

HEGEL AND PRAGMATISM: A SKETCH OF CONTINUITY

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VIŠŇOVSKÝ, E.: Hegel and Pragmatism: A Sketch of Continuity
FILOZOFIA, 78, 2023, No 9, pp. 783 – 795

The place and role of Hegel(ianism) in the history of philosophy is a central topic within the historical-philosophical research. It is also the subject matter of Jon Stewart's recent book *Hegel's Century*. But its focus is on the European, rather than the global story. This paper offers a brief supplement in the form of a North American story, specifically, a narrative of the relationship between Hegelianism and pragmatism. Having covered Hegelian "proto-pragmatism" and pragmatism's (both classical and contemporary) Post-Hegelianism, the author offers his own outline of what he sees as the continuity between the two philosophies. It lies in the common historicism, holism, and syntheticism as well as in a common anti-Cartesianism, anti-Kantianism and anti-Platonism.

Keywords: Hegelianism – Classical pragmatism – Neopragmatism – Metaphilosophy
– Naturalization – American philosophy

Introduction

In this paper I take the opportunity to discuss pragmatism, which originated in "Hegel's century," despite it being mentioned only three times in Jon Stewart's important book. The first mention is in reference to the critical reception Hegel's philosophy received from "Marxism, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and, in a sense, existentialism," all of which dismissed Hegelianism as "overly abstract and out of touch with the real world" (Stewart 2021, 62 – 63). The second mention occurs when Stewart combines pragmatism with utilitarianism and their understanding of human progress and rationality in contrast to that of Hegel and Dostoevsky (Stewart 2021, 221). The last mention comes in a footnote (no 16, p. 294) referring to Richard Rorty's paper "Philosophy in America Today" (1982) that provides his account of the Analytic-Continental split in American academia.¹ Overall, these remarks indicate that the

¹ Stewart had written about Rorty earlier. In one of his papers (Stewart 1994) he polemicizes with Rorty on professional and literary philosophy, and in a book chapter (Stewart 2013, 159 – 169) he reiterates and expands his arguments against Rorty's excessively frivolous views on the positioning of philosophy within the academy.

relationship between Hegel's philosophy and pragmatism has tended towards differences rather than commonalities. Nevertheless, it "is one of the most complicated and philosophically rich relationships in the Western canon" (Giladi 2018, 250), and, in fact, includes both. Despite the more traditional stories having focused on the differences, the more recent ones have identified commonalities.² My intention here is to bolster Stewart's description of "Hegel's Long Shadow in the History of Nineteenth-Century Philosophy" with a narrative about its "American dimension" in order to show what reasons (if any) the pragmatists (both classical and contemporary) had for appropriating Hegel(ianism).³

In what follows, I am interested in exploring two questions: (1) What is Hegel in relation to pragmatism? Is he merely a source of inspiration, or even a forerunner (anticipator), a sort of "*proto-pragmatist*"? (2) What is pragmatism in relation to Hegelianism? A continuation of sorts? Or in what sense *is pragmatism Hegelian*? Of course, answering these questions and providing arguments *pro et contra* is a book-length project. Within the limits of this paper, I therefore provide a brief historical-philosophical narrative, where the key objective is to look for the continuity between the two philosophy schools from the metaphilosophical point of view.

I. Hegelianism in North America

In pursuit of a fuller picture, Jon Stewart alluded briefly to "the surprisingly long tradition of Hegelianism in the United States" in a volume he edited titled *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Stewart 1996, 4). He noted, Hegel's "philosophy... has given birth to virtually all of the major schools of contemporary thought: phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, critical theory, structuralism, pragmatism, hermeneutics, and so on" (Stewart 1996, 4).⁴ But this particular volume – as well as Stewart's most recent book – focuses on Hegel's reception in Europe, not the American tradition. And here one must acknowledge the differences. While the European response has in

² The dividing line (as elsewhere) is between the Hegel of the *Science of Logic*, and the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (see, e.g., Stekeler 2014; 2019). Contemporary interpreters, in particular of the pragmatist vein, focus on the latter rather than the former.

³ Needless to say, any such appropriation depends on the metaphilosophical reading. Thus, reading Hegel through a pragmatist lens (and moreover which pragmatist lens? Peircean? Rortyan? Etc.) produces different outcomes than reading him through, say, an existentialist (Kierkegaardian) lens, would.

⁴ Conversely, Robert Solomon attributes this role to Kant as "the Abraham of virtually every Western philosophical movement of the past two centuries – pragmatism, existentialism, logical positivism, process philosophy and phenomenology, transcendental idealism, and social realism" (Solomon 1983, 70). Solomon argues in favor of the "pragmatic turn" in Hegel, epitomized in Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology* (the master-slave dialectic), but its roots lie in Fichte – he calls it "Hegel's Fichtean pragmatic move" (Solomon 1983, 431). On Fichte's proto-pragmatism, see also Redding (2015).

many ways been critical of Hegel or in search of alternative vistas in philosophy (famously from Kierkegaard and Marx to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and beyond to neo-Kantianism, etc.), within the American philosophical tradition of the 19th century Hegel had become an authoritative source, second only to Kant (see Redding 2015; Kaag – Jensen 2017).⁵ For some time it may have seemed as if Hegel had settled into his new home across the Atlantic, in the country he had prophetically described in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of History* as the “land of the future... the land of longing for all those who are weary of the historic arsenal that is old Europe” (Hegel 1998, 90).

The historical developments are well-known. Hegelianism was already influential in American philosophy before the inception of pragmatism and even became the authoritative “filter” through which emerging pragmatists somehow had to pass (Kaag – Jensen 2017, 679). Two (non-academic) centers of Hegelian thought were established before 1860.⁶ One was in Cincinnati, Ohio, represented primarily by John Bernard Stallo (1823 – 1900), August Willich (1810 – 1878), and Moncure Conway (1832 – 1907). They are considered left-wing American Hegelians. The other, much more influential, center was located in St. Louis, Missouri. Its leading figures were Henry Conrad Brokmayer (1826 – 1906) and William Torrey Harris (1835 – 1909). It took the form of the Philosophical Society, and its most enduring contribution was the founding of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1867, the first philosophical journal in the English-speaking world,⁷ edited by Harris until 1893 and revived in 1987 at Penn State University, Pennsylvania, and still very much alive today.⁸ By the 1880s though, the reputation of the Hegelians was being overshadowed by the growing influence of Darwinism. Although Hegel’s American century would continue in some way, nonetheless. The “absolute idealism” of Josiah Royce (1855 – 1916) is one example, and perhaps the most important one to have been inspired by Hegel. In his *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (Royce 1919, 258) Royce was among the first to proclaim himself “both a pragmatist and an absolutist” believing “each of these

⁵ Nonetheless, according to Stewart, the American tradition was “less important for the development of the Hegel myths and legends” than Hegelianism elsewhere (Stewart 1996, 4).

⁶ See Goetzmann. But they were not the first “American Hegelians” (Goetzmann 1973). In the 1820s the historian George Bancroft (1800 – 1891) attended Hegel’s lectures in Berlin. In the 1830s and 1840s Boston intellectuals, including the transcendentalist Theodore Parker (1810 – 1860) and others, were interested in Hegel’s interpretation of Christianity. Another factor was the influence of German immigrants, such as Marx’s collaborator Joseph Weydemeyer (1818 – 1866).

⁷ Alexander Bain established the journal *Mind* in 1876.

⁸ Hegel’s philosophy was close to many in America due to its promise of an overarching system of ideas uniting religion and science on the most general philosophical grounds (as the continuation of traditional deism), but to some it brought unacceptable havoc, like in the thought of Francis Ellingwood Abbot (1836 – 1903).

doctrines to involve the other,” and therefore regarding “them not only as reconcilable but as in truth reconciled.” Under Peirce’s influence Royce began to call his philosophy “absolute pragmatism” (Royce 1913, 123).

Thus, pragmatism may serve as the key example of Hegel’s continuing impact on American intellectual soil. Despite the publication of numerous papers and chapters on the topic, the relationship between the two still attracts attention, at least within the study of pragmatism (see, e.g., Gimmler 2004; Edmundts 2013; and Giladi 2018).

II. Hegel’s “Proto-Pragmatism”

Concerning my first question, “What is Hegel in relation to pragmatism?,” the crucial point is the framework of interpretation. Viewing Hegel’s philosophy from the perspective of pragmatism may help elucidate aspects of his thought that might otherwise be missed or misunderstood. For instance, Dina Emundts – recently having rediscovered features of pragmatism in Hegel – retrospectively claims that Hegel’s philosophy evinced features of pragmatism even before its inception (Emundts 2015). That means reading Hegel backward pragmatistically through a pragmatist lens, or by applying pragmatism’s attributes to Hegel (and possibly to others: Kant, etc.). Two common features are selected: 1. The pragmatic maxim, or practical testing of knowledge, theory, meaning, and 2. Anti-Cartesianism, or the rejection of apriorism (see also Gimmler 2004).

According to Kenneth Westphal – a resolute advocate of the “pragmatist Hegel” – the key pragmatist feature of Hegel’s philosophy is his *social ontology* (Westphal 2006). Hegel advocates for three theses: (1) Human beings are fundamentally social practitioners. Everything they do, say or think is performed within the context of social practices; (2) Whatever they do is a response to their social and natural environment; and (3) Social practitioners perpetuate and modify their social circumstances through their social practices, according to their needs. These are Hegelian theses that unify human beings, their practices and their societies into a single dynamic (dialectical) whole.

On the other hand, diverse interpreters of Hegel (by no means pragmatists themselves) have criticized pragmatist versions of Hegel, and claimed that the question of what relation, if any, exists between Hegel’s philosophy and the philosophy of the pragmatists will probably be endlessly debated (Redding 2015, 182). For instance, Willem de Vries, after considering the differences (such as Hegel’s metaphysics/pragmatist anti-metaphysics, idealism/realism) and convergencies (such as anti-Cartesianism), identifies problems with this common ground and concludes that despite Hegel’s “deep similarities to the pragmatists, and despite the great influence he exercised on several of the classic pragmatists,” one cannot unambiguously “simply call

Hegel a pragmatist” (de Vries 2020, 555). Therefore, it would be more accurate to classify Hegel as a “proto-pragmatist,” that is, as a forerunner rather than a pragmatist in the full sense of the word.⁹

III. Classical Pragmatism’s “Post-Hegelianism”

Concerning my second question “What is pragmatism in relation to Hegelianism?,” there is no doubt that the classical pragmatists knew Hegel and reacted to his philosophy, albeit in different ways. Hereby I offer a brief summary of some key points pertaining to the relationships between Peirce, James and Dewey, and Hegelianism.

Charles Sanders Peirce was a devoted Kantian and so can hardly be called a full-fledged Hegelian, but nonetheless one can discern a Hegelian bearing in him. While the early Peirce distanced himself from such Hegelians as Harris and detested what Hegel considered to be the character of logic, he later began to acknowledge the affinities between them, mainly when working on his categories. He admitted that his “three categories...resulted from two years incessant studies in the direction of trying to do what Hegel tried to do”; in other words, his short list was the fruition of his attempts to improve on Hegel’s long list (Fisch 1974, 176). Peirce’s use of Phenomenology in his classification of sciences echoes Hegel’s *Phenomenologie*. He could not refrain from exclaiming: “My philosophy resuscitates Hegel, though in a strange costume” (Peirce 1931, 1.42) In his *Lectures on Pragmatism* (1903), Peirce went even further, claiming that “pragmaticism is closely allied to Hegelian absolute idealism,” and it “belongs essentially to the triadic class of philosophical doctrines, and is much more essentially so than Hegelianism is” (Peirce 1905/1998, 345). He opined: “my own doctrine might very well be taken for a variety of Hegelianism” (Peirce 1903a/1998, 143 – 144). After 1900 he ended up elevating Hegel to “in some respects the greatest philosopher that ever lived” (Peirce 1931, 1.524) and his *Phenomenologie* to “a work...perhaps the most profound ever written” (Peirce 1903b/1998, 267).¹⁰

William James was different from Peirce in many ways, and from Hegel too. He started out as an anti-Hegelian with a deep aversion to German philosophy, which he thought a misguided pretentiousness. For James, Hegel epitomized the things philosophers should avoid: vicious intellectualism, abstract monism, cultivated obscurity and long grandiloquent pretentious sentences that sound profound but are really quite vacuous. There is a long-standing rumor that James was only able to read Hegel when

⁹ Despite the ambiguities in the term “proto-pragmatism,” there are many who have been called “proto-pragmatists” such as Hume, Fichte, Mill or Thomas Reid (see Lundestad 2006), respectively.

¹⁰ For a more detailed elaboration of the affinities between Peirce and Hegel, see, for example, Edmundts (2015, 350 – 368); Giladi (2018, 252 – 254).

under the influence of nitrous oxide. In a letter to Dewey of March 23, 1903, he distanced himself from the “the working of the Hegelian bacillus,” as Dewey called it in his reply of March 24 (Wilkins 1956, 333 – 334). James spent two chapters in *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1909) explaining all that was wrong with “monistic idealism” and lamenting the pernicious influence of Hegel. Pluralism, as James understood it, is a radical alternative to any form of Hegelianism. However, as most recent interpretations reveal, here James took a moment to praise Hegel. First, on the role of Hegel’s conception of religion, and second, on the dynamic living quality of experience within Hegel’s dialectic.¹¹

John Dewey – in contrast to Peirce and James who both moved cautiously from strong aversion to moderate attraction in their relation to Hegel – exemplifies the opposite direction. It was Dewey in particular who was inclined to read Hegel as a proto-pragmatist, for instance in his relation to religion (see Shook – Good 2010). He started out as a Hegelian, supported by W. T. Harris and educated by George Sylvester Morris (1840 – 1889), with an enthusiasm for Hegel and German idealism when studying for his PhD at Johns Hopkins University. What Dewey found so appealing was the sense of life, the dynamism and especially his vision of organic interrelated reality – and not the absolute, dialectic, logic or phenomenology. He wrote: “Hegel’s thought... supplied a demand for unification... synthesis of subject and object, matter and spirit, the divine and the human... Hegel’s treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts, involved the same dissolution of hard-and-fast dividing walls, and had a special attraction for me” (Dewey 1930/1984, 153). Dewey’s early works on psychology and his theory of self share much with Hegel (although not his theory of truth and method).¹² However, Dewey gradually drifted away from Hegel under the influence of Darwinism and experimental science. The standard story claims that by 1903 Dewey had moved away “from absolutism to experimentalism,”¹³ as indeed he himself stated in an autobiographical essay of 1930. But here he famously acknowledged that, “Hegel had left a permanent deposit in his thinking” (Dewey 1930/1984, 154). Thus recent interpreters have written about the compatibility between Dewey’s pragmatism and Hegel’s idealism and about “Deweyan Hegelian pragmatism” (Good 2005), ranging from the commonalities in the conceptions of experience to social practice and even to liberal politics. The kernel is the “naturalization of Hegel” by

¹¹ For a more detailed description of further affinities between James and Hegel, see, for example, Giladi (2018, 251 – 252).

¹² For a study of the great influence Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie* and *Philosophy of Spirit* had on Dewey’s theory of mind, see, for example, Dalton (2002).

¹³ Proposed by Morton White (1917 – 2016) in his *The Origin of Dewey’s Instrumentalism* (1943).

Dewey (Johnston 2010) through the location of knowledge within human conduct and the latter within nature.¹⁴

IV. Neopragmatism's "Post-Hegelianism"

With the growing influence of logical empiricism in the 1940s and 1950s, Hegel's impact seemed to fade temporarily. But then in the 1950s and subsequent decades, a new "Hegelian (re)turn" emerged. The change was gradual. There were signs that interest in Hegel was growing in the post-analytic movement championed by the figure behind the emergence of the school of "Pittsburgh Hegelians," Wilfrid Sellars (1912 – 1989) with his "incipient *meditations hegeliennes*" without becoming a staunch Hegelian of any sort. But Sellars' critique of the "myth of the Given" (Sellars 1956) exemplifies Hegel's criticism in the opening dialectical critique of "Sense Certainty" in his *Phenomenologie*. Sellars rejects the claim that there is immediate knowledge that does not involve conceptual mediation – a type of direct intuitive knowledge that allegedly serves as the foundation for all inferential knowledge. This leads us to a non-foundational, fallibilistic, intersubjective understanding of concept formation and inference. It also entails a rejection of representationalist semantics (i.e., the theory of meaning based on experiential representation), and requires a more holistic understanding of meaning through inference.

Sellars also inspired Richard Rorty, who made multiple references to Hegel in his works.¹⁵ Rorty was one of the first to suggest that Sellars was leading us from Kant to Hegel. He also agreed with the Darwinian naturalization of Hegel's philosophy that was underway in Dewey (Rorty 1995). Rorty reads Hegel predominantly as a historicist thinker who destroyed the Kantian idea of philosophy as science and who created a new "literary genre" (Rorty 1982, 139 – 159).¹⁶ Of Sellars and Brandom, Rorty wrote: "So they offer us a linguistified version of Hegel, one in which changes in vocabulary and in inferential relationships between sentences constitute the growth of Spirit's self-consciousness" (Rorty 2007, 39). Overall, Hegel emerged as one of Rorty's greatest philosophical heroes, shining behind the others (like Nietzsche, not just James and Dewey) and served as the emblem of philosophy that is meaningful. He wrote: "Let us optimistically imagine that intellectual historians in the year 2100 will see the twenty-first century as the one in which the philosophy professors finally ceased to take Cartesian problems seriously, and so were able to crawl out from under the dead hand

¹⁴ For a more detailed exposition of Dewey's Hegelianism see, for example, Dalton (2002); Giladi (2018, 254 – 256).

¹⁵ On Rorty's use of Hegel and his interpretation of the relation between pragmatism and Hegelianism, see Rorty (2007).

¹⁶ For more detail, see Hance (1995).

of Kant. If they do, I believe that these historians will give certain twentieth-century American neo-Hegelians some of the credit for that merciful deliverance” (Rorty 2007, 33).¹⁷

The contemporary offspring of these influences of Sellars and Rorty are the “Pittsburgh Neo-Hegelians,” John McDowell (*1942) and Robert Brandom (*1950). In his *Articulating Reasons*, Brandom explains that their work represents a continuation of this Hegelian line of thinking: “My teacher Richard Rorty has described the enterprise ... as an extension of Sellars’s; to make possible a further transition from a Kantian to a Hegelian approach to thought and action” (Brandom 2000a, 32). While McDowell inclines more towards post-analytic than to pragmatist philosophy, he also conceives of his key work *Mind and World* “as a prolegomenon to the reading of [Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*]” (McDowell 1994, ix). But Brandom has started explicitly identifying himself with a kind of neopragmatism – in particular “the pragmatism about norms” (Brandom 2000b) along with incorporating Hegel in it in his *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (2002) and *Reason in Philosophy* (2009). In his interpretation of the relation between pragmatism and Hegelianism, Brandom explains that it is “Hegelian pragmatism about conceptual norms” (Brandom 1999). In *A Spirit of Trust*, he offers “a pragmatist semantic reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*” based on an analysis of what is both necessary and impossible to think, which is determined by social norms (Brandom 2019). Finally, in his latest book, *Pragmatism and Idealism: Rorty and Hegel on Representation and Reality* (Brandom 2022), he explains his reading of Rorty as a true Hegelian whose philosophy evolved as an anti-authoritarian cultural politics, that is, as cultural practice concerning the social norms of actual and possible language use.

V. Hegelianism and Pragmatism: A Sketch of Continuity

This brief outline of key points in the development of the pragmatism/Hegelianism relationship brings us to my final question: What connects Hegelianism to pragmatism, and *vice versa*? Can we find any *continuity* or *common ground* between them?¹⁸ There are of course differences and incompatibilities, but I want to highlight the following analogies or similarities, a “shared outlook” (Stern 2009, 210) on which at least some contemporary interpreters seem to have agreed (see, for example, Rotenstreich 1985; Giladi 2018):

¹⁷ For an explanation of the “strategic” presence of Hegel in Rorty, see Kwiek (1996, 159 – 171).

¹⁸ This is a metaphilosophical question whose purpose is to reflect on various philosophies (and their comparisons) from the standpoint of their service to humanity (cf. Rorty 1961).

1. First of all, from the metaphilosophical point of view, both Hegelianism and pragmatism are types of philosophy that build on fully reflected *historicism*. All philosophies are the “children of their time” and are tasked with keeping in touch with their era by articulating its understanding via philosophical media. It is by no means an easy task because one cannot understand the present without understanding history, but also one cannot understand the future without understanding the present.
2. Still, from the metaphilosophical point of view, both Hegelianism and pragmatism are philosophies that strive for *holism* – the most comprehensive image of all reality grounded in an understanding of the continuities, connections and relations. Although pragmatism does not aspire to build a system in the way that Hegel did, Peirce’s synechism, Dewey’s transactionalism and even James’ radical empiricism and Rorty’s panrelationalism are holisms of this kind.
3. Finally, from the metaphilosophical point of view, both Hegelianism and pragmatism are types of *synthetic* rather than analytic philosophy. Hence they are averse to elevating or privileging key details – and even more importantly – they are anti-dualist, embracing the search for the complex coexistence (*Aufhebung*) of all kinds of differences (contradictions) rather than eliminating one at the expense of the other.

Other features have been singled out as being common in various measure to both Hegelianism and pragmatism. Let me just briefly list the following:

1. *Anti-Cartesianism* concerning *mind and knowledge* – both claim that Cartesian skepticism and the turn to subjectivity are misguided and distort the real picture of human knowledge, and so should be abandoned.
2. *Anti-Kantianism* concerning *experience and reason* – both claim that Kantian transcendental idealism fails to resolve the relation between experience and reason and maintains the dualism between them (e.g., a priori/a posteriori) out of a failure to understand real human practice, either epistemic or non-epistemic (linguistic/non-linguistic), which is social all the way down.¹⁹
3. *Anti-Platonism* concerning *thought and reality* – owing to the conception of the relation between nature and culture, the given and the constructed, the human and the nonhuman.

¹⁹ Hegel’s notion of practical creativity shares affinities with the notion of “situated creativity” associated with pragmatist conceptions of human action. See Joas (1996, 144).

Just as Hegel was not a full-fledged pragmatist, but a “proto-pragmatist,” the pragmatists themselves are not full-fledged Hegelians either, but can be labelled as “post-Hegelians.” In the way that Hegel preceded pragmatism, pragmatism has followed Hegelianism in the features outlined above. Pragmatists had some good reasons to continue these features (while discontinuing other features of Hegelianism) in their own way to gain support and an alliance in their philosophical endeavor. This, of course, does not mean that pragmatism is the only or privileged heir of “Hegel’s century,” but one would have a hard time arguing that it is not.²⁰

VI. Conclusion

Judging by the latest developments in neopragmatism, one might think that Hegel is still alive and well, even in the 21st century. But one can also ask: What’s the use of joining them together? First of all, it should be clear that the two have no shared identity, just as there is barely any shared identity between any of the original philosophies. But affinities abide. Or to put it differently: metaphilosophical typologies are revealing. There are philosophies of one type or another, such as scientism oriented towards knowledge, and anthropologism oriented towards human being from the 19th century onwards. I take it that Hegelianism and pragmatism are types of philosophical anthropologies that subsume knowledge as an instrument to human beings, human dignity and the good life.

Pragmatism, as is well known, is by no means a united philosophical doctrine either. It is pluralistic, rich in variety, and Hegelianism is similar. It should come as no surprise to learn that these two philosophies share continuity in various directions. Thus pragmatism may be understood as a version of Hegelianism transposed into meaningful social practice. Therefore Hegel is vital to pragmatism; just as pragmatism is vital to Hegelianism. It is more likely than not that without Hegel there would have been no pragmatism as we know it.

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²⁰ These features deserve elaboration worthy of a book-length project.

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This work was supported by the project “Naturalism and constructivism as competing or complementary philosophical programmes (NATCON)” of the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract no. APVV-22-0397.

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