Reading/Study Guide:
Rorty and his Critics

Richard Rorty’s “Universality and Truth”

I. The Political Context: Truth and Democratic Politics (1-4)
   A. What does Rorty mean by “democratic politics”? (1)
   B. How does Habermas’ notion of communicative reason come down “half way between the Greek idea that human beings are special because they can know (whereas other animals can merely cope) and Dewey’s idea that we are special because we can take charge of our own evolution”? (3)

II. Truth as Context-Transcendent Validity Claims (4-11)
   A. Truth and Justification (4-5)
      1. What is a “cautionary” use of the term “truth” and how does it involved in distinguishing truth from justification? (4)
      2. How does Rorty understand the cautionary use of the term “truth”? (4)
   B. Rorty’s Critique of the Habermasian Concept of Truth as an Unconditional Validity Claim (5-11)
      1. How does Rorty suggest that Habermas’ notion of a “transcendent moment of universal validity [which] bursts every provinciality asunder” runs together “a commendable willingness to try something new with an empty boast”? (6)
      2. How does Rorty respond to Habermas’ claim that without recourse to a “transcendent moment” in discourse we will be unable to distinguish between “practices of justification oriented to truth claims from practices that are regulated merely by social convention”? (7)
      3. How does Rorty suggest that there is nothing to be gained in speaking of a “good argument” despite the fact that it doesn’t convince everyone? (9)

III. Relativism and Universalism (11-17)
   A. Why does Rorty believe that denying that there are any context-independent, “correct standards” should not lead anyone to suppose that truth is relative? (11-
B. Why does Rorty believe that our ability (affirmed by Wellmer) to “find a way to talk over (our) differences” (12) is still not sufficient to justify democratic politics, period rather than merely for us? (12-13)

C. Why does Rorty believe that humans may universally share a capacity for language and a consequent need to justify our beliefs (both in the sense of making them coherent with each other and justifying them to our peers) and still lack (contra Habermas) a desire to justify our beliefs to anyone and everyone? (14-17)

IV. Communicating or Educating? (17-23)

A. What are the sort of “contingent human developments” which Rorty believes are behind the development a possible universality for humanity, but presuppose no “existent universality”? (17)

B. Persuasion and Education. (19-23)

1. How does Rorty propose to answer Nietzsche’s “scornful suggestion” that when we educate our children to think critically we are “simply inculcating our own ideology”? (20) How does Rorty believe Habermas wants to answer it? Why does Rorty not follow Habermas’ approach? (19-20)

2. Why doesn’t Rorty believe his attempts to educate his fundamentalist students are examples of persuasion in the first (good) sense? Why does he believe they are not herrschaftsfrei (free of power/control)? (22)

C. Why does Rorty believe “you have to smuggle some provinciality into your universals before they do you any good”? (23)

Jürgen Habermas’ “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn”

V. A Historical Context for Rorty’s Contextualism (31-39)

A. The Mentalist Epistemology and the Linguistic Turn.

1. What is the “mentalist epistemology” which Habermas and Rorty speak of? What are its “three paradigm-constituting assumptions”? (34-35)

2. How does the “linguistic turn” reconceptualize knowledge from a two-place relation (1. subject . . . knows . . . 2. object) to a three-place relation?
3. How does the “‘communication model’ (a.k.a. the linguistic turn) of knowledge highlight . . . the point that we have no unfiltered access to entities in the world, independent of our practices of reaching understanding and the linguistically constituted context of our lifeworld”? (36)

4. Why, on Rorty’s view, does “‘being in touch with reality’ (have) to be translated into the jargon of ‘being in touch with a human community’” and in what way does that make “the realist intuition” that our knowledge corresponds to an objective world it is about, disappear? (36)

B. Scepticism and Contextualism

1. How does mentalism give rise to scepticism? (38)

2. How does the linguistic turn give rise to contextualism? (39)

VI. Truth and Justification (40-42)

A. Why does Habermas believe (and what does he mean by it) that “language and reality interpenetrate in a manner that for us is indissoluble”? (40)

B. Why does Habermas believe that the coherence of our beliefs with each other is insufficient to “clarify the meaning of the concept of truth”? What “fundamental aspect” of this concept eludes us if we think of truth totally in terms of justification? (40)

C. Why does Habermas believe that “there has to be an internal relation between truth and justification”? (40)

VII. The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Pragmatic Perspective (42-44)

A. The semantic conception of truth is best captured by Tarski’s Convention T - “‘p’ is true if and only if p”. How does Habermas believe this conception of truth has realist connotations (albeit, “weak” ones)? (42)

B. Habermas’ Pragmatic Conception of Truth

1. How does truth mediate between “behavioral certainty and discursively justified assertibility”? (43-44)
2. Why does practical action (‘stepping on bridges, using cars, undergoing an operation, etc.’) require “a context-independent - that is, unconditional - sense” of truth? (44)

VIII. The Epistemic Conception of Truth (44-47)

A. How does the epistemic conception of truth attempt to preserve a distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘rational acceptability’ “through an idealization of the conditions of justification”? (44-45)

B. What are the two objections Habermas cites against the epistemic conception of truth? (45)

C. What does Habermas put forward as “the discourse theory of truth”? What is the point of Habermas’ important qualification that “this does not mean that it is also true for this reason”? (46)

D. Why does Habermas believe that our inability to know “whether propositions that are rationally acceptable today will, even under approximately ideal conditions, assert themselves against attempt to refute them in the future” implies that we must “be content with rational acceptability as sufficient proof of truth”? (46-47)

IX. The Pragmatic Conception of Truth (47-50)

A. How does the fact that “Because acting subjects have to cope with ‘the’ world, they cannot avoid being realists in the context of their lifeworld” (48) lead to the need to regard rational acceptability as a sufficient proof of a distinctively unconditional, context-transcendent sense of truth? (47-48)

B. How does the “Janus-faced concept of truth in action-contexts and in rational discourses” allow, on the one hand, the “translation of shaken-up behavioral certainties into problematized propositions” while, on the other hand, it permits “the translation back of discursively justified assertions into reestablished behavioral certainties”? (48-49)

C. How does Habermas believe Rorty would question his (Habermas’) assessment of how the “connection between rational discourse and action” requires an unconditional, context-transcendent conception of truth? (49)

X. The Naturalization of Linguistified Reason (50-52)

A. (Habermas’ first question (a)) Why does Habermas believe that Rorty has no explanation for why we should be interested in expanding the audience before
whom we justify our assertions? (50-51)

B. (Habermas’ second question (b)) Why does Habermas believe Rorty’s explanation for the rationality of our practices of justification (their “normativity,” as Habermas puts it, meaning the way we find them as practices we ought to adopt with respect to our beliefs) in terms of a naturalist (neo-Darwinist) description of our evolved capacities to cope with our environment merely trades one kind of objectivism for another? (51-52)

XI. Rorty’s “Response to Jürgen Habermas”

A. Why does Rorty believe that making an unconditional truth claim is making “an unjustified empirical prediction”? (56-57)

B. Why does Rorty believe that, contra Habermas, “The whole pragmatic force of the claim that truth is not conditional is to express willingness to change one’s mind if circumstances alter, not to explain or justify this willingness”? (57-58)

C. Rorty objects to Habermas’ view that “a justification (that) is successful in our justificatory context points in favor of the context-independent truth of the justified propositions” by noting how some justificatory contexts (“those of primitive science, racist politics, and the like”) point us away from truth. How does he believe Habermas would distinguish these different sorts of contexts and how does he respond to this anticipated move? (58)

D. Why does Rorty reject the idea that we can identify “the better argument” in a way that would not be relative to the context in which it is being considered? (59-60)

E. How does Rorty propose to replace the idea (which Habermas also rejects) of the search for truth as “an attempt to get closer to an ideal” with “an attempt to get farther away from the parts of our past that we most regret”? (60-63)

1. How does Rorty reinterpret the idea that we are under an obligation to “secure acceptance for ‘p’ beyond the bounds of (our) group” in a way that enables him to explain that sense of obligation differently than Habermas does (our attempt to make a truth claim which is unconditional and context-independent)? (61)

2. What is the significance of Rorty’s claim, “we do not treat each other with respect because we are rational. Rather, ‘rationality’ is, in our culture, one of our names for our habit of listening to the other side - treating most of our interlocutors with proper respect.” (62)