apart from human discourse, just as it is pointless to ask about the existence of subatomic particles: ‘human rights are no more or less “objective” than quarks, but this is just to say that reference to human rights is as indispensable to debates in the UN Security Council as is reference to quarks in debates in the Royal Society’.46 The indispensability of this ascription of the causal
independence of rights or quarks from discourse is part of the way we talk about them and should not be taken as an assertion about their reality:

Anybody who doesn’t know this fact about quarks is as unlikely to grasp what they are as is somebody who thinks that human rights were there before human beings. We can say, with Foucault, that both human rights and homosexuality are recent social constructions, but only if we say, with Bruno Latour, that quarks are too. There is no point in saying that the former are ‘just’ social constructions, for all the reasons that could be used to back up this claim are reasons that would apply to quarks as well.47

Having done away with the notion of the intrinsic nature of reality, you also ‘get rid of the notion that quarks and human rights differ in “ontological status”’, which in turn removes natural science from its privileged epistemic position as a paradigm for other discourses.48

**RORTY’S PRAGMATIC AND PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTIONS**

What are we to make of this view of truth and knowledge that detaches it from the real world in response to the difficulties of proving what seems patently obvious to common sense? I offer five criticisms of Rorty before finishing by briefly pointing to an alternative way of tackling the intractable debates of philosophy—a way that accepts the difficulties Rorty outlines but does not follow Rorty to such counter-intuitive conclusions.

First, Rorty remains a closet Cartesian. I believe Rorty’s views are the outcome of his acceptance of a Cartesian view of knowledge as indubitable belief, along with the recognition that it is impossible to have a grasp of the world that isn’t mediated by interpretive and dubitable practices. Rorty says rightly, and perhaps tritely, that ‘truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquirers of our own day’. And he goes on (in a way reminiscent of Polanyi) to say, ‘nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and ... there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence’.49 He also claims that nothing more can be said: talk of ontology has
no import and is perhaps unintelligible. In this, he allows for no distinction to speak of between truth and what is believed to be true. His conclusion is:

If we accept these criticisms, and therefore drop the notion of epistemology as the quest, initiated by Descartes, for those privileged items in the field of consciousness which are the touchstones of truth, we are in a position to ask whether there still remains something for epistemology to be. I want to urge that there does not.\textsuperscript{50}

At this point Rorty reveals his hand: he can conceive of no other way to do epistemology. Frustrated with the failure of the Cartesian project that would give sure answers to epistemic questions, Rorty rightly recognises that the only viable criterion of truth is our justificatory practices. But in so doing, rather than considering a fallibilism that acknowledges an inevitable epistemic gap between justification and truth, between what is justifiably believed to be true and what is true, he says that this distinction is nonsensical, preferring neither to talk of, nor to recognise, a way of discussing what lies on the other side of the gap.\textsuperscript{51} I suggest that this move arises not from the logic of arguments about truth but from his understandable desire to move on from intractable philosophical debates. But it is the preference of one committed to a Cartesian epistemology, who is weary of the ‘increasingly tiresome pendulum swing’ between dogmatism and scepticism that arises ‘as long as we try to project from the relative and conditioned to the absolute and unconditioned’.\textsuperscript{52} For Rorty, the only way to stop the pendulum is through the cultural change of reforming what is taken to be common sense. So rather than involve himself further in the quagmire of epistemology, his goal is to bring about ‘changes in the intuitions available for being pumped up by philosophical arguments’.\textsuperscript{53}

Second, Rorty tangles himself in Jürgen Habermas’s ‘performative contradiction’. Although he claims to be working within culture and language, and not to be drawing on notions of reality, Rorty must make use of concepts such as truth and reality while at the same time denying them.\textsuperscript{54} He incorporates notions of ‘how things really are’ in his discussion and he makes truth claims that assume an extra-human reality while at the same time denying that possibility.\textsuperscript{55} Likewise when he uses phrases such as coping ‘with the
situations we believe we face',\textsuperscript{56} he assumes an appearance-reality distinction by contrasting our beliefs, which might be wrong, with a situation that we actually face despite our belief that it is otherwise. When he says, 'we have no criterion of truth other than justification',\textsuperscript{57} he uses truth in a substantive sense; he does not mean we have no criterion for defining the word 'truth', but rather, that we have no means of access to truth except through our justificatory processes. This is clear when he says in the same context that phrases such as "good in the way of belief" are interchangeable with "justified" but not with "true".\textsuperscript{58} But if 'criterion' means something like a means of access then Rorty implicitly recognises truth as distinct from justification and as inaccessible. By holding that 'truth' has no use, he elides truth with our beliefs about the world instead of making the fiduciary leap that says, for example, 'I know that my beliefs may be false, but I nevertheless believe that the claim of science that "climate change is human-induced" is a true proposition about the world in itself'. In short, as one critic says: 'in the very act of renouncing "metaphysical" philosophy, and general theories of "the way things really are" ... Rorty presents an alternative ontological picture and general theory of "the way things really are"'.\textsuperscript{59}

Third, Rorty's views fail on pragmatic grounds. There are a number of ways in which his position fails the pragmatic test of usefulness because it does not recognise that convictions about objective truth do 'make a (useful) difference'. For example, the power of human rights discourse lies in a belief, opaque as it is, that human rights really exist and are more than a Western liberal language game or useful fiction. Rorty is right that rational argument is not sufficient, but rhetorical persuasion too depends on its ringing true. Rorty says, 'we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief',\textsuperscript{60} but an essential part of the social justification and persuasive power of knowledge claims lies in their being believed to be true in virtue of some sort of correspondence with reality. Rorty's unmasking of knowledge also strips his 'consensual knowledge' of its power to persuade. While philosophically this might be an acceptable outcome, it cannot be so for a pragmatist with utopian dreams of promoting the conversation of humankind. Knowledge without truth is not pragmatic. Associated with the unpragmatic nature of Rorty's proposals is the importance he places on common cultural values: 'What binds societies
together are common vocabularies and common hopes. But there are many who would disagree, for example, with his egalitarianism. At one end of the spectrum some not-so-liberals would argue that race, gender or religion do in fact make for moral distinctions, while at the other end some would charge Rorty with speciesism for leaving non-human animals out of his egalitarian picture. Rorty’s response no doubt would be to make his view attractive through rhetoric and imagination, but having lost the persuasive power of truth claims, the pragmatic virtues of his proposal seem dubitable.

Fourth, Rorty’s description of progress in science and in morality reveals that he has substituted one set of criteria for progress (‘approaching truth’) for another that is just as difficult to define and which is subject to the same sorts of ‘not knowing what that would mean’ arguments that he uses against the idea of ‘the world in itself’. Rorty’s ‘the best we can be’ makes his utopia as hard to define as any other moral vision, and in Rortian style I suggest that his ideal of ‘our best’ is an incantation, a pseudo-explanation appealing to indefinable cultural intuitions. Predictive success in science and ‘our best’ in morality are both obscure terms susceptible to the same sorts of critique that Rorty was keen to leave behind by not talking of truth as correspondence. Inevitably, truth re-enters the scene along with fallibility. In science we ask if this theory is better at predictions than another, or if this experimental result is or is not what was predicted. In response to such questions we offer a justifactory story when we argue with those who say that the result we invoke is not in fact an example of a successful prediction. Meanwhile in moral matters, Rorty only moves the discussion from one of whether, for example, ‘universal human rights’ exist, to one of whether in fact humans at their best are not racist.

Fifth, faced with the impossibility of fulfilling the dream of offering certain grounds for knowledge rooted in an objective external reality, Rorty ironically continues the search for apodictic truth by redefining truth and knowledge so that they are grounded in intersubjective justificatory practices. Knowledge remains ‘justified true belief’, but ‘true’ becomes redundant. Rorty’s new ‘truth’ is now self-evident, the incontestable outcome of human knowledge practices. While he is right that we cannot discuss the world without the language of beliefs, this does not mean that conceptually we do not draw the distinction between truth and belief or find the
distinction essential in making sense of the language of belief. In an act of philosophical self harm, Rorty cuts off his nose and refuses to continue the conversation: if he can't have the assured truth that the Cartesian project has sought, he won't have objective truth at all. Instead, in his search for assurance rooted in Cartesian insecurities, he chooses to redefine truth. The possibility that Rorty does not consider is that of accepting our intuitions about some sort of correspondence between beliefs and the world, and allowing that while we find that correspondence difficult to characterise, it is still our only way of making rational or pragmatic sense of that world.

Now is not the time to argue further with Rorty. Rather, I want to point to another way of approaching human knowledge that might offer solutions to the enduring problem with foundational and other epistemologies, while also allowing us to hold on to our fundamental intuitions that make the human conversation possible.

FIDUCIARY HERMENEUTIC FALLIBILISM

In the space of three years in the mid-twentieth century, two of the most significant critiques of the Enlightenment dream of guaranteeing knowledge through methodological rigour were published. In 1958 Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* presaged the work of Thomas Kuhn in its analysis of the social and intangible factors in scientific knowledge production. In 1960 Hans-Georg Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, the seminal work in philosophical hermeneutics. In the sense that both of these authors reject the possibility of an Archimedean standpoint, which is unmediated by tradition and unaffected by personal beliefs, they, like Rorty, cast aside Cartesian epistemic pretensions. But both also stand against relativism and subjectivism by holding that, while certainty is a chimera, we nevertheless can make universal truth claims. While they use different language, there is a marked correspondence in the way Gadamer and Polanyi describe what we might cautiously call the epistemic products of hermeneutics and of the natural sciences respectively. Both authors recognise the two poles of interpreter and meaning, but reject the inadequate descriptions implied by either subjectivism or a naive objectivism that assumes unmediated access to reality. For Gadamer, true understanding is not subjective, but nor can it ever be final. It is not merely subjective, because it is
in some sense true: ‘Meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way’, he claims. And he talks of the danger of failing ‘to hear what the other person is really saying’, or of ‘ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text’. ‘The important thing’, he says, ‘is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings’. Now consider Polanyi:

Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality ... By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact necessarily carry universal intent. Our claim to speak of reality serves thus as the external anchoring of our commitment in making a factual statement.

For these authors, knowledge is provisional, both in the sense that it is always in the making and in the sense that the interpreter may simply be wrong. Whether we think of Newton and Einstein or Romeo and Juliet, some interpretations are better than others. But conviction, not certainty, is the appropriate descriptor of beliefs that are no longer seen to lie at the extremes of the spectrum between certainty and uncertainty.

While neither Gadamer nor Polanyi are against method, they both elaborate their theories in conscious opposition to an Enlightenment confidence in method as a guarantee of truth. They recognise the inevitably partial nature of human exploration of truth, and both display an epistemic humility that challenges naive Enlightenment optimism and mastery, which in its positivist extremes claims that all that cannot be mastered is meaningless. Polanyi highlights the impossibility of formalising the rules of scientific discovery, and emphasises the personal agency, commitment and creativity of the scientist. For example:

Desisting henceforth from the vain pursuit of a formalized scientific method, commitment accepts in its place the person of the scientist as the agent responsible for conducting and accrediting scientific discoveries. The scientist’s procedure is of course
methodical. But his methods are but the maxims of an art which he applies in his own original way to the problem of his own choice.67

For his part, while Gadamer is happy to talk loosely of procedure (‘a procedure that we in fact exercise whenever we understand anything’68) and of ‘methodologically conscious understanding’,69 like Polanyi he is firmly against trusting in method to lead to truth. Gadamer refers to the task of hermeneutics in the following way:

Ultimately, it has always been known that the possibilities of rational proof and instruction do not fully exhaust the sphere of knowledge ... [We] must laboriously make our way back into this tradition by first showing the difficulties that result from the application of the modern concept of method to the human sciences.70

So, like Rorty, both Gadamer and Polanyi see themselves as attempting to escape from what Gadamer calls ‘entanglement in traditional epistemology’.71 But unlike Rorty, Gadamer and Polanyi hold on to the baby of truth as they throw out the bath water of the Cartesian hope for sure knowledge. Faced with the false dilemma of opting out of realist epistemology as Rorty does, or of entering the regressive cycle of fighting the phantoms of pre-critical belief, they choose neither, instead embracing prejudgements as allies to be coopted in the search for truth. So they develop more nuanced descriptions of the practice of human understanding or knowledge production and they do so by focusing on an articulation of a knowledge that is neither guaranteed nor final. They, like Rorty, highlight not only the inevitability but also the necessity of all thinking being entrenched in history, tradition and prejudgements. For Polanyi the purpose is ‘to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false’,72 and ‘to enter avenues of legitimate access to reality from which [extreme] objectivism debars us’.73 For Gadamer, who claims that the essence and downfall of Enlightenment epistemology was its prejudice against prejudice,74 the ‘fundamental epistemological question’75 concerns the indispensability and legitimate contributions of mostly unconscious prejudices, or prejudgements—the word is the same in German. So, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is based
on the doctrine that prejudgements are a condition for understanding. In an oft-quoted passage, he says:

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live... The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudgments of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.76

Polanyi, too, is in no doubt about the naivety of a program of Cartesian doubt that aims to eliminate preconceived opinions: 'While we can reduce the sum of our conscious acceptances to varying degrees, and even to nil, by reducing ourselves to a state of stupor, any given range of awareness seems to involve a correspondingly extensive set of acritically accepted beliefs.'77 While Gadamer's discussion is in terms of the role of prejudice and tradition, the conceptual link with Polanyi becomes clearer when Gadamer talks of the sort of authority that can be a valid source of truth:

Authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned... It rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others... The prejudgments that [the teacher, the superior, the expert] implant are legitimized by the person who presents them. But in this way they become prejudgments not just in favor of a person but a content, since they effect the same disposition to believe something that can be brought about in other ways—e.g. by good reasons.78

Now listen to Polanyi talking about authority and tradition in science:

The knowledge comprised by science is not known to any single person. Indeed, nobody knows more than a tiny fragment of science well enough to judge its validity and value at first hand. For the rest he has to rely on views accepted at second hand on the authority of a community of people accredited as scientists.79

One implication of the necessity of working from acritically accepted beliefs is the commitment implicit in holding such beliefs.
Gadamer recognises ‘the “scientific” integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding’, but it is Polanyi, challenging the image of the neutrality of the scientist, who highlights the personal involvement and commitment of the knower or interpreter. He talks of the ‘fiduciary rootedness of all rationality’ and says that ‘the attribution of truth to any particular, stable [view of the universe] is a fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms.’ For him, ‘the act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal coefficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity’. So, the scientist makes a personal decision, yet not arbitrarily, about what to believe:

He arrived at his conclusions by the utmost exercise of responsibility. He has reached responsible beliefs, born of necessity, and not changeable at will ... To accept commitment as the only relation in which we can believe something to be true is to abandon all efforts to find strict criteria of truth and strict procedures for arriving at the truth.

CONCLUSION

In these brief allusions to the work of Polanyi and Gadamer, I hope to have indicated why abandoning ‘efforts to find strict criteria of truth’ may not entail abandoning a realist view of truth. Richard Rorty’s pragmatic proposal for the conversation of humankind lacks warrant for accepting his liberal ironist way forward, while fiduciary hermeneutic fallibilism based on thinkers such as Polanyi and Gadamer finds common ground with some of Rorty’s assessment of the problems of traditional epistemology, but without accepting his conclusions. It offers an alternative that makes it possible to hold onto robust realism, in both science and morality, while at the same time recognising the contingency of our circumstances, and that we might conceivably be wrong.

There is also an appalling third way forward that debunks realist pretensions as Rorty does, but which submits to no moral norms: a Nietzschean and Darwinian existence where persuasion gives way to raw power and survival of the fittest. While this third way, like
the other two, is also home-grown in the West, it will not be the West that has the option of exercising such hegemony, as it cedes to the powerful nation-states of the future—those which have not drawn from the wells that gave us Western science, human rights and charity for the outcast and stranger. This threatening possibility, rooted not in xenophobia but in the realities of significant cultural differences, looms in the background, as reward for the failure of the conversation of humankind.

The global community does not need to agree on the exact ontological nature or source of morality, any more than it needs to agree on the precise consequences of profligate carbon consumption, in order to believe that climate change is anthropogenic and that universal human rights exist. While the realist believes that our obligation is rooted in the nature of humanity and the universe, the pragmatist too is bound for pragmatic reasons to accept the moral and scientific realism that is necessary to ground the human conversation.

ENDNOTES
1 I wish to thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for permission to use edited extracts from Chris Mulherin, 'A rose by any other name? Personal knowledge and hermeneutics', in Tihomir Margitay (ed.), Knowing and Being, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and to my supervisor Rev. Dr Shane Mackinlay who with the help of Kate (Turabian) keeps me on the straight and narrow.
3 According to philosopher Crispin Sartwell, interviewed on American Philosopher, a documentary by Philip McReynolds, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrEbfVvjM
6 Rorty, Mirror, 166–7.
8 Rorty, Contingency, xv.
9 Rorty, Contingency, 74.
10 Rorty's substantive argument against representationalism is found in the second part of Rorty, Mirror.
11 Rorty, Mirror, 12.
12 Rorty, Truth and Progress, 1.
Rorty acknowledges this criticism levelled at him by Habermas and Apel for example when he says, 'My own view is that we do not need, either in epistemology or in moral philosophy, the notion of universal validity. I argue for this in 'Sind Aussagen Universelle Geltungsansprüche?' in Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie vol. 42, no. 6, 1994, 975–88. Habermas and Apel find my view paradoxical and likely to produce performative self-contradiction'. See Rorty, 'Justice as a larger loyalty', Ethical Perspectives, vol. 4, no. 2, 1997, 139–51.

Rorty, Truth and Progress, 4.

Rorty, Truth and Progress, 2.

Rorty, Truth and Progress, 2.


Rorty, Mirror, 170.

Rorty, Contingency, 86.


Polanyi, vii–viii, 311.

Polanyi, 311.

Gadamer, 267.

Gadamer, 269.

Gadamer, 23–4.

Gadamer, 276.

Gadamer, 214.

Gadamer, 292.

Gadamer, 270.

Gadamer, 277.

Gadamer, 276–7. Emphasis is Gadamer’s. In this quotation and others I have changed the translator’s ‘prejudice’ to ‘prejudgment’ which equally represents the original German Vorurteil.

Polanyi, 296–7.


Polanyi, 163.

Gadamer, xxviii.

Polanyi, 297.

Polanyi, 294.

Polanyi, 17.

Polanyi, 311.