CHAPTER V

Responses to Charles Taylor’s Critique of Epistemology

In this chapter, we discuss some responses to Charles Taylor’s critique of epistemology. Though there are many who have reacted to Charles Taylor’s critique of epistemology, we focus on two philosophers Richard Rorty and Hubert Dreyfus whose responses are substantial enough to invite Charles Taylor’s reactions. Further, these philosophers with their own critiques have immensely contributed to the development of a tradition, which seeks to replace the core themes of the modern epistemological tradition. Also, Taylor while reacting to their responses has sharpened his own position. We may begin with Richard Rorty’s responses to Taylor’s critique of epistemology.

V. 1 Richard Rorty’s Response to Charles Taylor

Like Taylor, Rorty also attempts to overcome epistemology. While dealing with Rorty’s response to Taylor, it is necessary to explain Rorty’s own epistemological position. Rorty’s critique of epistemology is mainly rooted in his characterization of modern epistemology in a particular fashion. Within modern epistemology, there are various trends, which contradict each other. But for Rorty, all these are various forms of a particular framework called ‘foundationalism’. Therefore, Rorty’s criticism aims at undermining the thesis of foundationalism. He analyses the history of modern western epistemology to show that the
philosophers of rationalist and empiricist persuasion, including Kant, were working within the framework of foundationalism.

Rorty’s critique of epistemology though often criticized as a naive construal of western philosophical tradition is highly significant because he is the pioneer of the critique of epistemology in the Anglo-Saxon world. Rorty’s work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* can be considered as one of the first concrete attack against the whole of modern epistemological tradition in recent years. More significantly, the later critics of epistemology, even while differing with Rorty are substantially indebted to Rorty’s analysis for the formulation of their critiques of the Cartesian project.

The key component of Rorty’s critique of epistemology which ironically inspires successors and at the same time invites their wrath is his characterization of the history of modern western philosophy. According to Rorty’s analysis of modern philosophy, Cartesianism is structured and shaped by two presuppositions: “First, Descartes’ assumption that knowledge of external world is a matter of having mental representations that accurately picture that world and second, Locke’s assumption that the accuracy of a representation depends on the manner of its causal production.” (Gutting, Gary.2003:42)

According to modern epistemology, having knowledge is having mental entities called ‘ideas’ which represent the external world. The justification of mental representation lies in showing a causal connection between mental entities called the ‘ideas’ and ‘the world’. Undoubtedly, the first assumption is received across the rationalist and empiricist traditions. And the argument for the causal connection as a justification of knowledge is formulated within the empiricist tradition. For the rationalist tradition, often, the justification of knowledge is not solely
the argument from causal connection, but argument for the self-evident nature of knowledge, which can be shown by invoking representation as the reason. For example, Descartes justifies the existence of ‘I’ not through any causal argument but through the self-evident nature of the claim.

Though Descartes does not admit that ‘causal argument’ is the sole justification for knowledge claims about the world, he too relies on the causal argument. He establishes the causal connection between mental representation and the external world in a particular fashion. First, Descartes assumes that if there can be any connection between the ‘ideas’ and the ‘world’ then that can be only the causal connection. Descartes establishes the causal connection between ideas and the world by claiming that ‘causal connection’ is the sole credible hypothesis, which can explain the existence of mental representations. He was aware that ‘hypothesis of evil demon’ too can explain the existence of mental representation. But he counters such a hypothesis by bringing in the notion of God.

Empiricists too argue for the ‘causal connection’ mainly on the basis of the explanation of the existence of mental representation which for them an indubitable fact. But the trouble with modern epistemology starts with its failure to establish the causal connection. Hume’s sceptical analysis puts an end for/to such attempts. Rorty finds this failure as a failure to establish a foundational fact. Rorty notices that what tradition demands is not that all knowledge claims can be justified only on the basis of a causal connection, but that certain foundational knowledge claims can be justified only on the basis of a causal connection.

Another important move for foundationalism in modern epistemology is Kant’s strategy. When Kant entered into philosophy, he realized that solution to the epistemological problems
cannot be found in the traditions of rationalism and empiricism. Both the traditions fail to give a satisfactory explanation of our knowledge of extra-mental reality through our mental representations. Through his entirely radical kind of argument called ‘Transcendental argument’, Kant gave a new life to the modern epistemology’s idea of knowledge as mental representation. Rorty’s point is that through transcendental arguments, Kant was arguing that causation is necessary condition of human experience. That is Kant too was affirming the point that representationalism is inseparable from the foundationalist conception of knowledge.

The major point of Kant’s philosophy is the distinction between conceptual and intuitive elements: “…the conceptual providing the framework of intelligibility without which the object could not be presented and the intuitive providing the content without which the framework would be merely an empty scheme.” (Gutting, Gary. 2003: 43)

For accurate representation of external things, Kant brings in certain rules, which can correlate them with objects. In that way we are able to get accurate knowledge. Kant thinks that if we synthesize the rationalist and empiricist assumptions we can have a way of establishing the possibility of the knowledge of the extra-mental reality. But Rorty argues that, “Rather than characterizing human cognition as a synthesis of hypothetically separable components, Kant could simply have noted that to make a judgment is to hold a particular proposition to be true. He could then have cast the empiricism/rationalism dispute not as a conflict between rival reductionist strategies but as a disagreement about whether judgments about “secondary qualities” (i.e., empirical judgments) could be reduced to judgments about ‘primary qualities’ (i.e., judgments that seem to depend upon reason alone)” (Cutrofello, Andrew. 2005: 15)

The above remarks provide the background for understanding Rorty’s critique of epistemology. We may start with his attack on modern epistemology’s notion of truth. The
modern epistemologists argue that truth is only the matter of a special relationship called ‘representation’ between the mind and the world. Rorty rejected this view. He argues that such a concept of truth is a trivial one. Truth is only a matter of social practice. There is no reliable source for attaining truth. The argument is that “There is no way for us to know the truth other than the social practice of giving reasons. We have no reliable source of truth other than our ongoing conversation with one another. Perhaps we may or must understand truth as something beyond the best or ultimate outcome of that conversation” (Gutting, Gary. 2003: 52) Secondly, he questions the justificationary part of our knowledge claims. The argument is that justification is a matter of special experience, which is grounded normatively. Thirdly, modern epistemologists assert that philosophy can satisfactorily explain the notion of truth and can specify what sort of experience justifies our truth claim.

For him justification is a matter of being able to give good reasons for our beliefs. These good reasons can give adequate support to our propositions. But the goodness of a reason is based on the agreement of an epistemic community. Rorty does not have any problem with our conceptual insight and sensory awareness. He thinks that it is trivial to consider that both our conceptual insight and sensory awareness can give justification to our beliefs. Rorty finds that both these might be able to give causal explanation of why we have these beliefs. The problem arises only when they try to argue that sensory awareness and conceptual insight are the reasons for our belief.

Rorty tries to negate the empiricist claim that the sensory experience is the basis of our justification of knowledge. For instance, University of Hyderabad is situated in Andhra Pradesh. In this case, what we are doing is we are responding to a proposition. If this proposition is not true then the justification will not be possible. This proposition is fruitless unless I actually had
the experience of University of Hyderabad being situated in Andhra Pradesh. If this is the case can we really say that the justification of University of Hyderabad being in Andhra Pradesh is dependent on the experience?

Providing good reason is the justification of our knowledge claims. Good reason is not dependent upon the sort of experience we have. His argument is that to say that something exists in reality doesn’t mean that it exists in the space of reason. “The objection to Rorty assumes that the mere fact that a proposition is true can be reason for believing it is true. He denies this, maintaining that just because something exists in reality doesn’t mean it exists in the space of reason.” (Ibid: 45).

Epistemological behaviourism says that for knowledge justification is needed. The justification requires an ability to cite reason for our belief. We identifies out our reason through linguistic our ability. But empiricists deny the claim that linguistic ability is required for providing reason. They claim that there is pre-linguistic awareness of experience. For instance, an infant cries when he/she is hungry. An infant does not have any kind of linguistic ability. Empiricist argument is that the baby is hungry because baby feels hungry. Feeling hungry justifies the claim that baby is hungry. Does baby really know that it is feeling hungry? Rorty’s answer is negative. A baby is feeling hungry justifies someone’s knowledge claim that it is hungry. But it does not follow that the baby knows that it is hungry because being in a pre-linguistic state it lacks propositional knowledge. Rorty is equally against the rationalist claim that we know that we can justify what we consider to be necessary truth by means of conceptual insights. In addition to Quine’s convincing contention that it is highly problematic to draw watertight distinction between analytic and synthetic statements on the basis of experience being involved only in the latter, Rorty claims that the rationalists’ resort to conceptual insight is no
better than empiricists’ resort to sensory experience. As Gutting points out “In both cases, the key point is that the mere occurrence of an experience (whether sensory or conceptual) has no justificatory force. At best, justification is supplied by a belief that such an experience has occurred. Thus, the case against rationalist conceptual insights is the same as that against empiricist sense experience” (2003:47)

Rorty’s aim is to call into the question the very distinction between objective world and the subjective world made on the basis of the claim that we have direct access to only mental representations whether or not these representations match up with the world. “Rorty maintains, to accept this distinction is to endorse the classical modern view that we directly know only mental representations (“things as we describe them”), which may or may not match up with reality outside the mind (“things as they are in themselves”)” (Ibid: 49) Rorty argues that knowledge cannot be explained on the basis of such a kind of distinction between the two world. Philosophers try to frame a permanent representational framework in all possible ways. Therefore, according to Rorty, the attempt of modern epistemologists to work out a representational framework that entails a dichotomy between the objective world and the subjective world fails to explain the possibility of knowledge. “The notion that there is a permanent neutral framework whose “structure” philosophy can display is the notion that objects to be confronted by the mind, or the rules which constrain inquiry, are common to all discourse, or at least to every discourse on a given topic. Thus epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable” (Rorty, Richard. 1979: 316). Such an attempt overlooks how human beings cope with the world indifferent ways. In his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature Rorty shows how there is no privileged representation as Cartesian philosophy claims. Rorty thinks that if we could abandon these representational frameworks then
we do not need to answer the question concerning the distinction between our justified and unjustified claims. To attain knowledge what is needed is that human beings have to be located in an inter-subjective relationship. We were till now talking about the importance of the role of agent/subject. But justification of a claim is inter-subjective. And, hence, justification is a social practice made possible by language. The modern epistemologist treats language as “private” or at least that language is primarily private. Rorty’s argument is that language cannot be ‘private’ because, we are living in a community, we use language within the community, and the community accepts the language. To use a language is to employ certain norms, which are necessarily public.

It may also happen that the norms of a community are not at all mutually consistent, and an individual may be entitled to assert the claim of one norm against another that everyone else accepts. Of course, enough changes in the views and practices of the members of a community will eventually lead to changes in its norms, since norms have no basis outside of the community itself. But this does not mean that norms are changeable at the whim of a group, even if the group includes everyone. Even if we all say something different, we may not all be able to believe it or to reflect it in our practices. (Gutting, Gary.2003: 49)

In short, justification is not a phenomenon that can be attributed to an individual subject. The locus of objectivity of justification lies in the inter-subjective engagement. Hence, justification is social, that is, a trans-individual process. The question is ‘What is the source of such a consensus or inter-subjectivity’. It is neither reason nor a non-rational factor. Undoubtedly, giving and accepting reason is part of wider social practice. Rorty thus seeks to replace the core of traditional epistemology according to which knowledge is an attribute of
individual working according to certain shared norms. It is rather, located in and therefore is an attribute of, a mode of practice of a community.

We have drawn till now the broad contours of Rorty’s critique of epistemological tradition and his pragmatist alternative to it. Before dealing with his response to Taylor’s critique of modern epistemology let us briefly discuss Taylor’s reaction to Rorty’s epistemological position.

Taylor (1990) acknowledges that Rorty’s position is a radically new departure from the tradition of modern epistemology and in fact, the whole of modern philosophy because it promises us freedom from the host of questions central to philosophy till now. However, according to Taylor, “Rorty offers a great leap into non-realism: where there have hitherto been thought to be facts-or truths-of-the-matter, there turn out to be only rival languages, between which we end up plumping” (Taylor, Charles 1990: 258) and according to Taylor “non-realism is itself one of the recurrently generated aporiai of the tradition we both condemn. To get free of it is to come to an uncompromising realism” (Ibid)

Why does Taylor claim that Rorty is a non-realist? According to Taylor, Rorty’s position is that we have only alternative language games none of which can be taken to be uniquely correct. No language is nature’s own language. “On this view stubborn differences in representation would be unarbitrable, because no one would ever be able to get behind our pictures into contact with the world out there. This, of course, is the familiar picture of the modern epistemological tradition,…which threw up non-realist doctrines” (Taylor, Charles 1990:260) It is true that Rorty rejects dichotomies like realism- non-realism but mere rejection of such a dichotomy does not warrant the claim that one has overcome such a dichotomy. Rorty has
to say either that there is something like thing-in-itself or there is no such thing as reality as there are as many realities as there are languages.

Unlike Heidegger and Merleau Ponty whom Taylor follows, Rorty accepts “the whole procedure of arriving ex ante at some view of what knowledge has to be, and then dictating to reality from that standpoint. The great vice of the tradition is that it allows epistemology to command ontology.” (Ibid: 264) What according to Taylor is Rorty’s ex ante theory? No doubt Rorty rejects the notion of alternative conceptual frameworks and therefore, he rejects the distinction between a single world out there and plurality of conceptual schemes. But by accepting the only internal consistency of each language as the criterion of acceptability he nullified the possibility of arbitrating between various world views which he called ‘languages’. Correspondence theory of truth is obviously rejected. In fact, Rorty goes to the extent of eschewing truth-talk itself.

Against Rorty, Taylor maintains that realism is an adequate thesis and truth is a legitimate concept. And he even goes to the extent of saying that correspondence theory of truth should be re-cast and not rejected. Taylor’s rejection of representationalism has to be reformulated. Traditional representationalism considered the relation between our ideas/propositions/theories the one hand, and the world, on the other, is as one of representation and this relation of representation can stand in isolation from everything else since, it is a relation between a picture and what is pictured. Taylor is against representationalism in this sense. However, against the modern epistemological tradition he maintains that the relation mentioned above can be located only on the background constituted by our embodiment and our engagement, as Heidegger and Merleau Ponty pointed out. Representation, as Taylor conceives it is not one of picturing but is a function of our endeavour to cope with the world as bodily being-
in-the-world. Rorty will have none of this. However, correspondence theory of truth in Taylor’s scheme gets its content from his idea of representation as elucidated above. In short, Taylor’s view can said to be one of representation without representationalism. His version of correspondence theory of truth squares well with his minimalist notion of representation and minimalist notion of the real. Taylor considers his idea of truth as correspondence as a post-epistemological and intra-framework notion of truth. How does Taylor characterize his own version of the correspondence theory of truth, which his rival realist in particular and modern epistemologists in general might dub as highly emaciated? Taylor seeks to provide a content to such a notion of truth, which is apparently jettisoned of all substance, by contrasting it with another kind of truth. If truth as ‘correspondence’ in Taylor’s sense holds for what are usually called facts, the other kind of truth concerns self-understanding. In his own words, “What it contrasts with is the truth of self-understanding. Just because we are partly constituted by our self-understandings, we can’t construe them as of an independent object, in the way our descriptions of things are”. (Taylor, Charles. 1990: 271)

To sum up, Rorty rejects realism and truth as correspondence because, according to him, if we entertain these notions we will be forced to accept transcendental entities, which make our theories true. By assuming this claim, “Rorty seems to be operating within the logic of the old system that linked us to transcendent reality through a screen of representations, even while distancing himself from it within this logic, he makes the decisive move of rejecting the transcendent; and then all the non-realist conclusions naturally follow”. (Ibid) In other words, according to Taylor, Rorty is held captive by a picture which relates realism and truth as correspondence with the notion of our claims/ideas as representing transcendental entities. Correspondence, according to that picture is verification- transcendent as anti-realists like
Dummet have pointed out. In the place of such a picture, Taylor provides an account of correspondence, which relates our claims/ideas/propositions to entities, and the relations which are no way transcendent since they are immanent because they are inseparable from the background constituted by inarticulable elements related to our status as being-in-the-world. How does Rorty respond to Taylor’s attack on him?

Rorty begins by formulating the difference between him and Taylor regarding the correspondence theory of truth by saying “believers in the correspondence theory have to claim that some vocabularies (e.g; Newton’s) do not just work better than others (e.g; Aristotle’s) but do so because they represent reality more adequately. Taylor thinks that good sense can be made of this claim, and I do not.” (Rorty, Richard.1998:86). He notices that according to Taylor if a realist does reject the concept of thing-in-itself or _ex ante_ explanation then he must grant that the idea of an independent reality should be accepted as unquestionable and therefore, Rorty who rejects those concepts must not find such an idea to be problematic and hence, Rorty is wrong in not doing so. But Rorty replies that what he questions is not the idea of independent reality but only representational independence of reality. Realism, according to Rorty, assumes a distinction between intrinsic features of an object which are non-description-relative and extrinsic features which are description-relative, whereas he rejects that distinction. Taylor claims that statements like, for example, ‘There are no chairs in the room’ is true, if it is true ‘in virtue of the way things are’ and this is a truism. But Rorty says the expression ‘in virtue of the way things are’ can be interpreted in two ways. “One is short for “in virtue of the way our current descriptions of things are used and causal interactions we have with those things.” The other is short for “simply in virtue of the way things are, quite apart from how we describe them.”” (Ibid). Obviously, Rorty goes for the first interpretation. What is important is that Rorty seeks to show that Taylor by
overlooking the fact that the crucial idea of “in virtue of the way things are” is amenable to two distinct interpretations caricatures Rorty’s position by presenting it as violating an obvious truth. Further, Rorty argues that we cannot distinguish between the role of our describing activity and the role of the world in accounting for the truth of our claims/beliefs. If Taylor and those who follow him seek to distinguish the two they can do so only by accepting the distinction between scheme and content, according to which scheme is given by us and the content is given by the world. According to Rorty, the doctrine of scheme-content distinction has been convincingly refuted by Davidson who calls it the ‘third dogma of empiricism’. Once we reject the scheme-content dichotomy we are forced to reject both the concepts of thing-in-itself and of intrinsic feature/s and with them truth as correspondence. Rorty contends that Taylor’s attempt to keep the latter without the former is doomed to failure.

Rorty rejects Taylor’s post-epistemological and intra-framework notion of truth as correspondence by questioning Taylor’s attempt to contrast our factual claims which, if true, are true in Taylor’s sense of correspondence and the claims about ourselves which, if true, are true in no sense of correspondence. According to Rorty “the only difference between redescribing the solar system and redescribing myself is that I use the redescription to make true statements about the solar system before I redescribed it, whereas, in some cases, I do not use my redescriptions to make true statements about my earlier self” (Rorty, Richard.1998:89)

Rorty ends his attack on Taylor by showing how realism of any sort including that of Taylor is self-destructive. On the one hand “realism becomes interesting only when we supplement plain speech and common sense with the “in itself” versus “to us” distinction”. (Ibid: 94). On the other hand, our failure to bridge the gap between “in itself” and “to us” undermines realism. His point is that rejection of realism is therefore, rejection of non-realism too. Hence, if
he is not a realist, he is not a non-realist either. Taylor claims that we cannot simply walk away from the distinction between realism and non-realism but must deal with it. However, “neither he nor anyone else has explained why we cannot just walk away from it” (Ibid).

Let us now briefly look at Taylor’s reaction of Rorty’s critical response to his positions. Taylor defends, against Rorty, the distinction between scheme and content. Those who attack the distinction have construed it as a dichotomy. Scheme-content dichotomy cannot be sustained and Davidson as well as Rorty is right in saying so. But, according to Taylor, all that realism needs is only scheme-content distinction and not scheme-content dichotomy. The inference that the distinction in any form is untenable is based on the questionable assumption “that the only way to make sense of the distinction would be disaggregate and isolate somehow a component of pure precategorised reality, which could then somehow be compared or related to language.” (Taylor, Charles.1994: 219)

Taylor gives three reasons in favour of scheme-content distinction. First of all, he compares it with the distinction between form and colours. Just because we can distinguish between a colourless form and formless colour, we cannot throw away the distinction itself. Secondly, the distinction is necessary to understand the difference between Aristotle according to whom the sun is a planet and us according to whom the sun is not a planet. “What brings about this change is not reality [the content] but our adopting the different scheme”. (Ibid: 220). Similarly, if yesterday there were twelve chairs in a room whereas today there are only ten chairs “the language of the classification [the scheme] is the same, what has changed is the reality [the content] described” (Ibid). Thirdly, we can rank these schemes in terms of their ability to enable us “to grasp, or prevent us from grasping features of reality, including causal features, which we recognise as being independent of us. This is the nub of what I want to call realism”. (Ibid)
Finally, the rejection of scheme-content distinction leads to ethnocentrism and prejudiced understanding of the other. If we retain the scheme-content distinction, we can respond to Aztecs' way of looking at nature not in a negative way but in a positive way by saying that, they have different scheme and hence cannot be negatively judged. It allows us to recognize different ways of understanding natural world, human life etc., “somewhere along the line, you need some place in your ontology for something like ‘the Aztec way of seeing things’, in contrast to ‘our way of seeing things’; in short, something like scheme/content distinction. To fail to make this can be, literally, lethal”. (Taylor, Charles.1994:221)

We end this section by pointing out some gaps in Taylor’s reaction to Rorty. First of all, Taylor’s contention that it is only by accepting realism that we can account for our ranking of schemes is questionable. Taylor implies that from the point of view of Rorty, which he calls non-realist, such ranking is not possible. Taylor overlooks the fact that the so-called non-realist can account for ranking in terms of the suitability of a scheme for our purposes, cognitive included, better than other available alternatives rather than in terms of its ability to survive arbitration by reason or sense. Further, his argument is that only the scheme-content distinction saves us from ethnocentrism is unconvincing. Ethnocentrism does not question the invariance of content. It usually undermines the cognitive adequacy of certain schemes entertained by a people who are victims of a dominant culture. Further, Taylor has not convincingly shown that Davidson’s ‘Principles of Charity’ is not needed to promote inter-cultural understanding. (cf Taylor, Charles. 1994:221). This principle asks us to make best sense of what people in another culture believe in terms what we understand as sense. McDowell brings our clearly the utility of this principle when he says “It is not obvious to me that Davidson’s principle of charity diverges in the way Taylor suggests from one that is ontologically based, so as to be irrelevant to questions about
intercultural understanding. Davidson’s principle, properly understood, surely requires looking for common ground-if necessary engaging in conceptual innovation for the purpose-with candidates for understanding whom we initially find unintelligible” (2002: 284)

Further, his idea that our explanation of change in theory as merely a shift of scheme is most unconvincing because, as Kuhn and later Putnam have pointed out in a very important sense reality changes with a change in our fundamental theory. As Kuhn pointed out, a revolution in science is a shift from one lexicon to another. In that sense, scientific change is language change. This change makes two languages one of which succeeds the other, incommensurable. The two languages/lexicons have their own taxonomies and hence, divide the world in two different ways and therefore, their locutions stand for different things, even if they commonly figure in both the lexicons according to Kuhn, the shift from one lexicon to another involves meaning change of the common locutions. The meaning of any locutions is determined by the whole of the lexicon or language. Once meaning changes reference also changes. This is precisely the way Kuhn characterizes the transaction from Ptolemic theory to the Copernican theory. Hence, it is a lexicon, which determines what it is about.

Finally, Taylor’s contrast between truth about facts and truth about ourselves i.e. our self-understanding which he seeks to bring out to elucidates his version of correspondence theory is not convincing. There is no reason to think that there are only two kinds of truth, which he mentions. There may be truths about our aesthetic experience, moral life and religious understanding etc... The truths about these different domains can be viewed as having family resemblance. A watertight distinction between two arbitrarily chosen domains can be questionable enough to render Taylor’s elucidation of his version of correspondence theory quite problematic.
In spite of the above mentioned gaps in his reaction against Rorty’s responses to his stance Taylor’s realist position is quite convincing, provided that we construe his position as one of “real without realism”. The same point can be put in a more transparent manner. The kind of realism which Taylor rejects along with non-realism is generally called external or externalist realism- which is the traditional version of realism. As against this we have what may be called internal or internalist realism whose articulation within philosophy of science is provided by Kuhn, Putnam and Feyerabend in the later phases of their philosophical career. According to them, what is real and therefore what is true is internal to our broad theoretical commitments/language or lexicon/ research programme. Taylor also could have called his position ‘internal realism’. In fact, his version of internal realism can be broader in its scope than the internal realism in the current philosophy of science due to two reasons. Firstly, Taylor’s concern is not only about scientific knowledge but also about knowledge in general which might include scientific knowledge, perceptual knowledge and other kinds of knowledge. Secondly, in Taylor’s case the real is internal to not only our language or linguistic framework, which is the case with internal realism in philosophy of science but also such factors as our form of life we live as embodied being-in-the-world, which cannot be completely articulated. It is such an internal realism that fits well with his truncated notion of representation and equally jettisoned concept of truth as correspondence.

V.2 Hubert Dreyfus’ response to Charles Taylor

The above remarks provide an entry point to the consideration of the response of Dreyfus to Taylor’s epistemological position. Central to Dreyfus’ response is that Taylor can maintain a pluralistic and robust realism by agreeing with Rorty, “that there is no one language for correctly describing the universe, while holding, contra Rorty, that there could well be many languages
each correctly describing a different aspect of reality” (Dreyfus, Hubert. 2004: 79). Unlike Rorty, Dreyfus does not attack Taylor’s position. Rather he strengthens it by answering two major objections that can be raised against Taylor’s positions. However, Dreyfus seeks to show that by accepting Rorty’s position, which he calls ‘deflationary realism’ Taylor can enrich his own position which Dreyfus calls ‘Robust Realism’ by way of adding a pluralist dimension to his position and Taylor’s sympathy for pluralism in social and political philosophy can be extended to his epistemological position.

Dreyfus characterizes Taylor’s position as anti-epistemology. This does not mean that Taylor rejects the very possibility of epistemology as a genuine philosophical enquiry. Taylor does not take such a stance towards epistemology in a way akin to the positivist philosophers in particular and analytical philosophers in general regarding the possibility of metaphysics. He rejects a certain kind of epistemology. That is “a discipline that arises along with the subject / object ontology introduced by Descartes.” (Dreyfus, 2004:52) In this narrow sense, epistemology deals with problems of Knowledge by presupposing “...a series of mutually reinforcing dualisms such as subject/object, knower/known, mind/world and inside/outside. When the generation of knowledge is considered from within this framework, the key question becomes how the two sides of each pair are linked.” (Abbey, Ruth. 2004:5)

Since the possibility of knowledge as representation demands a mediation between two sides of the pairs, the tradition of epistemology as handed down to us since Descartes is called ‘mediational epistemology’ by Taylor. Epistemology, according to this tradition, is the study of such mediation. To overcome a philosophical thesis such as mediational epistemology is not to simply reject it even on sound reasons. ‘Overcoming’ is a much more positive endeavour than merely undermining. It involves addressing the concerns, which characterize the motivations that
propelled the thesis, which is being overcome. It also involves providing an alternative to the theory, which is rejected. According to Dreyfus, Taylor’s attempt to overcome the epistemological tradition succeeds in doing both. It may also be mentioned in this connection that Dreyfus and Taylor have a philosophical affinity of a substantial kind. Both of them reject the endeavour of cognitive scientists to provide a map of our cognitive processes as if those processes are akin to natural processes.

However, Dreyfus identifies two important objections that can be raised against Taylor’s position. Suppose we accept the knowledge involves the engagement of the cognitive agent as an embodied and engaged being with the world, which the cognitive agent seeks to cope. The question arises whether this coping itself is an illusion. Dreyfus in this connection invokes ‘Brain in the Vat’ argument. Suppose we keep a brain in a vat and a computer operates on the brain in such a way that the brain is stimulated to experience the coping. In other words, we may think that we are coping with the real world but actually, we may be coping with the matrix world. Dreyfus here refers to a film called ‘Matrix’ in which some computer scientists produce a kind of experience, which is not one of the real world. If such a possibility is realized, Taylor’s position is bedevilled by the same predicament faced by a standard representationalist account of knowledge. However, Dreyfus shows that this objection does not undermine Taylor’s position because Taylor does not need to prove that the embodied agents are coping with the real world. All he needs to show is that they experience coping. In other words, Taylor can say that even in the Matrix world one cannot give a description of agents’ experience without reference to his world. “The issue for Taylor should not be whether the world is as we believe it to be. That is Cartesian doubt. The phenomenological point is that our direct contact with the perceptual world is more basic than belief.” (Dreyfus, Hubert L. 2004:63)
Dreyfus comes to the second possible objection against Taylor’s position. Taylor advances some kind of representationalism, some kind of realism and some kind of truth as correspondence in the case of our scientific knowledge, which therefore zeroes in towards the world as it is. This stance of Taylor lands his position into a series of objections, which can come from a philosopher like Rorty who can claim that Taylor is caught in the trap of modern epistemology by making a distinction between the world in itself probed by science and the world constituted by us in our attempt of coping with that world. Against Taylor Rorty can claim that his position does not face such a predicament because according to him there is no knowledge of the world—in-itself but only of the world for us. Thus, the second challenge to Taylor’s position is that it is guilty of a dualism in spite of the pretension to overcome all dualisms, which are remnants of a discredited tradition.

According to Dreyfus, Taylor can overcome these objections. However, he first tries to find whether there are convicting arguments against these objections in Taylor’s writings themselves. In other words, Dreyfus seeks to find out whether Taylor can reconcile his two conflicting views: 1. That all knowledge comes from engaged coping on one hand and 2. And some understanding of the world such as our scientific understanding being truer than the others, on the other

Dreyfus seeks to find out whether Taylor’s contention that knowledge involves coping and coping involves finding meaning in what we experience can provide a point of reconciliation. In this connection, he refers to Taylor’s contention that when we cope with the world we acquire a sense that there is deeper reality that does not lend itself to our ascription of meanings. Such a deeper and meaning-independent reality sets limits or boundary conditions on our efforts to cope with the world. Therefore, coping is not open to any and every possibility.
The coping takes place within the bounds of structural realities. More we understand them, the better will be our coping. Science gives us the knowledge of these structural realities and therefore it facilitates our coping with our world. Hence, the duality between the world-in-itself and the world for us is, ontologically speaking, to be rejected.

But Rorty might claim that our awareness of those structural realities is nothing more than our acceptance of certain descriptions in the form of scientific theories. And these structural realities do not make sense independent of our description. And our descriptions have their basis in the factors that pertain to our purposes. Hence, Rorty may assert that the qualitative distinction, which Taylor draws, between scientific knowledge and other kinds of knowledge is to be rejected.

But Taylor may insists against Rorty that we confront reality in itself in our act of coping. Dreyfus quotes Taylor in this connection. “The most fundamental, rock-bottom feature of our general take on the world is that it surrounds us, gives us things, but also withholds, threatens to annihilate or hurt us sometimes, allows us to do some things, and resist others.” (2004: 67) That is to say, such experiences with the world indicate the way things-are-in-themselves rather than the way we make sense of them. In the context of scientific theory we have such encounters with reality when our theories are falsified. Taylor strengthens his position by saying that in our experience, we encounter aspects of the situation that go beyond our immediate grasp and this evidences the fact that we have a grip on reality. This is-further strengthened by our search for coherence in experience. But as Dreyfus points out deflationary realist such as Rorty do not get impressed by this arguments. None of the things Taylor has said makes the idea of a view from nowhere plausible and even intelligible. Dreyfus acknowledges that Rorty can contend that like the structural realities affordances also are vocabulary dependent.
Those who defend the idea of supersession of scientific theories as descriptions of structural realities might invoke the concept of essential prosperities of things which are the objects of scientific theories. For instance, the atomic weight of gold being 79 is taken as an essential property whereas its shining which may be looked upon by some tribes as reflection of divine radiance is not. They might even claim that those tribes can learn our theories and recognize the essential feature of gold. But Taylor does not and cannot go for this option provided by Kripke since this option implies that the beliefs about nature entertained by people of other cultures are false. As Dreyfus asks “How can Taylor claim that true scientific assertions pick out the essential properties of things as they are in themselves, without accepting the implication of Kripke’s scientific realism, that, insofar as our scientific understanding of nature is true, the understanding of nature of cultures that don’t share our understanding must be false” (Dreyfus, Hubert L.2004:76) In this connection Dreyfus makes a very important point when he says “ours may well be the only culture that claims that, if true, our theories concerning the kinds of entities in the universe correspond to those kinds as they are in themselves. Other cultures do not ask about the universe as it is in itself, in the sense of modern Western science. They have no notion of a view from nowhere.” (Ibid:77). This is the point of Rorty also. There is every reason to claim that Taylor too accepts it. The question then is “how can he maintain realism in connection with scientific knowledge and deem other kinds of knowledge to be mere products of our coping?” According to Dreyfus, Taylor does well if he accepts Rorty’s deflationary realism. Taylor can claim that our scientific theories, if true can identify for us, the property or properties that can explain other physical properties, say of gold. But the scientific theories cannot be taken to be the whole story about things. Dreyfus quotes Heidegger in this connection. “The statements of physics are correct. By means of them, science represents something real, by which it is
objectively controlled. But...science always encounters only what its kind of representation has admitted before hand as an object possible for science.” (Dreyfus, Hubert L.2004: 77). In other words, essential properties are those, which things have when they are “disworlded”, to use Heidegger’s expression. The scientific characterization of things is a characterization of a disenchanted world and therefore of a certain aspect of the objects. In that sense, they fall within in “the view from nowhere.” Thus, the validity of scientific knowledge is relative to that aspect of reality, which concerns a way of placing them in a disenchanted world. “The kind of correspondence claim implicit in the practices of pre modern cultures, if spelled out, would then amount to the claim that they have practices for gaining a perspective on reality that corresponds to one aspect of reality without claiming to have a view from nowhere that reveals objective reality as it is in itself.” (Ibid:78)

This means that Taylor can continue with his characterization of scientific theories in terms of truth as correspondence, provided that he is sensitive to the following point: since they concern only one aspect of the world related to the disenchantment they cannot claim a privileged status with the sole access to the world. Since the scientific and non-scientific distinction pertains to two distinct aspects there is no contradiction between them. Of course, the non- disenchanted aspect of the world makes its presence in as many ways as there are points of view located in distinct cultures. It is this pluralistic dimension that Taylor’s view acquires if the idea of supersession of the scientific theories is construed in a way that is consistent with Rorty’s central theses.

An objection might arise that such a plurality gets undermined if somebody asks ‘What are the aspects/aspects of’ This question can be answered in the following ways: something must be aspect of a specific thing is only a linguistic point, which does not necessarily lead to a
metaphysical stance of a monistic kind. It may even be the case that the expression which stands for a thing that possessing aspects is only a place marker. Suppose someone maintains that there is no such thing as mind but only mental states and mental capacities. For him ‘What are the states and capacities of’ is a meaningless question or he may say that mind is nothing more than the totality of those states/capacities. Similarly, Taylor might say, if he accepts Dreyfus’ advice, that aspects belong to that entity which is the totality of the aspects. Further, “aspects/s” is used by Dreyfus as a metaphor and to ask the question “What are the aspects of” is to deprive this expression of its metaphorical content and treat it as a mere literal expression.

We may end our discussion with the observation that Taylor’s position, if Dreyfus’ suggestion is incorporated, becomes something more than what it intends to be. Taylor would like his critique of (modern) epistemology enable us to overcome/transcend the modern epistemological tradition and not be satisfied with its mere deconstruction.