

From German Idealism to American Pragmatism—and Back

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I. Kant and Hegel

Developments over the past four decades have secured Immanuel Kant's status as being for contemporary philosophers what the sea was for Swinburne: the great, gray mother of us all. And Kant mattered as much for the classical American pragmatists as he does for us today. But we look back at that sepia-toned age across an extended period during which Anglophone philosophy largely wrote Kant out of its canon. The founding ideology of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, articulating the rationale and fighting faith for the rising tide of analytic philosophy, was forged in a recoil from the defects, perceived and real, of a British idealism inspired by Hegel. Mindful of the massive debt evidently and self-avowedly owed by Hegel to Kant, and putting aside neo-Kantian readings of Kant as an empiricist philosopher of science that cast him in a light they would have found more favorable, Russell and Moore diagnosed the idealist rot as having set in already with Kant. For them, and for many of their followers down through the

years, the progressive current in philosophy should be seen to have run directly from Locke, Leibniz, and Hume, to Mill and Frege, without any dangerous diversion into the oxbow of German idealism.

What did the pragmatists learn from Kant? I want to focus on two of Kant's master ideas: what I'll call his *normative turn*, and what I'll call (tendentiously but only proleptically) his *pragmatist* methodology. I think that we should still care today about these ideas—ideas which were for complicated reasons largely invisible to classical analytic philosophy. As I understand his work, Kant's most basic idea, the axis around which all his thought turns, is that what distinguishes exercises of judgment and intentional agency from the performances of merely natural creatures is that judgments and actions are subject to distinctive kinds of *normative* assessment. Judgments and actions are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They are a kind of *commitment* we undertake. Kant understands judging and acting as applying *rules*, concepts, that determine *what* the subject becomes committed to and responsible for by applying them. Applying concepts theoretically in judgment and practically in action binds the concept user, commits her, makes her responsible, by opening her up to normative assessment according to the rules she has made herself subject to.

The responsibility one undertakes by applying a concept is a task responsibility: a commitment to *do* something. On the theoretical side, what one is committed to doing, what one becomes liable to assessment as to one's success at doing, is integrating one's judgments into a whole that exhibits a distinctive kind of unity: the synthetic unity of apperception. It is a systematic, rational unity, dynamically created and sustained by

drawing inferential consequences from and finding reasons for one's judgments, and rejecting commitments incompatible with those one has undertaken. Apperceiving, the characteristically sapient sort of awareness, is discursive (that is, conceptual) awareness. For it consists in integrating judgments into a unity structured by relations of what judgments provide reasons for and against what others. And those rational relations among judgments are determined by the rules, that is the concepts, one binds oneself by in making the judgments. Each new episode of experience, paradigmatically the making of a perceptual judgment, requires integration into, and hence transformation of the antecedent constellation of commitments. New incompatibilities can arise, which must be dealt with critically by rejecting or modifying prior commitments. New joint consequences can ensue, which must be acknowledged or rejected. The process by which the whole evolves and develops systematically is a paradigmatically rational one, structured by the rhythm of inhalation or amplification by acknowledging new commitments and extracting new consequences, and exhalation or criticism by rejecting or adjusting old commitments in the light of their rational relations to the new ones.

Kant's new normative conception of what the activity of judging consists in, of what one must be *doing* in order to be judging (a corresponding story applies to acting), puts important structural constraints on how he understands the judgeable *contents* for which one is taking responsibility in judgment. The dominant order of logical and semantic explanation of the tradition Kant inherited began with a doctrine of terms or concepts. On that base, a doctrine of judgments was erected, and then finally a doctrine of consequences or syllogisms. But the minimal unit of *responsibility* is the judgment. It is

judgments, not concepts, that one can invest one's authority in, commit oneself to, by integrating them into an evolving constellation that exhibits the rational synthetic unity of apperception. Accordingly, in a radical break with his predecessors, Kant takes judgments to be the minimal units of awareness and experience. Concepts are to be understood analytically, as functions of judgment—that is, in terms of the contribution they make to judgeable contents. To be candidates for synthesis into a system exhibiting the rational unity characteristic of apperception, judgments must stand to one another in relations of material consequence and incompatibility. So if one is to understand judging also as the application of concepts, the first question one must ask about the contents of those concepts is how the use of one or another concept affects those rational relations among the judgeable contents that result. This methodological inversion is Kant's commitment to the *explanatory primacy of the propositional*. It is a methodological commitment that will be seconded by Frege, whose *Begriffsschrift* is structured by the observation that it is only judgeable contents to which pragmatic force can attach, and by Wittgenstein, who in the *Investigations* gives pride of place to sentences as the only kind of linguistic expression that can be used to make a move in a language game.

Kant's thought here, I think, is that alongside the *local* order of explanation, which looks to the contents of the particular concepts applied in judging to explain the specific possibilities of rational integration of judgeable contents containing them (their inferential grounds, consequences, and incompatibilities), there is a *global* order of explanation according to which one must understand what conceptual content *is* in terms of what judgeable contents are, and must understand that in terms of what one is *doing* in judging,

in making oneself responsible for such contents—namely integrating them into a whole exhibiting the synthetic unity of apperception. The *functionalism* about conceptual contents that consists in understanding them as functions of judgment, which is the practical expression of methodological commitment to the explanatory primacy of the propositional, is motivated by an overarching methodological *pragmatism* according to which semantics must answer to pragmatics (in a broad sense).¹ It is the strategy of understanding discursive *content* in terms of what one is *doing* in endorsing or applying it, of approaching the notions of judgeable, and therefore conceptual content generally, in terms of the constraints put on it by requirement derived from the account of the *activity* of judging.

Though I have for expository reasons focused my sketch on the cognitive, theoretical side of Kant's thought, it is important to be clear that pragmatism in the sense I am attributing to Kant is *not* a matter of giving explanatory priority to the practical over the theoretical, to exercises of agency over exercises of cognition. Rather, within both the practical and the theoretical spheres, it is understanding *content* in terms of *force* (in Frege's sense): what is judged, believed, or done in terms of one must *do*, what activity one must engage in, to be judging, believing, or doing it. Kant, I am claiming, should be thought of as a pragmatist *avant la lettre* because of the way his normative theory of conceptual *activity* (theoretical and practical) shapes his account of conceptual *content* (both theoretical and practical).

1 Later on (in Section V) I will suggest a somewhat narrower use of the term “methodological pragmatism”.

I read Hegel as taking over from Kant commitment both to a normative account of conceptual doings, and to a broadly pragmatist approach to understanding the contents of our cognitive and practical commitments in terms of what we are doing in undertaking those commitments. I see him as taking an important step toward *naturalizing* the picture of conceptual norms by taking those norms to be instituted by public, social, recognitive practices. Further, Hegel tells a story about how the very same practice of rational integration of commitments undertaken by applying concepts that is the social synthesis at once of recognized and recognizing individual subjects and of their recognitive communities, is at the same time the historical process by which the norms that articulate the contents of the concepts applied are instituted, determined, and developed. He calls that on-going social, historical process “experience” (Erfahrung), and no longer sees it as taking place principally between the ears of an individual.

II. Classical American Pragmatism

In the broadest terms, the classical American pragmatists, Peirce, James, and Dewey, developed this German idealist tradition by completing the process of *naturalizing* it, which had begun already with Hegel. In their hands, it was to take on the shape of an empirical scientific account of us and our transactions with our environment. The sort of understanding they sought was decisively shaped by two new models of scientific explanation, codifying new forms of intelligibility characteristic of late

nineteenth century science. Principal among these, of course, was Darwinian evolutionary explanations. The other form of explanation that was coming to maturity in the science of the day was statistical explanation. Pragmatism begins with a philosophy of science, pioneered by Peirce, that saw these two explanatory innovations as aspects of one conceptual revolution in science.

One dimension along which evolutionary and statistical explanations differ from those of the older mathematical physics concerns the dominant *modality* in which they are expressed. The modality of Newtonian laws is *necessity*. One explains something by showing that it is necessitated by eternal, exceptionless, universal laws. Evolutionary and statistical explanations, by contrast, explain *contingent* happenings, by displaying conditions under which they can be seen to have been *probable*. Both are ways of making intelligible and explicable the contingent emergence of collective order from individual randomness.

The original subject-matter of evolutionary explanations was, of course, the process by which biological species arise and diversify. Taking his cue from the way in which statistical explanation had been generalized from its original applications in social science to provide the basis for the triumph of thermodynamics in physics, Peirce substantially generalized evolutionary-statistical forms of intelligibility in two different directions. Most important was an idea that was picked up and developed by James and above all by Dewey: the recognition that *evolution*, at the level of species, and *learning*, at the level of individuals, share a common *selectional* structure. Both can be understood as processes of *adaptation*, in which interaction with the environment preserves and

reproduces (selects) some elements, while eliminating others. This insight is encapsulated in the concept of habit, and the picture of individual learning as the evolution-by-selection of a population of habits. This master idea made possible the naturalistic construal of a cognitive continuum that runs from the skillful coping of the competent predator, through the practical intelligence of primitive hominids, down to the traditional practices and common sense of civilized humans, all the way to the most sophisticated theorizing of contemporary scientists. All are seen as of a piece with, intelligible in the same general terms as, biological evolution.

The other direction in which Peirce generalized the evolutionary statistical selectional model of explanation was to *inorganic* nature. What those older scientific naturalists, for whom the paradigm of scientific understanding was Newtonian physics rather than Darwinian biology, had taken to be eternal, immutable, necessary, universal laws of nature, Peirce now sees as themselves in the largest sense “habits” of the universe—a kind of order that has arisen contingently, but ultimately statistically explicable, by a selectional-adaptational process operating on a population of such regularities, which in turn provides the dynamic habitat to which all must collectively adapt. There is no guarantee that any such accommodation will succeed permanently. As with habits learned by individuals, some of the lawlike regularities may prove more robust and others more fragile. The older picture of laws shows up as at best only approximately true, an idealization extrapolating a situation that actuality approaches at most asymptotically.² The naturalism of the classical American pragmatists was shaped

2 James endorses this Peircean idea in Lecture II of *Pragmatism*. [ref.]

by the new sort of nature they had been taught about by the best science of their times—a nature viewed through the lens of the new forms of statistical and selectional explanation.

The pragmatists' new form of *naturalism* was coupled with a new form of *empiricism*. The experimental scientific method is seen as just the explicit, principled distillation of the selectional learning process that is the practical form common to intelligent creatures at all stages of development. Dewey's term for that process, in all its varieties, is 'experience'—the axial concept of such central works as *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*. Experience in this sense is not the ignition of some internal Cartesian light—the occurrence of a self-intimating event of pure awareness, transparent and incorrigible to the subject of the experience. Experience is *work*: the application of force through distance. It is something *done* rather than something that merely *happens*—a process, engaging in a practice, the exercise of abilities, rather than an episode. It is experience, not in the sense of *Erlebnis* (or *Empfindung*), but of Hegel's *Erfahrung*. It is the decidedly non-Cartesian sense of 'experience' in which a want-ad can specify "No experience necessary," without intending thereby to invite applications from zombies. Earlier empiricists had thought of experience as the occurrence of conscious episodes that provide the raw materials for learning, via processes such as association, comparison, and abstraction. For the pragmatists, experience is not an input to the learning process. It just *is* learning: the process of perception and performance, followed by perception and assessment of the results of the performance, and then further performance, exhibiting the iterative, adaptive, conditional-branching structure of a Test-Operate-Test-Exit loop. The result of experience is not best thought of as the possession

of items of *knowledge*, but as a kind of practical *understanding*, a kind of adaptive attunement to the environment, the development of habits apt for successful coping with contingencies. It is knowing how rather than knowing that.

Ontological naturalism and epistemological empiricism are both encouraged by the idea that the rise of modern science, the most successful social institution of the past three hundred years, can teach philosophers the most important lessons both about how things really are and how we can best understand them. But from the beginning they have typically stood in significant tension with one another. The furniture of Newton's natural world does not include Locke's mind. And Hume can find nothing in experience by which we could come to know or understand laws, such as Newton's, as having the necessity that distinguishes laws from mere regularities. Nor is this tension a characteristic only of Enlightenment naturalism and empiricism. It equally afflicts the twentieth-century versions. The two principal wings of the Vienna Circle, which Carnap struggled heroically to keep from flying off in different directions, were distinguished precisely by their answers to the question: when empiricism and naturalism conflict, which should be relaxed or given up? Schlick urged the preeminence of empiricism, while Neurath was committed to the priority of naturalism. Quine never fully reconciled his (logical) empiricist hostility to modality with his naturalist privileging of the deliverances of science.

The classical pragmatist versions of naturalism and empiricism, though, fit together much better than the versions that preceded and succeeded them. Far from being in tension, they complement and mutually support one another. Both the world and our

knowledge of it are construed on a single model: as mutable, contingent products of statistical selectional-adaptational processes that allow order to pop to the surface and float in a sea of random variability. Both nature and experience are to be understood in terms of the processes by which relatively stable constellations of habits arise and sustain themselves through their interactions with an environment that includes a population of competing habits. There is no problem in principle in finding a place for experience, construed as learning, in nature, construed as evolving. Nor is there any analog of the traditional complementary problem of understanding how experience construed as the dynamic evolution of habits can give its subjects access to the modally robust habits of the things those knowers-and-agents interact with, adapt, and adapt to. The pragmatist forms of naturalism and empiricism are two sides of one coin.

The pragmatists' conception of experience is recognizably a naturalized version of the rational process of critically winnowing and actively extrapolating commitments, according to the material incompatibility and consequence relations they stand in to one another, that Kant describes as producing and exhibiting the distinctive synthetic unity of apperception. For that developmental process, too, is selectional (though not statistical). Some commitments (theoretical and practical) thrive and persist, in concert with their fellows, while others are modified or rejected as unable to flourish in that environment. It might be thought fanciful to focus on this common structure in light of the substantial difference between the conceptions, for Kant's process is structured by *rational*, conceptual relations of incompatibility and consequence, while the pragmatists' version is structured by *natural*, causal relations of incompatibility and consequence.

But the pragmatists would disagree. For they introduce not only a new conception of experience, but also a new conception of reason. They understand the rationality of the theoretical physicist as continuous with the intelligence of the culturally primitive hunter and the skill of the non-human predator. The grooming and development of discursive cognitive and practical commitments is a learning process of a piece and sharing a structure with the achievement of practical attunement to an environment and the acquisition of habits successful in that environment that in one form or another is a part of the natural history of all sentient organisms. Reason and intelligence in this sense can be seen (albeit in an inflexible and unlearned form) already in the maintenance of an equilibrium by that emblem of the industrial revolution: the fly-wheel governor. The nature of the pragmatists is through and through a rational nature—not just the part of it that is intelligible as experience.

III. Fundamental Pragmatism

The more specific strategy by which the classical American pragmatists sought to naturalize the concept of experience—to demystify and domesticate it, to disentangle it from two centuries of Cartesian encumbrances—is what I will call *fundamental* pragmatism. This is the idea that one should understand knowing *that* as a kind of knowing *how* (to put it in Rylean terms). That is, believing *that* things are thus-and-so is to be understood in terms of practical abilities to *do* something. Dewey, in particular, saw

the whole philosophical tradition down to his time as permeated by a kind of platonism or intellectualism that saw a rule or principle, something that is or could be made conceptually or propositionally explicit, behind every bit of skillful practice. He contrasted that approach with the contrary pragmatist approach, which emphasizes the implicit context of practices and practical abilities that forms the necessary background against which alone states and performances are intelligible as explicitly contentful believings and judgments. In this reversal of the traditional order of explanation, Dewey is joined by the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, with his project of understanding *Vorhandenheit* as a precipitate of the more ‘primordial’ *Zuhandenheit*, and by the later Wittgenstein. All three thinkers are downstream from Kant’s fundamental insight about the normative character of cognition and agency, and share a commitment to the explanatory priority of norms implicit as proprieties of practice to norms explicit as rules or principles.

I mean the rubric “fundamental pragmatism” to be a relatively loose and elastic description, whose parameters can be adjusted or interpreted so as to fit the methodology of many thinkers, who might differ in many other ways. It is supposed, for instance, to include both the order of explanation that lead Quine to criticize “myth of the museum” in thinking about meaning, and that Sellars employs in criticizing the “myth of the given” in thinking about sensory experience. It depends on a contrast, which may be filled-in in different ways, between something on the implicit, know-how, skill, practical ability, practice side and something on the explicit, conceptual, rule, principle, representation side. So we might distinguish between two grades of intentionality: practical and

discursive. Practical intentionality is the kind of attunement to their environment that intelligent nonlinguistic animals display—the way they can practically take or treat things as prey or predator, food, sexual partner or rival and cope with them accordingly. Discursive intentionality is using concepts in judgment and intentional action, being able explicitly to take things to be thus-and-so, to entertain and evaluate propositions, formulate rules and principles. The fundamental pragmatist aspiration is to be able to exhibit discursive intentionality as a distinctive kind of practical intentionality. This project can take a strong reductionist form. For instance, what I have elsewhere³ called the “pragmatist version of artificial intelligence” claims that there is a set of practices or abilities that are non-discursive, in the sense that each of them can be engaged in or exercised by nondiscursive creatures, and yet which can be algorithmically elaborated into the discursive capacity to use concepts and speak an autonomous language. But fundamental pragmatism need not take such a strong, reductive form. One might claim, more modestly, that discursive activity, from everyday thought to the cogitations of the theoretical physicist, is a species of practical intentionality (or a determination of that determinable), and indeed, one that is intelligible as having developed out of nondiscursive practical intentionality, while still maintaining that it is a wholly distinctive variety.

IV. The Linguistic Turn

3 In Chapter 3 of *Between Saying and Doing* [Oxford University Press, 2008].

When classical American pragmatism is looked back upon from the perspective of the analytic movement that dominated Anglophone philosophy for at least the last half of the twentieth century, it can easily appear that a decisive wrong turn was taken after Peirce. That pragmatist founder-member was principally concerned to advance the philosophical understanding of modern logic, symbolic and natural languages, and the natural sciences—a constellation of topics that remained at the center of the analytic tradition. In his logic of relations Peirce independently achieved the explosion of expressive power that Russell saw in Frege’s logic. But what did his successor pragmatists make of that achievement? Particularly in contrast to what Russell made of Frege, it would seem from a later vantage point that an opportunity was missed. James had little interest in logic and wrote almost nothing about it—in striking contrast to his Hegelian colleague Josiah Royce, who saw in the algebraic constructions of Alfred Bray Kempe (whom he had learned about from Peirce) a tool with which he hoped to solve the riddle of how to elaborate spatio-temporal relations from a purely conceptual basis.⁴ The logic Dewey wrote his late, important book about was unrecognizable as such to those of his readers in 1938 whose paradigm of logic was to be found in the works of Frege, Russell, and Carnap. The only pragmatist whose concern with logic matched and was recognizable as continuing that tradition was the homegrown neo-Kantian C. I. Lewis, the founder of twentieth century modal logic, who saw his own work as an attempt to synthesize the approaches of his teachers James and Royce, and in turn passed on pragmatist ideas to his students, Quine and Goodman.

4 See Bruce Kuklick’s discussion of this fascinating late project in his *Josiah Royce: An Intellectual Biography* [Hackett, 1985].

Again, although James was surely the by far the best writer among the classical triumvirate, his philosophical interests focused on experience, rather than language. Dewey did write a lot about language—what he called the “tool of tools.”⁵ He has many good things to say about the relations between meaning and use. But he, too, would not be recognizable to later philosophers of language as one of their number.

By “the linguistic turn” here I mean putting language at the center of philosophical concerns, and understanding philosophical problems to begin with in terms of the language one uses in formulating them. But there is a more specific significance one can take language to have. By ‘lingualism’—admittedly an unlovely term (but meant to belong in a family with ‘rationalism’)—I shall mean commitment to understanding *conceptual* capacities (discursiveness in general) in terms of *linguistic* capacities. Dummett epitomizes a strong version of this order of explanation when he says:

We have opposed throughout the view of assertion as the expression of an interior act of judgment; judgment, rather, is the interiorization of the external act of assertion.⁶

A weaker version of lingualism claims only that language is a *necessary* condition of discursiveness, not that it is a sufficient condition that can at least in principle be made intelligible independently of talk about discursive commitments.

5 *Experience and Nature, Later Works* Vol. 1, p. 134.

6 *Frege's Philosophy of Language* [ref.] p. 361.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the pragmatists after Peirce missed the linguistic turn. In fact, Dewey at least is clearly a (weak) lingualist about the discursive. What the pragmatists did was develop these thoughts within the context of a different approach to understanding the crucial phenomenon of language—one that was complementary to that of the analytic tradition. The Frege-Russell-Carnap approach to language takes as its paradigm artificial, formal, logistical languages articulated by explicit rules. The American pragmatists, like their fellow fundamental pragmatists the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, address natural languages, which they think of anthropologically, as aspects of the natural history of a certain kind of being. Their focus to begin with is not on *meaning*, but on *use*: on discursive practices, skills, and abilities, on what one must be able to *do* in order to count as saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so.

We can think of these two approaches as distinguished by their preferred order of explanation. The question is: which comes first, semantics (the theory of meaning) or pragmatics (the theory of use)? The logistical tradition begins with semantics: stipulating the association of some kind of semantic interpretants (paradigmatically, extensions) with basic expressions and deriving associations for more complex ones, or stipulating basic rules of derivation and then seeing what consequence relation they jointly determine. The question of how it is appropriate to *use* expressions governed by those rules is then deferred to a subsequent pragmatic theory, to which this current of thought has not

traditionally devoted a great deal of attention. By contrast, the pragmatist tradition begins with pragmatics: an account precisely of how it is appropriate to use expressions. It is true that the pragmatists, also have not traditionally given a lot of attention to the specifics of the semantics that goes with such a pragmatics.

But I think we can see two principles that govern fundamental pragmatists' understanding of the relation between pragmatics and semantics. They express complementary aspects of the sense of the pragmatism in the philosophy of language that consists in insisting that semantics must answer to pragmatics. First is what I shall call "methodological pragmatism." This is the principle that the *point* of associating meanings, extensions, contents, or other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is to codify (express explicitly) proprieties of *use*. I think we can discern commitment to this methodological principle even in a semantic nihilist such as the later Wittgenstein. For one thing he means by saying that language is a motley is that so many and so various are the uses of any expression that there are no realistic prospects of systematizing them by associating some underlying meaning, on the basis of which one hopes then uniformly to derive the various uses (say, by one rule for declarative uses, and another for imperative ones, another for hypothetical, and so on). If the variety of uses is open-ended and unsurveyable, then there is no prospect for semantic theorizing in philosophy, precisely because the only point of such theorizing would be systematizing those proprieties of use.

The second principle governing the pragmatists' understanding of the sense in which semantics should answer to pragmatics is what I shall call "semantic pragmatism." This is the principle that in a natural language, all there is to effect the association of meanings, contents, extensions, rules, or other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is the way those expressions are *used* by the linguistic practitioners themselves. *Formal* semantics for *artificial* languages can content itself with the explicit stipulation of such rules or associations of meanings, by the semantic theorist working in an expressively more powerful semantic metalanguage. *Philosophical* semantics for *natural* languages is obliged to say what it is about the practices the users of those expressions engage in or the abilities they exercise, in virtue of which they should be understood as *governed* by those rules, or as *conferring* those meanings. Semantic pragmatism is a kind of use-functionalism about meaning. Again, given his practice, I think commitment to such a principle can be attributed even to such a semantic pessimist as the later Wittgenstein, precisely in virtue of his criticism of various traditional ways of thinking about meaning or content for their failure to live up to this requirement. And that sort of strategy is equally evident in Dewey's criticisms of traditional intellectualist and mentalistic conceptions.

The combination of methodological and semantic pragmatism, the two senses in which semantics can be taken to answer to pragmatics, broadly construed, might be called "linguistic pragmatism." It is one natural way of applying fundamental pragmatism to systematic theorizing about language. One of the clearest and most emphatic proponents

of that conjunctive doctrine among recent philosophers is Dummett—though of course he does not associate it with pragmatism.

Quine carries forward this general pragmatist tradition in the philosophy of language when he criticizes Carnap's two-stage picture of language, according to which first meanings are stipulated, and only subsequently are theories formulated to determine which of the sentences with those meanings are true. That division of labor makes sense for artificial languages. But to understand natural languages we have to understand how the *one* thing we do, *use* the language, can serve at once to settle the meanings of our expressions *and* determine which of them we take to be true. Linguistic practice is not illuminated by postulating language/theory or meaning/belief distinctions of the Carnapian kind. As Quine famously concludes an early essay on Carnap:

“The lore of our fathers is a fabric of sentences...It is a pale grey lore, black with fact and white with convention. But I have found no substantial reasons for concluding that there are any quite black threads in it, or any white ones.”⁷

In fact, though he did not know it, in making this pragmatist point against Carnap, Quine was recapitulating one of the important ways in which Hegel moves beyond Kant. For Kant, all our empirical activity, cognitive and practical, is discursive activity. In endorsing judgeable contents and practical maxims, knowers and agents are applying concepts. Though further concepts may be developed thereby, for instance by judgments of reflection, one must always already have concepts in order to be apperceptively *aware*

of anything at all. Hegel thought Kant was uncharacteristically, but culpably, uncritical about the origins of our primordial concepts. The locus of those concepts, Hegel thought, lies in *language*, not in some kind of experience understood as prelinguistic. Language, he said, is the existence [Dasein] of Geist— that is, of the whole normatively articulated discursive realm.⁸ Compare Dewey:

Language in its widest sense...is the medium in which culture exists and through which it is transmitted.⁹

For Hegel, no less than for Quine and Dewey, we must understand linguistic practices as *both* instituting conceptual norms *and* applying them.¹⁰ It is precisely by applying concepts in judging and acting that conceptual content is both made more determinate, going forward, and shows up as always already determinate (in the only sense in which conceptual contents are determinate), looking back.¹¹

7 “Carnap on Logical Truth”, p. 406 [ref.]

8 *Phenomenology of Spirit* [652], [666].

9 *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry, Later Works* Vol. 12, p. 28

10 Here are some characteristic passages:

It is therefore through culture that the individual acquires standing and actuality. His true *original nature* and substance is the alienation of himself as Spirit from his *natural* being. This individuality *moulds* itself by culture into what it intrinsically is. [I: 489]

What, in relation to the single individual, appears as his culture, is the essential moment of the substance itself, viz. the immediate passage of the [mere] thought-form of its universality into actuality; or, culture is the simple soul of the substance by means of which, what is implicit in the substance, acquires an acknowledged, real existence. The process in which the individuality moulds itself by culture is, therefore, at the same time the development of it as the universal, objective essence, i.e. the development of the actual world. Although this world has come into being through individuality, it is for self-consciousness immediately an alienated world which has the form of a fixed and solid reality over against it. [PG 490]

V. Rationalism and Pragmatism

Pragmatists who have made the linguistic turn take it that the most important feature of the natural history of creatures like us is that we have *come into language*¹²: come to engage in distinctively linguistic practices and to exercise distinctively linguistic abilities. This is both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic achievement. Understanding it requires, at a minimum, addressing three large, interconnected kinds of question. These concern the issues of *demarcation*, *emergence*, and *leverage*. The demarcation question is definitional. How are *linguistic* practices and abilities (and hence, the linguistic about discursivity claims, *discursive* ones) to be distinguished from nonlinguistic ones? The emergence question concerns the requirement that any account of language that aspires to being naturalistic in even a very broad sense must explain the possibility of the transition from nonlinguistic to linguistic practices and abilities. How are the abilities we can see in non- or prelinguistic creatures recruited, deployed, and transformed so as to amount to linguistic ones? The leverage question is how to characterize and explain the massive qualitative difference in capacity between linguistic and nonlinguistic creatures: the bonanza of new abilities and possibilities that language opens up for those that do make the transition.

11 See footnote 16.

12 We have come to see that there are substantial, potentially controversial presuppositions involved in characterizing this in terms of language *learning*.

One of the principal accomplishments of the classical American pragmatists is the attention they gave to the problem of emergence, to displaying the continuities that make it naturalistically intelligible that species and individuals should be able to cross the boundary separating the prelinguistic from the linguistic. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey sets the emergence problem this way:

Upon the whole, professed transcendentalists have been more aware than have professed empiricists of the fact that language makes the difference between brute and man. The trouble is that they have lacked a naturalistic conception of its origin and status.¹³

In his *Logic*, he expands on this thought:

Any theory that rests upon a naturalistic postulate must face the problem of the extraordinary differences that mark off the activities and achievements of human beings from those of other biological forms. It is these differences that have led to the idea that man is completely separated from other animals by properties that come from a non-natural source....The development of language (in its widest sense) out of prior biological activities is, in its connection with wider cultural forces, the key to this transformation.¹⁴

13 *Experience and Nature, Later Works* Vol. 1, p. 134.

14 *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry, Later Works* Vol. 12, p. 50. This emphasis on continuity does not lead Dewey to ignore the differences that language makes:

The evidence usually adduced in support of the proposition that lower animals, animals without language, think, turns out, when examined, to be evidence that when men, organisms with power of social discourse, think, they do so with the organs of adaptation used by lower animals, and thus largely repeat in imagination schemes of overt animal action. But to argue from this fact to the conclusion that animals think is like concluding that because every tool, say a plow, originated from some pre-existing natural production, say a crooked root or forked branch, the latter was inherently and antecedently engaged in plowing. The connection is there, but it is the other way around.

The hallmark of an untenable intellectualism, he thinks, is an appeal to an inexplicable saltation: the ultimately miraculous dawning of consciousness or self-consciousness, the infusion of reason into a brute. The desire to provide a more satisfactory response to the emergence question than that sort of cartesian approach can offer binds Dewey together with the later Wittgenstein in a common enterprise. The point of many of the toy Sprachspiele the latter describes is to show us how features of discourse that might seem mysterious in a sense that calls for the invocation of a cartesian discontinuity can be exhibited already in practices we can see that intelligent nonlinguistic hominids could master.

When we turn to the demarcation question, however, I think the pragmatists disappoint. What is distinctive of linguistic (or discursive) practices? What sets them apart from prelinguistic or nondiscursive practices? It is one's answer to this question that ties together the emergence question with the leverage question. For the criteria of adequacy for answers to those questions turn on its being the *same* kind of practices and abilities that one has told a story about the nonmiraculous emergence of, in answering the first question, that one then must show can intelligibly account for the huge differences in capabilities, cognitive and practical, that come with the advent of language, in answering the second question. We need not assume that the emergence of language is an all-or-none thing. One might, with Wittgenstein, want to deny that there is or need be a bright line separating the discursive from the nondiscursive, in favor of a family-resemblances

sort of view. A pluralist-incrementalist response to the demarcation question makes the emergence question easier to answer, but makes the leverage question correspondingly more difficult. I don't think Dewey's metainstrumentalist "tool of tools" line can be made to work to bring the emergence and leverage issues into harmony—but I've argued that elsewhere and won't rehearse my complaints here.¹⁵

I cannot here address the all-important leverage question.¹⁶ But the demarcation question is prior. After all, if one is going to say how Geist precipitates out of nature, and how it transforms sentient organisms into sapient ones, one should try to say what it is. The challenge is to offer satisfactory responses to *both* the emergence question *and* the leverage question. Focusing on just one of them makes it too easy. In the passage above, Dewey says in effect that the neo-cartesian intellectualists make the leverage question too easy to respond to, by ignoring (or making it impossible to address) the question of emergence. I have just accused him of making the complementary mistake. In any case, it is clear that the hinge that connects the issues of emergence and leverage is the question of demarcation. For the challenge is to show that the *same* phenomenon that one has accounted for the emergence of can leverage sentience into sapience. So demarcating the realm of linguistic or discursive practices and abilities is an absolutely essential element of the philosophical project I have been describing: the development of pragmatism after the linguistic turn, a lingualist fundamental pragmatism.

15 *Experience and Nature, Later Works*, Vol. 1, p. 134. I discuss this approach in Chapters One
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I want to close with a suggestion as to one way fundamental pragmatists, those committed to understanding discursive intentionality as a kind of practical intentionality, who are weak lingualists about discursiveness, that is, who take engaging in linguistic practices as a necessary condition of deploying concepts (a class I take to include at least Peirce, Dewey, the early Heidegger, and the later Wittgenstein), might answer the demarcation question, and so determine definite criteria of adequacy for harmonious responses to both the emergence and the leverage questions. My idea is that pragmatism can usefully be combined with a *rationalist* criterion of demarcation of the linguistic—and hence of discursiveness in general. By this I mean that what distinguishes the linguistic practice in virtue of which we are sapient and not merely sentient beings is its core practices of giving and asking for *reasons*. Pragmatically, a necessary and sufficient condition of being a discursive practice is that some performances are accorded by it the pragmatic significance of *claimings* or assertings. Semantically, claimable or assertible contents are *propositional* contents. Syntactically, what expresses those contents is declarative sentences. This combination of pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features is the iron triangle of discursiveness. The pragmatist order of explanation of course starts with the pragmatics. The thought is that to have the *pragmatic* significance of an assertion is to be able both to serve as a reason, and potentially to stand in need of reasons. So, *semantically*, propositional contents are those that can play the role both of

and Two.

16 I do address it in *Making It Explicit* and *Between Saying and Doing*.

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premise and of conclusion in *inferences*. Discursive practice is accordingly understood as essentially inferentially articulated.

Commitment to a rationalist criterion of demarcation of the discursive requires disagreeing with Wittgenstein: Language *does* have a downtown, and it is the practice of making claims and giving and asking for reasons. Other things we can do with language are ancillary to and parasitic upon these essential core functions. On this view, most of the toy practices Wittgenstein calls “Sprachspiele” are *vocal*, but not genuinely *verbal*, not really *language games*.

Wittgenstein and Dewey are together in rejecting rationalist criteria of demarcation of the linguistic (and hence the discursive)—indeed, in resisting offering any answer at all to the demarcation question. In Dewey’s case, the idea of a rationalist pragmatism would probably have struck him as a *contradictio in adjecto*. But rationalism as I have described it is not a form of the intellectualism that stands opposed to fundamental pragmatism. It is wholly compatible with understanding discursive intentionality as a kind of practical intentionality: specifically, as the kind that includes practices of making claims and giving and asking for reasons. It aims to say what structure a norm-instituting social practice must have in order properly to be understood as such a practice: a *discursive practice*. It offers a specific proposal for how to

understand the kind of practical knowing *how* that adds up to cognitive claiming *that*: it is practical mastery of broadly inferential relations and transitions. And answering the demarcation question about discursive practice in a rationalist manner neither makes it impossible in principle to answer the emergence question nor obliges one to give a cartesian answer to it. It also, I claim—though I will not argue for that point here—provides sufficient resources for a satisfying answer to the leverage question.¹⁷

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I began my story about pragmatism in an unconventional place: with Kant's *normative* criterion of demarcation of the discursive, that is, with his idea that what is distinctive of judgments and intentional actions is that they are things we are *responsible* for. They are kinds of *commitments*. But that normative criterion of demarcation was also a *rationalist* criterion of demarcation. For he understood that responsibility, that commitment, as a *rational* responsibility, as the *justificatory* responsibility to have reasons for ones theoretical and practical commitments, the *ampliative* responsibility to acknowledge their inferential consequences, and the *critical* responsibility to revise commitments that are incompatible, that is, that serve as reasons against one another. Kant's pragmatism consists in his strategy of understanding semantic content in terms of what apperceiving subjects must *do* to fulfill those responsibilities. Judgeable contents

17 The whole of Part Two of *Making It Explicit* can be read as providing at least a substantial downpayment on this claim: Give me the practices of Part One, articulated by inference, substitution, and anaphora, and I will give you the (discursive) world.

have to stand to one another in relations of material consequence and incompatibility: the inferential relations that constrain the process of synthesizing a constellation of commitments and entitlements exhibiting the distinctive unity of apperception.

Wittgenstein's example teaches that we should follow Hegel's steps toward naturalizing Kant's notion of norms by understanding norms as implicit in social practices. Normative statuses of responsibility and commitment are *social* statuses: creatures of our practical attitudes of taking or treating each other *as* responsible and committed.

The move beyond Dewey and Wittgenstein to a rationalist, more specifically inferentialist pragmatism that I am recommending is accordingly also a return to pragmatism's roots in German idealism. As Kant synthesized empiricism and rationalism, and the pragmatists synthesized naturalism and empiricism, I'm suggesting that a way forward is to synthesize pragmatism and rationalism—in the form of the rationalist response to the demarcation question.

End