

German Idealism and American Pragmatism

A Quest for Metaphysics

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Introductory Remarks

It is a challenge to be a metaphysician in contemporary philosophy if one proposes that metaphysical thought concerns ultimate reality; which, in my opinion, is what metaphysicians must propose. The immediate demand is not that of qualifying one's standpoint on the matter, but more pressingly of justifying the matter itself. Introducing the notion of ultimate reality in philosophical, and even theological, discussions often provokes strong responses. One is readily perceived a dogmatic fundamentalist, adhering to constrained modes of thinking, or simply antiquely naïve.

Cornel West, the contemporary American pragmatist, observes about the tension between metaphysical and anti-metaphysical positions that an "intellectual renaissance is occurring under the broad banner of pragmatism" ... its spokesmen "have unsettled academic philosophy ... [and are] reshaping prevailing conceptions of religious thought."¹ The question is, however, whether the controversial nature of metaphysical argumentation may not indicate that it, likewise, faces an opportunity for renewed interest. It may well be that the critical atmosphere surrounding metaphysics is a negative expression of a positive quest for meaning in the fields of philosophy and theology. And it may well be that this quest for meaning has itself been increasingly confined, proportionally to the disappearance of metaphysical forms of argumentation from much philosophical debate.

In contemporary discussions on metaphysics it is important to ask the question of whether anti-metaphysical stances are responding to an accurate or an erroneous perception of metaphysics. My contention is that discussions about whether philosophical reflection should be of a metaphysical nature or not are at cross purposes from the beginning, because the opposing parties operate with conflicting notions of metaphysics. That is, when the contemporary critical extremes declare metaphysics to be either manipulative and totalitarian or ineffective and irrelevant, these claims seem to be raised against an erroneous perception of metaphysics. My argument shall be that the often quite frozen debates between metaphysicians and anti-metaphysicians can become more fruitful by shifting focus from the *justification* to the *definition* of metaphysics. Focusing on incompetent renditions of metaphysical thought, anti-metaphysical positions easily dismiss the possibility of an alternative and viable definition of metaphysics, which would be able to affirm both the idealist desire to comprehend the world in full and the pragmatic claim that this is a practically impossible project.

Addressing this current situation, I wish to draw attention to the counterposition of German idealism and American pragmatism as a converging point for the central arguments of the disputes between metaphysics and anti-metaphysics. The intention is to point out that both traditions express a quest for metaphysical reflection and that they can serve as mutual correctives in the pursuit of a viable philosophical response to this quest. To this end, Dieter Henrich's interpretation of German idealism and C.S. Peirce's understanding of pragmatism shall be consulted. In my opinion, these two figures capture well that for philosophy to reflect the full reality of human life, it cannot

¹ **Cornel West**, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) p.3.

pretend that there is one absolute explanation of reality, as classical understandings of idealism claim; nor that there is no absolute explanation of reality, as contemporary pragmatists freely claim. Rather, advocating that philosophy must engage a *kind* of metaphysical reflection that can embrace both of these contentions, they demonstrate that idealism and pragmatism quest a metaphysics that is able to balance the human desire for fulfillment beyond what this world can provide on one side, and the experience of enduring non-fulfillment within the confines of this world on the other. Both Henrich and Peirce recognize that philosophy must exist within the tension of reaching for ultimate insight and suffering the impossibility of attaining ultimate insight. They engage the philosophical struggle it is to formulate a metaphysics that affirms the double reality of human life as structurally stretched between the poles of striving towards absolute satisfaction and experiencing the impossibility of absolute satisfaction.

German Idealism Reconsidered

An interesting approach to German idealism now is to investigate the complex thought constellations its distinct writers' speculative systems are based on and grow forth from. Not only for historical-critical reasons, but in order to see how the idealists do not simply solidify Kantian philosophy and carry it on to a higher, more sophisticated level, but that they acknowledge the limitation of Kant's thinking and the need for a confident rather than a critical engagement in metaphysical argumentation. This task requires a preparedness to sift and rearrange the argumentative components of idealist philosophy in all its complexity. Such preparedness is found in the work of Dieter Henrich. In contemporary scholarship, Henrich has contributed to the breaking of stereotypical perceptions of German idealism, and has capacitated a more nuanced awareness of the complexity it implies to engage metaphysical reflection. Henrich argues the philosophical need for a transcendental grounding of human life, but also maintains that this must be complemented with an earnest attempt at actually understanding and comprehending that foundation itself. Avoiding uncritical acceptance of totalizing metaphysical systems, Henrich claims that envisioning ultimate unity is as inevitable as reaching for its actual fulfillment. Metaphysics cannot simply postulate what it is looking for. This approach is principally convincing in that it suggests the structural maxim that transcendental and metaphysical philosophy must first and foremost protect the double reality of *life's inescapable complexity* and of an *ultimate life unity*.

Henrich arrives at this double claim through a life long study of German idealism, challenging the fact that idealism is commonly perceived as a tradition of *progressing* philosophical speculation from Descartes through Kant, Fichte, Schelling and finally culminating in Hegel who accomplishes the absolute speculative metaphysical system, to which nothing can be supplemented. This classical view presupposes that the development of idealist thinking runs along an unbent line of separate and closed philosophical positions following one after another in a linear fashion, the whole of which has its indisputable philosophical background in Kantian philosophy. Henrich's interpretation, on the contrary, sees idealism as a highly complex picture of intertwined philosophical issues, which he terms a "*Kraftfeld der Motive* [power field of motifs]"².

Where the classical interpretation of idealism implies a dogmatic and totalitarian notion of metaphysics with its Hegelian culmination point always in view, Henrich's interpretation opens a way out of presumptuous metaphysical speculation without losing the *vision* of comprehending reality in full. He argues for a readiness to engage in a synthetic treatment of the conceptual complexity that the group of idealists are both creating and exploring. Doing this, Henrich avoids forcing their argumentation into a neatly linear progression. This position inherently affirms that it is possible and inevitable to live in unfulfillment, but also that it is not necessary to adopt a

² **Dieter Henrich**, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789-1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991) p.13.

negativity based form of existential stoicism, such as immediate post-idealism adheres to with a Nietzsche, a Schopenhauer or a Heidegger.

For present purposes the intention is not to give a detailed account of Henrich's work but to emphasize that reconsidering German idealism synthetically means taking the risk of leaving a rigid and stationary approach to metaphysical philosophy behind, in order to explore human life in its full complexity, confident that there *are* answers to the enigmas life incessantly causes. Moreover, the rigid and stationary approach Henrich avoids is the erroneous perception of metaphysics that contemporary pragmatism *rightly* critiques; for which pragmatism must be credited as an important corrective to the classical and predominant interpretation of idealist metaphysics.

American Pragmatism Reconsidered

Contemporary American pragmatism voices a definite anti-metaphysical appeal. Concentrating on its rootedness in Kantian epistemology-centered philosophy, it advances the simple and radical critique that *metaphysics is manipulative and totalitarian but irrelevant and ineffective*. It is nothing but an impotent rational superstructure resting on a postulated illusion. In the case of Fichte e.g., it remains a flow of rationally constructed pictures disconnected from the reality of individual people's lives. Or, in Richard Rorty's formulation: discussing how we can understand ultimate reality and truth simply "is not a profitable topic".³ Arguing that prevailing variants of the Cartesian-Kantian project of grounding rational activity are of no effect, pragmatism accordingly claims that no ultimate reference point exists; nor does it give meaning to postulate its existence in order to pursue any ultimate kind of truth via explanatory speculations about the limits of reason and its beyond.

According to Cornel West, pragmatists express a strong common disillusionment with transcendental and metaphysical thought, arguing against the controlling and authoritative position it has assumed. His charge is that - at the expense of seeing human agency released in all its various manifestations - metaphysical philosophy has boasted of an intellectual superiority it does not have, and that it has misused the power of philosophical argumentation. Appreciating Emerson's "democratic leveling of the subordination of common sense to Reason [capital R]"⁴, West then rouses a prophetic call to let philosophical activity be concerned with the *how* in stead of the *what*. In his opinion, philosophy must promote rational deliberation rather than rational instruction and should consider it of primary concern to create a democratic climate where human inquiry into knowledge and truth is no longer equated with a search for foundations. The creative capacity for acquiring and producing knowledge is in need of emancipation.

Whether the pragmatic critique is formulated in Rorty's philosophical or West's political language, its charges must be admitted *in so far as metaphysics actually is what these contemporary pragmatists presuppose*. Manipulative metaphysics ultimately is and will prove ineffective. My contention is, however, that their pragmatic critiques are provoked by the effects of an erroneous perception of metaphysics. The predominant metaphysical traditions may have effected philosophical misfortunes because their arguments have been advanced by ways of manipulation and empty speculation, but that this leads to a dismissal of metaphysics as such is unfortunate. Rather, the persistence with which metaphysical questioning remains a challenge to contemporary pragmatists should, in my opinion, be incitement enough for philosophy to keep exploring the possibilities of pursuing a positive definition of metaphysics. Only this will enable the philosopher's work towards a viable answer to the quest for metaphysics. A quest appearing across the spectrum of modern philosophy - from idealism to pragmatism - where Kant at one end and

³ **Richard Rorty**, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p.xliii.

⁴ **Cornel West**, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) p.212.

Rorty at the other both ask the relentless question: “Why do human beings ask metaphysical questions?”

My argument now is that Henrich’s critique of classical interpretations of German idealism resonates in the pragmatic dissatisfaction with manipulative and ineffective metaphysics. Which brings me to the suggestion that C.S. Peirce deserves special attention: Peirce is the early American pragmatist who struggles to formulate a metaphysics capable of avoiding the traps of both totalizing metaphysics and anti-metaphysics. Moreover, relating Peirce and Henrich reveals a *structural likeness* between the two. Henrich’s claim of the double reality of *life’s inescapable complexity* and an *ultimate life unity* is analogous to Peirce’s central argument that “although our schemes for describing the world are thoroughly human constructions, they are fated . . . to correspond to an independently existing reality.”⁵ Structurally, both Henrich and Peirce operate on the basis of the experience that human life offers both freedom for individuals to construct themselves and also imposes constraining limitations upon every individual. Faithful to that experience they share a wish to formulate a metaphysics that can embrace both these elements without reducing the significance of either.

A word about Peirce. Peirce contrasts idealism and realism, claiming that the world is simultaneously both constructed and objectively real. Attaining knowledge about the world is both an ongoing process *and* a process moving toward an objective end goal: It is ongoing, but not ceaseless. The way to knowledge is always guided by some interest moving through the course of our experiences of the world. Which, in Peirce’s formulation, is to say that “thought is a thread of melody running through the succession of our sensations. . . . Thought in action has for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest”⁶. Two elements are at work in this Peircean argument: a principle of *activity*, or rule of action, and a principle of *objectivity*. First, Peirce holds, an idea or concept only has meaning in so far as it is action indicative; its meaning is contained in its practical effect and is embodied only through experience. That is, we deceive ourselves if we think that “we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but *conceived sensible effects of things*. Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects”⁷. This is the principle of activity. Second, some unknown reality is never principally unknowable. The unknown is ultimately knowable, but just not yet known. For Peirce, the process of attaining knowledge about the world has a real destination outside of what rationality can actively grasp and construct. The process is guided by more than just an utopian mirage, or something like a regulating Kantian idea. This means that truth is not only “that which works in the moment”, as Rorty could argue, but that which has reality apart from and prior to rational inquiry. What is truly real will stand and never come to be reasoned wrong. This is the principle of objectivity. Hence, Peirce balances a vision of ultimate knowledge about reality with the impossibility of an actual fulfillment of that vision. For although reality will be fully comprehended at the end of the process of inquiry, no individual inquirer is in a position to contain such full comprehension of reality.

What I have wished to suggest is that following a *structure* such as the one Henrich and Peirce operate with is *a necessary beginning* to the establishment of a *kind of metaphysics* that can respond effectively and competently to the quest for metaphysics which appears to be intrinsically at work along the spectrum of modern philosophy. The important point is that this way the kind of metaphysics contemporary pragmatism rightly criticizes as manipulative and ineffective is avoided - without buying into the metaphysical indifference or political rebelliousness of contemporary

⁵ **Russell B. Goodman** (ed.), *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* (New York/London: Routledge 1995) p.235.

⁶ **C.S. Peirce**, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” in: *The Essential Peirce*. Vol 1. Edited by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) p.129.

⁷ **Ibid.**, p.132. Italics mine.

pragmatism. Both Henrich and Peirce - from opposite sides, as it were - drop anchor where the waters of idealism and pragmatism meet, realizing that in order to even begin reflecting on how to answer the metaphysical question, *a frame of thought must first be defined which includes both a negative and a positive element: the absence of fulfillment and the orientation toward fulfillment.* By shifting focus from the legitimacy to the definition of metaphysics it is possible to suggest a kind of metaphysics that avoids getting trapped by the polar modes of over-concern and indifference, the two modes adhered to by totalizing metaphysics and anti-metaphysics respectively.